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Ramana Ashtottaram

68. ओं दयार्णवाय नमः
Om dayārṇavāya namaḥ

Prostration to the one who is the ocean of compassion.

Siva's grace is embodied in Muruga, who is a visible, vibrant, adorable beam of his splendour. The terrible and the sublime are now available to us in a comely, homely human form, namely, that of Sri Bhagavan. Bhagavan Maharshi is also soft of speech and overflowing with compassion.

During his bodily lifetime Bhagavan was always available to whoever sought his grace, and even now Bhagavan's grace is easily accessible to those who are sincere and whose hearts are open to receive the inexhaustible, silent, healing grace. ▲

EDITORIAL

Arunachala as Symbol

Arunachala is the hub of the universe for those of us who are devotees of Sri Ramana. We are as stars revolving around a light that our eyes can sense but not see. Through literature and our own experiences, we come to understand that Bhagavan and Arunachala are one. Bhagavan is a visible representative who walked on this earth and guided us as much by example as by his words, and his devotion to Arunachala is cardinal to our understanding of who he was. Arunachala is an indisputable physical presence that radiates a subtle spiritual energy. It rejuvenates us when we are in its presence but it is also, whatever our distance from it may be, a potent, living symbol which reminds us of our purpose in loyally following where Bhagavan led. To remember Arunachala is to reflect on what is important in our lives. By some mysterious alchemy even the very thought of Arunachala has a transformative value that we cannot define because it operates below the surface of our rational minds,

but through unmistakable experience we come to recognise its deep healing power. Bhagavan once said how fortunate we were in that, even if he were not here with us, his guru Arunachala is always present.

On the physical plane (*bhumiloka*), Arunachala was a mountain of light in the original golden period, the *Satya Yuga*, when the truth was wholly accessible to all, and its summit was called the realm of truth (*satyaloka*). In this *Kali Yuga*, it has become solidified as rock. Arunachala is like glass, it is solid but translucent and with eyes of light and hearts aflame, we can see through it. No wonder Bhagavan called Arunachala 'father'; no wonder he yearned to go 'home'. Seeking him out on his journey from Madurai he left behind the boy, Venkataraman. His joy at arrival is impossible to describe. The myth, the symbol, had become a reality. This is a miracle.

Myths are the contrivances by which we struggle to make our experience intelligible. The meaning of a myth is intuited rather than defined. It has a way of implying things that are difficult to state explicitly. The myth of Arunachala's creation is meant to inspire. It continues to live in the hearts of those who come near this mountain not just as a collective memory but also as a living, dynamic presence. When we contemplate Arunachala either from afar or at close quarters we are performing a rite that reinforces our association with this magic mountain. We reinforce our sense of oneness by thinking of it. What we eat we become. What we think we become. What we identify with we become. There is the famous sloka from *Siva Rahasyam* cited in the Sanskrit work *Sri Arunachala Ashtakam*, "One gets liberation, from darsan in Chidambaram, / From taking birth in Tiruvarur, / And undoubtedly, from dying in Kasi, / [but merely] from thinking on Arunachala."¹

We could say that Arunachala is a *yantra* and our words of prayer or thought are *mantras*, either gross or subtle. Bhagavan's *Arunachala Akshara Manamalai* is an example. By repetition of this beautiful hymn we absorb the mood (*bhava*) in which Bhagavan composed it and thereby come closer in our relationship with this mighty spiritual force. We are fixing Arunachala in our hearts by this ritual gesture.

¹ Translated by William Forbes.

We engage in 'correspondence', and enact Bhagavan's absorption in Arunachala and if our hearts are in the right place we are bound together in harmony.

If we listen carefully, Arunachala hums like a powerful dynamo in the silence of the heart, but really what words, what symbol can encapsulate it? When we contemplate Arunachala do we think of it as a physical presence in a definite location or are we thinking of the transcendental Arunachala as it actually is, devoid of all concepts of time and space? In other words, is Arunachala the range of rocks situated at Tiruvannamalai or is it a transcendental divine principle that has no form?

If it is just a pile of rocks then, with all due respect, we are barking mad and if it is a divine principle then how do our tiny minds conceive the immensity of its glory? Either way we appear defeated.

Consider for a moment, money. Paper with pictures and writing on it or pieces of metal are exchanged so that we may conveniently buy the essentials required to live. We all need money, without it we could not survive. Yet this object is an abstraction and has no intrinsic value. We are not such fools to think that in itself it is valuable; it is what it can do for us, which is important.

We sing the praises of Arunachala and gaze on it with a mixture of awe and bafflement. Our words and feelings are our currency, by themselves they are nothing, but deliberately directed at the target of our devotion, we 'buy' a sense of oneness. We gather our affections like flowers and use them to garland the hill.

The eloquent singularity of Arunachala captures us and takes us to another level of consciousness; it is not that we can possess it but to the contrary, it possesses us. It liberates us from the confines of our own limited understanding. It frees us from the insistent and ultimately insane desire to control our world. Like the young Venkataraman, we too, will be astonished.

It has been described as a boundless pillar of light, an infinite *sattvic* energy. We should see beyond the mythological symbol to what it indicates. It is a living portal by which we transcend the false identification with name and form. The rocks of Arunachala

are charged with meaning and power. Of themselves, they cannot contribute to our awareness unless *we see through them as symbols*.

The holy hill, vibrating with an indescribable energy has awed saints for millennia. For those who have been graciously granted a vision of Arunachala Shiva they are reduced, in their songs, to employing words as exclamations. It would be foolish to expect them to directly share that experience as it is unique and unequivocal. The best the visionary can say is to compare it with this or that and leave us floundering with second hand images. This is the negative aspect of the symbol. Either from superficial reasoning or false hope we read or listen to these second-hand descriptions and pass around this currency of expression to reassure ourselves that we have understood. We have not. All we have done is appease our desire for certainty with a counterfeit of words. We have mistaken the symbol for the 'thing' in itself.

Likewise, we should be scrupulous not to debase the value of our devotion by trading it for some kind of approval. There is the false gold of conceit and the shallow coinage of self-satisfaction that we are tempted to share with others who are willing to buy our fallacious views. This is all because we took the symbol for the 'thing' in itself.

If we are to extend the metaphor we also are symbols. Our thoughts and emotions are interchangeable with those of other people with the same proclivities, otherwise how could we communicate? We clothe our ideas in words and as we have seen, words are symbols. If we ourselves are not 'symbols', then what are we?

Bhagavan composed a verse on the significance of Arunachala: "The sudden rise of the blazing column of Annamalai in front of Brahma and Vishnu and their distress at not being able to know that it is symbolic of the *sphurana* of the heart's centre as the real Self of the intellect and the ego."²

We see here that the Puranic story is a mirror of the *sphurana*, the perpetual surge of being, arising from our real Self. The story of Brahma and Vishnu is important to us as a symbolic enactment of our individual quest. Like the recounting of the life stories of Lord

² Osborne, A, (ed.), *The Collected Works of Sri Ramana Maharshi*, 1979. p.80.

Rama and Lord Krishna, which has the audience ritually participating as witnesses, we too repeat our shared story publicly at Kathikai Deepam when the holy flame is lit to signify "Getting rid of the 'I am the body' idea and merging into the heart to realize the Self as non-dual Being."³

On that special day each year, we catch a glimpse of a huge fire blazing on top of Arunachala. For a moment the almost painful momentum of tension generated during the previous nine days is released and the cumulative anticipation fulfilled; we forget our attachment to our body and mind in the upsurge of excitement so new and fresh. For a magical moment the holy hill and the vast attendant crowd are one. All is light and the air is filled with joy.

And what of those of us who cannot be at Arunachala, do we somehow miss out on all this grace? It is often remarked by those who cannot stay at Arunachala for any length of time, how lucky are those who can reside permanently at the foot of the hill. This is not necessarily true as Bhagavan pointed out. There are many who can be here for decades and yet not taste that divine elixir to the extent that their lives are revolutionised. And there are those who defy or fear their destiny in the world, bend their lives out of shape and stay at their peril. There is also, as if by accident, the passing pilgrim who is burnt by the sun of jnana. In Sri Ramana's court we are wherever in this wide world we should be. Divine wisdom locates us where we can best learn. We do not know when we are ready and we leave it in higher hands to guide us.

The greatness and beauty of Arunachala is that it is ever available, if we would but stop the mind's chatter for a moment and gaze in still, silent awe. We are one with Arunachala just as was Sri Ramana, the difference is that Bhagavan was conscious of his identity and

³ Ibid., verse by Bhagavan: *Significance of the Beacon*, p.80.



The Meaning of the Curse in the *Srimad Bhagavata*

NEERA KASHYAP

As in the Hindu epics and other *puranas*, in the *Srimad Bhagavata* too curses are pronounced by the empowered as a decree of destiny. Like ordainments, they cannot be revoked and their sentence must be borne by the cursed. Often a curse seems disproportionately harsh and undeserving in relation to the offence. But in taking a larger view, there appears to be divine will working through the curse like a hidden blessing: to cleanse the soul thoroughly of its known and unknown evil tendencies so the vehicle can be prepared for Self knowledge; to enable a willing and fearless acceptance — an awakening and surrender — to whatever must be borne; to transform attachment to the Maha Vishnu in the form of Krishna, and expressed

Neera Kashyap has worked on health communications and short stories for children. She is very interested in Vedantic studies and writing as a way to deepen self-understanding. She is an executive member of the Delhi Ramana Kendra and visits Sri Ramanasraman every winter.

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through intense negativity for the world, and through the Lord's grace, so the soul's unconscious need for merging in the divine is actualized; to stir ferment and discord so that the Truth can reveal itself; to destroy the remnants of ego in a ripe soul as well as the uncontrolled ego of the Lord's own earthly clan, the Yadus, so that both the individual and the universe can achieve liberation and peace.

There is an underlying suggestion throughout the *Srimad Bhagavata*, that a curse is given only to someone who, consciously or unconsciously, is a devotee who is being given the opportunity, though painful, to get past karmic barriers that have kept the light of devotion from shining in fullness. In tune with the whole of the *Bhagavata*, a curse also points to a penance borne willingly and with dispassion, so that devotion shines in surrender, gradually wilting doubts and desires and destroying the unexhausted stock of all past karmas.

Jaya and Vijaya, the two gatekeepers of Vaikuntha¹ appear to receive a curse that is disproportionate to their sin: they have to return to earth owing to their failure to recognize the spiritual attainments of the four Kumaras² whose entry they bar at the seventh and final gate of heaven. Earlier they had stopped Lord Rama's consort Sita (Lakshmi) from entering. So because of the compounded sin of false perception and suspicion unbecoming in a *sattvic* plane, the curse is not reduced and they must return to earth where diversity rises from the three vices of lust, anger and greed. As they humbly accept the curse from the Kumaras in the interest of their own purification, begging that it may take immediate effect, the Lord himself assures them that they will be firmly united with Him in thought, though in the form of a concentrated focus of anger, and that they will return to His service soon after.

But it takes three births among the *asuras*³ for Jaya and Vijaya

¹ The highest heaven, the abode of Lord Vishnu.

² The original sons of Brahma who preferred absorption in the Self to participation in creation.

³ Demonic race, a generic name for the enemies of the gods.

to cleanse themselves of their intense hostility towards the Lord. In their first birth they are born as the brothers Hiranyaksha and Hiranyakasipu, in their second as the brothers Ravana and Kumbhakarna and in their third as the close friends Sisupala and Dantavakra. In all three births the Lord, in his different avatars, must kill them Himself — putting to death their own intense attachment to Him through hate and anger so that they rise above the *gunas* in union with Him. The evils of hate and anger have a wide range. In the case of Hiranyaksha it is the basic evil of vanity, pride and derision towards the Lord which the Lord quickly overcomes. In the case of Hiranyakasipu, it is a complex battle against his own son Prahlada, who is a great devotee of the Lord. Empowered through a self-brutalizing penance, the father brings the full force of his cruelty to bear to torture his adamant but utterly composed son, so much so that when the Lord emerges from a pillar to kill him, the Lord Himself trembles with rage that can be appeased by none other than the exemplary devotee Prahlada himself.

Writes S.S.Cohen: "To our modern way of thinking... most of the curses recorded in the sacred *Bhagavata* seem to be curiously harsh and irreligious... [However]... Taking a long view of the matter, we find the curses to be not arbitrary, but governed by the laws of predestination to the lasting benefit of the persons affected. That they badly needed purification was proved by later events which showed them to be profoundly satanic, a trait temporarily covered up by the *sattvic* atmosphere in which they lived. As Hiranyakasipu and Ravana they were veritable monsters of arrogance, lust, greed, treachery, tyranny and what not, and needed birth in a plane which offered scope for their manifestation, so that they might be scotched."⁴

A distinctive aspect of a curse is its acceptance by the cursed who cut across both *asuras* and kings. Diti, daughter of Daksha⁵, is cursed by her own husband Sage Kasyapa, when in a moment of uncontrolled sexual desire, she compels him to satisfy her even as he sits for worship.

⁴ Cohen, S.S., *Srimad Bhagavata*, Sri Ramanasramam, 2007, fourth edition, p.154.

⁵ One of the nine mind-born sons of Brahma.

Kasyapa's curse on her: she will bear two wicked sons (Hiranyaksha and Hiranyakasipu) who will be the bane of existence, so much so that the Lord himself will have to descend to rid the world of them. Diti accepts the curse of bearing the wicked sons and starting the *asuric* race purely because she knows that her sons will die at the hands of the Lord and thus attain salvation. The birth of wickedness in the form of two sons to a virtuous woman is not considered calamitous because it would be dealt with by the Lord, controlled and destroyed by Him. This will be the vindication of her faith in the Lord, a faith infinitely greater than her faith in her Brahmin husband.

Parikshit's acceptance of his curse displays the surrender to the Lord of a great and benevolent king. While hunting in a forest he is overcome by fatigue, hunger and thirst. He enters a hermitage and requests the meditating Sage Samiga to give him food and water. As the sage does not stir from his deep absorption, the king's hunger makes him assume that the sage's silence is an inhospitable sham. To test him, he picks up a dead snake with the tip of his sword and places it around the sage's neck. The sage still does not stir. The curse upon Parikshit is pronounced not by the sage but by his enraged son: for his disrespect to the sage and his transgression, the king will be bitten by a serpent and will die on the seventh day after the bite.

Parikshit accepts this curse with a strange relief and calm, as if he is a ripe soul ready for the final lap of the journey. There is everything auspicious about Parikshit's preparations for death: he hands over his kingly tasks, he fasts and meditates, he is visited by holy *rishis* and finally by the most exalted Sukadeva himself, from whom he seeks to learn the nature of Realization and the means of achieving it. Kingship over, the spirit prepares through purification to enquire about the Self, the means for this enquiry and how one must face death. The result: the cursed king enters the fearless and blissful state of Brahman.

Another cursed king has to rid himself of demonic tendencies. As king, Chitraketu had a thousand wives but no child. This created in him an intense desire for one. His wish is granted by the sages Angira and Narada, but with the warning that the child who will be born to his eldest queen will bring both intense joy and intense grief.

The child is poisoned in infancy itself by the other jealous queens. Chitraketu learns his lesson: intense desire brings intense grief. As the sages themselves help the king to understand the nature of attachment, Chitraketu undergoes the purification of prayer and fasting. Lord Sesa⁶ appears, to further help rid him of the illusion of the world and to unite him with his Self. Chitraketu achieves oneness with the Lord and lives millions of years in the valleys of Mount Meru.

However, one day he comes upon Lord Shiva on Mount Kailas teaching an assembly of great sages with his consort Parvati on His lap. Chitraketu utters a derisive remark on the spiritual master's public exhibition of love. Parvati's curse: be born a terrible demon to expiate for this sin so that the world once again belongs only to the great. Chitraketu has the power to counter Parvati's curse with one of his own. Instead he accepts her curse with wise humility as the will of the Lord. In the unending fight between the gods and the *asuras*, he is invoked from the sacrificial fire as the demon Vritra to fight Indra, the king of the gods. The irony is that he knows that he has been invoked to be sacrificed, for the strategist behind Indra's fight is the Lord Himself. Yet Vritra's fight is spirited, inspired by the fierce courage and strength of inner devotion and knowledge. When he is killed by Indra, his soul enters the Lord who stands before the hosts of heaven.

One of the inspiring aspects of a curse in the *Bhagavata* is the effect on its trajectory when the cursed one has an encounter with the Lord Himself. The grandson of the *asura* king Bali, had supreme power, *brahma tejas*, and ruled the three worlds generously, magnanimously and with humility. As the gods lost their glory through Rishi Durvasa's curse on Indra for his arrogance, the Lord answered the prayers of Aditi, the mother of the gods, and took birth from her womb as the dwarf Vamana, so the gods could reign again. Lord Vamana lost no time in visiting Bali who treated him with great respect and requested him to name his wish. The Lord asked to be granted the gift of three paces of land. Bali poured water in the palm of one hand,

⁶ Adisesha, the thousand-headed serpent and the divine bed of Lord Vishnu.

pronouncing his solemn promise to give the gift demanded. Sensing mischief, Sukracharya, the Brahmin teacher of the *asuras*, warned Bali to withdraw the grant as it was surely a ruse that could endanger his whole race. When Bali refused to retract his promise, Sukracharya cursed him for his arrogance towards him, his teacher, predicting his fall from royal splendour. Undeterred, Bali proceeded lovingly to wash the Lord's feet. But the Lord expanded at such a rate that with two paces he covered the earth and the highest heaven, leaving no room for the third step.

Bali knew he and his race had lost, yet he enjoined his followers' patience and restraint. Lord Vamana charged Bali with perjury for having granted him only two paces when his demand was for three, and sentenced him to imprisonment in the nether regions. Bound with rope as a prisoner, Bali bore this too with equanimity, and humbly suggested that since he had lost all, the Lord could place his third step on his head. With this, he reverentially revealed his recognition of the Lord with the words: "You now pose as our enemy but I know you to be our greatest benefactor — you who have blessed us with a vision of yourself on the pretence of causing our downfall, that vision through which many an *asura* has attained supreme liberation. How good is my destiny to bring me in direct contact with you, disguised as my enemy though you may be!" The Lord's blessings came very swift to one who was unperturbed by calamity and threat, who stodd firm by his promise even at the great risk of disobeying his own guru: Sukracharya's curse was nullified; Bali would rule *sataloka*⁷ in the interim and then occupy the seat of Indra in the next cyclic age.

In the case of the two sons of Kubera⁸, Nalakuvara and Manigriva, Sage Narada himself times the curse to end with the brothers' seemingly casual encounter with the Lord as baby Krishna. Elevated to associate with Lord Siva and allowed to sport in a lush garden flanking Mount Kailasa, the brothers take to drink and sexual indulgence. Once when Narada chances upon them with their lovers, the naked

⁷ One of the seven subterranean regions of the earth characterized by natural beauty and divine architecture where inhabitants live free from sorrow and affliction.

⁸ The god of wealth.

girls cover themselves in shame, but not the sons of Kubera. For their arrogant indecency, Narada curses them to become trees for a hundred celestial years — as trees symbolize a naked unselfconsciousness — in order to reflect upon their own false prestige and drunken madness. Narada tells them that of all material enjoyments, it is riches that delude humans more than beauty, aristocracy or learning. It is only when this long period of involuntary self-reflection is over, that the crawling baby Krishna recognizes the two *arjuna* trees to be the cursed brothers and brings them down with the mortar that his mother has tied to his waist as his punishment for stealing curd! Shorn of their pride, the penitent brothers shoot out from the trees, and bow to the Lord, effulgent with the knowledge that it is He, though a baby, who deserves the highest worship. For their reverential recognition, Lord Krishna rids them of all material bondage and lets them return to their celestial abode.

A curse can also act as a penance so that the devotee can overcome specific weaknesses, dominant among which is sexual indulgence. We saw this weakness displayed by Diti, by Kubera's sons and even by King Chitraketu. A strong attachment to the senses is also seen in the flurry of curses and counter-curses that fly between Daksha and his divine son-in-law Lord Siva, only to establish in the end the Supreme Transcendence of Lord Siva and the attachment to the senses of Daksha, who must live with a goat's head forever, to symbolize his weakness! When Sukracharya curses his son-in-law Yayati for having illicit sex with the *asura* princess Sarmishtha against his explicit warning, Yayati is cursed to immediately become old and senile — the curse deliberately aimed at preventing further indulgence. Owing to Sukracharya's leniency, Yayati gets past this curse and turns to the divine when he realizes that lust can never be slaked by indulging it.

Curses also have a far-reaching impact, unleashing ferment and unending opposition between the gods and the *asuras*. When Parikshit is bitten by the celestial serpent Takshaka with such venom that his body is reduced to a heap of ash, his son Janamejaya is so aggrieved that he orders all the serpents in the land to be offered to a sacrificial fire. Thousands of serpents offer themselves, and when Takshaka appeals

to Indra for help, even Indra and his retinue feel obliged to obey a fresh royal command that they too, must offer themselves as oblations. It is only at the intervention of Brihaspati, the teacher of the gods, that the carnage halted and the lesson learnt that Takshaka cannot be killed by fire, as he has partaken of divine nectar, so Janamejaya's grief must be controlled and God's will accepted, that Parikshit had to die thus. In Rishi Durvasa's curse on Indra for his arrogance, he decrees that all the three worlds that Indra rules will lose their glory and prosperity with immediate effect. This starts an unending war between the gods and the *asuras*, in the course of which the Lord helps the gods to win back their supremacy at every turn and level.

Finally, the most terrible curse of all curses: the Lord's curse on His own clan, the Yadus: the Lord declares that they must die for their unspeakable insolence engendered by their unlimited prosperity and heroism. As Lord Krishna's mission on earth nears its end, and having fought unceasingly against unrighteousness, He must now reckon with His own kinsmen who have become wealthy, proud and mighty because of His unceasing guidance and support. The Lord thinks to Himself: "The Yadu race has, under My protection, enjoyed an unparalleled prosperity and has therefore become too strong to be defeated. So I alone can destroy it, by causing dissension within it, a dissension which will entirely consume it, like a bamboo forest which gets consumed by the fire sparked by itself..." Using *yogamaya*, the Lord causes a few Yadava princes to tease a group of venerable *rishis*. Dressing up Krishna's son Samba as a girl, the princes declare that the girl wishes to know from the *rishis'* unflinching vision whether the child she bears will be a boy or a girl. Pat comes the reply of the *rishis* in great anger: "She is bearing a mace which will destroy your race!"

Making careful provision for the safe passage of all the women, children and elders, the Lord gathers the able-bodied Yadu men at an appointed place on the banks of the sacred Ganga. Fate intervenes to execute the will of the Lord: the men imbibe a highly intoxicating liquor in large draughts. Reason abandoned, bitter quarrels break out between them and the clash that follows is so bloody that even

kinsmen and erstwhile friends hack each other down mercilessly and indiscriminately. The fury of their hatred unleashed by the intoxicant and the Lord's *maya*, is so great that it destroys them all, like a forest fire which leaves no tree alive. Thus is destroyed the Lord's own clan through His divine, impartial and impersonal will.

In Lord Krishna's final moments on earth, when He was with His fervent devotee Uddhava, He speaks words of advice saying to all His devotees: "On the seventh day from now Dwarka will be submerged by the sea. The world will be invaded by the spirit ▲"

The Names of Lalitha

Ramesh Menon

Profound *Ishvari*,
complex and simple mother,
heal us in the night;
for you these flickering lamps,
floated down grief's dark river.

Slender as the stalk
of the rare, dreaming lotus,
slim as shafts of the moon;
Bisa tantu taniyasi,
you are delicate as night.

Nirmala, pure one,
taintless, perfect, pristine one:
scent of the lotus.

Ocean of the spirit,
who fills the timeless sky;
Shanta, peaceful one.

The poems are loosely based on the Japanese tanka form of 5 lines. A tanka is a haiku with two extra 7-syllabled lines. The lines have 5/7/5/7/7 syllables, in that order.



Alexander Shuralov

Suffering as a Spiritual Catalyst

A Gendered Perspective

VIJAYA RAMASWAMY

...affliction is a treasure, and scarce any man hath enough of it. No man hath affliction enough that is not matured and ripened by it, and made fit for God by that affliction. If a man carry treasure in bullion or in a wedge of gold, and have none coined into current moneys, his treasure will not defray him as he travels. Tribulation is treasure in the nature of it, but it is not current money in the use of it, except we get nearer and nearer our home, heaven, by it. John Donne, Meditation XVII.

It is a truism that it is a human tendency to seek happiness and pleasure, and to run away from pain and suffering. Yet in the spiritual domain men and women have sought pain and suffering voluntarily. Here suffering should be perceived as a spiritual catalyst. This study presents the argument that suffering, especially physical

Prof. Vijaya Ramaswamy teaches ancient Indian history at the Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi. Her family has been closely connected with Sri Ramanasramam for generations. Readers can share their views on this article with her by email to: vijukrishnan@gmail.com

suffering, whether it is the practice of austerities or the infliction of pain for purificatory purposes, can be a spiritual catalyst. This is a notion that runs across many cultures, communities and religions, some in greater measure, where a whole theology of suffering is provided as in Christianity or in moderate measure, as with Hinduism, Islam or Buddhism.

While accepting as a basic premise that the practice of using suffering for spiritual catharsis is not gender specific, this article focuses primarily on the trope of 'suffering' undergone by women either as highly evolved spiritual practitioners or as aspirants on the path. However suffering *per se* need not be cleansing or spiritually inspiring unless the sufferer is able to tune into the divine and draw sustenance from her suffering.

Self-infliction of Suffering as Cathartic

Many women on a spiritual path have used suffering as a mode of spiritual expression. Within the Christian tradition the manifestation of Christ's stigmata in one's own body resulted in a cathartic cleansing of the human body and spirit. Many mystics like Catherine of Sienna, Therese Neumann and St. Catherine de Ricci manifested in their bodies especially their hands, feet and brows, the marks of Christ's crucifixion and lived through the last moments of the 'Passion of Christ'.¹ A similar phenomenon is found in India among certain orders of sadhus like the Bairagis, who pierce their cheeks with sharp wires. In the Tamil culture many lay spiritual seekers, both men and women also resort to the piercing of their cheeks or ears with spears or other sharp steel instruments. This is usually done while in a state of possession.

In terms of their conception and execution, practices such as cheek-piercing and fire-walking can be seen as cathartic processes in the lives of religious practitioners. Fire-walking is widely practised

¹ General information on visible and invisible stigmata is available on the website <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14294b.htm>. Although the first manifestation of the stigmata was in the thirteenth century saint Francis of Assisi, this phenomenon was perceived more in women saints than in spiritual men.

among Tamils in rituals connected with Murugan or Devi [the Goddess], especially Mariamman. Walking on fire is believed to be done by a devotee who is in a state of physical and mental purity.² The connection between physical suffering and heroic courage in the act of fire-walking and the issue of women's social and spiritual space is reflected in an article by Alleyn Diesel.³

He says: "The mythologies of many Amman Goddesses, including those of Draupadi and Mariamman, recount the details of hosts of women, ...often virtuous and faithful, who were abandoned, deceived, betrayed, insulted, raped and killed by men. Such 'texts of horror' record how these unjustly treated ...women drew strength from their purity... and thus brought healing to their communities. Many tales record how these human women were transformed into Goddesses, thus demonstrating the ultimate victory of women's strength."⁴

Marital Ill-treatment as Spiritual Catalyst

Suffering has been a major ingredient in the lives of women saints and the sublimation of anguish is the central thrust of my argument. Here again there is a whole range of suffering from marital ill-treatment which is the visible face of this pain to emotional violence. The high point of this suffering is *viraha bhakti*, the exquisite pain that lies in unrequited love for the Divine Lover, a love that finds its culmination only in death or in union with the Divine.

Meera danced with abandon "with anklets on her feet" in her passion for her God, Giridhar Gopal, with the result that she was poisoned by her sister-in-law, probably in connivance with her husband. The fourteenth century saint Lal Ded of Kashmir writes in her *vak* (spiritual sayings) that her mother-in-law never forgot to mix

² It must however be pointed out that not all such exercises productive of physical pain were aimed at spiritual purification. They were in many cases, the fulfilment of vows taken in order to fulfill material desires such as the desire for a progeny.

³ Allen Diesel, 'Tales of Women's Sufferings: Draupadi and other Amman Goddesses as Role Models for Women', *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, vol.17, No.1, 2002, pp. 5-20.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.9.

pebbles into her food. One day, Lal Ded gave up her marital home and walked out. She is also said to have shed all feminine modesty and danced naked. Her contemporary in Maharashtra, Bahina Bai writes in her *abhang* (devotional songs sung by the Maharashtrian Warkari saints) how her husband routinely beat her for keeping company with saints. Chakkubai, another saint from Maharashtra, was tied up with ropes by her in-laws to prevent her from joining the *warkari* pilgrimage to Pandarpur.⁵ Such examples are legion⁶ – and in every case, marital ill-treatment acted as a catalyst for the spiritual flowering of these women, though it was usually assumed to be hysteria or madness.

Did divine intoxication on the part of these women lead to their marginalization within society and their ill-treatment in their marital homes? This question could also be posed very differently. Did intense suffering in many forms, particularly marital ill-treatment, result in these women turning to a spiritual path as an alternate life-path?

Marital ill-treatment, and the physical and mental torment arising out of it, proved decidedly cathartic in the lives of many spiritual women, leading them to live saintly lives. Lalla or Lal Ded who lived in Kashmir around the twelfth century, Akka Mahadevi who belonged to twelfth century Karnataka and Meera Bai, who belonged to the princely family of Mewar in early sixteenth century Rajasthan, were all reluctant brides. Lalla, at the age of twelve, was married to a middle aged Brahmin, while the eighteen year old Meera was married to Raja Bhoj of Mewar. Both encountered a hostile atmosphere in their

⁵ *Warkari* :Literally ‘wari kari’ meaning one who goes on a pilgrimage annually to Pandarpur for one’s entire lifetime.

⁶ I wish to draw attention to some of my own articles where I have discussed the link between the marital ill-treatment and spiritual emergence of women saints: ‘Anklets on the Feet: Women Saints in Medieval Indian Society’, *The Indian Historical Review*, vol.XVII, Nos 1 and 2, (July 1991 and January. 1992), pp. 60-89; ‘Madness, Holiness, Poetry: The Vachanas of Virasaivite Women in Indian Literature’, Issue 173, Vol.XXXIX, No.3, (May-June 1996), pp.147-155; ‘Rebels, Mystics or Housewives? Women in Virasaivism’, *India International Centre Quarterly* (Winter 1996) vol.23, nos. 3 and 4, pp.190-203; ‘Rebels- Conformists? Women Saints in Medieval South India,’ *Anthropos*, (March 1992) Vol. 87,

marital homes. It is said of Lalla that her mother-in-law used to mix stones into her food, covering them with a thin top layer of rice, thus virtually starving her. On the festive occasion of *grihashanti* (literally ‘peace at home’), Lalla’s friends teased her about the ‘excellent food’ she would get to eat, to which she replied with the now famous verse:

They may kill a big sheep or a tender lamb,
Lalla will have her lump of stone all right.⁷

Meera refers in her verses to marital ill-treatment by her husband who was the Rana of Mewar, her mother and sister-in-law Udhabhai:

The mother-in-law fights,
The sister-in-law teases,
The Rana is angry.
They guard me,
They spy on me,
Imprison me with heavy locks.⁸

In her other well known verse “Meera dances with anklets on her feet,”⁹ she writes that the Rana had sent her a poisoned goblet of drink which she had accepted. Elsewhere, she writes that she had been presented with a poisonous snake hidden in a basket by the Rana under the persuasion of Udhabhai. Meera had worn the snake like a garland around her neck:

“They sent a snake in a basket, saying it was a garland of pearls, (Meera) wore the snake on her neck, lighting up the palace with its lustre.”¹⁰

Akka Mahadevi uses marital ill-treatment as an allegory, although the subject of her marriage is itself a matter of some dispute. However the medieval commentator Harihara does claim she was married to

⁷ Jayalal Kaul, *Lal Ded*, Sahitya Academy, New Delhi, 1973, p.10.

⁸ Parashuram Chaturvedi, *Meerabhai ki Padavali*, Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, Prayag, 1955-56, p.113.

⁹ *Pag gungroo bandh Meera nachi re*.

¹⁰ Virendra Sethi, *Meera Prem Diwani* (in Hindi) Radhasvami Satsang Vyas, Amritsar, 1986. The Hindi verse is on page 20. The trans-creation here is mine.

King Kaushika and describes her ultimate renunciation by walking out. In one of her *vachanas*, she writes:

I have maya for mother-in-law
The world for father-in-law
Three brothers-in-law like tigers
and the husband's thoughts
are full of pretty women.
Oh God, this man!
and I cannot cross my sister-in-law.¹¹

Most sources suggest that her renunciation came when she walked out naked from Kaushika's palace with her long tresses as her only covering.

Women who endure intense mental stress and physical/emotional suffering are, in a sense, at a cross-roads. On the one hand, their suffering can take the path of insanity or suicide. On the other, the more fortunate among them can use their suffering to cut asunder the bondage of *samsara* and familial obligations as well as their fear of social calumny. Such women break many social barriers to achieve spiritual transcendence.

Divine Madness or Psychological Disorder?

Trances, visions, speaking in tongues and irrational social behaviour, including the discarding of clothes, have been widely interpreted by psychoanalysts as a psycho-pathological condition. There seems to have often been a strong link between suffering and what is perceived as irrational social behaviour. The cathartic effect of suffering seems to have resulted in the rejection of all social norms, causing these spiritual figures, whether men or women, to be dubbed 'mad'. It is significant that many of these women saints have been labelled 'mad' — Meera *divani* (mad), Lalla *mast* (mad) etc., although their condition is better understood as a state of inspiredness rather than madness. In Hindu philosophy the term used for spiritual madness is *unmaththa*. However

¹¹ A.K.Ramanujan, ed. and transl. *Speaking of Siva*, Penguin, London, 1973, p.114, Vachana, No.140.

there is not necessarily a link between the phenomenon of personal suffering and the state of the *unmaththa*. Someone who is quite free from worldly afflictions can still be an *unmaththa*. Anandamayi Ma, one of the greatest women saints of all times, was a matronly, dignified Bengali woman who spent two years doing cartwheels in her front yard, unaware that her sari had slipped from her waist. Even in her old age Ma, when in a state of *bhava*, could be seen turning cartwheels in a blissful mood, in complete oblivion of social norms! It was however well recognised that hers was a state of 'god intoxication' rather than insanity and her acts of divine madness only increased the reverence of society towards her.¹²

In the present context however, I am not concerned with the phenomenon of 'divine madness' per se. Here I have specifically explored the 'madness' arising out of intense physical and emotional suffering, brought about either by the woman herself or marital ill-treatment.

Throughout women's spiritual history, saints like Bahina Bai and Meera had to face humiliation and hostility for their failure to conform to patriarchal norms. Women could respond to their spiritual calling only by risking their reputations and being termed deviant or mentally ill. Meera loudly proclaimed that dancing with anklets on her feet and keeping company with (holy) men, she had given up shame.¹³ In our own times, Andavan Pichchai Amma told me that her husband had locked her up in her room since her spiritual behaviour seemed like a classic case of hysteria.¹⁴ Maragatham Ammal was called 'Andavan Pichchi' ('pichchi' in Tamil means 'mad'). A spiritual female was almost by definition 'deviant', 'hysterical' and a rebel. This set her apart from the spiritual male who functioned to a large extent within

¹² This point is discussed in an interesting essay 'When Insanity is a Blessing: The Message of Shamanism' by H.Kalweit in Stanislav Grof and Christina Grof (edited.) *Spiritual Emergency: When Personal Transformation Becomes a Crisis*, Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1989.

¹³ *Pag gunguru bandh Meera nachi re.* (Meera danced with anklets on her feet).

¹⁴ Interview with Andavan Pichchai Amma at the Sivananda Ashram at Rishikesh in May 1986.

the established, patriarchal religious and cultural modes.

In medieval Europe the distinction between divine trance and witchcraft was not recognized, with tragic consequences. Christian mystics and visionaries like Joan of Arc were often burnt at the stake as 'witches' because Christianity failed to distinguish between witchcraft and divine trance. Joan of Arc was tried in 1430 for practising witchcraft even though all she claimed was that she was obeying the commands of visionary voices. Juliana of Norwich and Theresa of Avila among Christian women saints, Rabia in Sufi Islam, Lallesvari [Lal Ded] of Kashmir and Karaikkal Ammaiyar among the Bhagavatas and Anandamayi Ma in our own times, constantly went into ecstatic trance, beheld visions and heard unseen voices. These manifestations have been equally common among male saints like Chaitanya and Ramakrishna Paramahansa. But we should remember that many mystics look upon clairvoyance, clairaudience and spiritual healing as early stages of spiritual evolution which are best ignored if an aspirant wants to achieve salvation or transcendence.

We also need to discriminate between the external manifestations of both schizophrenia and spiritual mysticism which can bear a resemblance to each other. In both, the individual experiences herself and the world about her in a manner distinctly different from other members of civil society. Her behaviour is often socially inappropriate and strange and both incomprehensible as well as unacceptable to 'others'.

The Naked Saint

One of the manifestations of socially unacceptable behaviour was the practice among some mystics to discard their clothes and roam naked. While Jainism codified this practice in the sect of the Digambar saints, Saiva ascetic orders like the Naga cults, emphasized the importance of 'being naked' with neither possessions nor socially conditioned behaviour like shame or self-consciousness. While male monastic orders like the Digambar monks and the Saivite Nagas excluded women because they deemed that women were incapable of shedding their body awareness, it was precisely in the context of nakedness that

spiritual women made their most powerful statement. The fourteenth century Kashmiri saint Lal Ded who was addressed as 'Lalla Mast' meaning 'The Mad Lalla', danced naked. When admonished by her father-in-law that men were staring at her, Lalla is said to have remarked: "Where are the men, I see only sheep around me."¹⁵ She sings in her *Vak*:

Lalla, think not of things which are without,
Fix upon thy inner self thy thought.
So shall thou be freed from doubt
Dance then, Lalla, clad but in the sky,
Air and sky, what garment is more fair?
Cloth, says custom [but]
Does that satisfy? (Bazaz, Prem Nath: 1959: 133)

Lalla's flagrant violation of social norms led to her being both venerated and abused by different sections of Kashmiri society. When she was walking or dancing naked in the street in a semi-conscious state, a local cloth dealer tried to drive away her abusers and offer her a piece of cloth. Lalla cut it into two equal lengths, placing a length on each shoulder and went to the bazaar. When someone prostrated before her or abused her, she tied a knot in the respective length. In the evening Lalla went back to the cloth dealer and asked him to weigh both the lengths of cloth and to his amazement they weighed exactly the same. Lal Ded is said to have smilingly explained to him that praise and blame were equal to her.¹⁶ This combination of social transgression and spiritual transcendence is embodied in the twelfth century Virasaiva saint Akka Mahadevi, whose only covering for her body was her long tresses.¹⁷

¹⁵ Jayalal Kaul, *Lal Ded*, New Delhi: Sahitya Academy, 1972, p.15.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p.17.

¹⁷ The naked female saint and the social backlash she met with have been dealt with by me in two books — *Divinity and Deviance: Women in Virasaivism* (OUP, 1996) in which I have discussed this in relation to Akka Mahadevi in the chapter 'Gendered Spirituality and the Naked Saints', pp.38 to 43 and in a more general manner in my book *Walking Naked: Women, Society, Spirituality in South India* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1997).

Does Possession Lead to Spiritual Catharis?

There has been in many cultures a close connection between the suffering undergone by women in their marital situation and the phenomenon of possession, whether afflictive or ecstatic. A report on shamanism and possession among the Muslim Hausa of West Africa states: "Wives manipulate *bori* (possession) episodes in such a way as to reduce their husbands to social and economic straits. Hence *bori* is not only a symbolic but also a real way of defying the male dominance which pervades Hausa society. In *bori* women find an escape from a world dominated by men; and through *bori* the world of women temporarily subdues and humiliates the world of men."¹⁸ It is not reasonable to seek a single, universal result for such 'possession' of women. But a striking feature of afflictive possession is that it cannot spiritually liberate or empower women, it is only a temporary manifestation of power by virtue of being 'possessed' by a spirit or deity, either benevolent or malevolent.

Ecstatic possession is of a different order altogether. While afflictive possession is generally involuntary and violent, divine possession leading to trance is both peaceful and beatific. While the former state results in material benefits for the possessed, a person in the latter state confers both material and spiritual benefits on others.

The possession of Andavan Pichchai Amma was however unique.¹⁹ In her fiftieth year, her dying body was penetrated by the spirit of Pinnavasal Svamigal, a male disciple of the mystic Sadasiva Brahmendra. It gave her an in-depth knowledge of Vedanta and the Upanishads with which Amma, as an illiterate wife, had no acquaintance. In her instance Andavan Pichchai's possession was of a

transcendental quality and in fact distanced her from all social bonds,¹⁸ Onwuejeogwu, Michael, 1969, 'The cult of the *Bori* Spirits among the Hausa' in Mary Douglas and Phyllis M. Kaberry (eds.), *Man in Africa*. London, 1969.

¹⁹ *Een Pichchi Aanen* (How I Became Mad), the autobiography of Andavan Pichchai, Madras, Published by the devotees of Andavan Pichchai, 1980. See also *The Gift of God*, a biography of Andavan Pichchai Amma's miracle filled life. Her abnormal behaviour led people to call her 'pichchi' meaning mad. However the revered Paramacharya of Kanchi mutt corrected them saying 'She is not *pichchi* (mad) but *Andavan Pichchai* (literally the gift of God to us).'

Transgression and Transcendence

Finally, the language used in the state of spiritual ecstasy is a language that could well belong to the realm of schizophrenia or insanity. Julia Kristeva, the well known feminist psycho-analyst uses the interesting phrase 'Holiness, Madness, Poetry' in her analysis of subjectivity in religious poetics.²⁰ The language of madness and mysticism transcends both gender and symbolic language. The mystical experience (in both men and women) is beyond the experiential field of physical existence and becomes a transcendental/metaphysical moment which no language can unlock. However mystics, in their urge to communicate this incommunicable experience, are compelled to use the existent language structure. So their communication of their mystical experiences sounds mad, unintelligible. Certain metaphors, bridal mysticism, for instance, cut across race, religion and gender distinctions. The state of union with the divine is also expressed by both men and women saints in erotic mysticism. A verse from the *vachana* of Akka Mahadevi illustrates this point:

On a frame of water, raising a roof of fire,
Spreading the hailstones for the bridal floor-bed,
A husband without a head,
Married a wife without legs,
My parents gave me to an inseparable life,
They married me to Lord Chenna Mallikarjuna.

(Tipperudraswami: 1982: 222-23)

Along with Akka Mahadevi, Ayadakki Lakkamma, a married Shiva Sharane in the Virasaivite movement, uses the metaphor of the *sati-pati* (wife-husband) relationship.

When the seed is falling
on the face of the blossom
can there be a back and front
to the blossoming face?
If you forget it and

²⁰ Julia Kristeva, *The Revolution in Poetic Language*, Columbia University Press, 1984.

if I realize it, can
there be different bodies?
When the root vanishes
The blossom remains.
For this union can there be
Any other name but sati-pati?

(Hiremath: 1968: verse 89: page: 44)

Many of the ecstatic songs of female mystics go beyond the language of bridal union into a realm that is wholly unintelligible. The best examples of this are the *abhangs* of Muktabai, one of the saints of the Maharashtrian *Warkari panth* and the sister of the saint Jnaneshwar. She sings:

The ant flew in the sky
and devoured the orb of the sun;
Here is a great miracle.
A barren woman gave birth to a son.
A scorpion went to the nether world
and the *seshmaga* [sacred serpent] saluted
the feet of the scorpion.
A fly delivered
and the child is a *dhar* [a bird]
Seeing this, Muktai laughed.

(Sakala Sant Gatha: No.42: p.324)

In a world structured by patriarchal language, the language of these female mystics is necessarily equated with the “gibberish of the mad, the retarded and the schizophrenic.”

This article has explored the myriad ways in which women on the spiritual path have responded to personal, marital and social pressures. These responses ranged from social withdrawal to manifestations of hysteria and madness and went hand in hand with the language of mysticism. Suffering in the material world led to a state where the women

I would like to dedicate this article to my cousin Captain Narayanan who after a service of twenty years at Ramanasramam, attained Bhagavan Sri Ramana's feet on the 28th August, 2009.

VIDEO INTERVIEW

Recollections of Bhagavan

V. S. V. MANI

I originally came from Tiruvannamalai. I worked in a bank and eventually retired as the chairman of a bank. Though I started visiting the ashram in 1926, at the age of twelve years, it was only from 1939 onwards that I was a regular visitor to Sri Ramanasramam. So I was fortunate in being associated with Bhagavan for over 70 years.

I saw a photo of Bhagavan in a friend's house and afterwards I was very eager to see Bhagavan. One day, I reached Tiruvannamalai by train in the early morning, walked to the ashram and arrived at 6-30 a.m. I prostrated before Bhagavan. He asked me from where I had come. I told him that I was studying at Sethupati High School at Madurai and came for Bhagavan's darshan. I got into the habit that, whenever I went out, permission would first be taken of Bhagavan before leaving

V.S.V. Mani passed away at the age of 96, on the 21st November, 2009. He was a loyal friend of the ashram.

the Ashram. I wanted to see the place where the Karthigai Deepam was lit. Bhagavan told me to go to Skandasramam and from there go to the top of the Hill. He asked me to go on the straight path and not to follow any short cuts. After passing Skandasramam, we took an apparently shorter route. There we met monkeys and cobras on the way. Frightened by this, we returned and took the straight path as instructed by Bhagavan. Then we understood the value of his instructions as we would encounter obstructions if we didn't follow Bhagavan's advice.

I was married to Lalitha who was born and brought up in the Ashram. My marriage was fixed in Bhagavan's own presence. My wife had a close acquaintance with him even from her childhood. She realised that he was a *sannyasi* like others but also her relative so to speak.

Our first child was unable to walk until the age of two. When we brought the child to the Ashram, Bhagavan stroked the child's legs and on the third day she walked and on the fourth day, she started running. The child came and told Bhagavan that he spoke well. In return, Bhagavan lovingly gave her some sugar candy and a blessing. In the old meditation hall Bhagavan would feed the monkeys and squirrels with peanuts. Even though there were people crowding the dhyana hall, animals would fearlessly come into the room.

Somebody had presented a strong bull in the gosala. It was strong and violent. It would break its chains, rampage and charge those who were near it. Hearing this, Bhagavan rose from his seat, went to the bull and asked him to calm down. Due to Bhagavan's sweet pleadings the bull stopped, strolled away and didn't attack anyone after that. Bhagavan's very look made the bull tranquil.

I am always thinking of Bhagavan who always keeps me well.

For five generations my family was in close contact with Bhagavan. Being a doctor's daughter, my wife Lalitha set right the dispensary which had been constructed in the Ashram. My wife had close contact with Bhagavan and even in the dining hall Bhagavan would ask her what she would like to eat. When we invited Bhagavan for the *grahapravesham* of our house at Madurai, Bhagavan told

my wife that he would come there if she brought Annamalai there. Bhagavan said, "Annamalai is static and so also I am static and I will not move away."

When I had to leave the ashram and return to work, I requested permission to depart but Bhagavan told us to remain for two more days. It was unusual for Bhagavan to influence a person's travel plans. It turned out that the next day there was a cyclone and heavy rain, all roads were obstructed, trains were disrupted and nobody could travel. There was a breach in the railway track beyond Villupuram. Only then did we understand why Bhagavan didn't permit us to leave the Ashram.

Since her parents had regularly performed *lalitha chakram puja*, my wife Lalitha was given that name by Bhagavan when she was born. Bhagavan asked her to visit Tiruchuzhi and described to her the entire layout of the area where he had played as a child. Whenever Bhagavan went for giripradakshina, he would take Lalitha with him. They chanted *Aksharamanamalai* and he explained the details of every place and shrine that they passed. When Bhagavan worked in the kitchen, he would use a grinder and showed her how to make a smooth paste for the preparation of dosas and iddies.

Generally when Bhagavan went on giripradakshina, most of the ashram inmates went along with him, carrying food with them.

During the days when Bhagavan was at Skandasramam, his nephew T.N. Venkataraman was a young boy with long locks of hair. In those days, both boys and girls had their hair plaited. Once a snake came down a pillar and Bhagavan asked it to go away without hurting anybody. Bhagavan had a sense of humour and he made a joke comparing the snake with the plait of young Venkataraman's hair.

At the entrance to Skandasramam, there is still the raised platform where Bhagavan would sit. There was only one train to Tiruvannamalai which arrived at 6 a.m. There were no bus services. As the number of persons coming towards Skandasramam came into view, Bhagavan would count the number of people and arrange for their food, which would either be prepared or obtained from the town as bhiksha.

My father-in-law's mother, Lakshmi Ammal, lived at Tiruchuzhi and she studied, played and stayed with Bhagavan during her younger days. They came to know about his whereabouts when Bhagavan was living in Virupaksha Cave. She immediately came to see Bhagavan accompanied by a friend. But Bhagavan did not speak to her as he was in silence. She shed tears on seeing Bhagavan and he silently consoled her.

In the early days there was only a thatched shed in the Ashram. My grandmother Lakshmi Ammal and my mother stayed in the town, in the house of Pichu Iyer, my aunt's husband. They would come to the Ashram at 5 a.m. and helped with all kinds of service during the day. When the kitchen was constructed, the highways engineer K.K. Nambiar supervised the work.

While grinding wet flour in the grinding stone, Bhagavan instructed my mother-in-law how to press the flour properly, while the actual rolling of the stone was done by him. This is how Bhagavan gave instructions in a very simple way.

There was only one thatched guest house for men in the ashram. I remember Omandur Ramaswamy Reddiar, later the chief minister of Madras Presidency, Gopal Rao, who was the chairman of the Bank of Baroda and one Sastri, who was the regional manager of Central Bank of India, staying there with us. There were no regular cooks at that time. We used to serve the food and clean the vessels. As there were no servants everyone had to clean their respective rooms.

My job in the ashram was to take instructions from the visiting doctors who stayed and served the Ashram. They attended the patients who came for free. Dr Srinivasa Rao later started the free dispensary. These doctors would bring with them for free distribution, the medicines required in the subsequent months. At that time there was no building for the hospital. The medicines were stacked in the small cupboards under the staircase near the dhyana hall. The compounders would take the doctor's prescriptions and dispense the medicines from this place.

At that time Sama Iyer (Sama Thatha) did the cooking. He was very fond of Lalitha, who would clean the vessels and help him. Since

she was dark in complexion, she would say that as she was black, she was cleaning the blackish vessels. So Sama Thatha would fondly call her '*Karuppayee*' [the black one].

Muruganar also affectionately called her '*Karuppayee*'. When Bhagavan wrote a poem in Tamil and showed it to Muruganar, who then pointed out some mistakes in it and corrected them. Bhagavan jokingly said that in the olden days Nakkeeran had pointed out mistakes in *Easwaran's* (i.e. God's) poems. Similarly Muruganar was the Kaliyuga Nakkeeran, correcting his poems. Such was Muruganar's intimacy with Bhagavan.

The office and the Book Depot stood in what is today Bhagavan's Samadhi hall. I would regularly help with the books in the stall. Sarvadhikari Chinnaswamigal commanded everyone in their jobs. He would make me check the cash and keep accounts, as well as make flower-garlands.

Bhagavan was fond of groundnuts (peanuts). I used to peel off the shell and give them to Bhagavan. Lakshmiammal used to collect the shelled groundnuts and keep them safe so that Bhagavan could be offered them at a later date.

Bhagavan moved easily with everybody. When he sat in the Hall, everyone silently observed him. It was a common phenomenon that whatever questions one wanted to ask Bhagavan would get answered before questioning him. When we looked at Bhagavan's face, we did not need to ask any questions. Both in the mornings and evenings, he would enquire with everyone about their welfare.

Bhagavan talked to me on many occasions and while I was studying he would enquire about the school and the place where I was studying. I had no capacity to understand the correct meaning of *tattvas* and such terms of philosophy, but Bhagavan gave me reference books to clarify their meaning, and helped me understand them. He was fluent in all the regional languages.

I had no courage to ask questions of Bhagavan as I was not mature or conversant with spiritual matters. But because my wife and my father-in-law were very close to him, they would speak freely with him.

Kavyakanta Ganapathi Muni was a famous scholar and jnani.

He was a great scholar (*pulavar*) in the Hyderabad Nizam's Durbar. The Nizam and Kavyakantha played chess together for three days, and when the latter won the game, the Nizam presented him with a plate full of gold coins. But Kavyakanta took only six coins and left Hyderabad for Tiruvannamalai.

Kavyakanta Ganapathi had a long white beard and looked like Tagore. He would talk to Bhagavan in Tamil and Telugu about various aspects of Vedanta, which we could not understand. During these conversations Bhagavan would refer to various Vedantic scriptures. It is a wonder how and when Bhagavan studied these texts.

Kavyakanta Ganapathi Muni enquired of Bhagavan how he was able to survive on the hill when he was observing mouna and how he got his food. Bhagavan told him that there were very many shrubs on Arunachala and if he ate small fruits like *sundaikkai*, he did not feel hunger at all. There was one Mouna Swami from Courtallam who came to Bhagavan and wanted to learn about *rasavada*. Bhagavan told him that being a *sannyasi*, he should not aspire for *rasavada* and *siddhis*, but instead aspire to seek the Truth. After returning to Courtallam, my father-in-law offered him a house where he set up an ashram for the swami which was named 'Mounaswami Math'.

There was no water when the construction of Skandasramam was contemplated. But Bhagavan instructed us to dig for water at a spot and water was soon found to flow copiously. Now there is a perennial water supply there. At night, during Bhagavan's time, wild animals would come to drink water. Bhagavan said that the ashramites should not drive them away because it was their place.

At Ramanasramam whenever work was required, Bhagavan would join in and all of us, including the ladies and children, would assist him by carrying the stones, sand, cement, etc. Thus we had the opportunity of close proximity to Bhagavan.

One of Bhagavan's classmates, Ranganatha Iyer, visited Bhagavan. Bhagavan recollected the playdays with him and how they had climbed the mango trees to pluck fruits and swam in the Tiruchuzhi tank. At that time water was overflowing the bund gate, Ranganatha was caught in rushing water near the wooden plank but Bhagavan rescued

him. Ranga Iyer said that he had made him reach the shore, with the implied meaning that Ranga had crossed the *samsara sagara*. He also said that he was in good hands, meaning that Bhagavan had enabled him to cross the *samsaric* hurdles.

My mother-in-law would also assist with all the ashram work in the kitchen, like cleaning, sweeping, etc. But being young and timid she had no occasion to talk to Bhagavan. She held Bhagavan in awe as God Himself and was very devoted to him.

My sons were also regular visitors to the Ashram from their first birthdays. Bhagavan fed them their first solid food in their mouths. They were fortunate to receive *prasad* from Bhagavan's hands. All my sons and my daughter, by his Grace, are well settled in good positions. The fiftieth anniversary of my marriage to Lalitha was held here.

There was no sense of difference in the Ashram and all were treated equally. There was neither guru nor shishya. Bhagavan was not a *sannyasi*, but an *atmajnani*. He was an avatar of Lord Dakshinamurthi. In the hall he sat facing south and wherever else he sat, faced south as well. Even his sofa where he gave darshan faced south. I have not seen him sitting facing east. So, I feel that it is true that Bhagavan is the avatar of Dakshinamurthi. There has been a guru for everyone, including Sankaracharya. But Bhagavan had no guru — nobody gave him *sannyasa diksha*. His guru was only *Isvara* (God).

Every word uttered by him is *upadesa* (instruction). Only after serving food to everyone did he eat his food. He would never leave any food on his leaf-plate. He never allowed anybody to take away the used banana leaf except Sama Iyer.

He would always sit with his legs stretched out. He explained to Lalitha that his legs were very weak because he had remained sitting for long periods during his earlier days. Whenever his legs gave him pain, he himself applied oil and massaged his legs. He didn't ask the help of anyone else to massage his legs. Even though he did not say anything it was clear from his behaviour that he did not like the traditional deferential *guru-shishya* notion of service to the guru.

Whatever was needed for the development of the Ashram, it would, by Bhagavan's grace, appear. When Chinnaswami bemoaned

the scarcity of provisions, Bhagavan would reply that he need not worry and that everything would be alright. Very often somebody would soon after bring in a cart from the railway station, carrying the required provisions, whether bags of rice or say, plantain leaves.

At the time of the planning of the mother's temple, I was there during the discussions. It was proposed to build the temple in a simple style and Bhagavan approved the plans. During its construction, Bhagavan inspected the work daily and discussed with the *sthapathi*, every stage of construction that is should be done strictly according to *Agama Sastras*. Bhagavan never discussed the financial aspects of the construction of the temple. When the idol was to be placed facing east, it was Bhagavan who marked the exact direction with his walking stick.

The exact direction could not be easily ascertained, but Bhagavan correctly measured the angle and geometrical location. This was due to his *jnana drishti*, for he had never studied any sastras.

Everyday Mounaswami would bring the mail. Bhagavan would peruse it carefully and tell him that the replies be sent immediately. When a radio was donated to the Ashram it was set up in the Old Hall for Bhagavan to listen to the news.

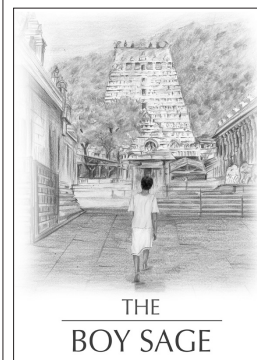
When I heard that Bhagavan was seriously ill in early 1950, my wife and I came immediately to the Ashram. Bhagavan was moved to a new room opposite mother's temple. His left arm was heavily bandaged. My father-in-law, who was a doctor, offered to treat him, but Bhagavan refused to take any medical treatment, and only on strong persuasion did he agree. When my wife asked him if he had any pain, Bhagavan replied, "The pain is only for the body and not for me. You should know this, as you have been coming here for many years — that the pain is not for me. That is the teaching: that the body and Self are different." This was two days before his *mahanirvana*. We stayed here all those days and on the *mahanirvana* day also.

Much earlier, on learning about the growth above the left elbow, I came immediately to the Ashram to be with Bhagavan. On seeing Bhagavan's arm covered in a bandage, I cried aloud in grief. Bhagavan asked me, "Why are you crying?" I said, "Seeing you suffer severe pain causes me much grief." He replied that the pain was only to the body

and not for him. He also said that even though I had been coming to see him for a long time, I did not seem to understand that the body and the mind are separate. He gave different examples to explain this.

He was happy and we could not see from his face that he was suffering. He spoke to my wife. He talked as usual. Even though almost nobody was allowed to go near him, my wife was allowed to do so. There seemed to be no change in him and, right until his nirvana day he remained cheerful, so that many devotees did not realise that he would die.

Just ten minutes before his end, he was sitting with his eyes closed and nobody was allowed to go near him. My father-in-law was not there then. Everyone was alert knowing that something would happen. Only five minutes after he left the body did we understand that he was no more. There was no sign of shivering or heavy breathing. The end was very natural. We had never thought the end would come on that particular day. Immediately after his passing there was silence for a minute but afterwards cries of grief arose. After two minutes people outside the ashram saw a bright light, like a star, going towards the hill. It lasted for two or three minutes. It was like the flame of a burning torch. It went to the top of the hill and disappeared in the sky. It was reddish yellow in colour.▲



THE
BOY SAGE

This is the first book published by Sri Ramanasramam with young children between the ages of 8-11 in mind. It is the story of the young Venkataraman. The Sage's teachings are brought to the children with a simple text and original pencil drawings.

Geeta Bhatt has worked with children in the USA for more than 28 years. A.K. Maithreyi is an art teacher from Bangalore and has worked for over a year on bringing alive the story. Younger and non-reader children will be drawn to the drawings. The story can be followed by them

KEYWORD

Saranagati

Sanskrit: Absolute self-surrender. Total dependence on God, leaving everything to His will.

In Hinduism, two main paths to Self-realization are taught. One analogy used in such teaching is of a person in chains. On the path of knowledge the spiritual seeker identifies with the Absolute, thereby becoming larger and larger, until the chains snap. On the path of devotion, the devotee declares “Not-me, O Lord, but you!” and thus becomes smaller and smaller until one is able to slip through the links of the chains.

Sri Ramana remarked:

“The ‘I’ casts off the illusion of ‘I’ and yet remains as ‘I’. Such is the paradox of Self-Realization. The realized do not see any contradiction in it. Take the case of *bhakti* – I approach *Iswara* and pray to be absorbed in Him. I then surrender myself in faith and by concentration. What remains afterwards? In place of the original ‘I’, perfect self-surrender leaves a residuum of God in which the ‘I’ is lost.

This is the highest form of devotion (*parabhakti*), *prapatti*, surrender or the height of *vairagya*.¹

Many religious traditions around the world advocate devotion and surrender to God as a means of salvation. A basic presupposition of these religions is that there is posited a gap between the human and the Divine. Somehow, these systems must find a 'bridge' which will enable these two separate entities to commune with each other. If one sets up God as an 'other', remote and estranged, a link must be found which will somehow tie the physical to the supra-physical. This link is devotion or surrender. Devotion is called the path of love, an intense love of God wherein the devotee says, "That constant love which the ignorant have for the objects of the senses, let me have that constancy in my love for Thee." Note that devotion, as it is traditionally known, involves not the disappearance of the ego, the 'I'- thought, but its release from all limiting barriers. No matter how high the soul moves, God is always higher — the soul may attain a God-like nature, but never God's identity.

In Sri Vaisnavism of South India, a distinction is made between devotion (*bhakti* is from *bhaj* = to share, partake of, to love, worship, praise, or revere) and surrender (*saranagati* from *sarana* = protecting, guarding, refuge + *gati* = come for, approach; thus, 'to seek refuge'). Devotion is said to be 'formal'. It is like a ladder with a gradual movement upwards towards communion with God. It has qualifications and is dependent on external aids. Formal devotion begins at birth and culminates at death. Thus, the devotee must have an unflinching will to undergo all the disciplines needed and the patience to endure. It is described as a long, step-by-step, moment-to-moment, path to God. It is a long hard path, full of pitfalls, and in Sri Vaisnavism, not open to all castes as rituals, *mantras*, and temple worship are not only required but absolutely mandatory, and such requirements are not open to all the Hindu castes. This path of devotion is called the 'way of the monkey'. A baby monkey clings to its mother's chest as she moves about the forest trees. If the

baby monkey lets go at any time, the little monkey will fall and die.

¹ Venkataramiah, M., *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, 2009. Talk 28, p. 29-30.

Thus in this path the devotee must exert continual *self-effort* as well as having faith in God.

Surrender, on the other hand, is a path open to everyone. The only prerequisite is a complete change of heart, an absolute confidence in the saving grace of the Lord. It has no rules. It is said to be a direct and easy path, for, once taken, all is then left in the hands of God. It is known as the 'way of the kitten'. A kitten makes no effort when the mother cat moves it from place to place. It just goes limp. If it was to struggle, it would make the mother's efforts much more difficult. This path preserves the essentials of formal devotion, but dispenses with the non-essentials.

The path of surrender implies abiding by the will of God in all things. There will be no grievances about what may or may not take place. Surrender dictates abiding by God's will whether God appears or not, does what one wants or not. One awaits His pleasure, at all times, in all circumstances. To ask God to do as one pleases or desires, is not to surrender. One does not demand that God fulfill one's desires. God knows what is best, and when, and how, to do everything. Surrender means leaving everything entirely up to God. God carries such a person's burden just as a lawyer, to whom one has signed over the power of attorney, carries one's burden.

Sri Ramana advocated two paths to Self-realization: Self-enquiry (*Atma-vichara*) and the path of surrender. He said:

"There are only two ways to conquer destiny or be independent of it. One is to enquire for whom is this destiny and discover that only the ego is bound by destiny and not the Self, and that the ego is non-existent. The other way is to kill the ego by completely surrendering to the Lord, by realizing one's helplessness and saying all the time: 'Not I but Thou, Oh Lord!', and giving up all sense of 'I' and 'mine' and leaving it to the Lord to do what he likes with you. Surrender can never be regarded as complete so long as the devotee wants this or that from the Lord. True surrender is love of God for the sake of love and nothing else, not even for the sake of salvation. In other words, complete effacement of the ego is necessary to conquer destiny, whether you achieve this effacement through Self enquiry or

through *bhakti marga*.”²

The path of devotion or surrender is generally thought of as the very antithesis of Self-enquiry since it is based on the presumption of duality, of worshipper and worshipped, whereas Self-enquiry presumes absolute non-duality. So, if Sri Ramana proposed surrender as a path, we should see what surrender entails in his definition of it. He remarked about surrender:

“The spark of *jnana* will easily consume all creation as if it were a mountain-heap of cotton. All the crores of worlds being built upon the weak (or no) foundation of the ego, they all topple down when the atomic bomb of *jnana* comes down upon them.” Bhagavan continued, “All talk of surrender is like pinching jaggery from the jaggery image of Lord Ganesa and offering it as *naivedya* to the same Lord Ganesa. You say you offer your body, soul and all possessions to God. Were they yours that you could offer them? At best, you can only say, ‘I falsely imagined till now that all these which are yours (God’s) were mine. Now I realise they are yours. I shall no more act as if they are mine.’ And this knowledge that there is nothing but God or Self, that ‘I’ and ‘mine’ don’t exist and that only the Self exists, is *jnana*.” He added, “Thus there is no difference between *bhakti* and *jnana*. *Bhakti* is *jnana mata* or the mother of *jnana*.”³

To conclude, Sri Ramana remarked to those who believe in the reality of the subject-object relationship and who advocate surrender to the worshipped by the worshipper, that they develop the feeling that God alone exists and that ‘I’ does not count. This leads to the effacement of the ego (*ahamkara*) and therefore there is no further sense of difference between the ‘I’-thought and God. Even in *jnana marga* complete surrender is necessary for without the relinquishing of that false sense of doership, one cannot dissolve the false sense of identification which deludes us. The state of Self-realization is beyond the triad of knower, knowledge, and known.

² Mudaliar, D., *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, 2006. p.266, 28-6-1946.

³ Mudaliar, D., *Ibid.*, p. 49, 22-11-1945 Afternoon.

Ulladu Narpadu

Based on Lakshmana Sarma’s
Commentary

Verse Twenty Six

S. RAM MOHAN

Verse 26

The world of name and form comes into existence along with the rise of the ego. That is, when the ego comes into existence, the world is manifested. When the ego becomes quiescent or dissolves, the world is no longer there. Hence ego itself is the source of the world. [All that you see and experience in the world is nothing but a manifestation of ego]. Therefore, the means for renouncing the world is seeking to know this Truth.

Commentary

The core of the teaching here is that *the ego is the world*. In the ego all is contained. We take the world’s existence for granted. It is the world that is the stage on which the drama of life is staged.

S. Ram Mohan is on the editorial board of this magazine. He is also the editor of the Tamil magazine *Ramanodhayam*, dedicated to Bhagavan.

In reality, it has no existence at all. It comes into manifestation when the ego comes into existence and, conversely, disappears when the ego withdraws its manifestation. While in the deep-sleep stage (*sushupti*), ego's three expressions — awareness of the body, mind and intellect — subside in the Self. None of us experience the world at the time of deep sleep. When the ego ceases, the whole world will also end. The quest of knowing this is called *sannyasa* or renunciation.

This is explained in verse 13 of the *Ulladu Narpadu* supplement. In this verse, Bhagavan says that not having the *dehatma-bhava* ('I-am-the-body feeling') bestows on us all the objects of our pursuit: munificence, sacrifice (*yajna*), devotion, inner space (*chidakasa*), eternal truth, grace, abiding silence, tranquillity, wisdom, renunciation, liberation and bliss. Thus he explains that true renunciation is the giving up of the identification with the body-mind complex.

In the Sanskrit version of *Sat-Darsanam*, the phrase '*Sarvajayaaya Marga*', is used and it means that this is the path for conquering everything. A king like Alexander attempts to conquer the known world. Afterwards, he wants to keep it and live in peace but this is impossible. History is replete with mighty conquerors tasting defeat in the end. But a *jnani*, by conquering his ego and identifying himself with the Self, becomes the Lord of all creation, because the entire creation is only the manifestation of the Self, springing from It and ultimately abiding in It. Any victory of the phenomenal world through military conquests will be ephemeral and unreal. When you succeed in the search for the root of the ego, you become one with ultimate existence, knowledge and bliss — which is Pure Consciousness. This is the true conquest.

Christ says, "I am the Gate, I am the Truth, I am the Way". His 'I' does not connote any ego or private person. It denotes the Universal — the Cosmic Consciousness.

There is an interesting anecdote concerning the Buddha. Lord Buddha's directive to his disciples was: "Be a light unto yourself." King Prasenajit came to see the Buddha. He saw a large number of bhikkhus bowing to him, saying *Buddham saranam gacchami* (I surrender to the feet of Buddha). Prasenajit found a contradiction in

this. He asked Buddha, "Master! You tell the people, 'Be a light unto yourself'. But even after this, when they say they surrender to you and touch your feet, you don't prevent them. If you say 'Be a light unto yourself', there is no need to surrender to anybody else, so why should they fall at your feet?"

The Buddha laughed and said, "These are not my feet. They are not surrendering to me because there is nobody inside me as the ego who can claim surrender. The disciples are simply surrendering. It is not surrender to me. Since they are not fully evolved yet, they are not capable of simple surrender without an excuse. My feet are just an excuse. I, as a person, do not exist!"

The Buddha as a manifestation of ego does not exist. But the Supreme Self, He is; you are not. The ego is a false idea and it is used till the real Self is known. Then it naturally falls away.

While the commentary on the first 25 verses of *Ulladu Narpadu* is entitled 'Discrimination' by Sri Lakshmana Sharma, the next portion of the commentary is entitled 'Enquiry into the Real Self'. The essence of the first section is as follows: experience of the Self is itself the state of deliverance. It is also the state of right awareness. The means to it is the seeking of that Self by turning the mind inwards. The obstacle to this sadhana is the unconscious identification with the thoughts in the mind. The rising of thoughts in the mind turns the attention outwards. Belief in the reality of the world is the cause of this obstacle. Instead of seeing the world as springing up from the substratum of Pure Consciousness, we think the phenomenal world of names and forms, (which are not real) is real. This world of names and forms enshrouds Reality and prevents It from being seen. By undertaking and pursuing the *sadhana*, Self-enquiry, the *sadhaka* must equip him or her self with the powerful tool of *viveka* (discrimination) of the real from the unreal. This enquiry, with the grace of the guru, will make the *sadhaka* arrive at the truth that the world of names and forms, the dyads and triads, time and space and all the other manifestation in the phenomenal world are creations of the mind, which has its root in the ego. This is the meaning of verse twenty six. ▲



Silhouettes of Afterlife

N. A. MOHAN RAO

The doctrine of *karma* tells us that even after death we continue to *be*,¹ but without a gross body until we are born again. The re-birth is said to come either immediately after our death, or later.² We could be reborn as a human being, or as an animal, a bird, an insect or some other sentient being.³

The cause of our re-births is our unfulfilled desire, existing as *vasanas*, which we wish to fulfil in order to obtain happiness. But every desire that is fulfilled stirs up further desires,⁴ many of which

¹ “Death cannot mean non-being.” *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, (Comp.) M. Venkataramiah, §306 of 26.12.1936. See also §64 of 6.7.1935, and *Bhagavad-gita*, 2.12, 13, 22.

² Venkataramiah, M., (comp.), op. cit., §276 of 5.11.1936, p.232 (1994); and §573 of 11.11.1938.

³ Ibid, §198 of 10.6.1936.

⁴ Ibid, §495 of 19.5.1938, p.476 (1994).

N. A. Mohan Rao lives in Hyderabad, where he has settled after retiring as a professor of chemical engineering. He spends his time in selective, intensive reading, and occasional writing in both Telugu and English.

remain unfulfilled in turn, so tending to make the births and deaths endless. A time comes when we realize the foolishness of our addiction to this body-bound happiness, which never lasts and alternates with unhappiness which is overshadowed by death. It is then that we come under the influence of a guru, and by his grace, emerge out of the hold of *avidya*⁵ and realize ourselves to be truly birthless and deathless.

So, then, we may say, within the sphere of our ignorance, our 'life cycle' consists of the period from our birth in the present life to our birth in the next. Of this cycle, we concern ourselves almost solely with the first half, namely, the period from birth to death, and hardly ever give a thought to what the other half might be like. It is true that we do not have reliable means of ascertaining the nature of this 'afterlife', the period *from death to rebirth*, since the scriptures do not give a clear and consistent account of it.⁶ But it does not mean that we can afford to remain totally uninformed about the nature of our afterlife.

The doctrine of *karma* and the concept of *dharma* are considered the starting point of the study of spirituality.⁷ These first lessons often make references to terms like heaven, hell, *vaitarani*, *apurva* etc, which relate to our afterlife. If we do not have at least *some* idea of what these terms imply, our base-level spiritual understanding will be far too hazy and ill-suited to back up our *sadhana* at this level.⁸

⁵ This is certain to happen, since as Bhagavan says, "The *karman* (actions) carry the seeds of their own destruction in themselves." Ibid, §11 of 15.5.1935. The forces of destruction come into play obviously after a sustained period of 'perpetuation' of *karma* as stated in verse 2 of *Upadesa Saram*.

⁶ This apparent laxity of the scriptures may be because the post-death states belong to a different kind of existence which cannot precisely be expressed in earth-bound terms. It may also be that we do not really need a very *exact* knowledge of these states to serve as the theoretical basis for our *sadhana*.

⁷ If some seekers do not find much of a need for them, it may be because they have crossed the stage of *srishti-drishti-vada* and have advanced well into *drishti-srishti-vada*. Vide *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, Devaraja Mudaliar, Entry of 15.3.1946; pp.149-50 (1989).

⁸ Even when we advance to the *bhakti* or *jnana* levels, we often find it *convenient* to resort to the doctrine of *karma* as a short-cut to curb unproductive thoughts like ruing the past, anxiety about the future, etc.

It is to prevent this subtle impediment to our *sadhana*, and partly to satisfy our natural curiosity, that we look to obtain some coherent understanding of our afterlife.

Soul, and Kinds of Afterlife

From a practical point of view, we may look upon the *jiva* (individual), relieved of his gross body upon death, as a 'soul'. It means the soul is the conglomerate of the Self with the causal body and the subtle body.⁹ There might arise times when the subtle body recedes into the causal; and when Realization dawns, even the causal body is resolved in its substratum of the Self, and so the soul becomes identified with the Self.

A human soul may have its afterlife in one of four ways. Two of them pertain to souls that take re-birth after a stint in heaven or hell. As Bhagavan puts it, "If one's merits and demerits are equal, they are directly reborn here. Merits outweighing demerits, the subtle bodies go to heavens and are then reborn here; demerits outweighing merits, they go to hells and are afterwards reborn here."¹⁰ The other two cases of afterlife are of souls that have no rebirth — either due to prior Liberation on earth, or due to Liberation being in the offing without necessity for any further *sadhana*.¹¹

The path taken by the soul of a virtuous person, involving a stint in heaven, is known as *pitriyana* ('path of the elders' or ancestors). That taken by the soul of one who has completed all *sadhana*, but has not realized Truth due to certain *pratibandhakas* (obstacles), is known as *devayana* ('path of gods'). When he becomes finally liberated, he is said to have obtained *krama-mukti* (gradual Liberation).¹² A person

⁹ "Even the disembodied souls have subtle bodies." *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, §328 of 17.1.1937, p.294 (1994).

¹⁰ Ibid., §573 of 11.11.1938. See also *Manu-smriti*, 12.20 & 21, <http://www.esnips.com/doc/133237a9-b9bd-4823-b37e-9555e3d0f707/Manu-Smriti—Sanskrit-Text-with-English-Translation>.

¹¹ Ibid., §276 of 5.11.1936, p.232 (1994).

¹² In all such cases, the term 'he' is not taken to be gender-specific, but to stand in common for 'he', 'she' and 'it'.

who has attained Liberation while yet in the physical body, i.e., a *jnani*, is said to have obtained *sadyo-mukti* (instant Liberation). We shall try to take a brief look at these different cases in the following.

Path of *Pitriyana*¹³

If a person has acquired a surplus of ‘*punya*’ (spiritual merit) as against ‘*papa*’ (demerit) through adherence to *dharma* (righteous conduct) and performance of many virtuous acts, the soul takes the path of ‘*pitriyana*’. We shall consider it at some length, since it can serve as the most illustrative of the nature of our afterlife.

‘Virtuous acts’ may be said to be of three kinds. The most obvious ones are devotional acts like worship of God, pilgrimage, service to temples etc, with intent to earn religious merit for the purpose of a better life here and hereafter. Another class of action involves service to humanity such as by way of planting trees, serving the sick, caring for orphans, etc. The third type are rituals like *gyotistoma yajna* and *panchagni-vidya*, thought to be most effective in securing heaven to their performer.¹⁴

A virtuous soul’s passage through afterlife may be considered in three stages. The first is the egress of the soul from the body. Next comes the journey to heaven and back. The last stage consists in the taking of the new birth.

Egress of the Soul :

When the moment of death draws near, the *karmendriyas* (organs of action) — namely the organs of excretion and reproduction, feet, hands

¹³ The general reference and authority for this article is: *Brahma Sutras*, text, meanings and commentary, Swami Sivananda (The Divine Life Society), Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi (1977), Part III *Sadhanadhyaya* and Part IV *Phaladhyaya*; it may be seen online at http://www.swami-krishnananda.org/bs_0.html. The content of *Pitriyana* is mostly drawn from III.1 *Adhikaranas* 1-2 & 4-6, and IV.2 *Adhikaranas* 1-3, 5 & 9. These include a reference to *Chandogya Upanishad*, V.10.5 & 6, dealing with the way the soul takes re-birth as a human. Like most *sutra* literature, the *Brahma Sutras* are terse and pithy, and should be read in the spirit in which they were written, which is more than literal.

¹⁴ According to *Manu-smriti* 12.20 (op. cit.), simply living in accordance with *dharma* is by itself a virtuous act, and can secure heaven to the individual.

and speech — cease to function, possibly in that order, manifesting the first symptoms of imminent death. Next, the *jnanendriyas*, namely the organs of smell, taste, sight, touch and hearing fail, again possibly in that order.¹⁵ It is commonly believed that hearing is the last sense to go. Hence the ancient advice to whisper God’s name in the dying person’s ears, so that the last thought, which would determine the next birth, would be that of God.¹⁶

Next, the mind begins to withdraw. The person will now be mentally ‘lost’ to the world of their *waking state*. But he still keeps his identity in a *dream-like* state, in which he visualises his future (subtle) body. He tries to reach for it, but his attachment to his present (subtle) body does not easily let him to do so. He struggles to-and-fro between the two bodies, and this is reflected outwardly in violent gasps.¹⁷ The gasps cease only when he finally reaches and assumes the other subtle body. It signals his physical death.

These successive steps are expressed in spiritual metaphor thus: The functions of the *karmendriyas* and *jnanendriyas* merge in the mind. The function of the mind merges in *prana*. The *prana* merges in the soul. The ‘soul’ may be taken here to refer to the causal body. So, it means that all the vital functions of the *jiva* are now withdrawn into the causal plane (corresponding to our normal state of deep sleep). The *jiva* is therefore now in a *sleep-like* condition, and unconscious of his surroundings.

The soul, with all its paraphernalia of *prana*, mind and organs,

¹⁵ The subtle elements (or *tanmatras*) are subtle forms of the gross elements, the earth, water, fire, air and ether. They are named *gandha*, *rasa*, *roopa*, *sparsa* and *sabda* (smell, taste, form, touch and sound), respectively. The *karmendriyas* and *jnanendriyas* are directly derived from them, and bear a one-to-one relation with them. Vide *The Philosophy of the Panchadasi*, Swami Krishnananda, The Divine Life Society, pp.9-10 (1992). There is a principle that the entity which is subtler, arrives *earlier* during evolution and will leave *later* during involution. The sense of hearing is derived from the *tanmatra* of *sabda* (sound), which is the subtlest, and so it is thought to be the first to arrive during birth, and the last to leave during death.

¹⁶ *Bhagavad-gita*, 8.5 & 6. See also *Self Realization*, B.V. Narasimha Swami, Ch. XIX, pp. 131-2 (1996).

then abides in the subtle elements (said to constitute ‘*mukhya-prana*’). In the course of his virtuous life, the person may have conducted a number of *yajnas*, offering oblations like milk, curds etc, which preponderate in water. This water now assumes a subtle form called *apurva*, and joins the subtle elements enveloping the soul to conduct the soul to heaven as a reward for its good deeds. The *apurva* also causes a preponderance of water in the subtle elements, and thereby ensures the soul’s rebirth in a higher form of life, such as a human being or an animal (and not an insect, plant, etc), which are constituted mostly of water.

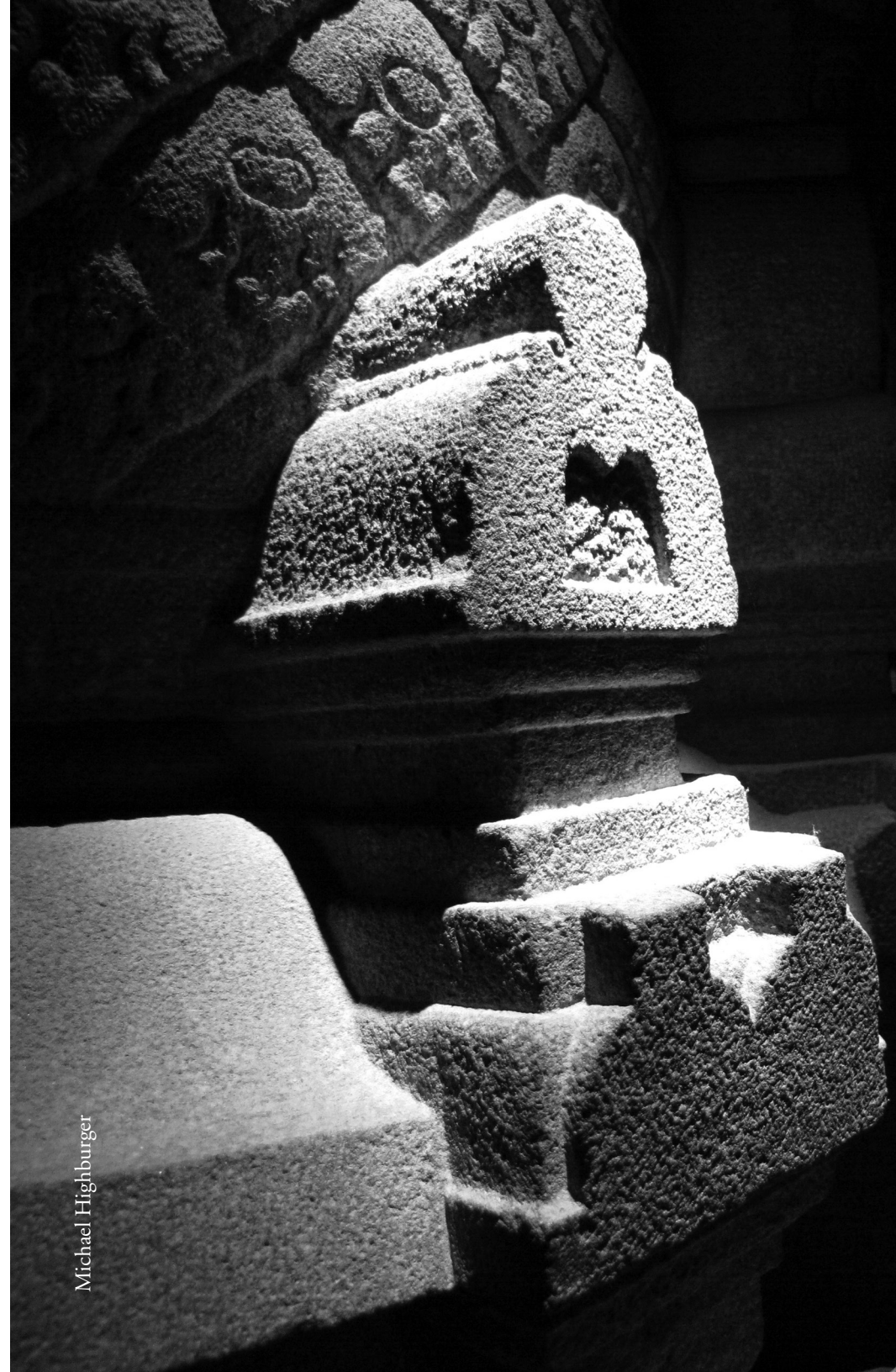
The soul, borne by the subtle elements, descends into the ‘heart’ where one hundred and one *nadis* (subtle nerves) merge. Because of its lack of *jnana*, the soul will not be able to find the very subtle *sushumna nadi* among them, which alone can lead away from rebirth. So, it takes one of the superior *nadis* among the rest, and reaches a ‘superior’ organ such as the eyes or the ears, through which it finally exits the body.¹⁸ It is now ready to start on its way to heaven, making use of the subtle elements as its vehicle.

Reaping the Fruit of Heaven:

The soul, on its way to heaven, passes through different *lokas* (astral realms) such as those of air, ether, etc. When it passes through the realm of air, it takes on temporarily the likeness of air, and similarly with the other *lokas*. After finally passing through the *loka* of ether, the soul enters heaven (called *chandraloka*).

This heaven is looked upon as the abode of the gods. These gods are believed to be the controllers of the powers of nature in the world — for instance, Vayu of the wind, Agni of fire, Indra of lightning, Varuna of rain, etc. They are supposed to discharge their duties in accordance with the will of the Creator, the supreme God. They hold their tenure of office as long as their good *karma* permits them, and are afterwards reborn like other beings. Fresh incumbents take their

¹⁸ Bhagavan remarked that Palaniswamy opened his eyes at the moment of death, signifying that his soul departed through the eyes, and that it meant he was assured of a good re-birth. *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Ibid.



place as gods, inheriting the same names.

The soul, which had so far been limited to the causal plane, now develops a temporary body made up of the subtle element of water, to enable it to derive enjoyment in heaven. It implies also that it regains its consciousness, which it lost at the time of exiting the gross body. The soul derives its enjoyment through the company of the gods. The portion of its good *karma* that was instrumental in obtaining heaven, gets expended through this enjoyment. It is then time for the soul to return to earth for a rebirth. The subtle body of the soul withdraws back into the causal fold, and the soul relapses into unconsciousness.

While returning to earth, the soul partly retraces the path it had taken during its ascent, and then takes a different path. It thus passes through the *lokas* of ether, air, smoke, mist, cloud and rain in that order. As during ascent, the soul takes on temporarily the likeness of the subtle principle of the *loka* it passes through at a given time.

Rebirth on Earth:

Since the soul passes through the realm of rain last, it descends to the earth in the form of rain. Here it has a long period of hibernation, waiting for the right circumstances for its rebirth. It is then taken up into a plant such as rice, corn, beans, plantain, etc. It remains merely associated with the plant, and does not 'animate' the plant as such.¹⁹ Shortly, the plant becomes food to a man, into whom the soul passes, and associates itself with his sperm. When the man participates in the act of procreation, the soul passes into the womb of its prospective mother and animates the human foetus. It is here that the soul once again regains its consciousness, and starts on its new life with its apportioned *karma*.

The aggregate of *karma*, called *sanchita*, possessed by an individual is said to be very large and requires countless lives for its exhaustion.²⁰

¹⁹ The plants are animated by *other* souls which take those births due to their evil *karma*. The descriptions in the subchapter *Pitriyana* about the passage of the soul, are located in *Brahma Sutras*, III.1.22-26, Swami Sivananda, op.cit., pp.408-13.

²⁰ Mudaliar, D., *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, Entry of 19.6.1946.

²¹ It would appear that *anusaya* is the term applied to this *karma* before rebirth, and *prarabdha karma* to that after rebirth. Vide *Talks*, §37, of 4.2.1935, pp.43-4.

Only the 'most potent' part of it goes to determine the nature of his immediate re-birth. If this part of *karma*, called *anusaya*,²¹ is good, the soul takes a good birth that offers much happiness. If it is bad, the soul takes an evil birth involving much suffering.²² On occasions, even a good soul may take birth as an animal, to quickly get through certain portions of its residual *karma*.²³

Path of the Sinners

A soul that has a surplus of evil *karma* takes the 'path of the sinners'. Its egress from the body is similar to that of the virtuous soul, except that it occurs through an inferior *nadi* and an inferior organ, which portend a troublesome afterlife and an evil re-birth.

After egress, the soul is hauled forcibly along the path to hell (the 'abode of Lord Yama', the god of Death) amid great suffering, with the soul 'constantly rising and falling, tired and swooning'. The soul is provided with a subtle body, called *yatana-sarira*, for the purpose of suffering these hardships and others that are to come later in hell. It implies that the soul is conscious at this point of time, unlike the soul of a virtuous person that is unconscious (on its way to heaven). Midway, the soul is made to cross the difficult *vaitaransi* river of pus and blood.

There are said to be five temporary hells and two eternal ones. The soul is lodged in one of them, and is put to insufferable torment in chastisement for the worst of its evil deeds.²⁴ The soul then returns to the earth for its re-birth as per the balance of *anusaya* (residual *karma*) left with it. It may be re-born as a human being in wretched conditions, or as a filthy animal or a tree. In extreme cases it may be re-born as an insect or other small creature which has a very short

²² In a somewhat related context, Bhagavan says, "there is an agency to look after all this." *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, op.cit., Entry of 18.11.1946.

²³ *Self Realization*, B.V. Narasimha Swami, Ch.XXII, pp.161, 163 (1996)

²⁴ Detailed accounts of the treatment in hell may be found in Swami Sivananda's *What Becomes of the Soul after Death?* excerpted at http://www.experiencefestival.com/a/Yama_Loka/id/9816. We may suppose that it is possibly the subconscious memory of such punishment that rouses the conscience of most of us against evil-doing of even an opportunistic kind.

span of life, and go through several rapid cycles of such births and deaths to reap its bad *karma*.

Path of *Devayana*

Meditation on the Self using some *pratikas* (substitutes like *prana*, heart etc) for the Self, is known as *saguna*-meditation. At the end of it, according to the scriptures, one does not forthwith get Realization, but has to wait till he overcomes certain *pratibandhakas* (obstacles). The *pratibandhakas* are said to be in the form of some residual *vasanas* which are *bhoga hetuh* (causative of enjoyment to the wise), and not *bandha hetuh* (causative of bondage).²⁵ So, when he dies, his soul goes to a so-called *brahma-loka* (abode of *saguna-brahma*), where it gets the opportunity to fulfil those residual *vasanas*. It is only then that he gets Realization, and he is said to have obtained *krama-mukti* (gradual Liberation). The path trodden by him is called *devayana* ('path of the gods').

The egress of the soul in *devayana* is slightly different from that of *pitriyana*. In the latter case, the soul is accompanied by *prana*, which is necessary for the taking of re-birth. In *devayana*, since there is no re-birth, the *prana* does not accompany the soul. Again, unlike in *pitriyana*, the soul in *devayana*, being quite enlightened, locates the very subtle *sushumna-nadi* and thereby reaches the *brahma-randhra* in the crown of the head. Its exit through this *randhra* (aperture) portends absence of re-birth.²⁶

'Path' of *Sadyo-mukti*

²⁵ Bhagavan speaks of such *vasanas* in regard to a *jnani* in *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, §515 of 17.9.1938. He does not subscribe to the view that Realization is obstructed by *vasanas* that are *bhoga-hetuh*, vide §317 of 6.1.1937, p.280 (1994), and so does not consider *krama-mukti* to be any different from *sadyo-mukti*. For his more detailed views on *krama-mukti*, vide §513 of 16.9.1938.

²⁶ For further details of *devayana* as per the scriptures, vide *Brahma Sutras*, op. cit., Part IV, Sections 2, 3 & 4.

²⁷ The scriptural view is that those who follow *nirguna-meditation* attain *sadyo-mukti*. But Bhagavan discounts any such difference between *sadyo-mukti* and *krama-mukti*. Vide *Ramana Gita*, 14.4 & 5.

A person who has realized his Self while yet living in the physical body is said to have obtained *sadyo-mukti* (instant Liberation).²⁷ His individuality as a person is resolved in the Self, and so the physical body is no more associated with an individual. However, the body continues to be active until the momentum generated by its past actions (prior to *mukti*) gets exhausted. The onlookers therefore associate an individual with the body, and refer to him as the *jnani*. The *jnani's* actions are then deemed to be merely in reciprocation of the *prarabdha karma* of those who interact with him.

When the *jnani* finally drops his body, the *pranas* are resolved in the Self, since they are not required to animate another body due to absence of re-birth. The same is true of the five *ijnanendriyas*, five *karmendriyas*, the mind and the five subtle elements.²⁸ There is thus nothing that is left to be called the soul of the person called *jnani*, and so no afterlife too.

Srishti-drishti-vada and Doctrine of *karma*

There is sometimes a tendency among us to dismiss all talk of afterlife and re-birth as mere illusion, taking Bhagavan's word for it. But we forget that Bhagavan holds these things as real or unreal as our 'present existence'.²⁹ As long as we are apt to feel disturbed by, say, an uncertainty hovering over our next meal in the day, we are bound to the relative reality³⁰ of this world, and hence the worlds beyond. It will be hypocritical of us if we take one seriously, and dismiss the other as illusory.

The doctrine of *karma* belongs to the level of *srishti-drishti-vada*, which holds that there is creation, and so, it comes to be experienced by us. It follows that the theories of re-birth and afterlife too are based on the same premise, which serves as the stepping stone to *karma-yoga*. When we move on to higher-level *sadhanas* like meditation or Self-enquiry, we are required to embrace *drishti-srishti-vada*, which

²⁸ These sixteen entities contributing to the subtle body are called *kaias*.

²⁹ *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, §31 of 4.2.1935, p.40 (1994).

³⁰ Reality (*satya*) is said to manifest at three levels: *vyavaharika* (customary, practical), *pratibhasika* (apparent, illusory), and *paramarthika* (spiritual, absolute). They relate to the three levels of *srishti-drishti*, *drishti-srishti* and *ajata*.

says that creation exists only because we sense it. But, until we advance far in that *sadhana*, we will not be able to do away *completely* with our lower-level *sadhanas*³¹ and the theories that back them.

It is hence that we need to have a tentative understanding of our afterlife. Incidentally, it may help us too to face death intelligently in case (God forbid) we fall far short in our *sadhana* and are overtaken.

³¹ *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, §80 of 3.10.1935, p.83 (1994).

Carry Me, He Said

Ana Callan

Ramana in His final days
shambling shuffling stuttering
towards me,

His feebling bones
blazing under cloth,
His walking stick
shaking under the limp
of his walk.

Carry Me, He said,
not on your shoulders,
not in your head.

Make a bower of your heart
so it may fill with the seeds
of my pleasure,
so all of my wounds
can flow through.

Let them breathe and release
so freedom may flower.

Carry Me, He said,
without need,
without measure.
And I will carry you.

Kuruntogai and the Akam legacy

ROBERT BUTLER

‘He is noble; there is no fault in him.
He wears milk-white ash,
and rides a bull!’ she says.
‘His watchful eyes, big and wide
are not two –
there are three of them!’ she says.
‘His matted locks are drenched
in Ganga’s swirling flood,’ she says.
Surely she has seen the Lord of *Kazhippalai*
set amidst the salty shallows?

Tevaram 4.6.5

On reading the verse above, a translation of verse 5 of Appar’s *patikam* on *Tirukazhipalai*, we might be forgiven for being a little puzzled; clearly, the spoken words refer to Lord Siva, and the power of his *darshan*, but who is speaking them, and who is the ‘she’

Robert Butler is a regular contributor to the Mountain Path, specializing in the translation of Tamil texts. He has recently completed a translation of the classical Tamil anthology, *Kuruntogai*, which will be available from online bookstores in early 2010.

My heart never leaves my lover.
 In the pain of love's separation
 it goes with him,
 but when I'm with him, worrying,
 it comes back to me.
 It doesn't know what to do.
 Thus torn, my friend, it suffers,
 like a flower-laden screwpine
 on the seashore,
 bending towards the shore
 with the incoming wave
 then bending back again as it recedes.

Kuruntogai 340

As with the *Appar* song, the locale is the maritime tract, the *neytal tinai*, named after a characteristic water flower of that landscape, the *neytal* lily. Its defining mood is that of anxious waiting, as the heroine pines for the return of her departed lover. In these poems, the hero and heroine often place the value of their love above life itself; the commitment of the heroine to the hero is portrayed as final and irreversible. Either she becomes one with him, merging her identity with his, or she abandons life itself. Her love, therefore, serves as a perfect metaphor for the *jiva's* spiritual longing for union with the divine, whilst at the same time being set in a context which is recognisable to all, that of the love between a man and a woman.

The poems of *Kuruntogai* are characterized by close observation of nature, which is used in each poem to illustrate and underline the central ideas within it. In the poem quoted above, the screwpine represents the heroine, and the waves, as they alternately flood in and recede, represent her love, as it ebbs and flows at the whim of her lover. The screwpine is a straggling tropical tree with long saw-edged leaves and large beautiful flowers, growing typically along the seashore. Being a tree, of course, it cannot move, and must remain where it is, stoically enduring the ocean's incessant battering, just as the heroine must remain confined in the home, at the mercy of the village gossips and the suspicions of her family about her clandestine affair.

whose words of praise the speaker is quoting? The answer is that the poet-sage is here adopting the conventions of Tamil *Akam* poetry. *Akam* means *inner, heart*, and its subject matter is the workings of the human heart, as expressed in the thoughts and emotions of a hero, *talaivan*, and heroine, *talaivi* as they experience together the ups and downs of the course of their love. The counterpart of *Akam* is *Puram* (meaning outer, external), and its subject matter is the lives of kings and chieftains, their wars and exploits, recorded by minstrels and bards and so on. This poetry attained its flowering between the second century B.C. and the fifth century A.D. The extant Tamil *Akam* and *Puram* poems, along with a contemporary work on phonetics, grammar, prosody and poetics called *Tolkappiyam* alone constitute the entire corpus of classical Tamil, without which the literary Tamil of the following 2,000 years would not exist in the form we know it.

It is not surprising, then, that later authors, such as the composers of the *Tevaram* hymns, should in their works display their indebtedness not only to the prosody of classical Tamil, but also to some of its major themes and preoccupations. In the verse quoted earlier, the theme of hero and heroine, lover and beloved, is employed as a metaphor for the soul's longing for union with Lord Siva. The speaker is the heroine's foster mother or birth mother. She has overheard her daughter's passionate outpourings and realized that she is clearly besotted with a new lover and distraught at their separation. She guesses that her new paramour must be the Lord of *Kazhippalai*. These identifications are nowhere stated, and the fact that the reader is left to deduce for him or herself the *dramatis personae* of this little drama clearly implies that the author feels that the reader will have no difficulty in making these correlations with no help from him, other than that suggested by the style and content of the *patikam* itself.

We will now look at a poem from *Kuruntogai*, a collection of 401 short verses in the *Akam* style which date from around the first century BC. The heroine's friend has just informed her of the hero's plans to visit her that night. The heroine refuses the meeting, saying that she is torn between the desire to be with him and the fear of the dangers he will surely encounter on his journey to her:

as they swim along.

Kuruntogai 57

In verse 156, spoken by the hero this time, the speaker roundly dismisses the idea that religion might constitute any form of consolation for the loss of the one he loves:

Sir Brahmin! Sir Brahmin!
 with your dangling water-pot
 and your staff
 from the red-flowering *murukku*,
 its fine bark stripped,
 Sir Brahmin
 with your ritual fasting,
 within those holy teachings
 whose meaning no words can express,
 is there some formula
 which has the power to unite
 those who are parted?
 If not, all you say is mere delusion.

Kuruntogai 156

Such verses do, however, tell us that Brahmin scholars or priests would be expected to be found amidst the minstrels, bards and servants of the hero's entourage. One would imagine that the hero is here speaking out of frustration at the failure of his ambitions, or ironically, with tongue-in-cheek. There are a number of verses in *Kuruntogai* in which the hero demonstrates that he is not unaware of the dangers of allowing free rein to ego and imagination, suggesting that he may be conversant at least with the warnings about such hazards given in the *sastras*. In the following verse, the hero replies to his companion who is taking him to task over his lovesick demeanour:

'Beware of love,' men say.
 It is not an external affliction,
 nor is it a disease of the body;
 it is not something that,
 starting small,

The poems of *Kuruntogai* are generally agreed to be amongst the oldest of the extant Classical Tamil poems and the religion reflected in them is principally an animistic one wherein elements of the landscape — rocks, mountains, trees, rivers, the ocean and so on — are deemed to be inhabited by spirits which need to be appeased. The relationship of the people with these spirits is mediated by female soothsayers, and by a class of shaman priests called *Velan*, who carry the spear, *Vel*, and who enter a state of trance to invoke the god *Murugan*, who in time became incorporated into the Hindu pantheon as the son of Lord Siva. Vedic Brahmanism, as well as Jainism and Buddhism, were clearly well established in Tamil Nadu at the time these poems were composed, but their overt influence, as evidenced in *Kuruntogai*, is merely tangential, and in one case at least, dismissive, as we will see later.

A number of the poems in *Kuruntogai* refer, directly or indirectly to the idea of reincarnation, suggesting the influence of Vedic dharma, or Brahmanism, as it is often called. In the following verse, the heroine, closely guarded by her family and unable to meet the hero, confides in her friend, saying that it would be preferable to have no life at all than to live separated from the one she loves. The lovers have been together, she feels, over many births, two people living as one soul, and their duty, *kadan*, is to remain together. 'If to die and be reunited with him in my next birth is the only way we can be together, then that is my choice,' says the heroine. There is no suggestion, however, that escape from rebirth altogether might be a desirable alternative:

Rather than bear the pain of living alone
 in a world where we are intended to share
 our life with another,
 I would rather that my life desert me here and now
 along with that love which can never die,
 and which makes our separation so unbearable.
 We are like a pair of lovebirds who suffer
 as though they have been parted for an age
 if so much as a water lily comes between them

you have slaughtered a little lamb,
 smearing the blood
 onto her fragrant forehead,
 and offered it up in prayer.
 But will that chest,
 adorned by a bright garland,
 that is causing her this pain –
 the chest of her Lord from the slopes
 of tall mountains that touch the sky –
 be able to eat it?

Kuruntogai 362

As suggested earlier one of the greatest legacies of the *Akam* poems is its constant use of well-observed observation of the natural world to mirror and elucidate the human thoughts and feelings it aims to express. In verse 90, the heroine's friend speaks to the heroine, knowing that the hero is standing unseen nearby. She praises the heroine's constancy, in spite of the suffering the secret affair is causing her; the implication is that he should marry her soon and put an end to her suffering.

How strange and wonderful
 that love has made your shoulders thin and hollow,
 yet in your noble heart
 it has brought forth only dignity and strength.
 Such is your devotion
 to your lover from the mountain country
 where the slopes are covered with ripe peppers
 and where
 at dead of night
 when the clouds rumble
 and the rain falls in sheets,
 a male monkey
 his coat dense and bristling,
 reaches for a ripe jackfruit
 with its intense flower-like perfume

rises to an agonising peak
 and then eases off again.
 Just as an elephant,
 on eating a certain weed,
 is driven into a frenzy,
 it wells up suddenly
 whenever it espies
 the object of its affection.

Kuruntogai 136

Two thousand or so years later, we find a very similar sentiment expressed by Muruganar in verse 561 of *Sri Guru Ramana Prasadam*:

Like bees intoxicated by the sight of honey, whatever they perceive, they rise up without so much as a thought, and rush towards it, so that that which they perceive becomes their very form! Know that this is the nature of our inherited dispositions [*vasanas*].

Not a few of the references to the *Velan-Murugan* cult are rather derisive in nature, suggesting, perhaps, that by this time the cult was in decline, at least amongst the upper social classes who were the patrons of this literature. It seems quite likely that even in this early period many of those involved in the creation and consumption of this literature had already adopted one of the three major religions mentioned earlier to satisfy their spiritual needs. In verse 362, in the presence of the heroine's foster mother, the heroine's friend speaks to the priest who has been called to perform an exorcism on the heroine, her lovesick condition having been interpreted as some form of demonic possession. Her words are really aimed at revealing to the foster-mother the true cause of the heroine's sickness (her clandestine love), and thus help precipitate an early marriage:

Wise priest, you who delight
 in the worship of Lord Murugan,
 don't be angry;
 there's something I want to ask you:
 with a sacrificial offering
 of many-coloured cooked rice,

resolution in the quiet shallows of the married state. The verse has resonances of *Tevaram* 1.10.2 of *Tirunanacampantar*:

Lord of Mount *Annamalai*
 where a male monkey plucks a sweet mango fruit
 and the branch, as it springs back,
 lashes the pure black rain clouds,
 scattering a fine drizzle over the rocky landscape
 so that the wild bulls and cows
 seek the shelter of His wooded groves.

Like the *Tiru-k-kural*, which is in many ways the counterpart in didactic literature of *Akam* poetry, *Kuruntogai* deals with *aram* (right living, virtue), *porul* (wealth, possessions) and *inbam* (the pleasure of love), but does not venture into the territory of *veedu* (spiritual liberation). However, as in the *Kural*, an air of spirituality pervades these poems, like the *sruti* note in a musical composition. The poetry itself, which, in many aspects, is unequalled by any other body of world literature, constitutes an inexhaustible storehouse of ideas and images for future generations to mine, whether their inspiration be spiritual or secular.

The *Akam* literature, with the lover-beloved correlation as its central axis, and its view of a natural world which resonates in harmony with the movements of the human heart, provided a perfect framework on which the poets of the later *bhakti* movement, led by Appar, Sundarar, Tirunanasambandar and Manikkavacagar, might model their compositions. Its influence continued down the centuries, in the works of such great poet-sages as Arunagirinathar and Tayumanavar, and flourishes still in the modern era in the works of sages like Muruganar and Ramana Maharshi himself, one of whose major compositions is, as we know, a 'Marital Garland' of 108 verses composed in the *Akam* style, in which the bride-heroine (the ego) complains to the bridegroom-hero (Arunachala-Siva), asking him why, having won her heart, he is now being tardy in completing the marriage (the annihilation of the ego in Himself).

and sends it splashing down
 into a swollen torrent
 which carries it swiftly to the places
 where people draw their water.

Kuruntogai 90

This picture has many resonances: the jackfruit, representing the love between the young couple, is obviously fully ripe, as it takes only a touch by the monkey to dislodge it. This fruit, once hanging beyond reach on a tree high up in the mountains, is now attainable, having floated down to the places where people live. By the same token, in becoming common knowledge, it has become the source of malicious gossip about the heroine. The stormy night might represent the mental, emotional and physical turmoil of the couple during the illicit phase of their relationship, leading up to its peaceful final

Bedsprad of Death

Ana Callan

Robed in a garment of air,
 his eyes are pools that reflect
 the cosmos. Grass in the wind
 he is, mountain in pyramids
 in the snow of his hair.

Who is it there in the picture,
 billowing layer upon layer
 of beauty so rare, it contains
 multitudes in one form

about to melt
 and spread across

galaxies like spilled
 ink, spelling

Ramana Ramana

in a calligraphy of stars?



Ramanendu Chatterjee

T.R. Kanakammal

A Tribute

On Bhagavan's Jayanti, the first of January 2010, a senior devotee of Bhagavan and an old ashramite, T.R. Kanakammal, was absorbed in Arunachala. Mountain Path offers a tribute to this blessed soul.

The Last Day

Bhagavan has written, "Bless me that I may die without losing hold of Thee or miserable will be my fate, O Arunachala." Thus goes the ninety-sixth couplet from the *Akshara Mana Malai*. But few have been the recipients of such blessed grace.

A divine play, perfectly scripted by the Master, was slowly unfolding in Bhagavan's very presence in the precincts of His shrine, where joyous Jayanti celebrations were on. Devaraja Mudaliar highlights the abundant grace that Bhagavan, the very embodiment of compassion, showered on His devotees on Jayanti days more than ever.

It was a doubly auspicious day. It was the day of Ardra – when Siva rose as a column of light between Vishnu and Brahma. Rarely

came on his rounds, Amma was surprised beyond measure to find that the power of speech had returned to her and that she could move her limbs freely, without any therapy or treatment. Later the specialist who examined her called her recovery miraculous. This direct and personal experience event taught her most convincingly the truth of total surrender and prepared her for her imminent and graceful exit.

In November 2009 she came for Deepam but extended her stay and said that she would stay on in Tiruvannamalai *until* Jayanti. Yes indeed, she did stay until Jayanti and not a day more!

The Jayanti day started like any other morning for her. With her own hands she served breakfast and coffee to the devotee who had come all the way from Kodaikanal to take care of her, probably as a way of saying 'Thank you' to her.

That day the Samadhi Hall was full to capacity. Even the spaces surrounding it were occupied. Some devotees had closed their eyes to meditate and some had positioned themselves in front of the stone balustrade by the north eastern corner of the shrine next to the side entrance near the well. Little did they realize that a divine play would soon unfold at that very spot.

The *Mahanyasa Rudra Japam* having just been completed, the Vedic pundits and the *vidyarthi*s of the Patasala were sitting in their places at the raised shrine mantapa and the *abhisheka* was about to commence. Sri Bhagavan's shrine was shining resplendently in all its glory.

The parayana of the *Mahānarayana Upanishad* was about to commence. The teacher of the Veda Patasala had taken his seat and was about to give the signal to start. One of the devotees who had come from Delhi nudged another saying, "Look at this old lady immaculately draped in a beautiful sari." Kanakammal was just then entering the hall through the entrance near the well, using her walking stick and escorted by her friend from Kodaikanal on one side and her attendant, Ramani, on the other. She moved towards the stone railing to rest her hand, and tried to hold on to it with her eyes directed at

do Ardra and Punarvasu¹ fall on the same day. It was also according to the Western calendar, New Year's Day, the first of January 2010.

The event that happened that morning at the Samadhi Hall shrine, in an atmosphere permeated with the presence of Bhagavan, was so natural as to lend it grace and dignity. In retrospect it seems as if Bhagavan had been preparing Kanakammal for her grand and graceful exit. Her advanced age, she was 88 years old, saw her struggle through several serious illnesses. But a few incidents stand out as significant.

Once, about fifteen years ago, in a momentary blackout, when she fell on a burning stove and sustained a burn, she brushed aside all enquiries saying, "Karma burnt me; Grace saved me" (*Vinai suttadhu; arul katthathu*). Though recurring bouts of ill-health necessitated her leaving Tiruvannamalai for Chennai, her resolve was very firm to be back as soon as she was well enough to live on her own.

The final preparation for the exit came in Chennai. Suddenly one night she found she could not move her limbs. She tried to alert her relatives but to her utter dismay no sounds escaped from her. She had lost her power of speech. She was admitted in the Intensive Care Unit of a hospital. Her mental faculties were intact. Greatly upset by the stifling atmosphere of the I.C.U. and agitated that her relatives were kept out, unable to provide support or succour of any kind, she made repeated vehement gestures, to be taken out of the I.C.U., but these helped in no way to make her intelligible to others. The nurse bestowed stern looks on her, making signs asking her to be still. Resigning herself to the situation she remained quiet. Suddenly there flashed in her mind what Bhagavan had said of total surrender: "Total surrender does not come that easily. When there is nothing that you can rely on, when your own kith and kin cannot help you, when your own body fails to obey your commands then, if one turns to the Lord with all one's heart, that is total surrender."

'How true', she thought. She anchored her thoughts and attention on Bhagavan and Bhagavan alone. She remembered nothing else.

Kanakammal woke up the next day calm and peaceful, as if having been administered a tranquillizer. When she spoke to the doctor who

¹ Punarvasu is Bhagavan's birth star. It is celebrated each month in the Ashram with a special ritual.

away to inform the president. It was decided to take Amma home quickly via the *Koranguthottam*³ to avoid any disturbance and to allow the Jayanti celebrations to continue smoothly. Amma's attendant was sent in advance to open the house. The president arrived, closely followed by his wife and their son, Dr Anand. One of the first to come and pay his respects at the house was V. Ganesan, the president's brother.

Amma's body was carried by devotees led by the president. The traffic on the highway was stopped as they crossed to Kanakammal's house. The mendicant swamis lounging in front of her gate got up, shocked and bewildered to see her lifeless body of Amma as they had seen her going to the ashram in a car just a short while before.

In this way Amma entered the compound, her residence for many years, where Sri Muruganar had taught her Sri Bhagavan's works, a legacy which she herself had carried on and thereby inspired the hearts of many devotees.

The news having spread, devotees started streaming to her house. Chanting of the *Akshara Mana Malai* began, so dear to the heart of every devotee of Bhagavan. Her relatives in Chennai and Bangalore were informed. Arrangements were made by the ashram to take care of all the funeral rites, in spite of the busy schedule of the Jayanti celebrations.

Amma's relatives arrived in the afternoon and the prescribed rites commenced in all their solemnity. Her younger brother performed the rites after all the devotees had paid their final respects. The relatives and some of the devotees acting as pall-bearers, her last journey began. *Arunachala Siva* was chanted all the way.

The mortal frame was consigned to the elements after the completion of the funeral rites, witnessed by towering Arunachala to the north and the setting crimson sun to the west. It was the most

² An oft repeated simile in the *Srimad Bhagavatam* is worth recalling here. An emperor holding court in the royal hall of audience, gets up after the durbar is over. All the ministers rise up instantly and wait. The emperor makes his exit with grace and all the others follow suit. *Pranan* is the emperor and when he decides to make his exit, the deities presiding over the other *indriyas* quietly follow suit.

the lingam. Her gait was a little unsteady and her hand, as it tried to hold onto the pillar shook violently. Her knees buckled and she fell on folded legs with both her arms outstretched. Devotees nearby rushed to arrest her fall and support her. Her walking stick and spectacles were collected by a devotee, who also gave her a little water to drink. Another devotee fanned her. The eyes closed forever and her mouth fell open. When efforts were made to straighten out her folded leg, it was observed that her extremities had become ice-cold.

A devotee was rushed off to call Dr Murthy, while her attendant called out, "Amma, Amma" with concern and anxiety. Her head briefly rested on the lap of the devotee from Delhi who later exclaimed how fortunate she was to have come all the way from Delhi just to earn this merit! Devotees who were going round the shrine, curious to know what had happened, started to crowd around her.

Dr Murthy arrived and it was decided to carry Kanakammal to the area behind the old meditation hall on the west side, to get fresh air and to avoid any commotion. This move was accompanied by the chanting of *Arunachala Siva*. A hefty-looking foreign devotee who had a young daughter with him also lent a helping hand to carry her out. Father and daughter joined in the chanting.

Kanakammal was laid on the ground with her head on the lap of another devotee. Dr Murthy softly informed the devotees that she had passed away. The chanting continued. In sheer disbelief some lady devotees looked up to him questioningly. He quietly asked them to continue the chant. Two gusts of air escaped Kanakammal's lips, and a glint of hope lingered.² Some hopeful devotees looked up again at the doctor who remained unmoved and shook his head, at which the girl attendant started to weep. The whole event was so solemn that the usual natural lament appeared so much out of place. The attendant was consoled and asked not to weep but to chant. It was inspiring to see the foreign devotee and his young daughter join in the chant throughout.

Curious onlookers were asked to keep away and a devotee hurried

³ 'Monkey Garden' gate which is further along the main road past the main gate.

graceful exit one could witness. There was no struggle, no sign of pain on her face. On the contrary, she looked calm, composed and serene. There was even a glow on her face.

Kanakammal's own words, which she never grew tired of repeating, echoed in our hearts: "Bhagavan never allows anyone who has come to him to go away empty-handed;" and "We all belong to Him." Encouraged and immensely inspired by the glory of Kanakammal's departure we bow our heads to Him in praise and prayer. The fervent desire of every earnest devotee who witnessed her exit from this world, is to earn the grace of Bhagavan and to emulate Kanakammal by living right till the end with a heart that remembers and holds to nothing but Him.

— Aparna Krishnamoorthy

The Loving Presence of Kanakammal

In 1986, I came to stay at Sri Ramanasramam for a few months. I joined a group that went to Kunju Swami in the mornings after breakfast. J. Jayaraman was reading a Tamil spiritual text to Kunju Swami, who was graciously explaining it. I know no Tamil, and understand such texts even less, but it was the *sannidhi* (presence) of Kunju Swami and satsang of the others that drew me and held me in that small room. The room, as I recall, felt dark like a cave, but the atmosphere was of deep silence. The only voice was that of J.J. interrupted from time to time by Kunju Swami. I noticed Kanakammal after a few days, when in reply to Swami's request, she said something.

She was a dignified woman in her early sixties. Her quiet ways, her focused attention, gained my respect. However, we never spoke to each other directly.

A year or two later, she was visiting the U.S.A. and came to Arunachala Ashrama in New York. We had a long wonderful satsang with Kanakammal. We were transported to the early forties and fifties at Sri Ramanasramam, as she spoke of Sri Bhagavan, and her coming to live near the ashram. She spoke in Hindi, and thus it was easy for us to understand her. Her personality, her poise, and the strength of her conviction that there was never a life for her away from her sadguru,

inspired me more than anything else. Most of her words are mostly forgotten at this distance of time, but the strength of her surrender has supported me all these years.

In early 2009 I was at Sri Ramanasramam for a long stay after a gap of many years. Someone informed me that Kanakammal was in the new hall. She was seated on a chair, in a white sari with a red border, facing the large portrait of Sri Bhagavan. I approached her, did my pranam, and said my name. She raised her glance to focus on my face, and her simple gesture of recognition melted my heart. I sat by her side for the next few days. There was no need for a conversation. She was in the presence of her ever-present sadguru. There was an unmoving quietness around her. After an hour, she would get up and leave.

After a few days, I had the opportunity to visit her. That evening, Ramanendu Chatterjee and I, along with Terry Sayre, a devotee from California, went to see her. She was surprised when we entered her house around 4 p.m., since that was her time to come to see Sri Bhagavan. She clearly recalled having met me in New York and said in Hindi,

"*Poochho, jo poochhanaa hai?*" (Ask whatever you want to ask). So I said, "Tell me how and when you spoke to Sri Bhagavan." It is difficult for me to ask questions, and I wanted to learn to overcome this hurdle.

She laughed and spoke to all three of us for a long time. I started to translate for Terry, and then he said graciously, "I don't need to know, basking in her presence is enough for me." The tears of devotion in his eyes were his silent offerings at the feet of Kanakamma, and I was convinced that they reached Sri Bhagavan.

She spoke to us for almost an hour. This is what I recall:

"There were a few close devotees who dominated the conversations around Sri Bhagavan. They talked about the problems of their domestic lives. As a young person, I used to think, 'What is the use of talking in front of the Master of Silence?'"

"I had seen others ask for permission before going on pradakshina. Therefore, one day I did the same. I approached the sofa, and stood there. Bhagavan looked up and with his eyes and a slight movement

of his head asked, ‘What?’ My mouth opened but no sound came. I was transfixed. He said, ‘You want to go on pradakshina. Is that it?’ Still there was no response from me. He then looked at the older lady who was with me, and turning towards me asked, ‘Is she going with you?’ Still no sound came out of me. The lady confirmed to Sri Bhagavan that she would take me with her. That was the end of my one and only private audience with Sri Bhagavan.

“Another occasion was the Jayanti celebration. There was only a thatched hut in which Sri Bhagavan stayed (adjacent to the Old Hall). Bhagavan was sitting on a chair outside the hut by the west wall. There was a queue of people starting from the well, going outside the hut towards the south, to the west facing Bhagavan, and then moving on. In other words, going around the hut in a clockwise manner, so that everyone could have a brief audience with Bhagavan on Jayanti day.

“I was very excited about this, my first formal occasion to be in front of him, and wanted to say something to him. I joined the line. But when I actually came in front of him, I was tongue-tied. Sri Bhagavan was glowing brighter than the golden sun. There are no words to describe what I witnessed: the *karuna* (compassion) in his eyes, the golden lustre of his physical being. Once again, speech was lost, the desire to speak was gone, and so I moved on silently.

“There is no regret that I never spoke to him.”

Kanakammal used Hindi to speak to me, but it was her hands, her eyes, and her heart that spoke to all three of us more forcefully. Terry who does not understand any Hindi, felt the power of her presence, and Ramanendu and I were overwhelmed.

On the last day of my stay, I went in the morning to say my goodbyes. She opened the door, and when she saw me with a tray of fruits in my hand, she asked me to place it in front of Sri Bhagavan’s photo, that stood on a raised shrine in the room. She sat on an easy chair in the same room, and watched me offer the fruits to Sri Bhagavan’s picture. She then asked me to come closer to her chair. She gave me back some fruits. I did my pranam to her. My head was in her lap. She put her hands on my head in a gesture of blessing, kept them there for some time, and filled me with her ‘unspoken’

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Quest

Chapter Three

LUCIA OSBORNE

Arunachala

After coming to Tiruvannamalai I was at first so preoccupied with getting settled and having to take care of three small children, the youngest not yet one year old, that I did not pay much attention to the Hill. Soon however, Arunachala made me aware of Itself. In a dream I saw a dark blue enormous moving mass — the Hill, alive, awe-inspiring. Messengers from It were heading towards the room in which the children and I were sleeping. The door was rattling with their banging. There was to be a sacrifice. I was afraid to open up. “Why me? There are the children. I am not fit.” Of course I understood later that it is the ego which has to be sacrificed, the greatest of mischief-makers to get rid of, so that our true divine state may blissfully shine forth in all its glory. The banging on the door increased till it became deafening and then I awoke into a cyclone. The banging and terrific noise was real enough. Half the roof had blown off but the other half, over our heads, remained untouched. In

Lucia Osborne was married to Arthur Osborne, the founder of *The Mountain Path*. She was editor of the magazine from 1970 to 1973.

It certainly kept me concentrated!

Arunachala revealed itself as more and more significant, alive and gracious. Already in March the weather in the plains of India, particularly in the south, becomes very hot, too hot for the children who were becoming very fretful. A visitor to the Ashram who lived in Kodaikanal in the Nilgiris (Blue Mountains) arranged for us to rent a cottage there for the hot season.

Reluctantly I was getting ready to leave. Around the Ashram there was a sick dog suffering from incessant tremors of one side of its body, the hind leg being most affected probably after an encounter with a cheetah. This prevented him from fighting for a share of the Ashram leftovers and so he was in a miserable condition, just skin and bones. A day before leaving I took some bread for him as I used to do every day when going to the Ashram for meditation, but the dog was not there. I went into the hall for meditation and sat down. After a while the dog came to the door looking for me, so I went out and gave him the bread. Bhagavan noticed it from his couch through the window and looked at the dog with compassion. I was sure that the misery of the dog would come to an end; it would probably die, I thought.

Next day we left for Kodaikanal. The little bungalow chosen for us was situated on the outskirts of the hill-station proper. The view which confronted us when we were brought there was breathtaking. I paid little attention to the house itself which looked neglected even from outside. The hill in front of us more than made up for any defects. The house stood on a little plateau with terraced fields sloping down towards a valley from which rose the hill called Perumal out of a sea of clouds to a great height. It dominated the whole landscape with its grandeur and strange wild beauty.

After a while we entered the house which was even more neglected inside. We unpacked after cleaning out the accumulated dust and arranging it as best we could. The air was crisp and invigorating. From the glassed-in veranda one could gaze at the hill in bad weather also.

Here too life settled into a sort of routine. Kitty and Adam started attending a nearby kindergarten and school run by Irish nuns. An *ayah*, a sort of nanny, helped to look after Frania who was too young

the morning we found a number of trees uprooted, there was havoc everywhere. The gardener's cottage collapsed into a heap and he stood there lamenting, not the cottage, which was not his property, but his supply of onions and chillies buried under it.

I asked about the Hill from a swami who occupied one of the rooms in the cottage. He was the future author of the *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*. He said its name was Arunachala, a manifestation of Siva. Dark blue is the throat of Siva who had swallowed the terrible poison from the churning of the sea of existence for *amrita* (nectar) in order to save the world. Krishna is also depicted as dark blue.

Now Arunachala became alive drawing me like a magnet. There is something truly magical about Arunachala. Just to sit there on a rock watching the sunset or sunrise or any time is an experience in itself. The Hill is vibrant and yet still at the same time. The rocks become imbued with life. At first it could be quite terrifying, particularly when alone at dusk or at night. I used to go there at all hours. With time this aspect diminished and gradually the Hill became friendly, protective, and gracious.

Occasionally there would be moments of anxiety over Arthur's fate, after news of the atrocities perpetrated on prisoners of war kept in concentration camps. Soon after Arthur's return to Siam the Japanese invaded the country and imprisoned all the Westerners at the Chulalongkorn University where he was a lecturer. So I would run to the Hill for solace, and be solaced. The very air was welcoming in such friendly, loving reassurance. In the early days there were still leopards and black-faced monkeys on the Hill. One evening, while I was leaning against a rock, a fairly large animal jumped down from a rock on the opposite side of the footpath. It must have been a cheetah. There was not enough light to see properly and I had forgotten to bring a torch but no calf or monkey would jump like that. I knew I must not show fear and run. I must not feel fear. Slowly I started walking back, not looking back, and not letting fear get the better of me:

"There is only the SelfAll is One. Any moment it might attack if it is following behind. Everything is the Self - Bhagavan - Arunachala."

Sonagiri (Arunachala), forgive the grievous faults of this poor self and by Thy merciful glance save me from being lost once more in the dreary waste (the world) or else I cannot cross the terrible ocean of births and deaths....

“Deign to ease me in my weariness struggling like a deer that is trapped....”

I missed the presence of Bhagavan and Arunachala. A few days after our arrival at this hill-station I had a strange dream. Arunachala and the hill facing our cottage, stood side by side and merged into one hill. From the summit a figure emerged growing.... growing till it seemed to support the sky. The extraordinary majesty of it, awe-inspiring, made my hair stand on end. I had read about hair standing on end but I never thought it could be experienced. Somehow the word ‘Guru’ came to my mind. I prostrated myself before the immense figure and woke up.

Next day I asked my Tamil teacher the name of the hill and told him about my dream. He explained that I was blessed with a vision of Perumal (the great man) which was another name for Mahavishnu and also the name of the hill. I have seen hikers moving round the bend of the path and stopping as if transfixed by the view of Perumal which confronted them. One could watch endlessly the play of the clouds, shadows and their changing expressions. Perumal is alive, its summit a gigantic face. Most of the time was spent meditating under its shadow. Thus Arunachala graciously followed me to Kodaikanal, revealed Itself there. Arunachala is a living vibrating Presence everywhere. ‘Heart is Thy Name’ writes Sri Bhagavan.

The power of a sacred mountain, of Arunachala is so great that people are drawn to it without compulsion as if by the force of some invisible magnet. Its mere presence is overwhelming. It is like coming Home. Arunachala breathes and pulsates with life. It has become a symbol of the highest aspirations of seekers, a signpost that points beyond earthly concerns towards Infinity, our origin to which we belong. We have forgotten our divine origin, and so we need the presence of such mighty signposts to arouse us from self-complacency. Fortunate are those whom the call has reached. Arunachala Siva-

to go to a kindergarten. The *ayah* was a simple village woman from Tiruvannamalai, not one of those trained professionals, some of whom would not mind giving opium to a child to keep it quiet. Most of my free time was spent sitting in meditation before the hill and learning Tamil.

I wanted to read *The Five Hymns to Sri Arunachala* composed by Bhagavan in the original. The English translation of it had already made a tremendous impression. It was a spontaneous outpouring during a *pradakshina* (circumambulation of the Hill) written as though coming from our own heart. This applies also to *The Necklet of Nine Gems*, the *Eleven Verses on Arunachala* and *Eight Stanzas on Sri Arunachala*.


“Ah! What a wonder! It stands as an insentient Hill. /Its action is mysterious, past human understanding /Only to convey by silence Thy transcendent State /Thou standest as a Hill shining from heaven to earth..../When I approach Thee regarding Thee as having form, /Thou standest as a Hill on earth”

“Only to make Thyself known as Being and Consciousness, /Thou dwellest in different religions under different names and forms..../It is Thou in Thy Unity who penetrates all the diversity of beings and religions.”

“Thou art Thyself the One Being ever aware of the self-luminous Heart....O benign and dazzling Aruna Hill, /Is there anything apart from Thee?”

Sadhana, spiritual striving, is a succession of ups and downs, particularly in the beginning. In my difficult moments when I felt lost, groping in darkness, I sometimes approached Bhagavan for help by handing him a slip of paper with one of the *slokas* (verses) on Arunachala copied as if coming from me. How He understood! It worked: “O Love in the shape of Arunachala! Now that by Thy Grace Thou has claimed me, what will become of me unless Thou manifest Thyself to me, and I, yearning wistfully for Thee and harassed by the darkness of the world, am lost?”

“Lord who art Consciousness Itself, reigning over the sublime



The Archives of Sri Ramanasramam

JOHN MAYNARD

This is an edited version of an article which appeared in Saranagathi, the online magazine of the ashram, in the months of August, September and October of 2009. Readers may access the magazine at www.sriramanamaharshi.org/saranagathi_newsletter.htm

Sequestered away in a quiet corner of the ashram grounds, surrounded and shaded by tall Bengal almond trees and green shrubbery, lies a quiet and unobtrusive bungalow. So peaceful is it that many devotees, though coming here for years, do not even know of its existence. This cloistered building houses the Ramanasramam Archives. The Chennai architects who designed it based their design upon a typical rural Tamil home, complete with an unencumbered interior courtyard with spacious rooms branching off its airy interior. Tiled roofs and a surrounding garden with tall trees protecting the

John Maynard is the curator of the photographic collection in the Ashram Archives building.

2010

Pinkernell work at the preservation and restoration of photographs, their framing and cataloguing, as well as providing photo materials for the *Mountain Path* magazine. The work of scanning all the main photos of Sri Ramana was performed by Graham Boyd and Sri A R. Chandramoulie. Every article on display within the anterior rooms as well as the Mahanirvana Room and the archive has been individually photographed and catalogued.

Touring the archive is restricted but may be arranged through Sri V.S. Ramanan (Sundaram) and Sri Subramanian (Mani), president and administrator of the ashram respectively. A typical tour would take you through the main interior courtyard with Sri Ramani, where objects used by Sri Ramana are on view. Sri Ramani knows many of the tales behind the materials and will respond to the depth of interest of the visitor. For some it is only a trip to a museum, while for others just viewing these articles that belonged to Sri Ramana brings on shivers of devotion and tears. Sri Ramani responds to such visitors who show this deeper level of devotion and spontaneously tells Bhagavan stories.

A favourite is the tale about the small carved elephant book stand which used to be situated on top of the revolving bookcase, always by Sri Bhagavan's side in the Old Hall. This was given to Sri Bhagavan by a lady devotee who asked him to use it himself and *not* send it off to the office, the fate of most gifts! This simple request He took to heart. This elegant mahogany book stand can therefore be seen in many photos. Many years later this same devotee was queuing for her very last darshan of Sri Ramana as He lay extremely ill and in pain in the body, in the small Mahanirvana Room. As she approached her departing master He noticed her, and despite His bodily pain, He slowly and tenderly raised His arm and pointed to the carved elephant book stand still by His side, as if to say, "See, look! It is still here with me!" Sure enough, she broke down. This piece is still with us. Wherever possible, Sri Ramani has added small photographs of Sri Ramana using the objects displayed. A tour may end with a viewing of a DVD on Sri Bhagavan's life in the archive auditorium.

The following are three direct quotations from books regarding

building set off this small jewel. Despite its humble exterior, however, this building is, in reality, a state-of-the-art archival facility, housing a large variety of Bhagavan Sri Ramana's works and articles in daily use.

Founded in 2002, in part with funds from a devotee, and opened in 2004, the archive brings together and stores all of the disparate objects left to us from Sri Ramana's lifetime; including many hundreds of black and white photographs and negatives, articles gifted to and used by Sri Bhagavan, manuscripts of original writings and corrections in Sri Ramana's handwriting, as well as a complete collection of all the books published by the ashram and by other publishers, including rare first editions. These had previously been stored in cupboards, in the library, and even lost altogether in the godowns around the ashram, suffering from the vicissitudes of the Indian climate. This rare and unique collection is now housed under one roof, in a temperature and humidity controlled environment.

The Ramanasramam archive is staffed by volunteer devotees who each take responsibility for particular areas. Outside expertise is freely given by highly skilled devotees and friends of the ashram; Dr P. Perumal, chief conservator of the Saraswati Mahal Palm Leaf Library in Thanjavur; Dr K. K. Gupta, curator in the National Museum in Delhi; Sri K. Gopalakrishnan, T. C. E. consultants, Chennai; and the architect, Mrs Krithika Subrahmanian of Chennai, as well as by Sri V. Karthik who has freely given enormous amounts of time and energy on the photographic side, setting up a lab in Chennai for large prints.

Sri Ramani, a volunteer, has served the ashram and cared for the manuscripts and other objects for fifteen years. Having collected most of the articles previously kept in the library, he has a vast knowledge of the archive objects and manuscripts, and has been guided by Dr Perumal on a regular basis. Sri Ramani is responsible for the layout of the archive as well as current overall responsibility for the original manuscripts and books and the archive in general. Sri M.G. Balu is another ashram volunteer working alongside Sri Ramani on technical projects, ensuring that the all-important air-conditioning and de-humidification systems function to the standard required. In the photo archive section John Maynard and Patricia

particular objects on view from the main courtyard area:

Plush velvet red mattress and cushions.

‘By now Bose too was back at the ashram and was busy overseeing the preparation of a ‘Yogasana’ in black granite to be used by Bhagavan, when the hall was completed. It was to be a gift by him to the ashram. The idea then struck me that I should provide the necessary cushions — a mattress and backrest suitable for the ‘Yogasana’. Immediately on my return to Madras I contacted the TVS people and requested them to arrange for preparing the cushion in their upholstery department. When they were completed I arranged to carry them to Tiruvannamalai. The cushions were made with plush cloth (smooth and shiny like velvet) and they had particularly asked me not to bend the mattress or attempt to roll them [the items] up for transporting to Tiruvannamalai. I had therefore to carry them on the roof of my car. On arrival at the ashram, when I went and sat before Bhagavan, he mentioned to me that it looked as if I had carried them on my head, though he had no occasion to see the way I had carried them on the car. “*Thalayil vechukondu varunna mathiriyundu*” was what he said. It gave me a pleasant thrill.’¹

‘One day the Sarvadhikari came accompanied by a man who was limping, whom he introduced to Bhagavan. He brought an electric lamp with a big mother-of-pearl shade and presented it to Bhagavan. Bhagavan said that he had been reading an illustrated Tamil encyclopaedia just an hour before, and a doubt had come [to him] whether a big mother-of-pearl could exist. He was surprised at the coincidence.’²

‘I obtained for Sri Bhagavan’s use an easychair, specially made with a footrest, from Curzon and Co., the well-known furniture makers of Madras. It is now used on Deepam day for Sri Bhagavan’s portrait. But when I got his sofa repaired, without his knowledge, he refused to sit on it for a long time. It was only when he saw my extreme distress that he relented and agreed to sit on it once more.’³

—Only if a visitor has a special need may the anterior rooms be

¹ Nambiar, K.K., *The Guiding Presence of Sri Ramana*, 1997, pp. 49-50.

² *Surpassing Love and Grace*, 2001, pp. 257-8. 2009.

³ Ramanapadananda, Swami, in *Fragrant Petals*, 2005, p.139.



John Maynard

of optimally designed shelves were custom designed and added, providing full support and aeration to the pH balanced boxes. These are made from neem wood and aluminium. (Neem wood and oil are natural insecticides and preservatives) From this collection come many of the photo prints seen in books, in the *Mountain Path* magazine, and for sale in the bookstore.

Visiting devotees often ask whether there are any ‘special’ unseen photographs of Sri Bhagavan that are kept hidden. Each photograph is definitely special but “No” is my usual reply! The most celebrated diamantine photos such as the Welling Busts, (1948) and the Mani Bust, (R.R.S. Mani – who stayed in the ashram from 1917-1922) which have, like magnets, irresistibly drawn seekers and devotees from all corners of the earth to Bhagavan, are all out in the open and have been seen. In earlier days when Henri Cartier-Bresson was being pushed to give the ashram all the negatives he had taken here, he replied to one of the requests:

“I have given them the best, now they want the rotten potatoes!”

To which one could say in reply when the so-called second-quality ‘rotten potatoes’ arrived: ‘So, there *are* less common photos, little used, and these are they!’

Visitors are often surprised to discover that there are around nine hundred negatives held in the archive, and approximately two thousand photos in total. The Welling prints seen now in books and for sale are from negatives made from the original prints. Restoration of all these photographs is an ongoing work.

Ongoing work in this section is the cataloguing of the Ramana and *Mountain Path* photos; the restoration of certain photographs; the scanning of the complete *Mountain Path* magazine for the Ashram website, as well as for posterity; and handling the normal day-to-day requests for photographic materials.

Bhagavan Ramana’s devotees are enormously indebted to Dr T. N. Krishnaswamy, the devotee whose hobby was photography, who shot about eighty-five percent of the images we now have of Sri Bhagavan. His first photograph of Bhagavan came out so well that he was asked to be the official ashram photographer. Most weekends, from the 1930s to 1950, he came up to Tiruvannamalai from Madras

viewed. This is a practical rule —only because the inner archive atmosphere is air-conditioned and humidity controlled. These anterior rooms house the collections of original manuscripts and books; the complete collection of photographs; a room of cloth bundles used around Sri Bhagavan in the Old Hall and on celebration days and a second collection of bedding materials used by Sri Bhagavan in the Old Hall and Mahanirvana room.

Each section and collection has its own needs in terms of preservation. The whole building is maintained at a constant temperature and humidity (50%), and the sections behind the glass partition are constantly monitored to ensure that these parameters are in place. No chemicals are used in the preservation process; instead Ayurvedic roots of *Acorus Calamu*, commonly known as *Sweet Flag* in English and cedar balls alongside herbal dyed maroon khadi cloth are used to keep unwanted insects out of the delicate areas. In the photographic section we use pH balanced papers and boxes sourced from the United States to maintain the negatives and prints, while in the original book section each volume is hand bound and wrapped in pH balanced paper from Auroville (near Pondicherry). Once a month the whole archive is vacuumed and thoroughly cleaned without water.

Anterior Rooms: Ramanasramam Photographic Archive

Housed in the south side of the archive this room contains over three thousand prints and negatives of Sri Ramana, old devotees and old photographs of Arunachala. Before the archive was constructed, albums of original prints were made by devotees such as Dr. G.H.Mees (Sadhu Ekarasa), as well as the original S.G & G.G. Welling album assembled by that well-known Bangalore photographic studio. Sri Karthik has reproduced the majority of the Sri Ramana photographs as duplicate negatives in a larger format in order to safeguard the collection. The collection has also been scanned and is preserved in several digital formats. In recent years it has also been catalogued also for ease of use.

This room is maintained at 20 degrees Centigrade and at fifty percent humidity to preserve this unique collection. In 2009 a set

MOUNTAIN PATH

and took more photos; he meticulously kept the medium format 2.25 X 2.25 inch negatives which we still have today. He once asked Bhagavan's attendant to take his photo with Sri Bhagavan on the Hill, since Dr T.N.K. rightly said he was always on the other side of the lens. Recently the family of Dr T. N. Krishnaswamy presented the archive with his trusty Rolleiflex camera.

On most weekends one or two devotees from Chennai come to the archive, in order to scan the original manuscripts, some of which contain Sri Bhagavan's handwritten corrections. These are later colour corrected and stored on archival gold 100-300 year DVDs. This work will take approximately another two years to complete and will ensure that we have the actual manuscripts preserved and that we will always know exactly what was said and written by Sri Bhagavan.

Anterior Rooms — Manuscript Room

This hidden room lies off the furniture room, which is visible to all visitors, and it contains the manuscripts, diaries and other written works in their original form, bound in dyed khadi cloth. You will notice that this binding is of the same colour as that worn by Tibetan monastics. This maroon dye acts as a deterrent to insects. These bundles are divided by language: Sanskrit, Malayalam, Tamil, Telugu and English, all of which were spoken and written by Sri Bhagavan. There are examples of Sri Ramana's handwriting in each language on show in this room as well as in the main courtyard. The original English set of *Talks with Ramana Maharshi* is kept here among many other scripts. At the back of this room sits a small cabinet containing some more artifacts used by or given to Sri Bhagavan.

Anterior Rooms: Cloth and Linen Rooms 1&2

Two other archive anterior rooms house cloth and bed linen used by Sri Bhagavan as well as cloths and drapes, etc., used on the old hall sofa and other places where He sat. Rolled carefully onto eight inch diameter plastic cylinders to prevent damage through creasing these are also preserved under the same dyed khadi cloth, and remain in



John Maynard

photographic prints or negatives in their possession might consider donating these to the Archive where they will be put on view for all to see, and carefully maintained. If you have such artifacts please again contact the ashram or the archive directly or through our website:

Our website address is: www.sriramanamaharshi.org

In Conclusion

After a visit, many visitors have commented on how much they like the archive. Many more devotees have also contributed much time, money and energy to make the place what it is, both within the building and the garden. It has been said by some professionals that it is one of the most advanced archival centres in India. Personnel have come from the Muktananda ashram in Ganeshpuri, Maharashtra while the Chinmaya Mission and the Aurobindo Ashram have sent specialists and taken away drawings, photographs and plans of how Ramanasramam Archive is designed and its *modus operandi* in the hope of recreating some similar facilities within their foundations or ashrams. It is said that imitation is the highest form of flattery! It has been said by no less a personage than Dr K.K.Gupta that nowhere in India has such a wonderful archive been erected.

But others might well say that Sri Ramana would not have wanted an archive at all; after all He always said that He was not the body. Thus to preserve these articles is completely against His teachings! In writing this piece on the archive I have had to consider these two diverging perspectives more thoroughly.

These two opposing schools of thought are a microcosm of what happens after any founder of a new religious path or finder of a new spiritual path, comes to this earth. One stream flows away into the exoteric doctrine and follows the form, the image, the body and the words; another stream breaks away and forms the esoteric school, engaging with the inner meaning of the teachings. This can be seen throughout history, in Islam and Sufism; Judaism and Hassidism, Theravada and Zen Buddhism. It is inevitable that this occurs and therefore both views of the archive are true in their own ways.

We should remember that even when Sri Bhagavan did not give His outright consent to some activity, sometimes it still went ahead

good condition. The second cloth room contains the mattress and many pillows used by Sri Bhagavan in the Mahanirvana room in His last days.

Anterior Room: Book Preservation Shelves

Between the photographic archive and the larger of the two cloth rooms there are free-standing rolling book-racks, which contain original copies of each book, old and new, published by the ashram as well as by other publishers worldwide. Books of Sri Ramana's teachings exist in Japanese, Chinese, Slovak, Russian and more than fifteen other European and East and West Asian languages, as well as in English and all of the Indian tongues.

Each book is bound and preserved in a pH balanced paper wrap which is then slipped into a further acid balanced paper sleeve, this paper being obtained from Auroville, near Pondicherry. At present there are more than one thousand two hundred books and periodicals shelved here, many first editions of old ashram books, along with two complete sets of the *Mountain Path* magazine and more than one complete set of the *Call Divine* magazine published in Bombay from 1954 to 1974.

Anterior Rooms: Air Conditioning Equipment Room

As you enter the archive the physical heart is on the right! This is the air-conditioning room where two 8.1 ton capacity German Liebert precision air-conditioning and humidity control units sit. Each unit is run on alternative days and a service contract with Emerson India is in operation for their monthly maintenance. The archive is maintained at 20 degrees Celsius with fifty percent humidity. The actual temperature and humidity within each anterior and show-case room is independently monitored with Isuzu Thermo hydrograph analogue monitors on a continuous basis, the paper recordings of variation being stored for several years.

To protect the archive from fire and lightning strike a conductor was added two years ago, and recently the interior fire alarm, fire plan and extinguishers were updated.

An Appeal

Anyone having articles used by or given to Sri Ramana or original
2010

as if it were the most natural thing in the world, and then it received His blessings in the flow of events, as well as the material wherewithal to succeed. Though the archive is not a temple in strict terms, and was built long after His Mahasamadhi, and although no pooja is ever performed here, it still holds His presence very powerfully.

It is rare, very rare indeed, that such a one as Sri Bhagavan walked this earth, and rarer still that such a thing should have happened in recent history. It is also very rarely that the few possessions of an

Correction: Mountain Path Subscriptions

Please note the correct three year subscription amounts for the renewal of the magazine which were first posted on page 65 of the January 2010 issue.

We request foreign subscribers to renew their subscription for a three year period if they normally send a cheque or demand draft to the Ashram as payment. The bank charges for a one year subscription are prohibitive. The alternative is to use an international postal order or contact the New York Ashram which has Paypal facilities for annual renewal.

Three year subscription: \$45; £30; €40.

Life subscription: \$250; £150; €200.

MOUNTAIN PATH

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I, V.S. Ramanan, hereby declare that the particulars given above are true to the best of my knowledge and belief.

31/03/2010

Maha Bhakta Vijayam

Vithoba Becomes a Sannyasi

NABAJI SIDDHA

Nabaji continued, 'O beloved saints! After spending a few days joyfully with Govindpant's family, Sidhopant and his wife imparted a few words of advice to their daughter and left for their native place, Alankavati.

About six years passed, but Vithoba remained indifferent to his wife. He did not succumb to the arrows of Kama. He spent his time mostly in the company of saints or in reading scriptures. His mind was always dwelling on the state of sannyas, thus strengthening his resolve to renounce worldly life and lose himself in total absorption. Just as the sky remains constant through the changing seasons of rain, winter and summer, so too, while one's physical body undergoes childhood, youth and old age, yet the Atma remains unaffected. According to the unalterable law of Nature that whatever is born is subject to death, Vithoba's parents also shed their mortal coil. A

cast on the jiva. This illusory power covers him with forgetfulness and puts him on the wheel of transmigration, just as a prostitute deceives a man of his wealth by her charms. Wise men declare that it is very difficult to conquer maya. Why else would a man be deluded by transient pleasures? Why should I be food for the Lord of Death like the helpless animals tied to the slaughter-post? This rare human birth obtained through countless merits should not be futile. Do wealth, house, wife and children accompany a man after his death? Or will they be of any use in the next birth? Out of my ignorance I have neglected the real treasure, holding on to the transient pleasures!”

With this train of thought, he beckoned his wife and said, “O woman, I am giving up this householder’s life. I am going to embrace sannyas. I am not so callous as to leave without your knowledge. Now, you know my intention. Please talk to your parents and get me their permission to leave.” With a sad heart, Rukmabai apprised her parents of the situation.

Sidhopant observed, “My beloved son-in-law! Why do you wish to adopt sannyas at this young age? Is it fair to talk to your wife like this? You are well aware that the scriptures recommend this course of life only after the seventy-fifth year of one’s life. It is not proper to suppress one’s natural instincts at a young age. Just as a vice like gambling seems attractive initially, but ruins the man in the end; or leaving for pilgrimage in a fit of passion is followed by remorse later; likewise, one may feel elated initially to embrace sannyas, but the force of the senses and one’s inner tendencies overpowers one’s will and erodes one’s strength of mind.”

He counselled further, “Just as mental worship is superior to external worship, inner detachment is far superior to formal sannyas. Destroying the oscillation of mind and renouncing its cravings while living in the normal waking state is the true sannyas, and not decorating oneself with ochre clothes. Attaining the state of Brahman is not a joke. Think deeply about the mysterious saying in the scriptures that one will scarcely find a single Brahmajnani in all the three worlds. Just as mental worship is said to be superior to physical worship, so too mental renunciation, destroying the mind,

few days after completing the final rites, Vithoba said to his wife, “I have to immerse the ashes of my parents in the river Ganga. You cannot live here alone. I will leave you with your father. Please take whatever you desire for yourself out of my father’s wealth and give away the rest in charity.” Rukmabai gave away everything except the matrimonial thread tied around her neck by her husband on the day of their marriage. Vithoba was amazed at her detachment and realized that she was indeed a noble woman.

After spending some time in Alankavati, Vithoba sought Sidhopant’s permission to proceed on his yatra for the immersion of his parents’ ashes in the river Ganga. As Rukmabai was well aware of his dispassionate state of mind, she cautioned her parents that once he left the house on yatra, he might not return home ever again. She suggested that it would be better for all of them to accompany him. Since Sidhopant did not allow him to go alone, in spite of repeated requests, Vithoba was assailed by anxiety regarding what to do.

One night, he pondered thus, “Despite the death of my parents, which demonstrates the impermanence of the body, I am merely wasting my life without seeking liberation or finding a sadguru to show me the way. How complacent can I be, not to seek the company of liberated ones or visit holy places, even when death is staring into my eyes? Alas, I will be doomed if I live any longer in Samsara. If I continue to subsist in this mire, when will I still the oscillating mind? When will I destroy the demons of ‘I’ and ‘mine’? When will my mind turn inwards? Ah... I should not remain here even a moment longer!”

He wondered, “In spite of being a wise man, how is it that Sidhopant remains deluded by this worldly life like an ignoramus? Is not human birth a rare gift to the jivas? What merits one must have acquired in previous births to earn this human birth? If this birth ends in ignorance, who knows what my next birth will be? Even if one is fortunate enough to be born again as a human being, will one have enough discrimination to seek release from this bondage of birth and death? Unaware of these imponderables, how can a man dream about securing liberation in the next life! What kind of intelligence is this? This stupidity is nothing but the spell of Maya, the enchantress,

“You should not violate your husband’s command. Don’t you know that Savitri brought her husband Satyavan back from the world of the dead by the power of her austerities? If you observe the *Gowri Vrata* by worshipping the Divine Mother for some time, all obstructions to your union will surely disappear. A man’s resolve becomes feeble before a woman’s fortitude. Parvati who married Siva and Rukmini who married Krishna got their heart’s wish fulfilled through the observance of *Gowri Vrata*.”

Rukmabai, realizing that following her husband would contradict his wish and also alienate her from his love, agreed to follow her father’s advice, which seemed to be the best option left to her to unite with her husband.

In the course of his travels, Vithoba reached Varanasi. After the immersion of his parents’ ashes in the river Ganga and worship of Lord Viswanatha, he went in search of a sadguru. He came upon the celebrated saint Sripada Swami who always remained in the bliss of the Self, oblivious of his body and surroundings. His transcendental state appealed to Vithoba greatly. Going round him and prostrating before him, Vithoba broke out in adoration, “O peace incarnate! King of jnana! Master of scriptures! Lord of yoga! Supreme One!”

Sripada Swami cast his gracious look on Vithoba who was standing before him with tears in his eyes and joined palms. Embracing him, he spoke these loving words, “Dear boy, lovely child, destroyer of worldly bondage, why are you so lovingly prostrating to me and equating me to Parabrahman? What mishap has betaken you? Why are you shedding tears?”

Overjoyed at his nectar-like words, Vithoba implored, “O my beloved sadguru, please rescue me from the bondage of worldly existence in which I am immersed! I have taken shelter in you; please raise me from this state!”

“Dear child, how is this human birth troubling you? The rest of humanity is lost in the pleasures of the world, taking it to be the ultimate heaven. While so, what ails you, my child?”

“O Swami, who is free from the web of desires? I am desperate, for I am surrounded by tigers of anger and lust, wild monkeys of

is greater than external sannyas. Even Narada who had conquered maya was outdone by a woman; Viswamitra who challenged Brahma, the creator, with his own creation, lost his power owing to a woman; Brihaspati and Sukracharya, the preceptors of the demi-gods and demons both succumbed to the charms of women. One may defeat the Lord of Death, but to challenge the God of Love is to court danger. It is better to elevate oneself from within the fort of samsara. You are intelligent enough to realize this.”

Vithoba replied, “Swami, just as a hero would rather face death on the battlefield than beat a retreat, I will persist in waging war against the unruly mind even if I fail to attain the tranquil state after sannyas. Just as a lion, though hungry, will not kill the deer found nearby but will go in search of the elephant, likewise, I too will not give up my struggle to reach the summit of unbroken bliss; even if it eludes me, I will never settle for a life of sense gratification. Even in a dream, I will not fall into the trap of sensual indulgence like a fool who smears filth on himself, considering it fragrant.”

With these final words, he prostrated to his in-laws and departed, ignoring their pleas. Rukmabai followed him, wailing loudly. He addressed her in a firm voice, “If what you have been asserting all along, namely that you are a chaste woman and will obey my words implicitly, is true, then listen to my words: return home and live with your parents!”

Vithoba walked quickly and disappeared from their sight. Bound by his order, Rukmabai halted in her steps. On reaching home she fainted. When she was revived by her parents, she again tried to run after Vithoba. Sidhopant restrained her and brought her back home. In deep anguish, Rukmabai attempted to take her own life.

Sidhopant, though equally tormented, rebuked her and said, “O my beloved daughter, supreme among pure women! If you forsake us who are aged, by taking your life, we will also surely follow suit. Will not this afflict your husband by creating bad karma for him? Can a faithful wife cause such a fate to her husband?”

Beset with sorrow, Rukmabai said, “I must follow him. How can a virtuous wife remain alive if she cannot live with her husband?”

to lack of water. Despite being the Lord of heaven and of rains, this happened to be his unenviable lot at one time. He was also many a time dispossessed of his kingdom by the demons and lived in exile. Who would I be in such a position?”

“I will initiate you into the much adored eight-lettered mantra, repetition of which will bestow upon you a life in the abode of Lord Vishnu.”

“O noble teacher! Don't I know the fate Jaya and Vijaya, the gatekeepers of Vaikunta [Vishnu's heaven], who were cursed to be born on earth as demons, when they incurred the wrath of the great sages Sanaka, Sanantana and others.¹ So I have no desire to live in Vishnu's abode.”

“I will initiate you into the five-lettered mantra of Siva, whose nature could not be fathomed even by Vishnu and Brahma. Meditation on this mantra will earn you a place in the supreme abode of Siva.”

“I don't envy the lot of Siva also, who lives the life of a mendicant for the sin of *Brahmahatya* [killing a Brahmin] and whose wife immolated herself due to the ignominy he suffered in Daksha's yagna.”

“Let me teach you the yoga and ajapa mantra which will empower you with the eight-fold siddhis and you will be able to live for many eons in your gross body.”

“When one can easily learn the knowledge of true immortality from your noble self, should I be such a fool as to go through the rigours of yoga, stilling the breath, thereby suffer death pangs, lose consciousness and become imbalanced? I certainly prefer the way of devotion to that of yoga. One may retain the gross body for many eons, yet it is ultimately transient. The body can never be immortal, and supernatural powers which may amaze the world only strengthen the ego and never lead one to immortality. Therefore, solely that liberation which transcends all attributes is the supreme state. Master, please bestow your grace on this hapless creature.”

“Apart from the mantra, tantra and yagnas specified in the scriptures, I don't know of any other branch of knowledge. You must look for some other teacher who can satisfy your quest.” Saying this, Sripada Swami became absorbed in silence.’

thoughts, mad elephants of ego, porcupines of attachment, wolves of desire and trapped in the darkness of ignorance in the forest of body-consciousness. I have been groping in the dark for a long time, finding no way of escape from this terrible plight. Will you not protect me from the danger encircling me?”

“O my dear boy, I too have been searching for a noble soul who will redeem me from these wild animals in the form of sense cravings and show me a way out. Has your search also turned out to be futile like mine? Now, apart from this, tell me how I can help you?”

“Please be kind enough to teach me that magic which will silence once for all the clamour of the senses, the inner and outer instruments of perception. Granting this single wish will fulfil all my desires.”

“O pure-hearted one! Dear devotee! I will teach you that royal knowledge which, if you practise for a period of a *mandalam*, will endow you with the power to win royal favour. The king will be under your spell and bestow on you his favours. You can live happily, enjoying all the pleasures of the world. Why should you forego this and suffer the indignities of a mendicant life?”

“Even great kings like Harishchandra, Nala and Muchukunda were not spared by all-powerful Destiny. Then, why should I choose the royal way of life? Will I sacrifice the goal of moksha for the trifling pleasures of the world?”

Sripada Swami then said, “O foremost among men of austerities! I will teach you the way to perform yagnas. Remaining in *grihasthasbham*, the state of a householder, you can enjoy the pleasures of the world and also attain the lordship of heaven through these yagnas. Why do you want to forego such a life of comforts and enter the life of a sannyasi and take to begging?”

“I have heard that on account of the sin of killing a Brahmin, Indra had to hide in a lotus stalk in a pond, which was empty due

(To be continued)

¹ See the article ‘*The Meaning of the Curse in the Srimad Bhagavata*’ by Neera Kashya in this issue of the *Mountain Path*, pp.9-16.



VEDANTA TEXT TRANSLATION

MAHARAJA THURAVU

Glory of Sannyasa: The Life and
Teachings of the King-turned-Ascetic

SRI KUMARA DEVA SWAMIGAL

TRANSLATED BY SWAMI TANMAYANANDA SARASVATI

Introduction

The Advaitic work *Maharaja Thuravu* was originally composed in Sanskrit. It narrates the story told by Maharshi Suta Muni to the ascetics of Naimisharanya forest in the present day state of Uttar Pradesh. Much later, the medieval saint Sri Kumara Deva Swamigal rendered this work in exquisite Tamil poetry for the benefit of Tamil-knowing devotees and seekers. In the Karaikudi Kovilur Math teaching tradition of Vedanta, established about 180 years ago by Srilasri Muktiramalinga Gnanadesika Swamigal, this work is the fourth in the syllabus list of canonical texts numbering sixteen.

Swami Tanmayananda Sarasvati, formerly Sadhu Tanmaya Chaitanya, received *sannyasa diksha* from Swami Virajeshwara Sarasvati, 'Hamsa Ashrama', at Anusoni, near Hosur, on Maha Sivaratri day, 12.02.2010. Swami Virajeshwara belongs to the *parampara* of Swami Sivananda,

2010

H.H. Swami Chandrasekhara Bharati, the Sankaracharya of Sringeri receiving obeisance from his disciple, Abhinava Vidya Tirtha

Great sages like Tattvarayar, Tandavarayar, Ulaganathar, Sivaprakasara, Santalinganar and others have rendered these texts in chaste Tamil poetry, capturing in elaborate detail and depth the great truths of Vedanta found in Sanskrit texts. Not being merely translations, these compositions rival their Sanskrit precursors in richness and depth and are treated on par with them as independent original classics. The first three texts¹ give the essence of Advaita Vedanta while the next three,² beginning with *Maharaja Thuravu*, focus on the methods and analysis to strengthen the seeker's dispassion (*vairagya*), which is indispensable for spiritual sadhana.

The author of *Maharaja Thuravu*, meaning 'The Renunciation of the King (by name Maharajan)' is Sri Kumara Deva Swamigal, who was himself a *mahayogi* and a *jivanmukta*. In a sense, the text has a touch of an autobiographical flavour because he himself was originally (in his *purvashrama* or householder stage) a king of a large province in the present day state of Karnataka following the Veera Saiva tradition. He had renounced everything out of dispassion, with the intense intent of gaining Self-knowledge. Searching for a guru, he came all the way to south Tamilnadu near Coimbatore and surrendered at the feet of Peraiyur (Perur) Santalinga Swamigal, who was an illustrious enlightened sage. After serving the master for some time and passing all his tests of conduct and ripeness of renunciation, he received from him esoteric instructions in yoga sadhana and Vedanta vichara. In due course, his intense sadhana culminated in spiritual illumination, as recognised by the guru himself, who was most pleased by the achievements of his eminent disciple. One day Sri Santalinga Swamigal called Sri Kumara Devar and after giving him the new title of 'Maharaja', he bade him farewell, instructing him to go and live henceforth in Vriddhachalam as an independent guru. (This is similar to the story of that other famed sage of Arunachala, Guhai Namasivaya Swamigal who commanded his enlightened disciple, Guru Namasivaya Swamigal, to go away from him and

live in Chidambaram, saying that 'two mighty elephants cannot be tethered to the same post'!)

Obedying the guru's commands, Sri Kumara Devar journeyed alone to Vriddhachalam for many days by foot where he had a vision of Goddess Perianayaki (Vriddhambika), the presiding deity of the temple as the holy Consort of Lord Siva who is known as Pazhamalainathar in that holy town. Experiencing Her Grace by way of being fed by Her with milk in a golden vessel, he was overjoyed and obeying Her personal command to remain there, he lived there in spiritual ecstasy. Performing many miracles, he lavished his blessings on all the devotees who came to him, recognising his exalted attainments.

Once when Kumara Deva Swamigal was immersed in *samadhi nishta*, Divine Mother Perianayaki, wishing to obtain Vedantic texts through him in order to guide humanity, appeared in front of him and commanded him to author a few shastras. Kumara Devar replied in all humility, "Oh Mother! How can I undertake such an onerous task with my little knowledge? Where is the capacity and what scholarship do I have to fulfil such an enterprise?" Then Perianayaki Amman assured him lovingly, "Have no worry, my dear child! I myself will dwell in your tongue and complete the compositions of these Vedanta shastras. Therefore, with courage and confidence, commence your recital of these works forthwith." Blessed with such a gracious commandment, Sri Kumara Deva Swamigal started dictating Vedantic poetry at a prolific rate and composed many Vedantic works beginning with this *Maharaja Thuravu*. He finally concluded his literary outpourings with a decad of devotional verses called *Perianayaki Pathigam*. In all, he authored sixteen texts including *Advaita Unnmai*, *Suddha Shatakam*, *Brahma Siddhi Agaval*, *Brahma Anubhava Agaval*, *Sahaja Nishtai*, *Vedanta Dasavatthai Kattalai*, etc. In the hallowed hall of Tamil Vedantic literature, these philosophical poems occupy pride of place and serve to guide serious seekers of Self-knowledge.

A more detailed account of his life, which is filled with many interesting miracles and quaint surreal happenings, will appear in a future issue.

¹ *Naanaa Jivavaada Kattalai*, *Geetha Saara Thaalattu* and *Sasivanna Bodham*.

² *Vairagya Shatakam* and *Vairagya Deepam*.

Maharaja Thuravu champions the supremacy of monastic renunciation as the unfailing means for achieving Self-realization. In the present day milieu of ‘liberal Vedanta’ propagation, such an orthodox viewpoint is looked askance and even labelled as regressive, for ‘is not inner renunciation the only thing that matters?’ For those with such a mindset, the topic of *sannyasa* has become highly debatable and rightly so. No doubt ‘inner renunciation’ alone is true renunciation, but because a majority of us do *not* have it, we tend to blithely disparage ‘external renunciation’ too, though it is the highest palpable symbol of the former. To smother an uneasy conscience, we further quote a few who failed to live up to the ‘fourth stage’ of human life, assumed by them in all sincerity. Traducing the ideal of *sannyasa* thus, in cynical disdain, merely betrays a shallow understanding of its ennobling depth and grandeur. Do we dismiss the ideals of all medical science (as enunciated by Hippocrates), just because quacks are also occasionally encountered? It is part of our tradition to revere the external symbols of renunciation as a powerful reminder of what they stand for in our own individual inner growth. In the *Periapuranam*, many Nayanmars won the Grace of Lord Siva by honouring such external symbols at the cost of their very lives!

It is always better to understand and judge any ideal by its ‘best examples’ rather than to take the easy option of trashing it by citing a few failures. Ideals are never at fault. If a few practitioners go wrong, their inability *only* reinforces the loftiness of their chosen pursuit and its formidable challenge. A few stray lapses cannot be pounced upon to condemn the ideal itself or to water it down so much as to make a travesty of *sannyasa*. *Maharaja Thuravu* categorically affirms that inner renunciation *must* eventually blossom and manifest as external renunciation too, sooner or later, and gives many powerful examples to support its thesis. Since there is a synergy between both kinds of renunciation — inner and outer —, the text espouses the adoption of the latter in order to achieve the former. As one famous contemporary sannyasi tellingly put it with regard to *sannyasa*, “Fake it, to make it.” This is indeed a sound strategy, as borne out in a famous parable of Sri Kamakrishna Paramahansa. For only a very rare

few are perfect to begin with and this mode of journey need not be postponed indefinitely till one becomes truly fit. Bhagavan Ramana took a superbly nuanced stand to resolve this vexatious issue, but to dwell on that would require a separate article. All we can say now is that the view of Sri Kumara Deva should be accorded an honoured place in our overall vision, though it may not be fashionable to do so in the consumerist age we live in.

The present work contains 117 verses and is rich in poetic imagery. The initial descriptions are full of extravagant flourishes, providing an interesting and elaborate backdrop for the uncompromising Vedantic teachings that follow, which then shine in sharp relief. Modern readers unaccustomed to such unabashed hyperbole are apt to find it amusing and the initial 25 verses are therefore greatly summarised to save space and perhaps spare the reader much tedium. The conversations are often blunt with no smooth niceties and exude a quaint, native charm.

The present translation is a free-flowing paraphrase of the verses, based mainly on *Kovilur Marabu Vedanta Noolgal — Part Two*, the commentary published by the Kovilur Matalayam in 2006 under the aegis of Srilasri Nachiyappa Gnana Desika Swamigal, the venerable pontiff of the Kovilur Aadheenam. Where necessary, a

MAHARAJA THURAVU

Invocatory Verse

We shall prostrate in deep devotion, to attain the divine blessings needed for completion of the present text in the manner intended, to Lord Ganesha, who is showering His Grace in the comely temple of Vriddhachalam, and Lord Skanda who also resides in the same holy shrine and Divine Mother Parvati, the daughter of Himavan, the Lord of the Himalayas, called Perianayaki (Vriddhambika) and to Lord Siva, hailed as Pazhamalainathar in Vriddhachalam, who rids His devotees of the three great impurities of Ego, Karma and Maya

to all the deities like Brahma, Vishnu and Siva, gave away much charity to mendicants and ascetics, and also performed Vedic *yagnas* offering oblations to the sacrificial fires, to fulfil his desire for an heir. He visited various holy pilgrim centres, built temples, dug wells and ponds, developed gardens and performed acts of charity of thirty two kinds, that are described in *dharmashastras*. Owing to the performance of such penances and charities, eventually the king was blessed with a robust male child, which gave immense joy to the king. He was happy that his present life was finally fulfilled and his after-life was also guaranteed with felicity and eventual liberation. The king then performed all the rituals associated with child-birth in the prescribed manner, got the horoscope of the child cast by experts, and finally named his son as 'Maharajan' meaning 'the Great King'!

As the child grew in strength over the years, the king arranged for the education of the prince under the best instructors in all the sixty-four classical branches of arts and sciences and ensured his all-round development, including skills in warfare, like mastery in riding horses, elephants and chariots. As the prince reached marriageable age, the king desired to perform his wedding with a most eligible princess of a neighbouring kingdom and accordingly commenced the most splendid preparations for a grand royal wedding. The king of Karunada Desa then despatched his royal invitation message to all the fifty-six kings of every neighbouring country, conveying his personal request to all of them to attend and grace the grand celebration of the wedding festival of the heir. The kings, with their mighty armies and personal retinues, duly began arriving in Mapuram, the capital city of Karunada Desa to participate in the royal function.

The city wore a festive look, with the most gorgeous decorations to receive the royal guests in a befitting manner and shone with great splendour, rivalling Amaravati, the heavenly capital of Indraloka itself. The princess was of incomparable beauty, as if sculpted by Lord Brahma himself with greatest care and even Mahalakshmi, the Consort of Lord Vishnu, was struck with wonder at her bewitching form and grace. As the celebrations moved towards their grand finale, the crown prince was duly ushered into wedlock with the princess,

Text

1. Once upon a time, when many *rishis* (ascetics) were performing austere penances in the forests of Naimisharanya, Maharishi Suta came that way. The ascetics welcomed him with reverence and said, 'Lord, you have narrated many elevating stories of the past; however, you have not told us the story of the *celebrated renunciation of the king* [Maharajan] so far. Kindly bless us with a narration of the same.' Thereupon Maharshi Suta said, 'Alright, I shall tell you in brief the glorious story of the Maharajan's renunciation, which has been narrated in the Vedas at great length; listen to it with attention,' and proceeded to expound the same.

2 – 9. Once there lived a great king ruling over the fertile lands of a prosperous country called Karunadu, protecting the welfare of his subjects from the city of Mapuram. All the chieftains of the nearby regions accepted his leadership and paid their homage by obeying his commands and dutifully paying the taxes levied upon them. This king was greater than Lord Indra in affluence, more handsome than even Lord Manmatha (Cupid), valorous as the lion, stronger than even a mountain rock in physical strength and skilled in warfare, being equipped with a great spear, capable of protecting the three worlds. In his palace there always resounded the melodies of various musical instruments everyday, accompanying auspicious occasions and events like weddings. The king was also known for his great charity to all the needy and deserving citizens in his kingdom. He ruled the country with great justice and fame as per the *Manu Dharmashastra* and, thus loved by his subjects and revered by his vassals, he enjoyed all the pleasures of earthly life for many years. However, he did not have an heir to rule after his reign and this was a major worry that unsettled his otherwise enviable and happy life.

10 – 20. In order to remove this lack, the king resolved to perform a number of meritorious deeds which would neutralise his bad karma and bestow on him the wealth of progeny. Accordingly, he bathed in various holy rivers like the Ganga, did ritualistic worship

listening with much humility to the advice of the elders and to the teachings of wise saints concerning the ultimate goal of human life and practising together deep contemplation of the truths revealed in the sacred texts. Often resorting to solitude, the royal couple engaged themselves in studying spiritual teachings that were conducive to gaining the ultimate knowledge. They ascertained finally that it is only by gaining the Supreme Knowledge of Truth, that one can escape from the bondage of Maya, that causes the endless cycle of birth and death, to attain true everlasting happiness. They then sought the feet of great souls who were illumined with that knowledge, served them everyday and asked them, with humility, about how to obtain that liberating knowledge. Of the two, the king began to develop an acute sense of discrimination between what is eternal and ephemeral, and detached his mind from the world and the pleasures that it can give. He concluded that there is no end to pampering the body which is anyway perishable and that with a steadfast mind, one should focus on the Knowledge of Truth for gaining emancipation from bondage. He also decided that such Knowledge can never arise within, without the Grace of a compassionate Guru who embodies that Knowledge.

26. Sages have said that to seek the liberating teaching from a self-styled guru who himself is wallowing in the scorching heat of worldly life is akin to seeking the ripe coconut fruit from a person who is desperately squeezing the sparse juice from the bark of a coconut tree, and is therefore bound to be futile.

27. Suppose there is a person who has studied all the *shastras*, Vedas, *puranas* and other scriptures very thoroughly and also expounds them flawlessly to lay people and guides them well to follow a *dharmic* life. But if he himself is not capable of living according to his own precepts and abiding by the values of a truthful and pure life, then to seek spiritual guidance from such a person, even though most learned, is comparable to seeking guidance from a donkey, carrying sack loads of vermilion powder upon its back, regarding the nature of the vermilion powder.

in accordance with all the Vedic rites duly performed by competent brahmin priests and blessed by great rishis and all the visiting royal dignitaries.

21 – 25. After the wedding, the king of Karunada Desa, in the presence of royal sages like Vasishtha and others, arranged for the coronation of the prince as his successor. The prince was bathed in holy waters brought from the Ganga and, decorated in royal splendour, was escorted to the royal throne of gold studded with diamonds and precious gems, by the king and Vedic priests amidst the chanting of Vedic mantras and duly installed as the new king with a dazzling crown and sceptre as his royal insignia, with the words of blessing, “May you now protect the entire earth that is surrounded by sea waters, with great benevolence and justice!” His father now retired without a trace of sadness, happy that he had now fulfilled all his duties by bequeathing the kingdom and the welfare of his subjects to the care of his capable son.

The young king Maharajan fulfilled the expectations of his father by ruling the kingdom with great competence and flair. He travelled far and wide in all the eight directions with his great army and brought the earth under his single command by conquering everyone who challenged his suzerainty. He ruled over his vastly enlarged kingdom with great justice and compassion and enriched the land with tremendous prosperity, rivalling that of the heavens ruled by Indra. He then enjoyed the heavenly pleasures of human life with his beautiful queen and lived in the great felicity of his mighty achievements. When Suta Maharshi narrated thus the glory of the king Maharajan, the Naimisharanya ascetics who were listening with rapt attention became curious and asked him, ‘After achieving so much, what did the king do further?’ Maharishi Suta then began to narrate the further course of the king’s spiritual evolution.

While living in this contentment, the king Maharajan and his royal queen were paying homage everyday to their parents, and worshipping great yogis and God with regular *upasana*. They were

unconcerned about the welfare of your beloved subjects. Such an attitude does not befit the stature of a wise king like you. Please resume your royal duties immediately.” The king replied to them, “I have no desire anymore to rule over this kingdom; I desire to know only myself in my real nature.....”

32. “...I have eradicated my desires for presiding over this wonderful kingdom as well as the pleasures of this royal life. I would prefer to live in a secluded forest in total solitude and conquer all the movements of my mind, and strive to attain liberation from *samsara*. Having decided thus on my future life, I shall not covet anymore the enjoyment of pleasures or return to my former worldly life. Therefore, please select and anoint another person as your king.”

33. Hearing these words of the king, his ministers and courtiers said, “Your father anointed you as our king at a very young age, pleased with your capability and strength, and you too, by virtue of your ability and valour, have protected this land without any blemish all these years. If such a great ruler as you repairs to the forest, who is there to govern and protect the welfare of our country with justice, wisdom and compassion? Further, your proposed course of abdication of your royal duties in favour of an ascetic life is not in harmony with the nature of this world and our society. Bereft of this opulence and all the luxuries of a royal life worthy for the enjoyment of the human body, what other goal can possibly exist in human destiny.....?”

34. “...further, if you renounce the kingdom and go off to a forest as a recluse, our citizens will suffer without protection and the country will plunge into instability. We will all be terribly distraught and plunged in despair. It is not at all proper for you to leave us in the lurch and seek to live alone in a forest. Please do give us a convincing answer to assuage our grief.” Listening to such entreaties, the king replied, “In people like you who think that this worldly life is absolutely real, however much I may tell you that this world is fleeting and unreal, the wisdom to appreciate the truth will not arise”

35. “.....further, the kingship of this country is pithless in

28. The king thereafter found a great sage living in a verdant forest, who was full of compassion for all beings and devotion to Lord Siva, and also an embodiment of dispassion and wisdom. The king fell at his feet and prayed to him to teach that excellent path, following which he himself could attain eternal bliss and be forever free from the cycle of births and death.

29. The sage then instructed the king with the counsel, “Oh King! Give up the feeling of ‘mine-ness’ towards both the world and the pleasures thereof and turn the mind away from all desires which draw it outward because of long association in the past. Drop all thoughts towards even safeguarding the body without any fear. Restrain your mind, and its four modifications (mind, intellect, memory and ego sense) and eliminate all contacts that rouse in your mind, the six inner enemies (lust, anger, greed, delusion, pride and jealousy) by faithfully following the guru’s instructions. In this manner, you will certainly gain *moksha*, which is your own nature, and the root cause of *samsara*, which is *avidya* (ignorance), will be automatically annihilated. Now keep this royal path in your mind and make haste towards your salvation.”

30. The king then obtained all the clarifications regarding this *jnana marg*a from his guru, and returned to his kingdom and resumed its governance as before for some time with great effort. Then one day, he intensely remembered the final instructions received from his guru in the forest and gave leave to all his ministers and officials from the royal court and retired to his private chambers where he discarded all his royal robes and insignia and remained aloof, in contemplation of *jnana marg*a, ignoring all his kingly duties.

31. Becoming anxious about the king’s indifference towards the royal administrative affairs, his vassal chieftains, ministers, purohiths, Vedic pundits and elders approached the king in his private chambers and beseeched him, “Oh Lord, it is not appropriate for you to completely abstain from your daily duties and sit alone doing nothing,

content and of paltry worth. There is no end to the miseries it brings forth upon oneself. Due to lack of discrimination, you are unable to comprehend this. How can you ever consider that this worldly life is full of happiness? When will you ever come to realise that it is devoid of enduring happiness? Because you lack inquiry into the truth behind the existence of this world, it will appear to you as if it is most enjoyable. It will never occur to you to see the truth of my contrary conclusions....”

36. In this manner, the king expounded in great detail to his ministers and others, the unreality of this world and the glory of attaining the vision of absolute Truth and then ordered them to stop, and not follow him. He then left the opulent, gold-embellished palace, and walked away swiftly along the streets of the capital city. The citizens of his kingdom, seeing the king walking alone, leaving behind all his royal paraphernalia, gathered in great numbers and walked behind him, weeping in disconsolate grief at the sudden turn of events, culminating in the renunciation of their beloved king.

37. The king then addressed his subjects with compassion, “My dear fellow countrymen! According to each one’s karma, each one is born into this world in the appropriate conditions. It is true indeed what the scriptures declare regarding everyone’s happiness and suffering is in accordance with their respective karmic lot, and there cannot be even the slightest deviation in such a divinely ordained scheme of things. If such be the case, who can be the support and succour for whom? Ponder over this deeply. When the body is fit and strong, each one should investigate as to who is the real support in this insubstantial worldly life, and accordingly endeavour to seek the protection of such a one who provides enduring support. Think well whether the temporary support, which you have gained because of your former karmas, can ever be the ultimate refuge?”

38. “...further, the temporary support that you enjoy at present,

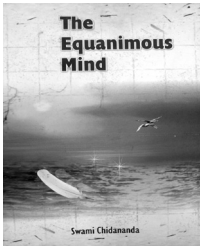
will last only as long as the duration of those karmas which fetched you the same. Once that karma is exhausted, such supports will also leave you. Such temporary associations and their subsequent dissociation is in the very nature of our *prarabdha* karma alone. But the nature of *tattva jnana* (essence of true knowledge) is altogether different. It always bestows enduring support. The fruit of karma that made me your king all these years is no more operative. It has been exhausted. Now I am intent only upon gaining the realisation of the supreme Truth and for that purpose, I wish to enter the forest for performing rigorous penance and to cross over all my karmas. I pray to you to stop here and not follow me anymore.”

39. Saying so, the king left them behind as if he were a stranger and proceeded further. Seeing him so determined in his resolve, the people went ahead of him and wept in grief shedding tears profusely and stopped pursuing him anymore. Then the king’s close relatives approached him again and said, “If today you forsake all of us and retire to the forest, who is there to protect us in the coming days? You are our dearest Lord, it is not fair on your part to abandon us to our fate and proceed without any concern.” To them the king replied as follows:

40. “It is not right on your part to treat me as your relative and pursue me thus. If you truly inquire, it will be clear that for all beings, the only unfailing relative is Self-Knowledge. Lack of that wisdom is the worst foe. Therefore, try to gain that true knowledge which is One and root out the dark ignorance which deludes you always. Know that the Self alone is the eternal companion to each one of us and, giving up your attachment to all the other relatives who are different from that One Entity, remain at peace.” ▲

(To be continued)

BOOK REVIEWS



to cater to an ever-expanding section of the middle-class audience, hungering for practical wisdom. —
Swami Tanmayananda

THE LIGHT BEHIND CONSCIOUSNESS, by John Wheeler, Non-Duality Press, U.K., 2008, pp. 225, US \$13.73, ISBN: 978-0-9558290-6-2. www.non-dualitybooks.com

John Wheeler's new book identifies our ordinary, non-dual awareness as the truth of our being, and clarifies what is entailed in ascertaining this beyond any doubt. His essential point is that nothing exists other than Awareness, and we are That already. Therefore, there is no need to go searching for the truth of our being; all seeking is misguided. We merely have to understand that we are Awareness as an *already-established* fact. This view is consistent with those of *jnanis* like Ramana Maharshi and Nisargadatta (who remarked that "Understanding is everything"). Wheeler constantly draws attention to the fact that we erroneously take ourselves to be an ego, which is an illusion. Our imagination attempts to separate out a conceptual ego, a 'person', from the unity that is Awareness, but that 'person' has no real existence.

Any spiritual method or technique that presumes the existence of the ego, Wheeler insists, is flawed. This is because, by bestowing apparent reality to a nonexistent entity, the technique ends up thwarting the recognition that Awareness is all. The remedy, then, is to be cognizant of the truth that ordinary, everyday awareness is our being and that there is nothing that is separate from it. The *expectation* that some event such as 'enlightenment' will establish this fact actually maintains the illusion of a separate person in place. For only the illusion of a separate person can anticipate such an event.

Awareness, our true being, has no need for enlightenment because there has never been any separation from it in reality. Wheeler repeatedly hammers home the point that, since Awareness is ever-present, the truth of our being should be seen here and now and not sought in some distant future.

About a fifth of *The Light Behind Consciousness* comprises essays that lay down the basics of Wheeler's approach, and the rest of the book consists of his dialogues with various questioners. Wheeler emphasizes that our true nature is beyond the grasp of thoughts; in fact, thoughts appear as objects in Awareness. So he is frugal in using concepts and is averse to invoking

THE EQUANIMOUS MIND by Swami Chidananda. Fowai Publications, Mumbai. 2007. pp.178, Rs200. ISBN: 878-81-905992-0-7 fowaiforum@yahoo.com

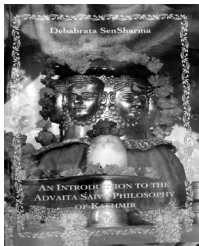
The book under review addresses the topical need of an angst-ridden humanity to cultivate a mind that abides in perfect equanimity under all conditions of duress from the world. The *Upanishads* declare that mind alone is the cause of bondage as well as liberation and that a tranquil mind free from all desires is the fruit of enlightenment. Tranquillity of mind is of two kinds, relative and absolute. The latter is the product of Self-knowledge while the former is an invaluable asset, aiding one's inner journey to the attainment of the latter. Thus Equanimity of Mind is in a sense, both the Way and the Goal. Mahatma Gandhi said in a telling fashion that 'The Way of Peace is the Way of Truth!' The *Bhagavad Gita* extols 'relative equanimity of mind as Yoga' (verse 2.48) and that 'all pains are destroyed in Absolute Peace' (verse 2.65). It thus champions the attainment of an equanimous mind as the unfailing means for ending all suffering.

The merit of the book lies in its simplicity of approach which makes the perennial wisdom of tradition accessible to even laymen of the modern age, who do not have the time or temperament to delve into the depths of Vedanta. The author, an acclaimed monk formerly from the Order of the Chinmaya Mission, is presently serving as the director at the Krishnamurti Foundation of India, Varanasi. The style of the author wafts along like a gentle breeze, which can soothe the nerves of a troubled mind, while coaxing it with a persuasive appeal to reassess one's life in the light of rational thought grounded on enduring spiritual values. The author does not indulge in judgments and sometimes provides conflicting perspectives of debatable ethics, leaving the reader free to arrive at his or her own conclusions, based on the inputs given. The essays are laced with an expert narration of interesting and instructive examples, quotations from great masters and texts, stories and even jokes which make for enjoyable reading on a serious theme. It takes special skill and empathy on the part of a thoroughbred scholar (like the author) to avoid pedagogy and a didactic tone, choosing instead to travel with the reader more as a friend and well-wisher. The book is replete with eminently practical tips for handling the stresses of urban living, laden as it is with complexities. As Bacon said of good books, this one is meant to be 'chewed, digested and assimilated' by the reader seeking to undergo an inner transformation and achieve an equanimous mind.

This slender volume, at a more moderate price in future editions, is sure

redundant belief systems that would engage the mind. His jargon-free writing is motivated by the single goal of directing readers to the truth of their being. Wheeler does not digress, take the scenic route as it were, or make casual detours and observations on tangentially related topics. He relentlessly brings readers back to the essentials.

This reviewer recommends Wheeler's book unreservedly to people who consider themselves serious 'seekers'. As the subtitle (*Radical Self-Knowledge and the End of Seeking*) suggests, the book is intended to put an end to seeking. No book can ever take us to the truth that Advaita asserts we already are. Even so, anyone aspiring for first hand recognition of this truth will find in this book invaluable pointers delivered with admirable clarity and uncompromising consistency. — Mukesh Eswaran

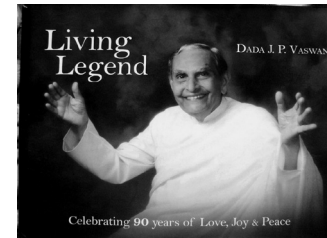


the reader a short historical summary as well as a longer philosophical summary of Advaita Saiva's basic position. In book one the author presents a concise summary of the origin and development of Advaita Saiva thought in India. He touches upon the *Agamas*, the *Spanda Sastra*, the *Pratyabhijna Sastra*, Abhinavagupta, and the Kaula and Krama traditions. In book two he explores the Advaita Saiva metaphysics including: the nature of the

Supreme Reality (*Siva*) and its manifestation as the world as well as the nature of human beings and their status in the world's manifestation. In this section of the book, the author notes that the Advaita Saivas describe the nature of the Supreme Reality, one without a second, in two different ways: as the transcendent abstract formless Reality and as Paramasiva and Paramesvara possessing a form as an all-pervasive Reality. At the end of the book there is also an addendum exploring such key concepts as: *citta* (consciousness), *prana* (vital breath), *mantra*, *kala* (time), *desa* (space), *nada* (sound) and *bindu* (point). Especially appreciated is that nowhere in the book has the author engaged in criticizing other systems but has concentrated only on elucidating the Advaita Saiva doctrines of Kashmir. It is a good introduction to the Advaita Saiva philosophy of Kashmir. — John Grimes

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE ADVAITA SAIVA PHILOSOPHY OF KASHMIR by Debabrata Sen Sharma. Indica Books, Varanasi. 2009. pp182, Rs 250. ISBN 81-86569-65-0 indicabooks@satyam.net.in

This book presents a concise introduction to the non-dual Advaita Saiva philosophy of Kashmir. The author's fifty years of study has nicely culled for



J. P. VASWANI. (1.) LIVING LEGEND — CELEBRATING 90 YEARS OF LOVE, JOY AND PEACE. Gita Pub. House. (HB), pp140. Price Not stated. gph@sadhuvaswani.org (2.) FORMULA FOR PROSPERITY Publisher: Gita Pub.House. pp.129, Price not stated.

(3.) DOES GOD HAVE FAVOURITES?

And Other Heart-to-Heart Talks. Sterling Paperbacks. pp.168, Rs125. mail@stirlingpublishers.com

(4.) LADDER OF ABHYASA — Practical Guide to Meditation. Sterling Paperbacks. pp.200, Rs150. (5.) GOOD PARENTING — HOW TO MAKE SURE THAT YOUR CHILD GROWS UP RIGHT. Sterling Paperbacks. pp.156, Rs125.

It's been more than 40 years since Sadhu Vaswani dropped his physical body but his grace and teachings still flow through his most beloved disciple, J.P Vaswani, fondly called Dada. This year, Dada turns 90. "I am the night, he is the day," he says lovingly about his guru. Reading J.P Vaswani is like eating a grand wedding meal that has dishes from the world over. You are served a little bit of every delicacy and feel spoilt for choice, but as you begin eating you are unable to finish everything and end up picking and choosing random dishes that please your eye. At the end you are bursting at the seams, but you can be sure of having a completely different eating experience from that of the person sitting next to you. Because he sampled a range of dishes that you left out.

The beauty of Dada's teachings is that there is something there for everyone. His love is all encompassing and his compassion transcends all boundaries. His teachings are full of anecdotes about Rama, Krishna, Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha, Mahavira, Guru Nanak, Greek philosophers and Jewish Rabbis

known as *Shariyat*. Here, at the preliminary stage, one conforms to the normative structure of religion, observing the ‘externalities’ alone, but failing to go beyond. The second stage is called *Tariqat*. This is the stage of *sadhana*, where an aspirant binds himself to certain ideals in order to keep the mind pure. “Speech, sight and hearing should be guarded carefully. There is a veritable storehouse of energy within each of us that is lost in talking, seeing or hearing undesirable things,” writes Dada. The third stage is called *M’arfat*, which literally translated means “c/o or care of”. This is the stage of self knowledge, where an aspirant needs a guru to guide him/her. He who crosses this third stage, drops his ego, realizes the divine within and conquers himself. “Death does not touch him who has died before his death,” an inspired poet once said. The fourth stage is called *Haqiqat*. This is the stage of Ultimate Truth. In this stage, the person is reborn. He/she sees with different eyes and he hears new and different sounds. This is the final stage of spiritual evolution, the stage of experiencing oneness with God, the ultimate truth.

LADDER OF ABHYASA – PRACTICAL GUIDE TO MEDITATION is a compilation of various techniques of meditation that can be practised at home. The teachings are drawn from various sources — Patanjali, Vipassana, the *Upanishads*, *Bhagavad Gita*, etc. If one wants to just casually read theoretically about meditation, this book limits itself in giving a good overview, but does not offer for the serious *sadhaka* an in-depth knowledge to make serious progress in meditation experiences.

GOOD PARENTING — HOW TO MAKE SURE YOUR CHILD GROWS UP RIGHT. This theme may seem a bit ironic, to me personally, to be coming from a spiritual guru who has enjoyed single blessedness all his long life. But then he has a very large family of devotees, young and old, and can deal with the subject with great clarity, detachment and compassion. This book can be useful to those who want to understand how children should be ‘ideally’ raised and then tailor make the lessons to fit, when it comes straight down to implementation.

Dada Vaswani is a natural story teller. He tells everything he has to through stories — both real and created by him. One should read his books, if only to learn a few meaningful parables to share with friends and family. They will play on our subconscious mind and eventually influence our actions too. Love and goodness are infectious. Happy birthday Dada! May you tell us plenty more stories to enrich our souls.

— Shriya Mohan

only to name a few. Nobody falls outside the radar of Dada’s loving vision.

LIVING LEGEND — a collection of rare photographs of his younger days, growing up with his guru, and later, his journey across the world as a missionary of peace — takes readers on a trip down memory lane. Along with the pictures are brief explanations of Dada’s contribution to society, his meetings with world leaders of various faiths and the activities of Sadhu Vaswani mission, all interspersed with words of wisdom from Dada. “The opposite of love is not hate: it is apathy or indifference,” he says.

At first, when you see a book titled FORMULA FOR PROSPERITY, you are most likely to pick it eager to find some quick tips on how to get rich. But J.P. Vaswani is not about to give us a crash course in becoming millionaires. To him prosperity has a different meaning. It equates self-fulfilment, happiness and peace of mind. (For everything else there’s Master Card!) The J.P. formula runs as follows: Prosperity = *fn* (Hard work + integrity + God’s grace + philanthropy). He assures us that seeking prosperity this way will always keep us fulfilled.

In DOES GOD HAVE FAVOURITES? AND OTHER HEART-TO-HEART TALKS, he explores topics like faith in guru, god and the different forms of prayer. ‘*Sukh sagar mein aake mat jao pyasa pyare*,’ one of Sadhu Vaswani’s immortal compositions translates as: ‘Having come to the ocean of joy, dear one, don’t go thirsty (without tasting its sweet waters.)’ Dada urges us to make the most of our precious life by quickly discovering its divine nectar.

A story that makes a striking impression in the book is ‘The Way of the Sufis’ – the four stages to spiritual growth in Sufism. The first stage is

THE FOUR YOGAS, A Guide to the Spiritual Paths of Action, Devotion, Meditation and Knowledge. pp277, (HB) Rs200. ISBN: 978-81-7823-489-2. THE SPIRITUAL QUEST AND THE WAY OF YOGA, The Goal, the Journey and the Milestones. pp267, (HB) Rs200. ISBN: 978-81-7823-490-8. Both books by Swami Adiswarananda, Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2008. srkmath@vsnl.com

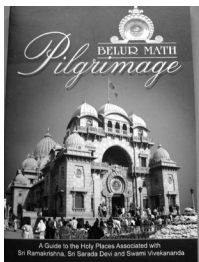
Swami Adiswarananda was the resident swami at the Ramakrishna Centre of New York until his passing in 2007. Both books under review encompass the essential aspects of yoga and philosophy necessary for right understanding and practice. As a rule a Ramakrishna monk is thoroughly conversant with all aspects of Hindu spirituality and Swami Adiswarananda is no exception. These two volumes would be an excellent introduction for those who want a general presentation with a broad and reliable sweep of the concepts. The

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language is straight-forward. The editors have taken considerable pains in editing Swamiji's lectures, but regrettably, the presentation is dry.

HOW TO SEEK GOD by Swami Yatiswarananda. Sri Ramakrishna Math, Chennai. 2009. (HB) pp310, Rs150. ISBN: 978-81-7823-499-1 srkmath@vsnl.com

Swami Yatiswarananda was president of the Sri Ramakrishna Math in Bangalore for many years and this book contains lectures which were originally published in *The Vedanta Kesari*. As with all Ramakrishna Math publications the Swami's lectures are comprehensive and authoritative. The editing is pleasing. There are subtle differences with the two books given above under review by Swami Adiswarananda are for American audiences while *How To Seek God*, is for Indian audiences. All are meant for those who want clarity in their understanding of Vedanta and guidance in the practice of meditation. They are all eminently practical and down to earth in their approach.



BELUR MATH PILGRIMAGE. A Guide to the Holy Places Associated with Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda. by Swami Asutoshananda. Sri Ramakrishna Math, Chennai. 2009. pp114, Rs25. ISBN: 978-81-7823-515-8 srkmath@vsnl.com

This is a delightful little book which provides a valuable service to those who wish to make a pilgrimage to Belur Math, Kolkata and other places associated with Sri Ramakrishna, the Holy Mother and Swami Vivekananda. There are separate chapters and sub-sections for each site and shrine which include information about the importance of the place as well as a short narration of incidents associated with it. There are small but effective photos. At the end are appendices with details like the distances between sites, addresses of pilgrim centres and a list of appropriate books to read in preparation. Reading this small book aroused in me the desire to make a pilgrimage to these sacred places. Whether it will happen is another question but even just making us think about Ramakrishna Paramahansa makes this publication a success.
— T.V. Ramamurthy



Bhagavan's Jayanti Celebrations

This year, Bhagavan's Jayanti fell on January 1st, bringing in the New Year with divine splendour. A thousand devotees (or an approximate number) came from across the world to partake in the celebrations. Bhagavan's Samadhi glowed, decorated with colourful lights and garlands of sweet scented flowers. With day break the ashram echoed with priests chanting *Rudram* and *Chamakam*, followed by the reverberating melody of the nadaswaram wafting through the air. The maha abhishekam was performed bathing the Samadhi in an assortment of fresh fruits, dry fruits, nuts, sandalwood, honey and milk. A grand alankaram followed, decking the Samadhi with strikingly beautiful garlands. Not a stomach went hungry on the day, with long queues of devotees being fed Bhagavan's prasadam outside the dining hall.

On the eve of the Jayanti, the ashram hosted a musical extravaganza. Sulochana Natarajan's troupe from Bangalore's Ramana Kendra, a talented group of young singers, put up a melodious performance. The songs of Muruganar, Sadhu Om, and a few hindi bhajans and English songs on Bhagavan set in upbeat tunes entertained the devotees and sparked off the grand jayanti.

The boundless grace of Bhagavan on his teeming devotees can be felt all through the year, but if one has the good fortune of being in Tiruvannamalai for Bhagavan's Jayanti, a special grace can be felt on that day. Amidst all the festivities and activities all around, if one abides in the inner stillness, even if for a few moments, the presence of Bhagavan can be felt unmistakably, proceeding over the ceremonies, accepting our numerous prostrations and enveloping us in his love.

Shri Ramana Seva Sangha, Kumta

The Jayanti of Sri Bhagavan was celebrated on the first of January, at Kumta, Karnataka. Sri Sadananad P. Bhat spoke about *Sri Bhagavan and Bhagavadgita* on the occasion.

Sri Ramana Samalochana Kendram, Khammam observed Bhagavan's Jayanti on the first of January, 2010. This is the tenth year of the Sri Ramana Samalochana Kendram. There was a morning puja in honour of Bhagavan followed by a short discourse by Sri B. Lakshmikanta Rao who dwelt on the life of Sri Ramana Maharshi.

Sri Ramana Sath Sangam, Tiruchirappalli

Sri Bhagavan's *Sri Arunachala Akshara Manamalai* and *Upadesa Undiyar* are being chanted regularly in about 60 Primary, Middle, High and Higher Secondary schools in and around Trichy. They are fast becoming part of the daily prayer sessions of the schools. Intra and inter-school recitation competitions are conducted and proficiency certificates and shields carrying the pictures of Arunachala Annamalaiyar with Unnamulai Amman and Sri Ramana with suitable inscriptions are presented to the winners. The Second Annual Inter-school Recitation Competitions were conducted this academic year on 22.11.2009 at the National College Higher Secondary School premises. About 280 students participated in the competitions. The participants were divided into four categories viz. Primary School, Middle School, High School and Higher Secondary School and prizes for the first three places were given to the winners in each of the categories. Each winner was also given a photograph of Sri Bhagavan and a copy of Mr. Kamath's biography of Sri Bhagavan.

On *Pradosham* days, the two songs are chanted by devotees in about 40 temples in Trichy. On Sundays, regular chantings take place in some temples and apartments. Next year, the Sri Ramana Sathsangam hopes to take this scheme to the women's colleges in and around Trichy.

Obituaries

Smt. C. Annapurna attained Siva Sannidhi on the 16 October 2009. She fought bravely and with dignity the terrible cancer for about a year. She left with the chanting of *Om Namasivaya* continuously from morning until her last breath at 3 p.m. Though in a semi-conscious state she was performing puja with the one hand, which she was able to move, in the air in the same way we move the hand to place flowers on the deity.



Smt. Subbulakshmi Nathan (1926-2009) first saw Bhagavan in 1942, soon after her marriage to Sri Pazhamalai Nathan of Cuddalore

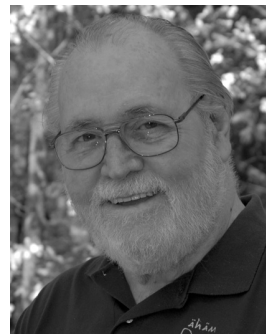


(brother of Somasundaram Pillai). They settled shortly afterwards in Ramana Nagar. In 1957 her husband suffered a stroke that left him paralysed for the remaining 14 years of his life, so as a mother of two young children and in the most trying circumstances she had to bear the burden of nursing her husband and maintaining their family. However, in spite of her often impoverished circumstances, her *sadhana* was to serve food to devotees of Sri Bhagavan, which she always did with great love.

During the last days of Mudaliar Patti, when she had become too weak to prepare food for Sri Bhagavan, as she had been doing daily for many years, Bhagavan himself suggested that Subbulakshmi Nathan should prepare it on her behalf, so for a short while she had the good fortune to cook food not only for Mudaliar Patti but also for Sri Bhagavan. Over the years she fed many other devotees, including Sri Muruganar, but the most notable service done by her and her husband was to provide food and shelter to both Sri Sadhu Om (for about 25 years) and Sri Tinnai Swami (for about 45 years).

For over thirteen years, from 1985 till 1998, she performed daily *giri pradakshina*. Her deep devotion and warm generosity of heart were an inspiration to all who met her. She was absorbed into Arunachala on 14th December 2009.

A. Ramana (Arunachala Ramana), at age 80, was absorbed in Arunachala on February 15, 2010. He was born in Texas, USA. From an early age, A. Ramana intentionally sought a deeper understanding of the truth of God, of himself and the *real* meaning and purpose of life. In 1973, Ramana's spiritual search reached its zenith by his 'discovery' of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi, his real and Ultimate Teacher (Guru). In 1978 he founded AHAM, (The Association of Happiness for All Mankind) to share



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