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Divine Names of Arunachala

24. ॐ व्यतस्तनृत्याय नमः

Om vyatasta-nṛtyāya namaḥ

Prostration to Him dancing with his raised leg crossed over.

Nṛtyam means dancing and *vyatasta* means placed across or crosswise. The *natarāja* is invoked here, clearly one of the most rapturous and enduring mystical representations of creation in all of art history. The great poet Sri Ramana Maharshi imaginatively refers to this revered icon in his divinely inspired *Śrī Aruṇācala Stuti Pañchakam*.

In verse 1 of *Śrī Aruṇācala Navamaṇimālai* the eternal Mountain is opposed to dancing Śiva at Chidambaram. “*Though He is the ever unmoving One, yet in the temple hall (of Thillai) His dance of bliss He dances before the Mother moveless there. Now that Power withdrawn within, His form here moveless, still, He soars as Aruna Hill.*”¹

In verse 2 of *Śrī Aruṇācala Pañcaratnam* the icon fuses with the Holy Hill. “*In Thee, O Arunachala, all, having come into being and having stayed for a while, attain resolution. This is wonderful (or, This is like a picture). In the heart, Thou dancest as ‘I’, as the Self. O Lord, they call Thee by the name ‘Heart’.*”²

In verse 7 of *Śrī Aruṇācala Padigam*, the poet somewhat humorously plays the dwarf Muyalaka who asks ‘Who am I?’ “*If the elements – space, air, fire, water, earth and material objects, which manifest as the many living beings, are not other than You, the space of light, who else am I (but You)? O Blemishless One! Since You shine without another in the heart as the space (of consciousness), who am I who come out as another? O Arunachala! placing your vast Lotus-Feet on his head, come out (and manifest Yourself as the real ‘I’).*”³

No small wonder that just as Bhagavan was born, the Natarāja returned from procession to the temple at Tiruchuzhi on the sacred day of *Ārdrā Darśan* when Śiva manifested himself to his devotees as Lord of the Dance!

— BKC

¹ Translated by Professor K. Swaminathan.

² Translated by Professor T.M.P. Mahadevan.

³ Translated by Sri Sadhu Om.

EDITORIAL

Attend To That For Which You Came

Bhagavan said on a number of occasions in Tamil, *Vandha Velaiyai Pār*¹ more than likely for the benefit of those who came to the ashram for spiritual guidance and who eventually couldn't seem to avoid getting involved in ashram affairs that more often than not had nothing to do with them.

There are times we all think we know better and if given half a chance would solve a problem that defied the best efforts of others. If we could allow for some perspective we could call this propensity unnecessary meddling caused by both ignorance and vanity. It is hard to mind our own business and keep quiet. Yes, there are times when we should speak up but there are also times when we should just keep out of it and get on with what we are supposed to do. Practise that for which we came to the ashram and Arunachala. With time and effort, we learn how to be quiet with a still, alert mind. This applies not just in spiritual matters but also in worldly situations. Parents, for example, learn this wisdom over the years with their children as they grow up. They master when to speak and when to keep quiet. They notice when

¹ 'Attend to that for which you came'. Nagamma, Suri, *Letters From Sri Ramanasramam*, Volume II, Chapter 75, 16th February 1949. 'What Does Bhagavan Like Most?' Mudaliar, Devaraja, *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, 11-8-1946.

their children are open to advice and when it is instinctively rejected. In a way we too are children of Bhagavan. Sometimes we listen and at other times we try to avoid attracting Bhagavan's attention as we know he can see through us! Deafness is a useful strategy when it suits us.

Then how do we remain open to a higher inner voice gently guiding us? It is said that when asked to respond to a situation or give an opinion, Bhagavan would say it once and then remain quiet. He never 'preached' in the accepted sense. It was up to those surrounding him to listen carefully to each word and act upon it. We too are in the same position today. Bhagavan did not then and does not now bludgeon us with loud proclamations or blatant harangues. The responsibility is up to us to listen sensitively to what is in the air. A direct result of *ātma-vicāra* is that it engenders in us the capacity to listen and be alert. Like a fish probing the depths of the ocean we are constantly on the lookout not just to protect ourselves from predators who want to 'eat' us psychologically or in an extreme, physically destroy us, but to see what is right and what is detrimental to our well-being. To continue the fish analogy, when does the fish become aware of the nature of water?²

Physically we are living in another type of ocean, and that is of air. We breathe in an environment of oxygen that we take for granted and yet is absolutely essential for our survival. Our bodies are constantly registering whether we are breathing correctly. Is our breath shallow? Is it agitated? Why? There are many signs to tell us what condition we are in. Do we recognize them or do we just take it for granted? Mostly we ignore them unless there is a crisis and our bodies' metabolism takes over and forces us to concentrate. In the same way our minds continuously register untold amounts of information that our senses pick up from the external world. It then filters what is relevant and ignores what is unnecessary for our happiness. Our practice of self-

²“There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, “Morning, boys. How’s the water?” And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes “What the hell is water?” David Foster Wallace, *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life*.

enquiry focuses on what is absolutely essential to our well-being, the central core from which radiates all the energy to create and recognize forms, for our world is our creation. It is impossible for us to know ourselves through external creation. It is like thinking that the image we peer at in a mirror is our true self. Bhagavan used the analogy of the mind which is like a thief who is turned into a policeman to catch the thief. It is impossible.³

The key to understanding is pure consciousness free of all thoughts that by their nature hide, obscure and deflect us from understanding the source of their existence. Like breathing we are rarely aware of what we are thinking. For the most part we sleepwalk through the day automatically reacting to situations without much conscious awareness at all. This is a paradox because much of our time we are not aware we are conscious and yet we think we are. Just like the fish who are swimming in an ocean of water we are not aware of the consciousness in which we live and breathe and think. Everything is alive to a varying degree. The human being is said to be the most aware creature in the world. We are not the fastest; we are not the strongest; we cannot fly; with our thin skins we get cold quickly; we cannot exist in a high temperature like many other creatures. The list goes on as to what we cannot do. What we can do is be aware of our actions and their consequences, though to look at the world today one could make a strong argument that even there we are deluded.

If the power of awareness is our single most important talent then how do we make use of this power and become more aware?

Bhagavan gave us two simple methods. To dive into our stable unwavering Self, either through breath control or *ātma-vicāra*. Both are easy to perform. Both increase incrementally our awareness. All these two humble methods require is the determination to do so, and the perseverance to practise in all conditions, both favourable and detrimental. We stand in queues waiting to be served at a supermarket,

³ *Maharshi's Gospel, Book II, Chapter Self-enquiry*. M. The attempt to destroy the ego or the mind through *sadhanas* other than *atma-vichara*, is just like the thief assuming the guise of a policeman to catch the thief, that is himself. *atma-vichara* alone can reveal the truth that neither the ego nor the mind really exists, and enables one to realise the pure, undifferentiated Being of the Self or the Absolute.

a bus stop, an airport lounge, or a bank. We sit in front of a computer patiently waiting for an interminable download to be completed. These are all opportunities to stand or sit quietly and withdraw into one's self and practise.

Practising *ātma-vicāra* does not mean sitting for long hours each day. Yes, we do need initially to develop the mental strength necessary in order not allow thoughts to run rampant and for that some discipline is required, however, after a certain point meditation is no longer restricted to sitting quietly say in the Old Hall but is integrated into one's everyday activities. Arthur Osborne once commented that, unless one is a *jñāni*, it is impossible to spend one's whole time doing formal meditation without in some way becoming unbalanced. He advised that we should engage in some wholesome activity in-between bouts of sitting. Some job that could be undertaken to occupy the mind without becoming overwhelmingly personal. When I first came to the ashram and sat with other new comers for long hours in the Old Hall, we commented to each other that many in the ashram do not do meditation at all and at most they would come into the Old Hall to prostrate and then leave. We did not know then that within a short time we would also be doing the same thing. Why? Because Bhagavan's Grace made those long hours unnecessary as the divine flow of subtle grace had permanently impregnated itself into our consciousness.

We may think it is impossible to do *ātma-vicāra* wherever we may be, but that is avoiding the responsibility of following the advice given by Bhagavan. Nobody can do it for us, not even Bhagavan. Just one or two seconds at a time is all that is necessary at first. We are not asked to leap across an ocean in one jump. All that is required are small steps, one after the other. That slow steady accumulation of moments of pure self-reflection will one day coalesce into a huge power that can effortlessly pull one free of all distracting thoughts. So first let us first focus on that tiny step and attend to the business for which we have come. ▲

Śrī Ramaṇa Maharṣi's Comprehensive Teaching

Seeing with the Eye of *Jñāna* and the Eye of *Bhakti*

KENNETH ROSE

Bhagavan Śrī Ramaṇa Maharṣi's ongoing presence has been part of my conscious awareness since at least 1993. It was strengthened on two pilgrimages to Sri Ramansramam, and it has become the central fact of my spiritual life and the touchstone of my spiritual practice over the last three decades. It would be difficult to explain this to people without spiritual interests, and I might be tempted to doubt it myself were it not for the testimony that many devotees give to the reality of Bhagavan's ongoing guiding presence. Bhagavan's unmistakable presence is the gentlest and most vivid divine presence that I have experienced in my life, an experience that is becoming more widespread as more people come under his influence. There is no sense of compulsion in Bhagavan's presence, so there is no need for missionary activity on his behalf, since his divine presence is always available.

A materialist would find it odd or worse that I believe myself to be in personal contact with someone who, they would say, died in 1950.

Kenneth Rose, Ph.D., (krose51@outlook.com) is an author, speaker, and retired professor of philosophy and religion specializing in comparative religion.

A devout disciple of a guru still present in their physical body might insist that I need ‘a living guru’, one who knows how to overcome the tricks of my ego. But as anyone who has sensed the inner call of Bhagavan will testify, Bhagavan is neither dead nor remote. He is an ever-available presence, who appears whenever we think of him or call upon him.

While this claim will strike the skeptic as delusional, and believers in exclusivistic religions will likely challenge or reject it, there is nothing unusual about it for those of us who know the unmistakable characteristics of the divine presence, which is felt inwardly as a bright but gentle stream of strength, spiritual confidence, and unfailing guidance. Many know this as the presence of God, Īsvara, Mary, Kṛṣṇa, Rādhā, Amma, Jesus, Anandamayi Ma, Neem Karoli Baba, and other great saints from any tradition (here I name some of the divine figures who have influenced me over the decades). To see each of these figures as an expression of the same inner presence that I now experience as Bhagavan will not offend the religious sentiments of a religious pluralist and certainly not of the Hindu who lives by the ancient Vedic dictum, *ekaṃ sadviprā bahudhā vadanti: One is the Real—inspired persons speak diversely*.

The way that I came to Advaita Vedānta under the inner guiding presence of Bhagavan is an expression, in its own individual way, of this Vedic maxim. In 1971, I began my formal practise of spirituality by taking initiation as a Gauḍīya-Vaiṣṇava *bhakta*, or devotee of Viṣṇu in his incarnation as Lord Kṛṣṇa. Because I was born into a family of European immigrants in New York City, my first encounter with the *sanātana dharma* was through the Hare Krishna movement (ISKCON), which was founded in New York in 1966 by the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava *ācārya* A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda. This was an encounter with what was then for me an utterly new religion.

I grew up in Brooklyn, where my spiritual sensibility was formed by traditional Catholicism before it was reformed in the 1960s, so I was unconsciously shaped by my religious background to think of religion as a supple ensemble of devotional practices, sumptuous rituals, and aesthetically inspiring church buildings. A religion merely of the mind and heart lacking the paraphernalia of sacramental spirituality was not merely foreign to me at the time, it was unknown to me and

outside the range of my experience. Like many American Catholics of my age and generation, I fell away from the Catholic Church as a teenager, yet its mystical and liturgical ambience smoothed my way into the spiritually rich world of Hindu devotionism by educating me to think of religion and spirituality as involving not only the mind and heart but also the senses and the body.

My initiation as a *bhakta* was not the end of my spiritual journey, which I have recounted in *The Light of the Self: A Memoir of a Spiritual Awakening*, but the beginning of a journey that led from semi-dualistic (*acintya-bhedābheda*) Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism to strictly dualist evangelical Protestantism, and then to increasingly more liberal forms of Christianity and post-Christianity and the comparative study of religion in graduate studies at Harvard, a journey that brought me to Bhagavan's nondualism after a journey through the nondualism of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

A puzzle posed by my spiritual journey for people shaped mostly or exclusively by Christianity is why I cherish Hindu spirituality over Christian spirituality. After all, my childhood parochial-school Catholicism, my deep plunge into the many worlds of evangelical Christianity, and my long-standing appreciation and study of Catholic mystical theology are all portals into worlds of spiritual experience and conviction that are much closer to my own culture and ancestry than Hindu devotional and meditation traditions.

This preference for religious and spiritual practices and teachings originating in India is not merely cultural, nor is it an expression of a desire to be different or exotic, as Western religious critics of converts to Asian religions sometimes suggest. I did try to return to my Christian roots after my first exposure to Hinduism in the Hare Krishna movement, but I never personally discovered in the Christian traditions that I explored the depth of mystical insight and comprehensive philosophical perspectives that I absorbed in the many worlds of Hindu and Buddhist spirituality and philosophy. This may not be true for other people who returned to Western religions after encountering Hindu and Buddhist spiritualities, although many others will agree with me on this point.

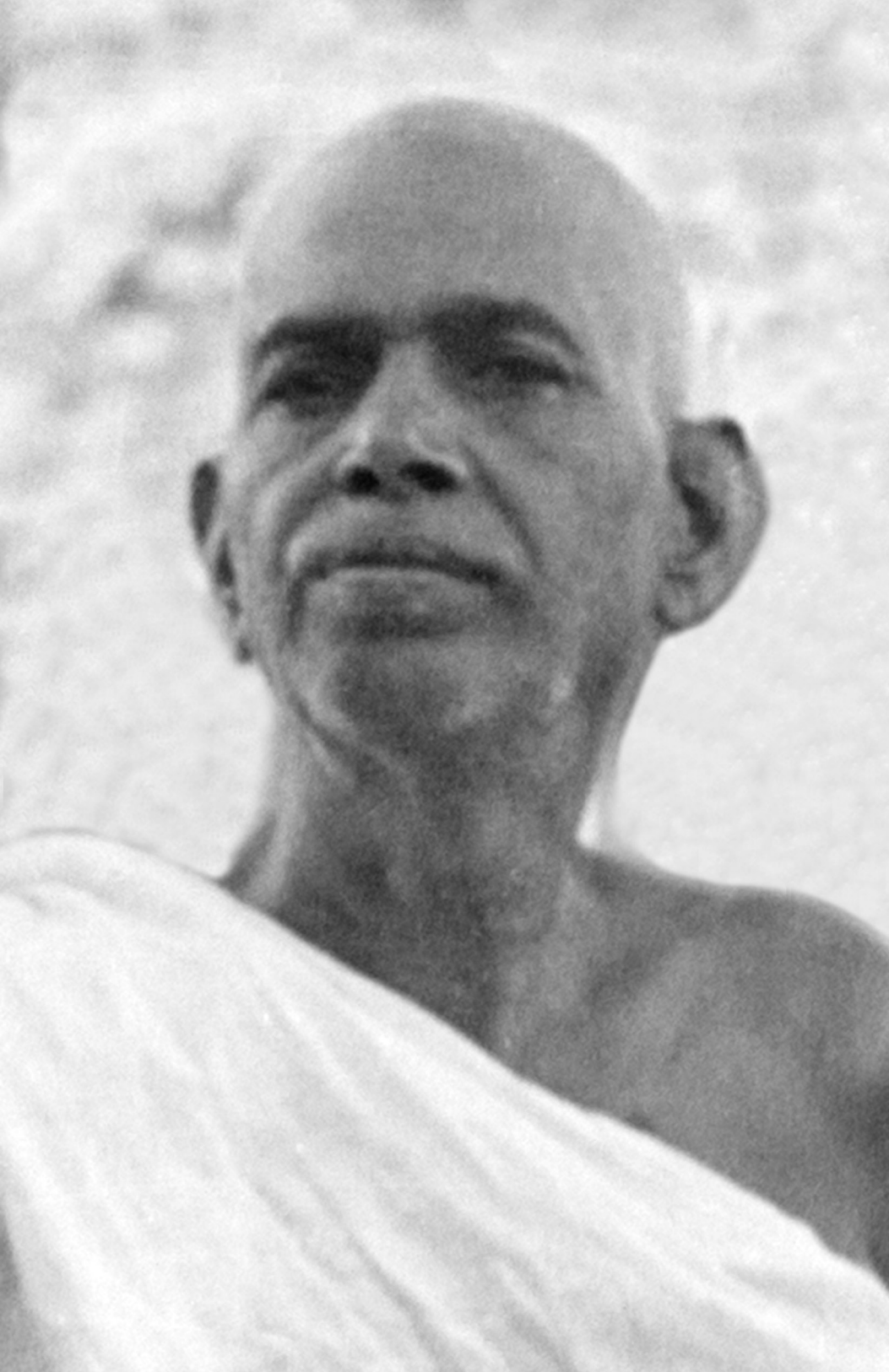
In the end, how we choose our religious traditions is less a matter of rational calculation and more a matter of attraction. In my defense,

I can only say that I was completely captivated by Kṛṣṇa and the traditional Indian spiritual world that surrounded his worship when I first encountered it as a questing American teenager in the late 1960s. Countless converts across the globe and through history have had similar experiences when leaving their inherited religious traditions for new traditions moved by attraction alone and undeterred by the consequences of changing religions.

Another puzzle posed by my spiritual journey is why, given my attraction to Kṛṣṇa and the practice of *bhakti*, or devotion, I fitfully but decisively moved over the decades toward nondual Advaita Vedānta from the semi-dualistic practice of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava devotionalism with its subtle theology, its delightful stories detailing the nuances of intimacy between the *jīvātman* and the *paramātman* Kṛṣṇa, and its bliss-inducing chants, hymns, and poetry, all recounted in gorgeous and endless scriptures recounting the glory of Kṛṣṇa and Kṛṣṇa's servants, friends, family, lovers, and—never to be excluded—foes.

This has been a weighty dilemma for me, and one that I have not taken lightly over the decades. The main reason was not an initial attraction to Advaita Vedānta but the influence of Bhagavan, who became my guru not through my own choice but through his. Drawn by Bhagavan's picture on the cover of a book in a bookstore in the US in the fall of 1993, I picked it up and instantly sensed the now familiar but then surprising voice of Bhagavan inviting me to come to Sri Ramanasramam. This voice has become a familiar and guiding presence in my life over the decades.

As a now-retired professor with a Ph.D. in religious studies, I am skilled in the arts of studying religion academically and critically, so I do not say this without having subjected this inner guidance to the test of experience and critical reason. I will say that none of the guidance or assurances that Bhagavan has inwardly offered me over the decades have turned out to be wrong. This is a common experience of Bhagavan's devotees, as the merest glance at the stories recounted by them in countless books, websites, and articles will confirm. So I didn't just decide to make Bhagavan my guru — indeed, in 1993, before my first pilgrimage to Sri Ramanasramam, I thought that I was finished with gurus and spiritual teachers. But, as the editor of *Mountain Path* Christopher Quilkey recently wrote



in the *Mountain Path*, it is “much more likely it is Bhagavan who selects us.”¹

It was during my first pilgrimage to Sri Ramanasramam in 1994 that I began an intensive study and practise of Bhagavan’s teaching. Still, because of my exposure to Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, I wobbled for a long time between the paths of *bhakti* and *jñāna*, although my sense of loyalty to Bhagavan and my willingness to take his teaching as ultimate for me meant that I had to consider seriously the teaching that *jñāna* is a more direct route to awakening than *bhakti* when practised dualistically or semi-dualistically. I also had to overcome the familiar image of Bhagavan as only teaching *ātma-vicāra* and the *jñāna-mārga*. It is quite common in the global alternative-spirituality and consciousness movements to encounter Śrī Ramaṇa Maharṣi as the preeminent *satsang* teacher. This Bhagavan teaches only one thing: you are already and always the Self, and there is nothing at all to do except to remain in that awareness. If some help is needed, the instruction is simple and straightforward: Whenever you get caught up in thoughts, simply trace it back to its source, the Self, the I-I, and remain there. Repeat this move until it is no longer necessary.

While it is true that this is Bhagavan’s ultimate verbal teaching, the record of his teaching expresses a richer view in which Bhagavan expands upon other teachings as well. This becomes clear when reading *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi, Day by Day with Bhagavan*, or *Letters from Sri Ramanasramam*, where he taught countless practices other than *ātma-vicāra*, even if this practice was his ultimate intention for his hearers. His own words provide the underlying principle that governs his approach:

“The inquiry into the Self is inclusive of all, faith, devotion, jnana, yoga and all.”²

The essence of numerous Hindu spiritual teachings turns up in the extensive published record of Bhagavan’s teachings. Not only was he a foremost living example and teacher of nonduality in recent centuries, he was also a master teacher of many more dualistic teachings, which he allowed as steps toward resuming our natural nondual standpoint as *ātman*/Brahman. If I can be permitted to make an academic distinction,

¹ Christopher Quilkey, ‘Who Is a Genuine Guru’, *Mountain Path* (April 2020): 3.

² Venkataramiah, Munagala S., *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk§596.

I would distinguish between what I see as Bhagavan's specific teaching and his comprehensive teaching. The specific teaching is his silent presence, which, when expressed verbally, is the teaching of nondual self-attention, while his comprehensive teaching includes the many other practices that he discussed and offered to his questioners.

The richness of Bhagavan's comprehensive teaching has been a crucial element in my inner training with Bhagavan over the decades, which has guided me toward the supreme nondual stance of self-attention and self-abiding from the more dualistic teachings that shaped my earlier life, including Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, Catholic mysticism, evangelical Protestantism, and Theravāda Buddhist meditation practices and philosophies. This eclecticism is less unusual today than it was in the late 1960s, when I began my spiritual journey, but apart from this varied journey, it is unlikely that I – and many like me – would have made my way from a Western religious background to discipleship in Bhagavan's teaching and practice.

I practice *ātma-vicāra* regularly, but I often find it necessary to abide in a slightly more dualistic state where *bhakti* and *rāja-yoga* take on a more central role in my spiritual life. This move would be rejected by some adherents of different versions of Advaita Vedānta who think that practise and mystical experience are needless because we are already enlightened. This teaching is not merely an innovation of the Neo-Advaita nondualism movement and influential traditional Advaita Vedāntins who reject nondual experience (*anubhava*) as an impediment to *jñāna*. Śaṅkara taught that *jñāna* is the proper path to realising that we are, by the sheer fact of our existence, already Brahman and enlightened.³ In his teaching, religious activities and devotional practices are helpful to but are not causes of enlightenment. Yet, even as revered an Advaita Vedānta text as the *Pañcadaśī* skirts this issue in favour of practise, as the following dialogue shows:

“Action is useless,” claims a student.

The teacher responds, “And why is actionless helpful?”

“Dropping action is the cause of awakening,” asserts the student.

“But action is useful for someone who desires to know Brahman,” advises the teacher.⁴

³ See Śaṅkara's commentary on *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* 1.11.2-4.

⁴ *Pañcadaśī* 7. 276, my translation.

This comprehensive teaching suggests that if the spiritual life were already accomplished even before we set out on it, then everyone who ever started out on it would have finished the journey before they set out on it. In contrast to the student's antinomian stance, the *Pañcadaśī* gives the rationale for a comprehensive approach, which includes experience and can give rise to devotional sentiments: *ayamātmā parānandaḥ parapremāspadam yataḥ*: "Because this Self is supreme bliss, it is the abode of supreme love."⁵ Similarly, we find in Bhagavan's teaching an intensely experiential expression of nondual realisation. Bhagavan's *advaita* is not an experientially blank nondualism or a merely conceptual *advaita* but a richly experienced *advaita*. This is suggested in the famous saying of Bhagavan: "When the scriptures speak of 'seeing the Self' and 'seeing God,' what is the truth they mean? How to see the Self? As the Self is one without a second, it is impossible to see it. How to see God? To see Him is to be consumed by him" (*Ulladu Narpadu*, v.21). Only a saint whose vision stands at the culmination of *bhakti* and *jñāna* could speak a truth like this with the effortless eloquence and realised learning that are constant traits of Bhagavan's writings and talks.

It is clear in Bhagavan's recorded talks and in writings that the way of nondual *jñāna* is central, yet, even as a fully-realised *jñānin*, he composed exquisite devotional *stotra*-s. Bhagavan was a *bhakta* who so loved the Nayanmars and Arunachala that hearing about them would bring tears to his eyes.⁶ Because of this combination of the practise of *bhakti* and *jñāna* in the example of Bhagavan's life and in his comprehensive teaching, I have developed the capacity for what I call 'double seeing', or seeing with the eye of the *bhakta* and with the eye of the *jñānin*. In the comprehensive teaching of Bhagavan, both ways are true and both have their place in a well-balanced spiritual life. I know now that I need not reject either one of these ways of seeing the divine, but that, as with my two physical eyes, I should see with both spiritual eyes simultaneously. The following anecdote expresses this in words attributed to Bhagavan:

⁵ *Pañcadaśī* 1.8, my translation.

⁶ See, for example, Suri Nagamma, *Letters from Sri Ramanasramam*, volumes I and II, translated by D. S. Sastri (Tiruvannamalai: Sri Ramansramam, 2006), 4-5, Letter 3, 'Quarrel Between Uma and Maheswara'.

At Gopalda's [Sri Krishnaprem's] behest, I later narrated this account [of Gopalda's vision of Śrīmatī Rādhā and Śrī Kṛṣṇa at the temple in Srirangam] to Ramana Maharshi. Ramana observed, 'His experience was correct. What he saw depicts the two-fold phenomenon of the eternal, motionless, unchangeable, and the play or lila with manifestation.' Then the Maharshi told me that on that particular day when Gopalda was present, the puja at Srirangam had been done with the sankalpa (literally a resolve) of depicting how manifestation arose out of the unmanifest – a sort of Viswarupa darshan. Of course, he concluded his remarks with, 'Was this experience independent of or outside his atma-satta?' And much later still, when I came to recount this episode to the Maharshi, he appeared to enjoy it heartily. He said, 'That is just like the Lord. First He gives you darshan and then later says you can't have it'.⁷

If we see the divine with only one eye, we may find it confusing that fully-developed versions of the *bhaktimārga* and the *jñānamārga* appear in Bhagavan's teachings. Looking only with the eye of *bhakti*, we might take the following *upadeśa*, which is widely quoted on the internet, as Bhagavan's supreme teaching:

Place your burden at the feet of the Lord of the universe who accomplishes everything. Remain all the time steadfast in the heart, in the Transcendental Absolute. God knows the past, present and future. He will determine the future for you and accomplish the work. What is to be done will be done at the proper time. Don't worry. Abide in the heart and surrender your acts to the Divine.⁸

Or this from the *Talks*:

Take the case of bhakti – I approach *Īśvara* and pray to be absorbed in Him. I then surrender myself in faith and by concentration. What remains afterwards? In place of the original

⁷ S. Chakravarty, 'Sri Krishnaprem's Visit to Sri Ramana Maharshi, Part IV', *The Maharshi*, 29. no. 6 (November-December, 2019): 2.

⁸ This saying is widely quoted but without a specific source cited on the internet. The furthest back that I have been able to trace it is to a banner quotation displayed without a named source in *The Mountain Path*, 24:4 (October 1987): 227.

‘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.⁹

Or this from the Kapali Sastriar’s *Sat-Darshana Bhashya*:

D. — Then what is true devotion (*bhakti*)?

M. — Whatever I do or consider myself doing is really the Lord’s doing. Nothing really belongs to me. I am here for the service of the Lord. The spirit of service (*Arul uruvam*) is really devotion supreme and the true devotee sees the Supreme Being as the Lord immanent in everything. Worship of Him by name and form leads one all beyond name and form. Devotion complete culminates in knowledge supreme.¹⁰

Looking only with the eye of *jñāna*, we might take the following well-known teaching as an example of Bhagavan’s highest verbal teaching:

You are awareness. Awareness is another name for you. Since you are awareness there is no need to attain or cultivate it. . . . All that you have to do is to give up being aware of other things, that is, of the not-Self. If one gives up being aware of them then pure awareness alone remains, and that is the Self.¹¹

Or this from the *Talks*:

You must exist in order that you may think. You may think these thoughts or other thoughts. The thoughts change but not you. Let go the passing thoughts and hold on to the unchanging Self. The thoughts form your bondage. If they are given up, there is release.¹²

Or this, also from the *Talks*:

You need not cease thinking. Only think of the root of the thoughts; seek it and find it. The Self shines by itself. When that is found the thoughts cease of their own accord. That is freedom from bondage.¹³

⁹ Venkataramiah, *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk§28.

¹⁰ K. [Kapali Sastriar], *Sat-Darshana Bhashya*, 11th ed. 2015, p.6.

¹¹ A.Devaraja Mudaliar, *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, July 24, 1946.

¹² Venkataramiah, *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk§523.

¹³ Venkataramiah, *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk§524.

Or this from *Spiritual Instruction*:

It is only if bondage is real that liberation and the nature of its experiences have to be considered. So far as the Self (*Purusha*) is concerned it has really no bondage in any of the four states. As bondage is merely a verbal assumption according to the emphatic proclamation of the Vedanta system, how can the question of liberation, which depends upon the question of bondage, arise when there is no bondage? Without knowing this truth, to enquire into the nature of bondage and liberation, is like enquiring into the nonexistent height, colour, etc., of a barren woman's son or the horns of a hare.¹⁴

As is clear in the quotations concerning *bhakti* given above, Bhagavan teaches that there is no ultimate difference between the two *mārga*-s, and that each one, when diligently practised, coincides at the apex of the spiritual life with the other. This is an elegant solution, but it takes practise to realise because it demands the double seeing of keeping one eye on the nondual witness-consciousness and the other on the universal activity and grace of Brahman in the many forms assumed by *Īsvara*.

In Suri Nagamma's first letter from Sri Ramanasramam, she recounted an episode with Bhagavan at the ashram that sublimely illustrates Bhagavan's comprehensive teaching. And with this anecdote, I will let Bhagavan have the last word, at least for me, on the issue of the relationship between *bhakti* and *jñāna*:

The day before yesterday being full moon, the usual Deepotsava (festival of lights) was celebrated on a grand scale. This morning Sri Arunachaleswarar started for giri pradakshina (going round the hill) with the usual retinue and devotees and accompaniment of music. By the time the procession reached the Ashram gate, Sri Niranjanananda Swami (the Sarvadhikari) came out with Ashram devotees, offered coconuts and camphor to Sri Arunachaleswarar, and paid homage when the procession was stopped and the priests performed *ārati* (waving of the lights) to the God.

¹⁴ Śrī Ramaṇa Maḥarṣi, *Spiritual Instruction* (multiple editions), IV.11.

Just then Sri Bhagavan happened to be going towards the Gosala (cowshed) and seeing the grandeur he sat down on the pial near the tap by the side of the book depot. The *arati* plate offered to Arunachaleswarar was brought to Bhagavan by Ashram devotees and Sri Bhagavan took a little *vibhuti* (holy ashes) and applied it to his forehead, saying in an undertone “*Appanukku Pillai Adakkam*” (The son is beholden to the father). His voice seemed choked with emotion as he spoke. The expression on his face proved the ancient saying ‘*bhakti poornathaya Jnanam*’ (the culmination of devotion is knowledge). Sri Bhagavan is Lord Siva’s son. Sri Ganapati Muni’s saying that he is Skanda incarnate, was confirmed. It struck us that Bhagavan was teaching us that since all creatures are the children of Ishwara, even a Jnani should be beholden to Ishwara.¹⁵ ▲

¹⁵ Nagamma, *Letters from Sri Ramanasramam*, 1-2, Letter 1, ‘The Son is Beholden to the Father’.

A Few Advaitic And Zen Hi Coo

Kevan Myers

Please try and tell me
how I can be
other than this moment

This moment awakes me
I seek for a name
but this mirror has no frame

Each day, waking free,
I gather bits of stuff
that I lock up and then call ‘me’

In front of the mirror:
wondering why...
I cannot see myself.

Periya Puranam

An Epic of Devotion

V.S. KRISHNAN

The love which springs from the heart towards God is called devotion. According to the *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam*, when the mind shakes off all its attachments towards worldly objects, expects no gratification from any other source and when the senses are subdued, it results in devotion. Lord Krishna says “Just as fire which has burst into flames reduces a pile of firewood to ashes, so does devotion directed towards Me burns up all stains and sins. As gold sheds its dross and regains its purity when heated with fire, so too does the soul shake off the seeds of Karma through devotion, and attains oneness with Me.”¹ He further says, “Neither Yoga, nor Sankhya nor righteousness nor study of the Vedas, austerity or renunciation captivates me as does devotion. He is a true devotee, who speaks in a voice choked with emotion, whose heart melts, who weeps incessantly at the thought of separation from Me.”² *Periya Puranam* is the Tamil poetic portrayal of those who exemplified devotion.

Though the spirit of devotion is already inherent in us, it does not manifest on its own. The individual has to seek and establish a link

¹ *Uddhava Gītā*, Chapter 9, verse 19. ² *Ibid.*, verse 20.

V.S. Krishnan comes from a family tradition of Muruga worship performed through the songs of Arunagirinathar, known as *Tiruppugazh*, a tradition which he follows even now at the age of 82. The devotion which *Tiruppugazh* kindled prompted him to the teachings of Bhagavan.

with God. Though it rains all over, the man in need of water has to put out a bucket to collect the water and similarly while the Omnipresent God is everywhere, the individual has to establish a link with God and seek His grace. Mānikkavacakar, the Saivite saint, said that only by His grace can one become a devotee. (*Avan Arulāl Avan Tāl Vaṅaṅgi*). For the rare few, the grace comes naturally, in continuation of a past link of devotion, in some form or other. Grace came in the form of a relative to young Venkataraman, the son of Sundaram Iyer and Azhagammal of Madurai. When Venkataraman asked an uncle why he was not seen for some time, the relative replied that he was at Arunachalam. The moment the word 'Arunachalam' fell on his ears Venkataraman could experience a past link and he was spontaneously inspired to seek to revive that link. He recites this experience in *Śrī Aruṅācala Akṣaramaṇamālai* verse 70: "Oh Arunachala, the moment I thought of your name, you have drawn me towards you and who can comprehend your glory?" It may be noted that there was no mention about this relative anywhere after this communication, which goes to show that he appeared before Venkataraman not by any coincidence but by a divine intervention. It was a continuous flow of grace thereafter. Then Venkataraman chanced upon a copy of Sekkizhar's book, *Periya Puranam*, the great Tamil biography of saints.

The book attracted him at first sight and made a profound impact on him. It was the first religious book he laid his hand on. He started reading it with keen interest. *Periya Puranam* described the lives of 63 Tamil saints known as *Nāyanmārs*. As Venkataraman went on reading the book he was spellbound by their total detachment from world, their dispassion of mind, their disciplined senses and their dedication to their goal of union with God. When he visited the Meenakshi temple at Madurai and saw the images of these saints, he recollected all that he read in *Periya Puranam* and shed tears before these images. He said, "I would feel the waves of emotion overcome me..... Isvara, the Controller of the universe and the destinies of all, the Omniscient and Omnipotent, and occasionally pray for the descent of his grace upon me so that my devotion would increase and become perpetual like that of the 63 saints..."³

³ Osborne, Arthur, *Ramana Maharshi and the Path of Self-knowledge*, 2012. p.15-6.



King Anabhāya Chozha fanning Saint Sekkizhar

Soon afterwards the great awakening occurred when he made an experiment with death and emerged enlightened. Having heard the call of Arunachala, he renounced everything and set out for Tiruvannamalai, the abode of Arunachala. Arriving there, he saw Lord Arunachala in His splendour. When the question arose ‘Who saw Arunachala?’, there was none to answer, because the seer, the ego, who had already been immersed and lost in Arunachala, was not there. Venkataraman who had ceased to be an individual, had been transformed into a realised sage, who would come to be known as Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi.

Seldom has there appeared a saint who got realisation as instantly, by direct experience, as Bhagavan. Most of the time Bhagavan remained in the transcendental state of Samadhi. A devotee remarked that he was the living illustration of the Truth, as declared in the *Śrī Bhagavad Gītā*. Swami Siddheswarananda, an erudite scholar of Vedanta, Head of Ramakrishna Mission, Paris, called the Maharshi a ‘*jīvanmukta*’. He said, that “the existence of such an individual, who is the living incarnation of the Truth, renders the truth demonstrable.” Forever, he remained at peace. A steady stream of devotees started flowing towards him.

Most of the time he remained in silence and even when he spoke, he spoke only a few words. While he was very precise in answering questions, he became very eloquent when talking about the Saivite Saints. Bhagavan, who was *jñāna* personified, quite often referred to the extraordinary devotion and detachment of the Saivite saints, to prove that devotion is the mother of *jñāna*, wisdom.

What is it that makes *Periya Puranam* so enlightening that it inspires saints, sages and simple devotees, all alike? According to Sekkizhar, the author of *Periya Puranam*, the highest aim of a devotee was not a seat in heaven, not even *mukti*, but admission to the galaxy of devotees. He held the view that admission to the galaxy of devotees itself was liberation. Having observed the depth of Sekkizhar’s devotion towards Śiva and his veneration towards Śiva devotees, King Kulotthunga Chozha, appointed him as Prime Minister and requested him to compose a work of Śiva devotees, a work which Sekkizhar loved to do and was fully qualified to do. Before commencing his work, Sekkizhar meditated on Śiva and solicited the blessings of the Lord. He wondered how he could truthfully undertake

a magnificent work portraying the life of Śiva devotees and sought guidance from the Lord. Then he heard a voice from space that sounded: “*Ulagelām*” (encompassing the universe). Sekkizhar got the signal he had been looking for and began his first song with the word *ulagelām* and went on with his composition. Based on the work of Sri Sundaramurthi Swamigal (*Tiruttonḍat Thogai*) and Sri Nambi Andar Nambi (*Tiruttonḍar Tiruvantādi*), who compiled in the 11th Century the poetic works of Sambandhar, Appar and Sundarar and others into a twelve volume collection. Sekkizhar built the edifice of sublime *Periya Puranam* as a capstone to the entire structure.

The ‘Puranam’ covered a period of 700 years and comprised over 4,253 songs. The songs composed by Tirujñāna Sambandhar, Appar and Sundarar are known as the *Tevaram*,⁴ those by Mānikkavacakar are known as the *Tiruvachakam* and those by Tirumular as the *Tirumandiram*. Some songs hailed the glory of God and His qualities of love and compassion while some extolled the importance of the Five Letter Mantra (*Pancākṣara, Om Namaḥ Śivāya*). Some songs were composed as prayers to confess one’s shortcomings and to lead one to the path of perfection and truth. Since service to Śiva and to Śiva devotees was their aim, Sekkizhar addressed them as ‘Servitors’ (*tonḍar*). Perhaps never before had devotion, literature, history and poetry blended as beautifully as in the *Periya Puranam*.

Sekkizhar also explained the qualities of a servitor. Though they came from all castes, classes, professions and both sexes, they were all united by their bond of devotion towards Śiva. They expressed their devotion in different ways; by being a companion to God (Sundarar), by being the son of God (Tirujñāna Sambandhar), by being God’s servant (Appar) and by being a cowherd (Tirumūlar). The sacred ash smeared over their foreheads and the chains of *rudrākṣa* beads round their necks identified them. A servitor – one who seeks to serve others – does not feel joy at having wealth nor does she or he feel sorrow by being poor. They view a begging bowl made of clay and a bowl made of gold without distinction. Though they worship Śiva with extreme

⁴ Bhagavan quoted a stanza from *Tevaram*: “Oh sages, eager to get over all miseries, worry not about inferences and examples. Our light is ever shining forth from within. With mind clear, live in God!” *Tevaram* speaks of the Eternal and Ever-experienced Being. Thus, *Tevaram* takes one directly to the Reality. (Talk No. §512).

devotion, they expect no result from this. What they wear are only torn and stained clothes. They have no other aim in life than serving God.

In one of her songs Karaikkal Ammaiyar prays: “Let me not be born again. Even if I am born, let me ever remain in remembrance of You.” They were engaged in their duties and yet they remained unattached to the results of their actions. They remained ever contented and made a total surrender of their lives to God. They held the view that the world of form and images was a mere illusion and they could attain eternal bliss and immortality only by reaching Śiva, the Godhead, through dispassion and discrimination. Bhagavan has summarized their qualities in four categories: (i) their undifferentiated, non-dual worship of Lord Śiva; (ii) their continuous and never-failing remembrance of the Lord; (iii) their minds were quiet, devoid of thoughts; and (iv) they always rested in Pure Awareness, abiding in the Self.⁵

Tirujñāna Sambandhar, the son of Bhagavati Ammal and Śivapada Hridayar, born at Sirkazhi, near Chidambaram, was one among the 63 saints (*Nāyanmārs*) whom Sekkizhar portrayed. As his name suggests, he was an embodiment of *jñāna* (knowledge/wisdom). He had attained liberation and yet he was born, not as a result of his past Karma but on his own volition, in order to extol Saiva Siddhantam, a doctrine of disciplined and dispassionate Śiva worship. Seldom had there appeared a saint like Sambandhar, who got self-realisation by his direct experience of devotion and surrender towards Lord Śiva. Bhagavan, who had studied the lives and works of the Saivite saints, narrated the events connected with Tirujñāna Sambandhar with great fervour to a group of devotees who visited him on 15th October 1938. What Bhagavan described in brief is detailed below.

Sambandhar was only three years old when his parents carried him with them to the temple at Sirkazhi. After leaving the child at the steps of the tank, the parents went into the tank for their baths. Finding himself alone, the little child started crying and, it is said, none other than Goddess Parvati herself manifested, consoled the child and, putting him to her breast, fed milk to him. When his father returned and saw the little boy smiling with streaks of milk around his lips, he wanted to know what had happened. The little boy gave reply by way

⁵ Venkataramiah, M., *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk§306.

of a song in a babbling way. It soon became evident that the boy had been fed, not on ordinary mother's milk but the very Milk of Wisdom (*jñānappāl*). At the age of three, when most children are not even able to speak or walk, Sambandhar started visiting temples, and composing and singing songs in praise of the Lord. While addressing Lord Śiva, the Ardhanareeswara (Śiva as Half-Woman), he saw the earring on the left side of Śiva's body, which belonged to Parvati. Sambandhar then composed a song describing Śiva as the One who wears an earring: "He whose ear is adorned by the [ear] ring [of Parvati] and who rides the bull, whose head is adorned with the crescent moon, who manifests smeared with white-ash from the cremation ground, that Thief who has stolen my heart, Who has his abode at Brahmapuram, I worship the Lord of such magnificence."⁶

Bhagavan continued with his narration: It was high time, Sambandhar thought, that he should visit the abode of Arunachala, the Lord whose mere thought liberates the individual. With Tiruvannamalai as his destination, Sambandhar set out on his pilgrimage. He reached Tiru Araiyanainallur⁷ also known as Tirukkoilur. Tiruvannamalai is located 18 miles away. The place is well known for its small Śiva temple. During his stay there, Tirujñāna Sambandhar composed songs on Arunachala and his consort Unnamulaiyar and prayed for guidance on how to reach Arunachalam. Exactly then an old man appeared there with a flower-basket.

When the young boy asked him who he was, the old man replied that he was a servitor of Arunachala, the Lord of Tiruvannamalai. "How far is it from here?" asked the sage. "I walk every day from there to here to collect flowers for daily worship. So it is very near," said the old man. "Then I shall go with you to that place," said the young sage. "That would be a pleasure," replied the old man. They walked together, along with Sambandhar's followers. While listening to the

⁶ *Tōḍuḍaiya Ceviyaṅ...*

⁷ It was here, in Tiru Araiyanainallur many years after Sambandhar's visit, that the young Venkataraman, on his way to Tiruvannamalai, had halted. He was not aware then that this place has been sanctified by the visit of Sambandhar. He went to the temple, worshipped and came out. Seeing his tired face, a sympathetic temple drum player, shared his food with Venkataraman. On his suggestion, Venkataraman visited the house of one Muthukrishna Bhagavatar, who offered him food and a resting place where young Venkataraman had a nice sleep.

old man narrate various events relating to Arunachala, Sambandhar and he walked forward.

After walking some distance, when the young sage looked back, he could not see the old man. Suddenly, a gang of dacoits waylaid them and carried away all their possessions. However, Jñāna Sambandhar and his team continued walking and ultimately reached their destination, the abode of Arunachala. As Sambandhar started contemplating, he saw Arunachala in his vision and heard the Lord saying: “The dacoits were none other than my followers. I sent them to free you from all your attachments. Now all your aspirations will be fulfilled.”

The very sight of the Hill moved Sambandhar deeply. He rolled on the ground in pious devotion and shed tears while reciting the names of Arunachala. “The Hill fascinates my heart,” he said. He described Arunachala Hill as the manifestation of Eternal Reality, the Brahman. In one of the hymns he sang in praise of Arunachala, he says: ‘You are a dense mass of *jñāna*, capable of removing the ‘I-am-the-body-idea’ from your devotees. Herds of gazelles, of boars and of bears come down your slopes at night to look for food. Herds of elephants go up from the plains to your slopes so they may rest at night. Thus herds of various kinds of animals meet on your slopes.’”

Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi continued: “So, this Hill must have been a dense forest 1,500 years ago. It has since been denuded of its forests by the wood-cutters through these centuries. The account of Sri Arunachala given by the mysterious old man to Jñāna Sambandhar is contained in 300 slokas in Upamanyu’s *Bhakta Charita*. One of the *archaka*-s of the temple who possessed it had shown it to me.”⁸ Sri Ramana Bhagavan thus concluded his unusually lengthy talk with the group of devotees who visited him.

Among the four Saivite Servitors (*nālvar*) who were in the forefront, Tirunāvukkarasar (king of the sacred tongue), also known as Appar, was one. His voluminous works known as *Kurunthogai* and *Tiruthāṇḍakam*, are unique for their devotional and literary appeal. “My duty is to remain doing service,”⁹ said Appar and he always came to the forefront to perform any service to fellowmen. A normal

⁸ Venkataramiah, Talk§529.

⁹ *En Kaḍan Paṇi Seydu Kidappadē*.

devotee would visit the temple, worship the deity and return but not Appar. Appar would look around; attend to some work like helping the priest, cleaning the precincts and giving some help to the needy.

“True worship is performed when you shed loving tears before God and repent your mistakes,”¹⁰ Appar sang in one of his songs. And in another, “While worshipping, all parts of the body, the mind and senses should be concentrated on God. Worship should be made with unshakeable faith and humility. There should be genuine interest in correcting one’s weaknesses and *vāsanās*. One should cultivate the qualities of love, humility and devotion to be able to reach God,” Appar said in another song.¹¹ “As you continue to worship God-with-form, gradually you will experience the formless God within you. Once you experience God within, you will enjoy Him as directly as you enjoy a fruit.”¹²

Later, after visiting Arunachala Tirujñāna Sambandhar continued his extensive pilgrimage in his palanquin,¹³ and reached Tirukkadavur. He instantly remembered Appar, who belonged to this region. He had long desired to see Appar, an embodiment of devotion and service to God, and to pay his obeisance to him. Having learnt that Appar was residing at a place called Tiruppūnturutti, Sambandhar proceeded in that direction. On reaching the town, he asked one of the carriers of palanquin to enquire and find out where Appar’s residence was. Then he heard a voice from below: “I am here. Because I have done great Tapas earlier, I have been given the privilege of being a carrier of your palanquin.” Appar spoke while holding the pole that formed the base of the palanquin. Apparently, when Appar had seen the palanquin approaching Tiruppūnturutti, he went to it and asked one of the bearers to leave and took over the task of carrying the palanquin on his shoulder. The moment Sambandhar heard Appar speak, he

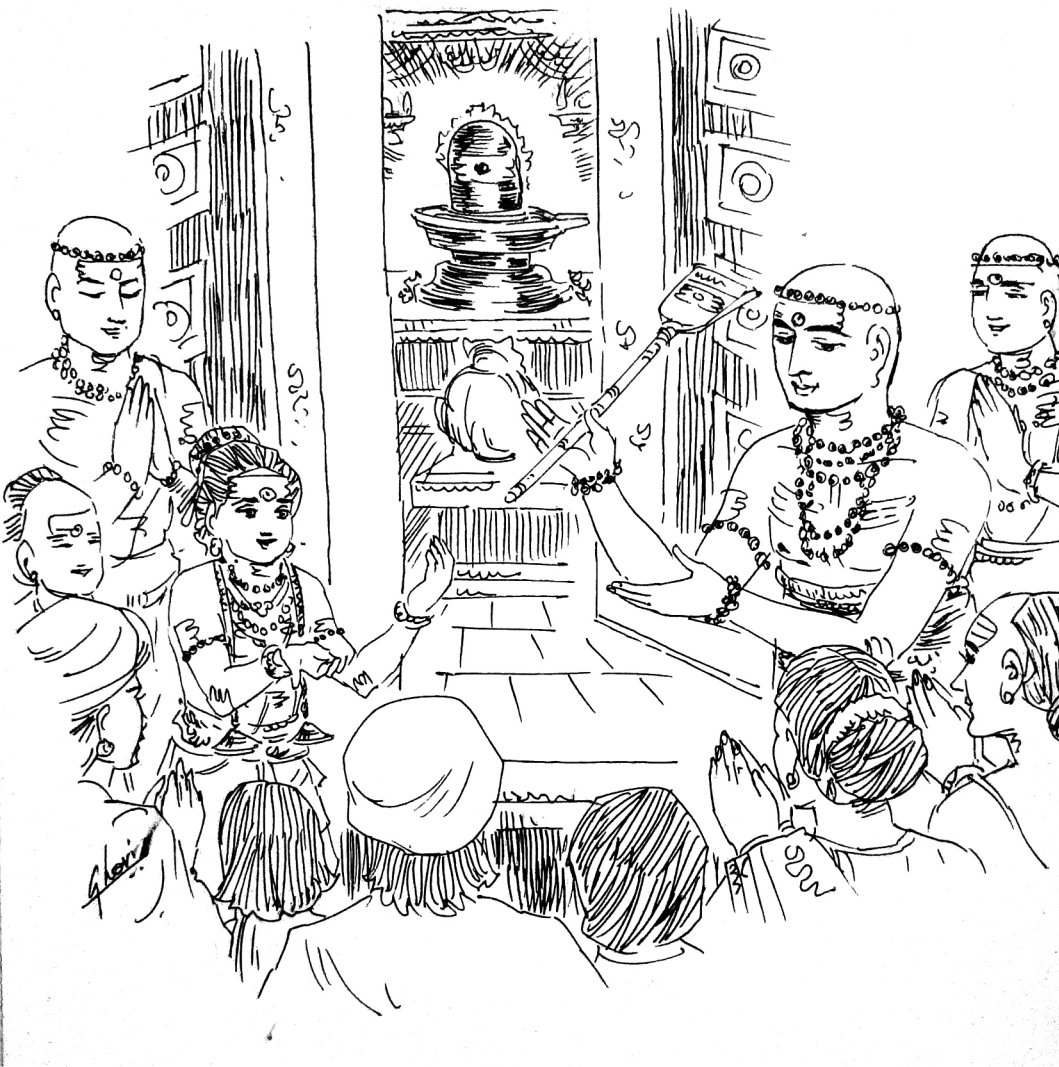
¹⁰ *Anbōḍu Azhuvārkkku* 4-92-5. ¹¹ *Tozhudu Tūmalar* 6-21-8. ¹² *Kattravar vizhuṅṅum karpagak kaniyai*, 6-32-1.

¹³ The very young Tirujñāna Sambandhar was always on the move. He continued to visit temples either by sitting on the shoulders of his father or by walking there, but the heat was very severe and his tender feet became sore. It is said that the Lord appeared in the dream of some Brahmins and told them to arrange a palanquin for the young Jñāna Sambandhar. Since the Lord appeared in Sambandhar’s dream also and told him about his gift, Sambandar accepted it reluctantly.

got down, prostrated before him and said that it was not proper for Appar to do this. Appar said that it was his privilege and honour. They thereafter discussed many things which they shared in common.

While Appar was leading the pilgrimage and Sambandhar was following, an event happened that revealed the divine relation between the two. They reached a place called Tirumaraikkāḍu (today's Vedāraṇyam). They were surprised to see that the main doors leading to the *sanctum sanctorum* of the temple were closed. They learned that ever since the practice of reciting Vedic hymns was discontinued, the doors automatically shut and remained shut. Devotees therefore had to use a side door to enter for worship. Sambandhar suggested to Appar that they should worship the Lord and pray for the opening of the main doors. At the request of Sambandhar, Appar started singing, with the opening lines "*Paṇṇin Nērmozhiyā!.....Tiṅṅamāgat Tīrandaru! seym 'minē,*" and prayed for the opening of the doors. He continued singing for hours together and at last, when he was getting very tired, the doors opened. Appar then requested Jñāna Sambandhar to sing and pray for the closure of the doors, so that these main doors could be opened and closed daily without any hindrance. Jñāna Sambandhar then sang the *patigam* (poem in praise of a deity) starting with "*Caturam Maṅgaitān Tudiseydu Vaṅaṅgum.*" As Sambandhar started singing, the doors closed instantly. However, he continued singing and completed eleven famous songs. Appar wondered whether his devotion was not pure because he had had to sing for hours for the doors to open, whereas the moment Sambandhar started singing the doors had closed. He expressed his apprehensions to Sambandhar, wondering if this was because of some sin committed by him. Sambandhar said, "Not at all. Yours is a pure and true devotion. The doors were not opened instantly because God was enjoying your song and wanted to hear more of it! Perhaps He felt that my very first song was enough and therefore responded immediately."

In Madurai, the Pandya King, who had converted to Jainism was afflicted by a serious disease. He had tried all the available medicines including those suggested by the Jains but all in vain. At the invitation of Queen Maṅgaiyarkkarasiyār and Minister Kulacciraīyār, both of whom adhered strictly to Saivism, Sambandhar came to Madurai. When Jñāna Sambandhar entered the royal palace, the Queen looked



Tirunāvukkarasar and Tirujñāna Sambandhar at the Tirumariakkādu Temple

at him with disbelief and dismay and wondered, “How can a young boy, just 12 years old, cure this serious illness of the King?” But Sambandhar set her doubts at rest by singing a wonderful stanza in which he said that though he was young he was more than a match for the Jains. While reciting this stanza Bhagavan was choked with emotion and could not proceed with it. Needless to say, the King recovered from his illness and came back to Saivism.¹⁴

Just as the 63 Nāyanmārs and many others found fulfilment in life by worshipping Lord Śiva and hailing His glory, there are many devotees, the world over, who have been inspired by Bhagavan’s teachings and follow them. Their devotion towards Bhagavan is equal to the devotion shown by the Saivite saints towards Lord Śiva. ▲

¹⁴ Venkataramiah, Talk§415.

General Sources:

1. *Sekkizhar* by Dr. Selva Ganapathi. *Jnana Parambarai*, Volume 1, General Editor, Dr. N. Mahalingam.
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3. *Saints of South India* by V.S. Krishnan

Song of the Flute

Suresh Kailash

Your silent melody,
no matter how often heard,
always, always, feels new,
fresh like morning’s dew,

It fills and empties me,
this breath flowing from you,
touched by your lips, Ramana,
I’m hollowed like a flute.

It's Not About The Rain

NADHIA SUTARA

Carl Jung often used to relate a story of the rainmaker of Kiao-chau as illustrative of several important aspects of his psychological insights. It was originally told to him by Richard Wilhelm, the famous sinologist who translated, among other things, the *I Ching*. Jung used it ‘as an example of “being in Tao” [perfect balance] and its synchronistic accompaniments’. In Wilhelm’s words:

There was a great drought where I lived; for months there had not been a drop of rain and the situation became catastrophic. The Catholics made processions, the Protestants made prayers, and the Chinese burned joss-sticks and shot off guns to frighten away the demons of the drought, but with no result. Finally the Chinese said, ‘We will fetch the rainmaker.’ And from another province a dried up old man appeared. The only thing he asked

Nadhia Sutarta was absorbed into Arunachala on the 6th August 2021. She spent months preparing what she considered an important article and said after it was finally complete, “This article took me longer to write than ANYTHING I have ever written (except my MA dissertation).”

for was a quiet little house somewhere, and there he locked himself in for three days. On the fourth day the clouds gathered and there was a great snow-storm at a time of year when no snow was expected, an unusual amount, and the town was so full of rumours about the wonderful rainmaker that I went to ask the man how he did it.

In true European fashion I said: ‘They call you the rainmaker, will you tell me how you made the snow?’ And the little Chinese said: ‘I did not make the snow, I am not responsible.’

‘But what have you done these three days?’

‘Oh, I can explain that. I come from another country where things are in Tao [balance]. Here they are out of [balance], they are not as they should be by the ordinance of heaven. Therefore the whole country is not in Tao, and *I also am not in the natural order of things because I am in a disordered country* [italics mine]. So I had to wait three days until I was back in Tao and then naturally the rain came.’¹

This story strikes us in many ways, but the ramifications concerning the conditions in the world today are impossible to miss. Unlike earlier civilisations that lived in much greater harmony with the world around them, such as the Native Americans and Australian aborigines, we have set ourselves to ‘conquer nature’, to create a technologically dominant, entirely materialistic civilisation, that has become woefully unbalanced, even, one might say, broken. It is astonishing how few people realise how out of balance our so-called developed world is (and, alas, the developing world is rapidly following suit): we have stripped the planet of ozone, oil, and other natural resources, destroyed innumerable species of wildlife, not to mention the mass genocide of indigenous cultures. In order to get these resources and in using them, we have polluted our environment and lives in more ways than anyone can count; the entire world climate is out of order; the seas are rising and the poles are disappearing, suicide rates are rising

¹ Carl Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, 1963, p 419.

² Wikipedia defines Plague as (among other things) ‘an epidemic of infectious disease [medical or agricultural]; a pandemic caused by such a disease.’

astronomically, mental illness and so-called disorders have increased, and now a new, apparently unstoppable disease has appeared. The planet is seriously ailing, seriously out of balance, and so are we who live in it and *are inseparable from it* (much as we might like to deny this). Much, much worse than the drought of Wilhelm's story. How could anyone be surprised that we now have what the scientists call a pandemic, but what in older times would have been called a plague?²

Due to the crisis of the moment, our eyes are turned away from serious issues such as climate change, endangered species, mental illnesses and other symptoms of enormous imbalance, and totally fixed upon the present immanent fear of suffering and death and finding a way to 'fix it'. Worse, our eyes are turned away from ourselves, our centre and our own imbalances.

As a result of repeated abuse of power by those in whom we had reposed our trust, the world is hopelessly – and justifiably – divided upon every aspect of the subject: some urgently want a vaccine to eradicate or at least mitigate the disease; some prefer to concentrate on a cure; others don't believe there IS a disease in the first place; others that the vaccine itself is worse than the disease. Conspiracy theories abound: it is a plot by (a) big pharma to make a lot of money; (b) the military-industrial complex to take over the world; (c) the governments to thin out the human population; (d) Martians; (e) fill in the blank.

The point is that in history, in every case a civilisation has crumbled or been taken over, there has always been one common feature: fragmented factionalism. While we argue about the cause or solution to a particular manifestation of our imbalance we are distracted from paying attention to ourselves: *ourselves* as part of the problem.

What is to be done?

The reasons for this tremendous imbalance may be a subject for another article. Many are obvious, some may not be so. In this article, however, I am attempting to focus on what we as individuals and groups can do about the situation and especially about our state of mind because *we are the world*. Where do we look, who do we trust, what can we do?

When people asked J. Krishnamurti what they could do to address the difficulties of the time, he always answered, 'How can you fix the

problem when you are part of the problem yourselves? First look to yourself.’ Sri Bhagavan said the same thing: ‘First find out who you are, then see if there is a problem.’

There is another thing Sri Bhagavan said that we should pay especial attention to. In answer to the question about how he did miracles, answered prayers, cured snake bites and so forth, he invariably said he knew nothing about the occurrence. He always maintained that he himself did nothing – *absolutely nothing*. But, he added, by doing *nothing*, a tremendous energy is created which he called *Sannidhi*, Presence. It is this Presence, he said, that grants prayers, does miracles, and so forth.

This is a crucial point for us. If we ourselves can come into balance (however incomplete), our *sannidhi*, our aura so to speak, can influence those around us. Certainly we are not *jñāni*-s ... yet ... but the more in balance we are, the better the environment we create by our presence. This is a very enticing personal and collective goal, whichever path we are on.

For those of us who are committed to a life of *sādhana*, who are no longer attracted by the world and who have only one great Goal in life, the answer is easy to understand: simply carry on. Eliminate oneself from being a part of the problem, a part of the tremendous imbalance of the world’s bumbling tenants, and become a blessing instead. The more weight we create on the side of balance, the less imbalance will be possible. It is in this way a Kali Yuga can be turned into a Satya Yuga. If we all pull together. An ideal example of this is the two samadhi halls in Sri Ramanasramam. People come from all over the world to be blessed by Bhagavan’s continued, palpable Presence.

Is this enough? If enough of us redouble our commitment and strive to eliminate any latent complacency, yes, I believe it is.

This article is focused more on those who may be just starting or anywhere in the middle – between a bustling worldly life and a quiet introverted spiritual one. One’s state of mind is of as much importance, if not more, as, say, social distancing and washing one’s hands.

The current atmosphere of panic that is enveloping the developed world is quite as contagious – and damaging – as bubonic plague. We breathe it in with every breath; it contaminates our minds and emotions, which invariably affect our health and those around us. And in the state of ensuing panic there is no madness we are immune

to. Never mind the political ramifications, which I am deliberately avoiding, what about the personal ones? Families are on edge and at each other's throats, personal relationships break down, there is tension and bitter quarrelling about things that just don't matter. People lash out at everything and everyone OUTSIDE themselves, because looking within is impossible in a state of panic. There is nothing that destroys reason like panic.

So the point is just this: a call to take a deep breath and return to what we know is important: faith, love, caring, tenderness, simplicity, wonder – all of which naturally arise from our connection with our inner selves. Balance. It is here that meditation and other spiritual practices come in, and we dare not lose sight of them amidst the encircling chaos all are experiencing. If I am in balance, I can ameliorate the situation for those around me, do what is possible to do and leave the rest to the Divine. But first, I must be making the attempt to come into balance myself. Better, I should redouble my earnest attempts at meditation, *prāṇāyāma*, *haṭha yoga* – whatever *sādhana* appeals to me because by that means I am improving the atmosphere, the balance, not only of myself but of those around me. I'm not saying this is easy; but it is most definitely possible. At this time, especially with all the lockdowns, the opportunity is positively beckoning if we are not too blinded to see it.

For those of us not interested in spirituality who may happen to read this article, please note that what I am writing about 'is not about the rain', a symptom. It is about the cause – the imbalance itself – and what can be done to remedy it. There is always the opportunity to do something about whatever symptom of this imbalance (Covid-19, climate change, species extinction, abuse of animals, and so forth) appeals to one. I am not demeaning any form of constructive activism, that is, karma yoga. I tell my activist friends: 'You do what you can, and I'll do what I can. It takes two hands to clap.'

The divergent conclusions people have drawn about the cause and remedy of the current Covid crisis are themselves a symptom of our imbalance. How can this crisis be handled if we do not all pull together? However much we may be compromising our various positions, to continue with this warring fragmentation itself will kill us. Historically, it is well-known that the time to invade a country is

when it is at its weakest, and our internal quarrelling, back-biting and insisting on our rights to maintain our position in the face of calamity leaves us open to ... well ... just think about it.

This applies as well to *sādhaka*-s who don't believe in one or all of the symptoms of imbalance I've described, or who may, inadvertently, be contributing to them. Not wearing a mask because you yourself are not afraid of getting ill is selfish, consciously or not. One may be asymptomatic (as was Typhoid Mary), but what about not communicating the disease to others? And what is the use of a conspiracy theory if it takes your mind off your meditation, off what matters the most?

The Christians have a proverb: 'God helps those who help themselves.' The Muslims have a similar one: 'Trust in Allah but tether your camel first.' There is no reason why, regardless of our private opinions, we cannot make a peaceful coordinated effort to pull together and do our best both for our individual selves as well as humanity.

I'll conclude this article by saying that this has been only my own observation, an opinion, and makes no claim to be anything other than that. As an aside, I have restrained myself from calling it, 'The Politics of Greed' primarily because, while greed plays a major role in the issue at hand, it is not the crux but a significant symptom of the issue. The crux, as I see it, is our human growing pains. We do not yet *realise* that 'I am the world'. Because we are not separate from the world or 'others', what we do directly affects ourselves as well. If I pollute the air by burning fossil fuels rather than walking, by even cigarette smoking, I breathe that air myself. I hurt myself most of all. It's *not* about the rain: it's about the imbalance that created all of our world's crises. ▲

Tamil Siddhas

Part Two

So Siva, So Siddhas

P. RAJA

‘*Siddhan Pōkku, Śivan Pokku*’, so goes an old Tamil adage. It simply means ‘The ways of the siddhas follow the footprints of Lord Śiva.’ Another Tamil Proverb reports: ‘*Hariyum Śivaṇum oṇṇu, idai aṛiyādavar vāyil maṇṇu*’, meaning ‘Hari and Śiva are one. The one who knows not this truth brings doom on oneself.’

Like the many names given to water in various states of our country – to cite a few from the south, *taṇṇīr* (Tamil), *vellam* (Malayalam), *nīlu* (Telugu) and *nīru* (Kannada), God is known by many names. To Vaishnavites God is Vishnu, to Saivites Śiva, to Mohammedans Allah and to Christians, Jesus. A rose is a rose is a rose, by any other name too. God is one.

Avvai, the grand old wise woman we read in Tamil literature devotes a whole book *Avvaik Kural* to give a clear understanding of the Divine force. In her sixth couplet, she asserts that God is one:

Mayan,¹ Brahman,² Rudran,³ Mahesan,⁴ and Śivan⁵
make five in one – Lord Supreme.

¹ Protector. ² Creator. ³ Destroyer. ⁴ Giver. ⁵ Guide to godhood.

Dr. P. Raja. Cell: 9443617124 Email: rajbusybee@gmail.com
web: www.professorraja.com

In couplet no. 153, Avvai states:

The Divine has no shape, no passions,
only formlessness.

And in her couplet no.190, she confirms:

The earliest light that still rules the world
is just a symbol of the one and only Divine.

Literary historians invariably opine that Avvai was one among the Siddhas. Her *Avvai Kural*, one among her thirty and odd works of worldly wisdom, bears ample testimony to this fact. Since Siddhas are realised beings, it may be construed that the Siddhas follow the footprints of the one and only Lord, whom they call Śiva. It is a name to identify the Divine force. And this is to say that the Siddhas accepted Śiva as ‘Maha Siddha’. ‘*Tennāḍuḍaiya Śivanē pōttri*’ is the motto of these siddhas, which means “Praised be Lord Śiva, the Lord of south India.” It is no wonder that they much extolled their chief by breaking into lengthy panegyrics. A reading of their poems is bound to tell us of their pure monotheism and their belief in the unity of God and their disdain for idolatry.

The Maha Siddha, Lord Śiva, is usually seen sitting in a meditative pose against the white background of the snow-capped Mt. Kailash (Himalayas). Symbolic of perfect inner harmony and peace, his posture speaks volumes about perfect serenity, equanimity, and tranquillity in all environments and circumstances. And the snow-white background symbolizes the absolute purity of mind.

The agitated mind does not allow us to realise the divinity in us. The predominant message of Siddha philosophy is to realise the divinity in us.

A couple of verses from Tirumoolar, doyen of the Siddha School of thought, would help to substantiate this view:

As a shade that appears in the sky
And later disappears,
As a bubble that emerges from water
Merges again with water,
So the soul that came from Śiva
Will disappear into Him,
Like camphor that dissolves in fire.⁶

⁶ Tirumoolar, *Tirumantiram*, v.2587.



Lord Śiva accepts the holy waters of the Ganga on His Head while the Mother Goddess Pārvatī looks on.

When body and soul seamlessly unite
They will enjoy the grace of Śiva-Śakti
And become one with the supreme.
But when the soul releases itself from the body
It becomes all pervasive like Śiva
And merges with Him.⁷

A. Parthasarathy in his well-known book *The Symbolism of Hindu Gods and Rituals* writes,

Lord Śiva not only represents the supreme state of perfection in man but in his very pose indicates the way to reach it as well. Śiva has his eyes half-closed, that is neither fully closed nor fully open. It is called *Samabhavimudra*. Closing the eyes completely would mean that the individual has shut out the world. He is not at all in this world. Opening the eyes fully would mean that he is totally involved in this world. Half-closed eyes therefore signify that his mind is absorbed in the inner self while his body is engaged in the outer world. One aspect of his personality is ever-rooted in God-Consciousness while the other is dealing with worldly duties and responsibilities...⁸

He continues:

The state of meditation shown in Śiva's posture is again symbolic. Meditation is the final gateway to self-realisation. To attain the state of godhood you need to meditate. However, in order to meditate successfully you must possess a pure mind. To develop a pure mind you need to work impersonally in this world. The process of self-development first necessitates selfless dedicated actions, *karma*. By such *karma* your ego and egocentric desires fall away. In the process your mind gets purified. Such a man is brought to the state of meditation. Through meditation you realise your supreme self.⁹

We tend to associate Śiva's Third Eye with wrath. Yet yogis and rishis invariably believe that the third eye is the eye of wisdom.

The eye whose vision reaches beyond that of the two mortal eyes. The idea of the third eye is not to be taken literally to mean

⁷ Ibid., Verse 2588.

⁸ Published by Vedanta Life Institute, Mumbai, Sixth edition 2001, p.22-24.

⁹ Ibid., p.24.

that a third fleshy organ exists in Śiva. It only means that Śiva has a divine vision of Reality.¹⁰

It is this divine vision of Reality that Tirumoolar underlines in the following verse:

The five organs of sense confuse the mind
As do the five organs of knowledge;
They make this illusory world pass for real.
If the mind rests on Śiva
The illusion will disappear, giving rise to reality.¹¹

Among the one thousand names attributed to Śiva, Gangadhara is one. This is because He carries River Ganges in his locks. Here is a mythological story that speaks of how the heavenly river, reached the Earth.

King Bhagiratha finding the people of the earth thirsting for water prayed to Akasa Ganga, personified in mythology as a goddess, to show mercy on the needy people. The goddess granted his prayer. “But,” she warned, “the flow of water from the heavens will be so torrential, that the earth would not be able to bear its force. Yet if Lord Śiva wills...”

The king turned his face towards Mt. Kailash and implored the Lord to bear the flow of descent of the waters. Since Śiva was not just the god of destruction but also the god of regeneration, He agreed to imprison Ganga in his locks.

After imprisoning the goddess, Lord Śiva forgot all about it and returned to the forest to continue with his meditation. And poor Ganga could not flow on the earth.

The king had to pray to the Lord once again. Śiva released the waters of the Holy Ganga from his locks for the welfare of the people.

So ends the legend behind Śiva as a carrier of Ganga in his locks. Now to delve deep into the story to find the hidden truth of the matter. It seems to hold a deep inner significance. Goddess Ganga is a symbol, “for the ultimate Truth, the ultimate Reality, the Knowledge of the *Atman* or Divinity in man. It is

¹⁰ Ibid., p.25.

¹¹ Tirumoolar, *Tirumantiram*, v.2589.

symbolically represented as being located above in the Heavens... The primary qualification needed for the receipt of knowledge is symbolized in the personality of Śiva. Śiva is reputed for his great *tapas*, contemplation and meditation... That state is achieved by independent reflection and meditation, which has been indicated by Śiva returning to the jungles. Having attained spiritual unfoldment, the knowledge of Truth has to be communicated to the people of the world gradually, carefully. The power to understand the higher truth is limited. This idea is again beautifully indicated by the release of the Ganga from Śiva's head in trickles. Thus by gradual and slow education, spiritual knowledge is gained in this world. Ganga water stands for wisdom."¹²

This may be yet another reason for the Siddhas to shelter themselves in forests and hills, in pursuit of divine knowledge.

A live serpent adorns the neck of Śiva. It is symbolic of the serpent power in human body that can be brought out and controlled through *kuṇḍalinī yoga*. It is in fitness of things that a siddha called himself *Pāmbāṭṭi* (snake charmer), the controller of serpent power. Invariably all his stanzas end with the note 'āḍu pāmbē' (raise your hood and dance O, snake!).

Śiva and his consort Parvati are usually worshipped together. Their union, that is Creation, is represented through the image of Lingam. Legends galore explain the origin of Lingam worship. One myth tells us that it was in this shape that Śiva appeared to Brahma and Vishnu when the three deities were born out of primal chaos. Another has it that Śiva was too attached to the company of his wife, which caused some inconvenience to the sage Bhrigu who cursed the God to be worshipped as the organ of his lust. A third one reports that the over-sexed god committed rape for which he was cursed to be known as the Lingam.¹³ More such legends can be traced in the Puranas. Hence the lingam can be regarded as symbolically representing the power of sexuality and creativity held in restraint.

No wonder that the Siddhas, who faithfully followed the footprints of Śiva, shunned riches and women. Here is a sip from the cup of

¹² A. Parthasarathy, *The Symbolism of Hindu Gods and Rituals*, p.27.

¹³ Thomas. P: *Hindu Religion, Customs and Manners*. Pub: Bombay: D.B. Taraporevala Sons & Co. Pvt. Ltd. 1960, p.25.

Siddha Pāmbatti. The following two stanzas scare the hell out of us, as do all his other stanzas:

The gorgeous silken clothes, the inviting perfumes,
 Fascinating ornaments, the resplendent
 Parasols, the feathery fans and all other
 royal splendours will never accompany
 you when you depart for the kingdom of
 Lord Yama. Assert so and dance O Snake.¹⁴

So much for loathing riches as they realised their ephemeral value. Here is the second one that speaks of the Siddha's attitude towards women:

With the acquisition of Divine knowledge
 we shunned the beetle-eyed and
 rotund breasted women. Dance O Snake!
 And proudly say we have killed and
 Devoured the virtuous Lord of Death
 Seated on the sturdy buffalo.¹⁵

What gave the Siddhas the audacity to declare so? It is the Trident that Śiva keeps in his hand. Popularly known to the Tamils as Trisulam, it is a three-pronged weapon that symbolizes the destruction of the ego. The weapon of Śiva is a serial killer of the three-fold desires of body, mind and intellect. It is this victory over ego that all Siddhas aspired for.

Śiva is also a dancer of the first order. No other god is as good as Śiva in this art. Hence he is also known by another name – Nataraja. Dance liberates the dancer from the ego and leads to self-effacement.

Commenting on Nataraja, Swami Swahananda in his very readable book *Hindu Symbolism and Other Essays* writes:

Śiva in the dancing pose is a veritable example of aesthetic and divine perfection in carriage, gesture and movement. Naturalness and rhythm are the watch words...Nataraja's dance of self-forgetfulness appeal to us, for they transport us

¹⁴ Pāmbāṭṭi: *Pādalgāḷ*, no.8 in 'Perishable Riches'.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, *Pādalgāḷ*, no.2 in 'Lust for Women'.

to a haven of bliss where the deadweight of ego is lifted up and we are at peace.¹⁶

Needless to say that it was only in the quest for this inner peace, the Siddhas moved heaven and earth.

Among Śiva's paraphernalia, special mention must be made of Nandi, the Lord's bull-vehicle. Nandi is of a milky white colour though in several temples he is dark as the rock he is made of. As we park our costly vehicles outside our dwelling places, Nandi too becomes conspicuous by his position before the shrines of Śiva.

The Chamberlain of Śiva, Nandi is also the chief of the Lord's personal attendants, known as '*ganapati-s*'. Like the several names of Śiva, he too has a plethora of names by which he is called during worship.

As Nandi is the gate-guardian deity of Mt. Kailasa, the abode of Lord Śiva, almost all Śiva temples flaunt the stone images of a seated Nandi, generally facing the *sanctum sanctorum*, so that Nandi may perpetually gaze on the Lord.

Since waiting is considered the greatest virtue in our culture, Nandi facing the Lord symbolizes eternal waiting. This is not to say that he is waiting to take commands from the Lord. But he is only waiting... waiting forever, that forms the very essence of receptivity. And it is this receptivity that made Nandi, Śiva's closest accomplice.

Vayu Purana makes Nandi the son of Kasyapa and Surabhi. *Śiva Purana* tells the interesting story of how Nandi became Śiva's closest companion.

Shilada, a sage, loved children but did not have any to call his own. He decided to adopt one and so meditated upon Lord Śiva for many years. At last, Śiva listened to the sage's prayer.

One fine morning the sage went to his field to plough and to his great surprise, he found a charming baby behind the plough.

Shilada was in a fix. He then heard a voice from the sky say, "He is a special child. Care for him. Bring him up to your satisfaction."

Happy at heart, the sage took the baby home and named him Nandi. As he grew up, he proved to be a very precocious child learning everything fast. The sage was very proud of the boy.

¹⁶ Swami Swahananda, Ramakrishna Math, Chennai. p.91.

A few years rolled by. One day two rishis Mitra and Varuna visited Shilada. Shilada made their stay comfortable by entrusting the work to Nandi. Nandi too played his part well.

When it was time for the Rishis to continue with their pilgrimage, Shilada and Nandi prostrated before them to receive their blessings.

“Have a long and happy life, Shilada. We enjoyed your stay”. But to Nandi, they said, “Be well...be learned.”

Shilada was taken aback. “Oh, beloved Rishis! Why didn’t you bless my son with long life?”

The Rishis replied: “How can we? Nandi is destined to die when he is eight years old. It is fated thus”. They left with sorrow-laden faces.

Shilada felt his heart crumble at the words of the Rishis. But Nandi began to console his father. He told him that as an ardent admirer and devotee he would pray to Lord Śiva and beg Him to rewrite his fate.

“To meet Śiva is not as easy as you think. I meditated for a thousand years before I could get a *darśan* of him. You are already seven and how do you expect to meet Śiva in the one year that is left to you?” asked the depressed father.

“I will manage. I will wait with devotion and faith”, so saying Nandi jumped into River Bhuvana and began his underwater prayers.

His prayers were quickly answered. Pleased with the boy’s efforts to meet Him, Lord Śiva appeared before him, and asked what he wanted.

“Lord! I love you so much that I want to remain devoted to you forever. Do not let me be born again, and die of old age.”

Pleased with the words of Nandi, Lord Śiva granted his request by allowing him and his father to become residents of His Śivaloka. He transformed Nandi into half man and half bull and granted him immortality. Apart from retaining Nandi as his perpetual companion, he made him ‘*ganapati*’, the chief of His companions, known by the name ‘*ganas*’. And as a welcome gift, the Lord gave Nandi a wonderful garland to wear. Once it adorned his neck, Nandi became resplendent with three eyes and four hands.

Since then Nandi became Śiva’s companion, doorman and vehicle. It was by sheer devotion and waiting with faith, Nandi was able to overcome his fate. In fact, he rewrote it.

Once it so happened that when the Devas and the Asuras churned the milky ocean for nectar with Mt. Manthara for the churn and serpent Vasuki for the rope, the first thing that emerged was the deadly poison called *halāhala*. It could have easily destroyed the world, had not Lord Śiva jumped into the fray. He collected the poison in his hand and swallowed it.

Panic-stricken Parvathi, Śiva's consort, caught her husband by his throat and thereby retained the *halāhala* there, so that the poison would not harm him. Lord Śiva's throat turned blue. However, a small quantity of poison slipped out of Śiva's hands and fell to the ground. Following his master, Nandi licked and swallowed it up.

Shocked stood the Devas for they were witnesses to Nandi's action. Nothing happened to Nandi. Śiva smiled and said to the Devas thus: "Nandi is my greatest devotee. All my powers are his too and my Devi's protection will go to him too."

Such was the love Nandi commanded from his master Śiva. This story also proves that Nandi had immense strength and immunity, the gift of the Lord.

No wonder that the gifted bull is worshipped too. It is said that the *pūjā* of Lord Śiva would be incomplete if Nandi is not worshipped along with him.

Since Nandi's strength of mind and body was beyond question, he fought battles and won victories for Lord Śiva. The Lord's youngest son, Karthikeya who himself was a great warrior took Nandi's advice before he entered any battle.

Thus Nandi became the favourite of Śiva's entire family. It is in fitness of things that Nandi is given a place of great importance in all Śiva's temples, especially in the South. He is seen as a humped white bull sitting on a raised platform and facing the entrance door of the shrine. The message is that the soul (Nandi) should always remain focussed on the supreme power (Śiva). Every Siddha believed that by being a great devotee of Śiva, he could enjoy like Nandi the Lord's powers and Parvati's protection.

Finally, a legend speaks of Śiva as the glorious practitioner of Siddha medicine. Śiva was also the first and foremost in that school of medicine. Parvati who has great love for all creatures big and small, was reduced to tears when she saw a pandemic trying to reduce the



Top: Lord Śiva drinking the *halāhala* poison as Mother Goddess Pārvatī holds His throat

Bottom: Lord Śiva dancing on *Pradośa Kālam*

population. Hence she complained to her husband to quash the virus that was destroying the whole world. Lord Śiva, who most of the time lent his ear to his beloved wife, immediately plunged into action. He called in Nandi, his bull-vehicle and told him in detail about the value of herbs in treating the diseases, that humanity faces off and on again. Enlightened Nandi took special classes to all the followers of Śiva – from Agastya to Pāmbāṭṭi Siddha – and propagated Siddha treatment of diseases, known widely as *Siddha Vaidyam*. ▲

(Note: All the translations from the poems of the Siddhas quoted in this essay are free renderings done by the author.)

Let Me

Suresh Kailash

Let me not be filled with hopes and plans
for a tomorrow of my dreams,
Let me not hold my head high and stand,
ready for this journey.

Let me not open my eyes to proudly scan
the horizon I want to reach,
Let me not roll my sleeves and flex my hands
as if all will be done by me.

Instead, let me see, only by your breath I am,
that I live and breathe,
And seeing this, Ramana,
let me lie aware, awake,
surrendered at your feet.

The Paramount Importance of Self Attention

Part Thirty Nine

SADHU OM
AS RECORDED BY MICHAEL JAMES

6th January 1979

Sadhu Om: In verse 15 of *Uḷḷadu Nāṛpadu* Bhagavan says:
Past and future stand holding the present. While occurring, they too are actually the present. The present is the only one. Not knowing the reality of now, trying to know the past or future is trying to count without one.

Though a dividing line seems to separate the edge of table from the empty space beyond it, if we try to find whether any such line actually exists, we will find no such thing, because where the table ends the empty space begins, so there is no gap between them. Likewise, though something called the present seems to separate the past from the future, if we try to find whether any such thing actually exists, we

Michael James assisted Sri Sadhu Om in translating Bhagavan's Tamil writings and *Guru Vācaka Kōvai*. Many of his writings and translations have been published, and some of them are also available on his website, happinessofbeing.com.

will find no such thing, because if we consider it carefully enough, we will see that where it is supposed to be, one moment before is past and one moment after is future. Where the most recent past moment ends, the most immediate future moment begins, so between them there is no room for any such thing as the present to exist.

Though there is no time that could be called the precise present moment, the entire appearance of time is built upon the appearance of such a moment, because without its appearance no such thing as the past or future would seem to exist. That is, it is only from the perspective of what seems to be the present moment that the past and future seem to exist, as Bhagavan points out by saying in the first sentence of this verse, 'Past and future stand holding the present', thereby implying that the past and future depend upon the present for their seeming existence.

Each moment, both past and future, seems to be present while it is occurring, as he says in the second sentence, but it is only so long as we are caught up in the flow of time from past to future that there seems to be a present moment, because if instead of attending to anything that occurs in the flow of time we try to attend to the precise present, we will find no gap at all between the moment that has just past and the next future moment. That is, the precise present is so fleeting and infinitesimally brief that it has no duration whatsoever, so since any moment must have some duration, even to call it a moment in time is not correct.

What then is the present, and why does he say in the third sentence, '*niharvu ondrē*', which means 'The present alone [exists]' or 'The present is the only one'? To understand this, we need to consider what is actually present. What is always actually present is only our own existence, 'I am', so it is only the presence of ourself as 'I am' that makes any time or place seem to be present. So long as we are aware of ourself as 'I am this body', our presence seems to be limited to a particular place, 'here', and a particular time, 'now', but if we were aware of ourself as just 'I am', we would be aware of no such limitation in either place or time.

Time and place both seem to exist only when we are aware of ourself as 'I am this body', and it is only from the standpoint of the time and place in which we now seem to be present that all other times

and places seem to exist. However, so long as time seems to exist, we never stand still in it, because we seem to be constantly moving from past to future, and hence time itself seems to be a ceaseless flow from past to future.

Everything other than 'I am' appears and disappears, so all such things seem to exist only in the flow of time. Therefore, since the precise present has no duration, there is no room in it for anything to appear, so what exists in it is only the presence of oneself, not as 'I am this body' but just as 'I am'. Therefore we can attend to the precise present only by attending to 'I am', which is always standing still and immutable, and is therefore never touched or affected in any way by the seeming flow of time.

What Bhagavan means, therefore, when he says that the present alone exists is that it exists not as a moment in time but as the one ever-present reality, 'I am', from which the appearance of a present moment derives its seeming existence. Without the eternal presence of 'I am', the present moment would not seem to exist, and without the present moment no other time would seem to exist, so the entire appearance of time derives its seeming existence from the seeming existence of the present moment, which in turn is derived from the seeming existence of ego, the false awareness 'I am this body', which is derived only from what alone actually exists, namely 'I am'.

Time seems to exist only in the view of oneself as ego, so in order to know the reality of time we need to know the reality of ego, and in order to know the reality of ego we need to investigate oneself, who is what now seems to be ego. If we investigate oneself keenly enough, we will find that we are just the one fundamental awareness 'I am', so 'I am' alone is the reality of ego and hence of the entire appearance of time. In other words, what actually exists is only 'I am' and not either ego or time.

Since ego does not actually exist, neither does time nor anything else other than 'I am', but until we investigate oneself keenly enough, we will continue to be aware of oneself as 'I am this body' and will consequently be aware of the seeming existence of time and whatever appears in time. However, not knowing the unreality of time and hence of whatever appears or happens in time, we try to know things other than oneself, including what happened in the past and will happen

MOUNTAIN PATH

in the future, but trying to do so is futile, as Bhagavan implies in the final sentence of this verse:

‘Not knowing the reality of now, trying to know the past or future is [like] trying to count [calculate or evaluate] without [the number] one’.

If we are asked to count how many measures of rice a sack can hold, we cannot do so without knowing the size or weight of one measure. Likewise, we cannot know the reality of the past or future, or of anything that appeared or happened in the past and will appear or happen in the future, without knowing the reality of the present. As a moment in time, the present is unreal, so the reality of the present is only ‘I am’, which is the one real presence that underlies the appearance of the present moment and makes it seem to be present. Therefore, since the appearance of past and future depends on the appearance of the present, ‘I am’ alone is the reality not only of the present but also of the past and future, and of anything that appears or happens in time.

All thoughts, phenomena, actions and events appear and disappear only in the flow of time, but none of them can occur in the precise present, because the precise present is too fleeting to have any duration, so nothing can ever happen in it. Therefore, if we try to attend to the precise present, the mind will come to a standstill and all thoughts, including the first thought, namely the false awareness ‘I am this body’, will cease to exist. What will then remain is only the one eternal, immutable and self-shining presence, ‘I am’. ▲

(To be continued)

KEYWORD

Sukha Sukham Sukhin

Happiness

B. K. CROISSANT

The *Aṣṭāvakra Gītā* or *Aṣṭāvakra Samhitā*, a concise treatise of 298 Sanskrit verses, is an inspired mystical text on the nature of Awareness that is greatly beloved and admired by mature spiritual aspirants both in India and the West. Its author is an anonymous saint and poet about whom nothing is known for certain. When it was composed is also unknown. While some editors and scholars place it around the fifth or fourth century B.C.E. about the time of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, others, who consider it as written by a follower of Śaṅkarācārya, date it either to the eighth century when Śaṅkarācārya lived or the fourteenth century when a resurgence of his teaching occurred.¹ Written in the easy śloka metre of the Epics and Puranas, the text is simple and direct. Its power comes from its uncanny ability

¹ Byron, Thomas, *The Heart of Awareness: A Translation of the Ashtavakra Gita*, p.xxiii.

B.K. Croissant first encountered Bhagavan in 1993. She retired in 2006 after serving as a senior administrator in the arts and humanities at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. Since then *sādhana* has been her highest priority and greatest joy.

to unerringly touch the human heart and transport it to an experience of Consciousness in its purest form.

The author of the Song chose two well-known legendary figures in classical Indian literature, Aṣṭāvakra and Janaka, to convey his message. The sage Aṣṭāvakra appears in various places, including the *Mahābhārata*. In one well-known story, the Sage Aṣṭāvakra, whose name means ‘eight crooked limbs’, was cursed by his father and born deformed for correcting mistakes in his father’s recitation of the Vedas while still in his mother’s womb. When his father was defeated in debate by Vandin, the foremost scholar in King Janaka’s court, and exiled into the depths of the sea, Aṣṭāvakra, as a mere boy, defeated Vandin to free him. Subsequently his limbs were restored in the river Samaṅgā.²

In Suri Nagamma’s *Letters from Sri Ramanasramam*, Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi places the Aṣṭāvakra Gītā in context. He recounts the story of King Janaka who jails the pandits in his kingdom for not being able to prove that within the time taken to put both feet in the stirrups of the saddle of a horse one can become a Realised Soul, as stated in the scriptures. Aṣṭāvakra appears on the scene and tests the king until he proves himself to be worthy of instruction or *upadeśa*. At that point, the *Aṣṭāvakra Gītā* begins, and the whole night passes as though it were only a few moments.³

In *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, Ramana Maharshi gives the meaning of the story.

Because *Brahma jñāna* is not something external, which is somewhere far away where you can go and get it, you cannot say that it will take so long or so short a time to attain it. It is always with you. You are That! The story of *Aṣṭāvakra Gītā* is intended to teach that for getting *Brahma jñāna* all that is necessary is to surrender yourself completely to the guru, to surrender your notion of ‘I’ and ‘mine’. If these are surrendered, what remains is the Reality. Then, it becomes impossible to state what further time it would take to attain *Brahma jñāna*. It would be wrong to state that it takes as much time as a man

² *Mahābhārata, vanaparvan*, III, 132-134.

³ 24th April, 1948, ‘Discussion between Ashtavakra and Janaka’.

would require to put his other foot into the second stirrup after having placed one foot in the first stirrup. The moment when ego is completely surrendered, the Self shines.⁴

Nan Yar (Who am I?), one of Bhagavan's first set of instructions along with *Vicārasaṅgraham*, opens with the notion of happiness meaning *Brahma jñāna*. It is well-known among devotees.

All living beings desire to be happy always, without any misery. In everyone there is observed supreme love for oneself. And happiness alone is the cause of love. In order therefore, to gain that happiness which is one's nature and which is experienced in the state of deep sleep, where there is no mind, one should know oneself. For that, the path of knowledge, the enquiry of the form 'Who am I?' is the principal means.⁵

In the *Aṣṭāvakra Gītā*, the theme of happiness is expressed over and over again using various Sanskrit words. The adjective *sukha* is from *su* plus *kha*. Originally it meant having a good axle shaft, running swiftly or easily, as applied to cars or chariots. The meaning evolved to happy, delighted, joyful, pleased. *Sukham*, the neuter noun, means happiness, joy, delight, pleasure, comfort, ease, as in alleviation from sorrow. As an indeclinable adverb *sukham* signifies happily, joyfully, comfortably, with ease. *Sukhin*, as an adjective, means happy, glad, joyful or, as a masculine noun, a religious ascetic, one who possesses happiness.⁶

In Chapter I, Advaita Vedānta in its purest form is presented in twenty soaring verses. Janaka is told he is Pure Consciousness itself and passionately enjoined to cease identifying with his mind and body which are blocking realisation of happiness, his true nature. Later he is told that absolutely nothing exists other than Pure Consciousness. *Sukhī* meaning happy or *sukham* meaning happily appears six times. In verse 4, the emphasis is on abiding in the Self.

यदि देहं पृथक्कृत्य चित्ति विश्राम्य तिष्ठसि ।
अधुनैव सुखी शान्तो बन्धमुक्तो भविष्यसि ॥

⁴ Mudaliar, Devaraja, *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, 31-3-45, afternoon.

⁵ Translated by T.M.P. Mahadevan.

⁶ See dictionaries by Monier-Williams and Apte.

yadi dehaṁ prthak-kṛtya citi viśrāmya tiṣṭhasi
adhunaiva sukhī śānto bandhamukto bhaviṣyasi

If you set yourself apart from the body and remain absolutely still in Pure Consciousness, you will instantly feel happy, serene and free from sorrow.⁷

It is reminiscent of Bhagavan's parable about the shade in *Who Am I?*.

Under the tree the shade is pleasant; out in the open the heat is scorching. A person who has been going about in the sun feels cool when he reaches the shade. Someone who keeps on going from the shade into the sun and then back into the shade is a fool. A wise man stays permanently in the shade. Similarly, the mind of the one who knows the truth does not leave *Brahman*.⁸

[Note that *sukhī* is one of several adjectives describing the state following deep surrender and that *viśrāmya* (resting) denotes a repose that is thought-free. *Adhunaiva* (even now itself) gives the verse an immediacy that is gripping and that echoes Janaka's question to the pandits in his court.]

In verse 10 the poet evokes the snake on a rope, a much beloved simile.

यत्र विश्वमिदं भाति कल्पितं रज्जुसर्पवत् ।
आनन्दपरमानन्दः स बोधस्त्वं सुखं चर ॥

yatra viśvam idaṁ bhāti kalpitaṁ rajju-sarpavat
ānanda-paramānandaḥ sa bodhastvaṁ sukhaṁ cara

This false universe appears like a snake on a rope. You are Pure Awareness itself from which the delusion arises, Bliss, unbounded Bliss. Live happily!

[While the first line is beautifully succinct, the second line is meant

⁷ All translations of verses from the *Aṣṭāvakra Gītā* in this article were done by the author. There are many talented and inspired individuals who have translated the treatise, such as Swami Nityaswarupananda, Swami Chinmayananda, John Richards, Thomas Byron, and Bart Marshall. Some editions include useful introductions and commentaries. In 2001 Sri Ramanasramam published a translation with the Sanskrit text copied by Ramana Maharshi in his own hand. A stirring recitation of the *Aṣṭāvakra Gītā* by Nochur Venkataraman is on the Ashram's website.

⁸ Translation by T.M.P. Mahadevan.

to really grab your attention. Notice how *ānanda* (Bliss) is stated then restated with emphasis as *paramānandaḥ* (unbounded Bliss) and fills the entire first half of the *pāda*. The second half begins with the often repeated ‘You are That’ (*sa bodhastvam*), the essential teaching of the Upaniṣad-s, and ends with a reverberating command, live happily (*sukham cara*!)]

Verse 14 is a beautiful and compassionate plea.

देहाभिमानपाशेन चिरं बद्धोऽसि पुत्रक ।

बोधोऽहं ज्ञानखड्गेन तन्निकृत्य सुखी भव ॥

dehābhimāna-pāśena ciram baddho’si putraka

bodho’ham jñāna-khaḍgena tannikṛtya sukhī bhava

The noose ‘I am the body’ has ensnared you, my dear son, for a long time indeed. With the sword of Knowledge ‘I am Pure Consciousness’, sever that bondage and be happy!

[Two compelling figures of speech, *dehābhimāna-pāśena* (the noose ‘I am the body’) and *bodho’ham jñāna-khaḍgena* (the sword of Knowledge ‘I am Pure Consciousness’) interact dynamically with a forceful double command, *tannikṛtya* (sever that, meaning the noose or bonds!) and *sukhī bhava* (be a happy one or be happy!). Notice the pathos of *ciram* (existing from a long time, ancient) and the sweetness of *putraka* (my dear son or child).]

Six more verses ending in *sukhī* or *sukham* occur in Chapter XV. Verse 6 takes us to the highest level of happiness, where the relative world merges completely into Pure Consciousness.

सर्वभूतेषु चात्मानं सर्वभूतानि चात्मनि ।

विज्ञाय निरहङ्कारो निर्ममस्त्वं सुखी भव ॥

sarva-bhūteṣu cātmanam sarva-bhūtāni cātmani

vijñāya nirahaṅkāro nirmamas-tvam sukhī bhava

The Self is in all living beings and all living beings are in the Self. Realising that and unconstrained by ‘I’ and ‘mine’, be happy!

Bhagavan addresses this in *Talks*.

In the beginning one has to be told that he is not the body, because he thinks that he is the body only. Whereas he is the body and all else. The body is only a part. Let him know it finally. He must first discern consciousness from insentience and

be the consciousness only. Later let him realise that insentience is not apart from consciousness.⁹

[Note the symmetry and balance of the two halves in the first line, recalling verse 29, Chapter VI in the *Bhagavad Gītā* (*sarva-bhūtastham ātmānam sarva-bhūtāni cātmani*). *Mama* (mineness) in the second line reinforces *ahaṅkāra* (ego or personal identity), adding the nuance of attachment. Both are negated by the same prefix ‘*nir*’. *Vijñā* meaning to know, realise is significantly a participle in the present (*vijñāya*), evoking abidance and absence of the concept of time. *Vijñāya* can also refer to ‘I’ and ‘mine’, in which case, the first *pāda* of the second line would read ‘knowing that when free from ego and mineness’ or ‘knowing you are free from ego and mineness’. *Sukhī bhava* is both a familiar command and a haunting refrain.]

Verse 18 is a beautiful restatement of Oneness that negates the reality of both bondage and liberation.

एक एव भवाम्भोधावासीदस्ति भविष्यति ।

न ते बन्धोऽस्ति मोक्षो वा कृतकृत्यः सुखं चर ॥

eka eva bhavāmbhodhāvāsīd asti bhaviṣyati

na te bandho'sti mokṣo vā kṛtakṛtyaḥ sukhaṁ cara.

The One alone was, is and will be in the ocean of being. For you bondage and liberation do not exist. Do what is to be done and wherever you go, go happily!

This same idea is affirmed by Bhagavan in *Day by Day*.

Mukti is not anything to be attained. It is our real nature. We are always That. It is only so long as one feels that he is in bondage that he has to try to get released from bondage. When a man feels that he is in bondage he tries to find out for whom is the bondage and by that enquiry discovers that there is no bondage for him but only for the mind, and that the mind itself disappears or proves non-existent when turned inwards instead of outwards towards sense-objects; it merges into its source, the Self, and ceases to exist as a separate entity. In that state there is no feeling either of bondage or liberation. So long as one speaks of *mukti* he is not free from the sense of bondage.¹⁰

⁹ Munagala S. Venkataramiah, *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk§192.

¹⁰ Mudaliar, Devaraja, *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, 5-5-1946.

[Notice in the first line the prominent position of *eka*. The notion One, reinforced by *eva* (only or alone), not only leads the verse but also pervades it. It is followed by a strong yet familiar metaphor, the ocean of existence or being. The second half of the *pāda* transcends the illusory triad of time. In the first *pāda* of the second line the false duality of liberation and bondage are dismissed. *Kṛtakṛtyaḥ*, which can also denote being already fulfilled, contented, grabs our attention in the second *pāda* by its forcefulness (it's beautiful to pronounce aloud!) and the *pāda* ends, not surprisingly, with the command *sukham cara* (go happily).]

Chapter XIII is Janaka's response to Aṣṭāvakra's impassioned appeal to realise his own inherent happiness through surrender. All seven verses that comprise the Chapter end with the refrain 'I live happily', and verse 1 sets the tone of uncompromising adherence to the principles of Vedānta.

अकिञ्चनभवं स्वास्थ्यं कौपीनत्वेऽपि दुर्लभम् ।

त्यागादाने विहायास्मादहमासे यथासुखम् ॥

akiñcana-bhavaṁ svāsthyam kaupīnatve'pi durlabham
tyāgādāne vihāyāsmād aham āse yathā-sukham

Stillness of mind from having absolutely nothing is difficult even for one wearing just a loincloth. Therefore I give up the ideas of acceptance and rejection and live happily indeed.

Janaka is indicating that he understands the highest level of happiness in which all dualities have been discarded. Like the stick in the funeral pyre, even renunciation must be destroyed in order to realise Pure Consciousness. The realised soul is indifferent to both having and not having.

[Note the use of *kaupīna* (loincloth), an evocative visual image, to denote the renunciate. *Akiñcanabhavaṁ* (having absolutely nothing) can also be interpreted as knowing the world is nothing or knowing the Self alone. The refrain (*aham āse yathā-sukham*) takes up an entire *pāda* in the second line.]

In Chapters XVII and XVIII there are many verses that contain the words *sukham* or *sukhī*. Chapter XVIII, by far the longest chapter in the *Gītā* (it comprises 100 verses), summarizes Aṣṭāvakra's instruction

on Advaita Vedānta and exhaustively extols the *jñāni*. It begins with a resounding salutation to Pure Awareness in verse 1.

यस्य बोधोदये तावत् स्वप्नवद्भवति भ्रमः ।

तस्मै सुखैकरूपाय नमः शान्ताय तेजसे ॥

yasya bodhodaye tāvat svapnavad-bhavati bhramah

tasmai sukhaika-rupāya namaḥ śāntāya tejase

When Knowledge dawns, the entire illusory world is seen as a dream. Praise to That which is by nature pure happiness, Peace and Light.

[*Bodhodaye* (when Knowledge dawns) in the first *pāda* of the first line is the operative concept here. When total surrender occurs, one's perception of the world is immediately shifted from apparently real to unreal, and there is nothing but the Self. Note that *sukham* appears in a compound (*sukhaika-rupāya*) that amplifies its import (by nature happiness itself).]

How to explain the bliss or true happiness of a *jñāni*? Only a *jñāni* would know! Aṣṭāvakra tells us, in verse 59, that absolutely no aspect of a *jñāni*'s life is ever governed by the ego.

सुखमास्ते सुखं शेते सुखमायाति याति च ।

सुखं वक्ति सुखं भुङ्क्ते व्यवहारेऽपि शान्तधीः ॥

sukham-āste sukham śete sukham-āyāti yāti ca

sukham vakti sukham bhun̄kte vyavahāre'pi śāntadhīḥ

In practical affairs, a man at peace sits happily, sleeps happily, moves about happily, speaks happily and eats happily.

Many have stated that the true impact of Bhagavan's life was his example. We have testimony of that from those who were in his presence bodily and even from those who were not. Arthur Osborne gives a stirring description of what it was like to be in the proximity of a true *sadguru*.

His face is like the face of water, always changing, yet always the same. It is amazing how swiftly it moves from gentleness to rock-like grandeur, from laughter to compassion. So completely does each successive aspect live that one feels it is not one man's face but the face of all mankind. Technically he may not be beautiful, for the features are not regular; and yet the

most beautiful face looks trivial beside him. Such reality is in his face that its impress sinks deep in the memory and abides when others fade. Even those who have seen him only for a short time or only in a photograph recall him to their mind's eye more vividly than those they know well. Indeed, it may be that the love, the grace, the wisdom, the deep understanding, the childlike innocence that shines from such a picture is a better starting point for meditation than any words.¹¹

What more fitting reference to happiness or bliss than verses 28 and 29 of Bhagavan's *Upadeśa Sāram*?

किं स्वरूपमित्यात्मदर्शने ।
 अव्ययाभवापूर्णचित्तसुखम् ॥
 बन्धमुक्त्यतीतं परं सुखम् ।
 विन्दतीह जीवस्तु दैविकः ॥
 kiṁ svarūpam-ityātma-darśane
 avyayābhavāpūrṇa-cit-sukham
 bandha-muktyatītaṁ paraṁ sukham
 vindatīha jīvas-tu daivikaḥ

*If one can only realise at Heart
 What one's true nature is, one then will find
 That 'tis Infinite Wisdom, Truth and Bliss, [sukham]
 Without beginning and without end.
 Remaining in this state of Supreme Bliss, [sukham]
 Devoid of bondage and of freedom too,
 Is found to be a state in which one is
 Rapt in perpetual service of the Lord.*¹² ▲

¹¹ Osborne, Arthur, *Ramana Maharshi and the Path of Self-knowledge*, 1995, p.129.

¹² Sadhu Arunachala (Major A.W. Chadwick), *The Poems of Sri Ramana Maharshi Rendered into English Verse*, 2009, p.17.



BOOK EXCERPT

Sri Mahaswami

The Sage with Eyes of Light

SERGE DEMETRIAN

Śrī Mahāswami, *The Sage with Eyes of Light* relates the direct experiences of the author with Śrī Kāñci Pīṭhādhipati Jagadguru Śrī Śaṅkarācārya, Śrī Candraśekarendra Sarasvati Svāmī, which took place from 1968 until the mahāsamādhi of Śrī Mahāswami in 1994.

The book is available at Indica Books, Varanasi. The price for PB ₹1,095/- & HB ₹1,500/-; pp.816. ISBN: 978-93-81120-20-0. The book is available in Amazon and other webpages. If Indica Books is emailed at indicabooksindia@gmail.com they will send the book by post.

Karvetinagar, 31st August 1971

The Fight against Fear

Yesterday on the steps of the Venugopala temple I had the opportunity to meditate for about thirty minutes at less than one metre distance from Shri Mahaswami. He had started the day by performing a pradakṣiṇā of the main shrine during which he had stopped for a long pause in order to press his forehead on a certain spot on the wall of the temple. For what reason, I will never know. However, what is sure is that I went quickly to that spot and touched it with my fingers, before the people who were around him rushed there, which is what usually happens. Then he sat on the stairs of the temple; he allowed me to come very near and kept me there alone in

front of him. With his unique talent as a stage manager, he sent a large group of visitors further back. Night had fallen. By the dim light of the moon, I could see in the temple a chorus of youngsters who were reciting the Vedas.

I invoked Shri Mahaswami, in his form of light, but also as Adishankara and Kamakshi, the Great Goddess. They came easily. I was able to feel them as complete living beings. From them emanated a subtle air formed of all that was finest, which our senses could detect. This current penetrated and inundated me with an unspeakable sentiment of happiness. It was concentrated in the form of a pillar of white light, which placed itself, of its own accord, in the centre of 'my' body that was felt to be in front of the spine or vertebral column. From there it irradiated a blinding brilliance of diamonds articulated by a spray of rays. Everything lasted a few seconds or perhaps a few minutes. During this blessed interval, the feeling of individuality was wiped out almost totally.

After some time, as the individuality threateningly tried to return, I turned once again towards the three Masters of Wisdom just mentioned and tried with all my might to bring at least one of them into my heart. But it was Shri Mahaswami who reached there first. He engaged himself in every organ of this body starting with the head and the nervous system and finishing with the blood. Everything was invaded. There was left only a faint mark of individuality residing in a blurred bodily frame, mostly a mental sketch of an individual. Indeed, what could still be called a body was changed in a thin, whitish fog.

Suddenly it became impossible to maintain even this reduced state of individuality. The acute perception of a precipice appeared in front of me. I was on a straight rope, encircled by a cold, dark, unknown abyss. I was so afraid that for a moment I felt I was about to jump into a dark, largely open well in the temple's yard nearby, to my left, which attracted me.

This terrifying experience had happened several times. Yesterday, it just felt stronger. I had been overpowered before by this fear and its manic desire to get rid of this body in the Lotus Pond, and this, in the very presence of Shri Mahaswami. Indeed, long intense meditations increase the cerebral tension.

It was he who, once again, slowly brought me back to normality, as probably I had passed beyond the limit of resilience of the nervous

system. I was able to turn afresh to the Reality without form, good and luminous, which was waiting, somewhere it seemed, around me, or in the interior of my being. Hardly had the sense of individuality aspired towards this Reality than I was invaded by a fine and transforming light that replaced everything with its presence. The radiation was more intense and steady, and the loss of individuality continuous. But for how long? Who could say when nobody was there to count the units of time?

At the return of the body consciousness, I was incapable of moving my limbs. I sat nailed to the temple stone step and watched the departure of Shri Mahaswami without being able to make even the vaguest gesture of respect. The idea of re-entering the stream of mundane life that was about to restart, so different from what I had just experienced, raised a wave of grief. The emotion gripped my throat. In addition, he was no more there! Only he could have saved me from the misery of the transitory existence. I closed the eyes, dejected, hoping to see him near me at least in the mind. Although he had already walked quite far away, Shri Mahaswami had heard me. His image came to me. He was smiling, with soothing gestures, just as one caresses a young child who inadvertently ran into a tree.

“Who is afraid?” he was asking in direct language, without any words but through the medium of instantaneous understanding, “You and I, we are one... we have the same heart... Do you want the proof? Look at me, right at the centre.”

I was compelled to meditate on the middle of his chest. Almost immediately, a sphāṭika-līṅga burst out, a large, dazzling light, protected from behind by the head of a golden cobra. The force of this vision compelled me to open the eyes, so strong was the glare that it was blinding. The next moment the līṅga with its golden cobra took its place in my heart, but this penetration was accompanied by a wave of pain. My breath stopped and the heart of flesh hesitated. For a moment I reeled. The vision faded away and in its place lingered a little white and slightly bluish sun.

Week after week the body became purer. The predominant thoughts were less violent, the passions less coloured. I renounced any plans for the future or to ruminate on the past or to construct imaginary stories. I distanced myself more and more from desire and anger.

Karvetinagar, Wednesday 15th September 1971

Meditation on the Hill

The day before yesterday, in the afternoon and in the evening, I had a painful physical reaction, a secondary effect of the passed experiences. Shri Mahaswami kept me in his hands; I felt his presence as a security net under which an acrobat performs a deadly jump. He has supported and protected me for five hours at the reservoir, while I endured a headache, drowsiness and a general feeling of indisposition.

Yesterday, in the morning, a spectacular change occurred. Hardly had I done a single pradakṣiṇā when he came out from his hut and headed without hesitation towards the bare hill at the south of the Lotus Pond, where he had previously blessed the construction of a temple dedicated to Subrahmanya at its summit.

I joined the small group of followers and strove to stay exactly behind him — an envied place and very much sought after by knowledgeable devotees. On the top of the hillock he sat down for a time, in anuṣṭhāna. I was attentive to his most minute gesture. Finally I was rewarded: for a fraction of a second, in the moment he stood up, I saw he was several metres tall! Nobody had guessed what stood concealed behind the aspect of a short aged man; the matt gold of his skin and the orange colour of his dress vibrated in harmony without any alteration.

Soon afterwards, unbothered, he had his bath in view of the public, in a small pool formed by the recent rains, at the foot of the temple. As if he had ordered it — perhaps he even did — two persons had just arrived with two small bottles of tīrtha (sacred water) from the Narmada River, while other visitors offered kum-kum as prasāda from a certain temple. I waited for him to finish his bath in order to touch the water of the small pool left behind, but another visitor was quicker. I immediately turned back as, from a traditional point of view, it would have been improper to use the water touched by someone else.

Shri Mahaswami, seated on a stone, had accomplished his special rites of purification after the bath. He sat in padmāsana. Every time when he chooses to lead me in my meditation, he selects the most convenient place. This time the view of the surrounding locality, the hermitage and the Lotus Pond, was superb. The weather was beautiful

and the air crisp: Nature showed itself as a friend. Swamiji started by purifying inwardly my body and my mind: I became attentive and well-disposed to the reception of His grace. Then, without showing any special sign, he made all the onlookers move away. I was alone near him at two or three metres standing and facing north; he had his face turned eastward. Indeed, during certain teachings the Guru should look towards east and the disciple towards north.

The course of the meditation was similar to that of the day before yesterday's meditation: appeals of the Great Friends and their arrival; the separation of the Puruṣa from the body; the awakening of the kuṇḍalinī; the aspiration towards the Infinite. Having not been able to sufficiently remain in this last phase I had to return several times to the meditation on the Puruṣa. A new situation now came forth. I felt totally deprived of the body. To put it another way: body, mind, individuality existed no more. What lingered was a luminous yellowish cloud that was not even mine, but was one of Shri Mahaswami. I could not say that I was happy, as I was the Felicity itself!

After some time, there occurred a partial return to the consciousness of the body and of the mind: I could even open my terrestrial eyes. In front of me Shri Mahaswami was meditating, transfigured in an azure haze. Then this last image perished and the Infinite Bliss reappeared! When this second plunge into Felicity ended, I now understood how the real Saints were able to bear their own body. The visible form is no more a burden to them as they are able to quit it in a few seconds. As for me, in all the duration of this wonder, I did not feel the scorching Sun over my head, nor the hot stone under my feet. I could have remained there the rest of my entire life: standing, hands in añjali, in front of Shri Mahaswami. I felt it was only he who determined that I should come down the hill. When one has surrendered to a Guru, one has renounced one's individual will to His will. After a long prostration and a pradakṣiṇā round him, I left without regret. He seemed satisfied with my submission and he blessed me with his hand in abhaya, gently approving by a sign of his head.

He stayed back on the hill, in a cavity carved in the rock where there was installed a small and friendly statue of Ganesh. There he passed the whole day, without eating and drinking, which happens frequently with him.

By evening, at 6 pm, at the very moment I reached the hermitage after a rest, he returned. He kept me near him for another five hours. He protected me during that time of the familiar 'shock of return': my nervous system could never have borne alone an experience as intense as that of this morning.

Shri Mahaswami shows, in a clear manner, that he wants to educate me. Although due to certain traditional reasons, he has not recognised me formally as his disciple, during the years the essential gestures of transmission have been indisputably accomplished. For the time being, he follows me by his look at the hermitage wherever I stand or sit. He sits always in such a way that I can clearly see him. Depending on my receptive capacities, he shows himself from front or in profile. The blessing by his naked foot is, for me, a discovery of these last months; it seems as powerful as that of the hands; in addition, it can be maintained for hours without drawing the attention of the public. Often he turns his feet into unnatural angles for the sake of a devotee who he wishes to bless. The soles of his feet are so much sought by experienced devotees. I never have seen such beautiful feet and better shaped for a person of his age; this despite the thousands of kilometres he had walked barefooted. Sometimes I compare them with my feet, ugly, full of knots, the sole hurt by stones and the hot tar of the roads, covered with the scars of multiple small wounds as well as the bites of mosquitoes and other insects. In comparison, the feet of Shri Mahaswami seem newly carved out of precious marble stone from the workshop of some divine artist.

The blessings during the frequent special pūjās are very important to me. On other occasions also he performs the same gestures. Sometimes, maybe in difficult situations, before transmitting the blessing, he draws large circles in the air. He cuts the space vertically and touches the left palm with the fingers of the right hand. He also performs these signs in the direction of the concerned person, like in my case. I have not seen him act the same way towards other visitors or devotees. These gestures can be performed discreetly, as he talks with his assistants, for instance. Every time when I am in his presence and he carries out these signs, I feel as if I am being worked upon, almost kneaded as a piece of dough, by a certain force.

Yesterday evening, wanting probably to strengthen the results of the blessing from the morning and prevent a reaction in my organism,

Shri Mahaswami repeated during, it seemed, some elongated minutes a series of 'magic' pūjā gestures directed towards me, without himself performing any overt or visible pūjā. I was alone in front of him, as he had made all onlookers move away. I heard then what I had never heard before, that is, he would whistle clearly for a good half minute a single note, quite high, without any modulation, as if he wanted to call or pacify someone. Undoubtedly I was the recipient of this sign. Soon afterward, he retired in his hut and lay on the bed.

These conscious observations of mine cover probably only a very small portion of what really happens; the most important subtle work occurs unbeknown to the normal everyday consciousness. From out of the change in the deep layers of consciousness, what I can perceive, or better what the daily consciousness while awake can perceive, is a transmutation of the personality. During the good days, I am nothing other than Shri Mahaswami. I do not talk of the meditation periods with their peak minutes, but of the hours of reading or studying at home and of the usual house activities, or ordinary walking in the street. This happens in any place or at whatever time it may be. There is no more the question for someone, which is 'me', to feel that Shri Mahaswami moves 'my' hand; it is only Shri Mahaswami who exists and who moves the hand of Shri Mahaswami. This applies to all actions, to the speech and to the movements of the thought.

The nervous fatigue after meditations is becoming shorter and less intense. For instance, some months ago, after an experience similar to that of this morning, I would have avoided Swamiji at least two or three days. Now he keeps me near him, under different pretexts, sometimes for hours, no doubt as to pacify the nervous system, the senses and the mind that are affected by the sudden arrival of so much richness. In addition, these last days I was not permitted to read. Shri Mahaswami seemed for his 'project' to have prohibited every pointless or less than useful mental activity.

Yesterday night, after a short interval for dinner, I came back to the hermitage at 10:30 pm, against my will. As soon as I was in front of the door of the hut, the consciousness of the body was blown by a sort of wind I was unable to localise. I was totally taken in charge of by the image of the Great Goddess, the good and powerful Kamakshi, who destroys the chains that bind the Puruṣa to the quintuple layers of the body. I left with the heart full of joy.

The mental power of reason asks itself what is the meaning of the difficult hours that torture the Puruṣa with the illusion that he is bound to the body. Why is the separation from the body not instantaneous and total? The body should fall, like a tree of ashes, with all its vitality consumed by the fire of the Knowledge of God!

This morning, after a satisfactory rest, I arrived at the reservoir by seven; I felt as 'pulled' and was in a good frame of mind for the matters of the spirit.

I straight away saw Shri Mahaswami sitting in the hut. I observed his face from the left side. He was the Destroyer, concentrated and severe, however I did not feel any fear. I liked him even better as I hoped that he would destroy all the attachments of the heart that restrains me to the transitory, hṛdaya-granthi, my number one and consuming problem. Although he did not turn his head, I prostrated. Standing up and looking at him it was as if his left eye had become larger and radiated a muted luminosity.

I went to the other side of the reservoir. My meditation started easily. I was compelled to purify myself by digging out the very roots of my present life. I saw myself, before my birth, choosing the heavy family conditions that I had to bear, with the conviction that a difficult terrestrial life will remove the desire for new 'experiences' in some other life. A spear of fire was in my hand and with this weapon I was destroying everything that could bind me. As soon as an image appeared, be it more or less agreeable, or an idea of success or not, or of heroism or flight: all were transformed in nothingness. Finally, I was free of any image.

Happy the one who is freed of the illusory forms of thought!

For me this is not yet the case. I am still obliged to be busy with the transitory. The pains of the spine that I suffered from these last days have much diminished; they were probably of nervous origin. I perceived some cracking sounds while moving the joints in a definite way. If I rub the painful points with vibhūti and apply kum-kum on the neck I feel the vertebra fitting comfortably in their places. Now I am less compelled to lie down and perform a forceful flexing of the head in order to straighten the spine. Sleep without pillow is more convenient for me. Ten to fifteen minutes of haṭha-yoga every day seem essential.

(To be continued)



The Maharshi and The Mother

Part Three

KAYS

When the idea of a temple over Mother's Samadhi was first mooted by others it received Bhagavan's approval and blessing in full. It was an ambitious project for devotees to undertake, a labour of love and reverence, and took ten long years to be completed. The chief architect of the temple was Vaidyanatha Sthapathy, the master-sculptor. He designed a small but grand temple, on the lines of the ancient temples built in accordance with the injunctions of the Agama Sastras. The foundation of the temple was laid on the 1st of September 1939, a significant event, for it marked the day of Bhagavan's advent to Arunachala.

Bhagavan's divine detachment was much in evidence concerning both the construction of Ashram buildings and the Mother's temple. Huge funds were now required, but Bhagavan was extremely strict and forbade anyone to seek funds using His name. Instead He advised patience and trust in providence. Pointing to the Hill He would say, "This Arunachala gives us everything we want" and "If we maintain an inner silence and have faith in God's providence, everything we need will come to us automatically."¹ And of course that is what happened. Total reliance was placed on unsolicited donations and the amounts needed would somehow arrive at the right time. Such

¹ Godman, D., *The Power of the Presence*, Vol.II, p.192.

incidents happened too often to be brushed aside as mere coincidences: the Ashram's history is replete with them. Bhagavan's Grace provided for its needs and for those of His devotees.

"At night, when no one was moving about, Bhagavan would walk around the [temple] construction consecrating it."² He would minutely examine the walls with the light of his torch. Each stone in the temple wall, every tile on the temple floor, each grain of sand is saturated with His presence and could recount endless incidents of wondrous love and grandeur. Every atom in Sri Ramanasramam is a silent but moving reminder of Eternity's advent in the midst of us ordinary mortals: God lived amongst us.

Over the entrance to the temple's *sanctum sanctorum*, one can see two elephants flanking Goddess Lakshmi sculpted in stone. Under their feet is a scroll with the name of the temple in Sanskrit '*Māṭṛbhuteśvara Mahā Sannidhānam*' carved in stone. Bhagavan himself wrote these Sanskrit *akṣarās* (letters) and gave instructions to stencil them and paint them on the scroll. Later one of the sthaphathis carved the name by chiseling out the area covered by the stencilled letters.

The steady stream of visitors to the Ashram continued to swell and the (Old) Hall was found inadequate to accommodate them all. Meanwhile, even as the temple construction was proceeding, devotees wanted to celebrate the Golden Jubilee, the fiftieth anniversary of Bhagavan's Advent to Arunachala. Since huge crowds were expected, a commodious *pandal* – roofed and thatched – was erected in the space north of the Old Hall. The veranda area at the entrance to the Old Hall was cemented. Bhagavan sat on a stone couch at its western end with his back to the north. The latest arrival, the white peacock from Baroda, was accommodated alongside Him. Here countless devotees partook the Divine Grace radiating from the Maharshi, the ebullient sun of *jñāna*.

Among many, one instance of divine intervention was the procurement of coloured sands from Kanyakumari for use during the rituals for the temple's *kumbhabhishekam*. When a devotee was taking leave of Bhagavan and proceeding to Kanyakumari on a private visit he was informed by Bhagavan that a devotee who had been requested

² Sadhu Arunachala, *A Sadhu's Reminiscences*, p.59.



Bhagavan with His Mother and devotees at Skandasramam

to procure the sands had not sent them. This devotee took the cue and, while at Kanyakumari, procured and packed the different sands neatly in his bag. There was a strict government ban on this and the police were therefore checking the luggage of all passengers for the illicit transportation of these coloured sands. Seized with apprehension at the sight of policemen at the checking counter, the hapless devotee simply prayed to Bhagavan – and wonder of wonders – he, with his luggage, was allowed to pass through unchecked. On arrival he delivered them safely to Bhagavan. Later the parcel sent by the other devotee did arrive but its contents were useless because the different sands had got badly mixed up.

The *kumbhābhīshekam* of the temple was the grand finale of a ten-year tireless effort to bless posterity with a sacred heritage ever alive with spiritual vibrations. It was a grand four-day celebration attended by surging crowds. The Shankaracharya of Puri, delighted with Bhagavan's enlightening answers to his questions on '*avachchaya yoga*'³ during his earlier visit, chose to grace the occasion of the consecration of the Mātṛbhuteśvara temple and personally supervised all the rituals in the *yāgasālās* and ensured the right conduct of everything.

During the consecration festival, the Ashram was decorated with festoons, flowers and lights. Many *yāgasālās* were erected and with their enclosures decorated with paintings of dancing Siva or Nataraja. With a hundred Vedic pandits participating, the yagnas were conducted to the chanting of the Vedas. The sanctity and serenity of the Ashram, resounding with the sonorous sound of the Vedic mantras raised in unison by the Vedic pandits, made the scene reminiscent of the ancient ashrams. But, above all, it was the Presence of Bhagavan, the Monarch of Mystic Silence, who, like Lord Dakshinamoorthy, sat silently, a mere witness to the huge din of the crowds mingling with devotional music that transformed the sacred spot into Kailash itself. There was no Heaven elsewhere.

Along with the temple construction, a spacious hall, christened the New Hall, had been completed in front of the new temple, adjoining it. A specially carved stone sofa with two lions on either side, with

³ The effulgence of Atman spread by *manovṛitti* (reflection or *chāya*) and uniting it with Itself is called *avachchaya yoga*.

the sacred symbol OM in a lotus on the back rest had been provided for the Maharshi to sit on thereafter. The four legs of the stone seat have carvings of Goddess Lakshmi. On the northern wall, behind the stone sofa, the holy mantra of *Hridaya Vidya*, enunciated and encapsulated in a single Sanskrit *sloka* by Bhagavan, is inscribed in letters of gold. A huge board installed in the late 1980s describing Bhagavan's death experience in His own words covers the wall on the western side.

The Balalayam, where the idols of Yogambika and Matrubhuteshwara and the other idols that were to be installed in the temple were housed, was in the place where the Maharshi's Samadhi stands today. After obtaining Bhagavan's permission, the temple's opening ceremonies were begun with the worship of Lord Ganapathy, the Remover of Obstacles. After opening the doors of the new temple, Bhagavan went straight to the Samadhi where the Lingam and Meru were to be installed, touched them, went round the temple and came into the New Hall. On the night of the second day the Meru was placed behind the Lingam by Bhagavan. A golden Sri Chakra was placed underneath the Siva Lingam which was soldered to the stone platform with 8 ounces of gold. On the fourth and final day *abhishekam* (ritual bathing) was performed to all the *kalasas* of the temple towers and to the idols in the temple. Then Mahabhishekam was performed that night.

When one enters the Mother's temple from the New Hall, to the left is the idol of the Sun God and to the right is the idol of the Moon God. In front is Nandi on a raised pedestal and on the ceiling above Nandi is the zodiac sign with all the nine planets, a replica of the ceiling in Thiruchchuzhi Temple. The sacrificial altar – the *bali pīṭham* – is at the rear of Nandi. The figure of Nandi, with his expressive eyes, inspires at once love and reverence. And, specially in the evenings of Pradosham days, decked in colourful flower garlands, Nandi looks grand and imposing. All the *mūrti*-s (idols) of the Mother's shrine are alive with *caitanya* (consciousness), thanks to the architectural marvel, the skill of hand of the sculptural art and the finesse of the finish, in all of which the Maharshi took an interest right from the start. His sanctifying look and touch consciously rendering them sacred, His constant attention to their creation at every step, all have resulted in making the idols of this temple vibrant with life.

As one goes round the Temple, one first meets on the outer wall of the shrine a niche for Lord Ganesa. This is followed by one for Lord Dakshinamoorthy. The rear wall houses the niche for the Lingodbhava (the emergence of the first Lingam of Light – the principle behind Arunachala). This depiction is mandatory in every Siva Temple on the outer wall behind the Sanctum Sanctorum as per the tenets of the Agama Sastras. The outer wall on the northern side houses niches for Brahma and Durga. In between is a small shrine dedicated to Chandikeshwara, the foremost devotee of Siva. In addition as one goes round the Prakara, the right and left corners of the temple have small, beautiful shrines to Lord Ganesa (again) and to Lord Subrahmanya. Whether the smiling eyes of Vinayaka or the look of compassion and endearment of Lord Dakshinamoorthy or the suave grace, shorn of fearsomeness, of Devi Durga, all arrest our attention, captivate and purify our hearts and inspire deep devotion.

The four pillars supporting the canopy above Nandi have the carved figures of various Gods and the intricate poses of Lord Siva. There are two small rooms on either side of the entrance to the Temple. The one on the left is used as a kitchen in which to prepare the *naivedya* to be offered to the deities and the one on the right functions as a storeroom for the ornaments and dresses that the deities are decked with on special occasions. In front of the storeroom is a raised stone platform housing the Navagrahas. To the west of the Navagrahas a beautiful Lord Nataraja and His consort, Goddess Sivakama Sundari, are installed on a separate pedestal. Near the door leading to Bhagavan's Samadhi, to the right of Lord Nataraja, is Lord Bhairava, traditionally the guardian of the temples.

While Mother's Temple is centered on traditional ritualism Bhagavan's Shrine on the rich heritage of the Path to Light within. As such spiritual catering for two modes of spiritual experiences they constitute two mighty citadels of *bhakti* and *jñāna*. Both united as Brahman or Pure Awareness and the *Śakti* of Brahman combine in them the infinite Love Compassion and guidance of the Universal Mother and Father.

Thus the Indweller of the Mansion of Infinity has chosen this earthly abode to provide a potent tryst with divinity to devotees, legion in numbers, for all time to come. The Light and Reality, found here without seeking, are ready to embrace us, if only we are ready. ▲

FROM THE ARCHIVES

Wandering Through India

Part Two

THELMA RAPPOLD

1948 Tue Mar 09

When I arrived at the meditation hall at 5:00 o'clock this morning it was so crowded I had difficulty finding a place to sit. Later someone said it was Shivaratree day, a very auspicious day. This is the day the year's supply of holy ash is prepared, the basic ingredient being cow-dung.

Shivaratree called for a special puja in the Temple tonight. Shiva was decked and redecked with garlands upon garlands of flowers. The Temple was dazzling with lights. Even the meditation hall and stairs came in for their share of the little wick-burning oil lamps. On this big occasion women are allowed to remain an extra hour in the hall with Bhagavan and everyone ate dinner at the same time. These occasions are such a treat as they give one the added joy of eating another meal with Bhagavan.

Raja suggested my joining the group going around the Hill tonight. Whatever wish is made on this night Siva is supposed to grant. At 8:30 o'clock all the pilgrims assembled ready to make the pradakshina.

MOUNTAIN PATH

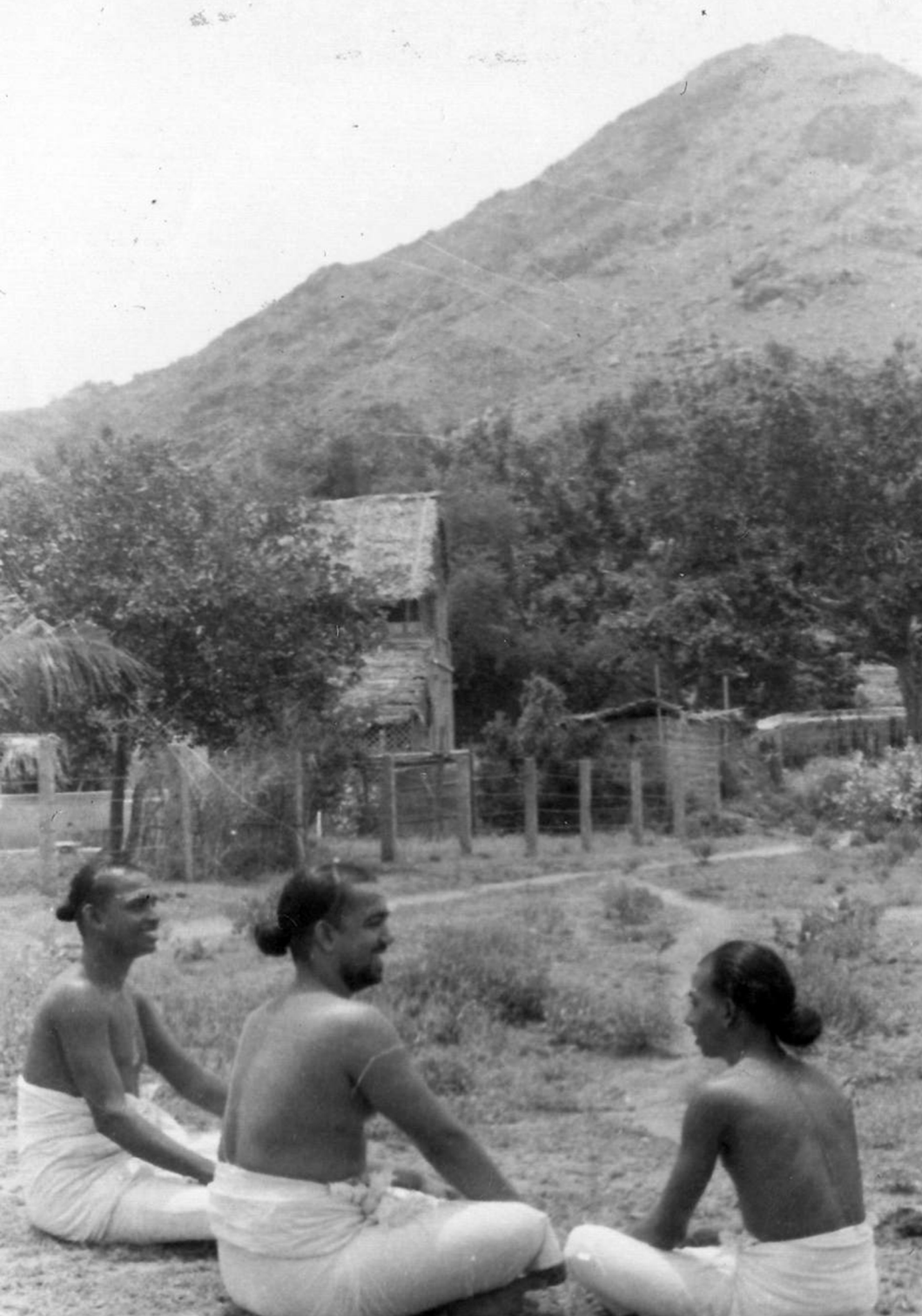
Raja said it was customary to first get Bhagavan's permission and blessing before starting, and so he went with me to the Hill. Except for the attendant Bhagavan was alone when we went in. As so often it happens in his presence, a feeling of child-like awe came over me, and I shyly asked (as one might ask a paternal father), "Bhagavan, may I go around the Hill tonight?" He chuckled and laughingly pointed to me and said to the attendant, "Look she asks ME if she may go around the Hill". All had a good laugh as I stood there blushing from head to toe.

Elsa Lowenstern¹ and I walked together, always keeping well in back of the others so that we couldn't hear their constant chatter. We both had the same idea of remaining silent. It was a beautiful starry night. The new moon had already gone to rest and so we took a hurricane lantern to light our way. It was a thrilling experience. After the first few minutes I removed my chappals and went bare-footed like the rest of the crowd. We made our first stop at a wayside shrine about 2 1/2 miles from the Ashram. Anamalai Swami the attendant of the Shrine gave us a drink of water. In the lamplight he looked like an old Biblical character come to life.

At the next stop Elsa and I found two rocks to stretch out on. We lay gazing at Arunachala and the stars until the leader insisted we move on. We made a number of stops along the way at places that Bhagavan had frequented. On the homeward stretch we went through the inner courtyard of the Arunachala Temple. The 1000-pillared mantap took on a rather mystical appearance in the night light.

The pradakshina (circumambulation of the Hill) covers eight miles. The last mile was the longest. One leg could hardly drag after the other and the bare feet were pretty well battered. As we sat at the Ashram Gate, waiting for the rest of the group to catch up, feeling sorry for our tired aching bodies, a blind swami who makes the trip around the Hill twice every night passed us with lightening speed with only a cane and his inner eye to guide him. He really put us to shame. He sleeps in the Temple in town during the day and spends his nights walking around the Hill.

¹ Throughout the text, Thelma refers to a German woman at the Ashram as Miss Lowenstern, Elsa, Elisa, Ilsa or lisa. The correct spelling is Ilse Lowenstern. — Editor.



The young ashram priests 'Kittu' (Krishnamurthy) in the centre with his best friend 'Appichi' (Subramanian) to his right sitting in the area which is now Manukkala Vinayakar Street

1948 Wed Mar 10

After the long pilgrimage last night I decided to sleep until the shameful hour of 6:00 A.M. As soon as I stirred I heard my tall, dark and unpredictable body guard getting up from his bed on the porch and making a pretense of getting his early morning chores done in my presence. The morning flew by and surprising enough all the body aches and pains were gone. Even the legs weren't a bit stiff.

To the Hall this afternoon came a most unusual holy (?) man, a kind of Serpent Gladiator. He wore only a small cod-piece but he had four serpent-like bracelets coiled up the full length of each arm. Around his torso were three large serpent-like bandettes, each in 5 1/2 coils. Each of his ten fingers were adorned with serpent rings. All his regalia was made of a copper colored hollow metal tubing and gave him the appearance of being in a straight-jacket of serpents.

He also carried a tiger skin with him, a small green and orange cloth, and a spear-headed silver staff about 6 1/2 feet long. His eyes were like black diamonds in a pearl white setting which stood out against his ebony colored skin.

It would have been interesting to know what transpired between Bhagavan and him. Not a word was spoken. He was doing some kind of yogic breathing that made him sound like one in the throes of death. Whenever he moved the copper tubing sounded like bones rattling in a junkdealer's graveyard.

Yours truly learned of another thing NOT to do today, i.e. to sit in the meditation hall with the legs stretched out in front of one. My legs got cramped from sitting so long cross legged and inasmuch as the hall wasn't very crowded I thought it would be a good idea to stretch them. One of the Brahmin women was shocked and motioned me not to do that. Someone later explained that to do so was being very disrespectful to Bhagavan – why? – she could give no reason. I am sure Bhagavan wouldn't have considered it disrespectful, especially for the uninformed Westerner.

1948 Thu Mar 11

The days slip through the fingers like the proverbial sand through the toes, and always Bhagavan is the same Blissful Self. One can always feel his thoughts being whipped into position for a hurried exit, when coming into Bhagavan's Ever-serene presence.

1948 Fri Mar 12

After breakfast I was sitting very peacefully gazing at Arunachala when Raja came and asked me if I would please try to eat faster and leave the dining hall sooner. Inasmuch as I am usually the last one finished, they (Raja didn't explain who 'they' were) thought I did that purposely so as to be with Bhagavan longer – even if that were true, what harm could that be? I tried to explain that was my natural way of eating, but it made no impression.

Why there is such childish pettiness in an Ashram is difficult to understand. Bhagavan is in the midst of all this and yet he is far above such trivialities. He merely looks on as a disinterested spectator. Without his presence the Ashram would probably close up in no time.

1948 Sat Mar 13

Finding a suitable place to live has been a major problem these days. Miss Lowenstern suggested I share a place with her. Harindranath is moving and suggested I go to his old place. Mrs. Osborne suggested I share a place with her. Living alone still appeals to me most. The best thing to do is to relax and let everything handle itself.

At breakfast this morning I took only one idlie so as to be able to finish when the others do.

1948 Mon Mar 15

Today the temperature was 100 degrees F. Miss Lowenstern said she felt as though she had a slight sunstroke. It isn't much wonder in this heat. She seems to enjoy arguing, today it was all about egos. Whose ego soared the highest would be difficult to say. As one looks about and sees so many egos shooting darts at one another, one can't help feeling what a fertile field this would be for a Hollywood Production 'The Parade of the Egos'.

1948 Tue Mar 16

This morning Raja said Miss Lowenstern had gone to the hills and hadn't returned. He seemed somewhat concerned. He said he would have to ask her to leave the Ashram. He tried to imply she was about to lose her mind. If that were really true from a spiritual point of view that would be wonderful. All of us would wish to be in her shoes.

1948 Wed Mar 17

Today I went back to see the possibility of staying in the Syed compound. Even though the atmosphere isn't the most ideal. This time Dr. Syed suggested I sleep on their new penthouse terrace. What a heavenly view of Arunachala from there. That closed the deal. To be able to spend the nights in full view of the Hill and the stars – what more could anyone ask?

1948 Sat Mar 20

This afternoon two chipmunks were playing gleefully about on Bhagavan's couch. About the same time one of the monkeys made a quick dash into the hall, swiped a banana lying on the floor and made his get-away before the attendant saw him. Bhagavan's eyes really sparkle when he witnesses such scenes.

Today was also party day in the Ashram. Two different persons brought homemade Indian delicacies for Bhagavan which were passed to everyone. Meditation suffered considerably because of all the distractions.

Raja told Elsa she would have to leave Tiruvannamalai. She has been offered a teaching job in Bangalore. She took the letter to Bhagavan so that he could help her decide what to do: to go or to stay. She got no verbal answer, but those who looked on say Bhagavan definitely wanted her to go. Maybe what Raja says about her being unbalanced is true. She does have a strange light in her eyes on occasions.

1948 Sun Mar 21

Moving day! The new quarters at Dr. Syed's could hardly be put in the same category as the Ritz, but they are reasonably comfortable compared with other accommodations in the neighborhood. At least there is a rope cot, a small table and a chair and even an electric light in the larger of the two rooms. The combination kitchen and bath didn't fare so well, however, it has only a single wooden plank for an all-purpose shelf; no lights and just one tiny window. The thatched roof and side walls don't meet, leaving an open invitation to mice, rats, cats, snakes, etc. Looks as though I am due for an invitation into the real Indian way of life. The doors are so low only a pygmy could enter without bumping his head.



Thelma Rappold in a jutka at the Tiruvannamalai bazaar

1948 Mon Mar 22

Went to town on a shopping expedition for pots and pans. Came home looking like a jungle Santa Claus. Met one of the Ashram men in the bazaar who helped me find my way about. Dr. Syed left for Allahabad today which means Mrs. Syed and I will have the compound to ourselves.

1948 Tue Mar 23

This morning I had my last breakfast with Bhagavan and so I took special care to thoroughly enjoy it: No rushing this time.

1948 Wed Mar 24

Awaken at 3:15 A.M. and tip-toed down the terrace steps so as not to disturb Mrs. Syed. Arrived at Bose's compound exactly at 4:00 o'clock. Elsa was sitting on the fence waiting. The moon was still high in the sky – a perfect morning to make a pradakshina. One is supposed to receive merit according to the Hindu belief for going around the Hill or any holy place. The greatest merit comes to those who go barefooted in silent meditation. Bhagavan says one should walk as slowly as a woman in her tenth month of pregnancy.²

We walked along for the first 2 1/2 miles in silence. The first stop was at the little wayside shrine of the 'Biblical Character' we had met on the last trip. The sadhus were having their morning bath, after they had finished their ablutions and dressed we approached them for a drink of water. To Ilse's horror we found that the drinking water came from the same tank that is used for bathing. They drank it and so I thought "Why not I?".

We continued on our way and as the moon neared the Western horizon we stood watching as in a trance. The feet refused to carry us any farther until the moon made its colorful exit. As the day began to break we passed the little village of Annamalai which looked much different in the morning light than it did in the moonlight. Nearby we saw a retinue of hundreds of monkeys. It is amazing to see how the little ones cling to their mothers while on the run. We sat to rest for a

² One should walk slowly like a woman who is in the ninth month of pregnancy. *Arunachala Purana* verse 578. Also Suri Nagamma, *Letters from Sri Ramanasramam*, 26th June, 1949 (251) 'The Importance of Yatra and Pradakshina'. — Editor.

while to watch the blazing sun rise over the town of Tiruvannamalai. With the coming of daylight conversation began to flow more freely.

This being full moon day Bhagavan got his monthly shearing which delayed lunch until 12:00 o'clock. Raja gave me some buttermilk to tide me over until lunch time. In our anticipation of going on the eight-mile pradakshina we neglected to eat any breakfast. Raja then took me to the Dispensary so I could lie down – a very welcome half-hour of relaxation. This noon I really had my last meal at the Ashram.

1948 Thu Mar 25

After the strenuous day yesterday I slept until 7:00 o'clock. Mrs. Syed came up to see if I was ill. It is actually shameful to sleep so late but this was a golden opportunity to watch the moon set in the West and at the same time to see the sun rise in the East with Arunachala the ever serene spectator, on the North.

At last the day has come for me to start on my own. Learning to cook with charcoal – what an experience. It may be much easier to give up eating. I struggled and struggled and struggled, and fanned and fanned and fanned, but the dratted fire wouldn't burn. Sakur came to my rescue by bringing over some live coals. He too struggled for a long time before the recalcitrant fire finally got under way. Then he and the gardener's wife looked on and tried to tell me in Hindi and Tamil how to prepare the first meal. They thought I had never cooked before as my actions seemed to indicate. They looked on for a while with a hopeless kind of attitude and then each went about his own work.

Spent so much time going around in circles I didn't get to the Ashram until 10:30 o'clock. At the moment all I can say for charcoal, is that there is the advantage of being able to put the food on the stove, go away for a few hours and come back to a well cooked meal.

1948 Fri Mar 26

Starting a charcoal fire is a much dreaded operation. Again it was necessary to get live coals from Mrs. Syed. Surely there must be another way, I can't depend upon her all the time. Once the fire is started things go along without too many hitches. Today Mrs. Syed felt sorry for me and came over to help. We made pillau, bajis, lady fingers and sago pudding. Cooking once for the entire day appeals to me very much. As I sat on the floor scrubbing the pots and pans, the

feeling came over me very strongly that, “These things I am doing, I’ve done before, but I can’t remember where or when.”

This being the first day I’ve missed going to the Ashram the Yogi family came over to see what was the matter. Mrs. Syed took them on a tour of inspection of her new house. A unique feature about it is the underground chamber, the entrance of which is disguised to look like a wall cabinet and one must use a retractable ladder to get down. She said it was meant for a meditation hall, but the indications are that it is a shelter from the enemy during the Hindu-Muslim riots. The only ventilation comes from tiny slit-like windows concealed under the first floor stairs, and a small cylindrical air passage tunneled through a ten-foot wall.

1948 Tue Mar 30

Spent the entire morning getting a general overhauling to make sure I had fulfilled all the requirements for returning to the Ashram after a period of uncleanliness. The return to the Ashram proves rather embarrassing at times like this. People come up and ask “Where have you been?”. After a short pause they smile knowingly and say, “Oh yes, you’ve been ill for a few days”. One might just as well wear a big poster advertising the fact.

1948 Fri Apr 02

Coming home from parayana this morning I found an ideal spot on the summit of a mammoth rock from which to watch the sunrise and to get a commanding view of the country for miles around. The only obstruction between me and the sunrise was an occasional bird in flight. This spot is even better than the terraced roof in that one’s continuity of thought (or absence of thought) need not be changed after leaving Bhagavan’s presence.

Another point about the seclusion of women while they are ‘unclean’ they are not allowed to enter their own kitchens nor allowed to touch anything. This rule can easily be carried out in practice because of the joint family arrangement in India.

There are always several women in each family so that the ‘unclean’, one has an opportunity for complete rest. She is treated almost as a leper during this period. The others handing her for what she asks, but making certain not to touch her. Nor is she allowed to

sleep on her regular bedding. Instead she must sleep on a straw mat on the bare floor. Whenever possible she spends the time outdoors. According to the Hindu belief, the vibrations are lowered during this period and the baser instincts are in ascendancy.

Arunachala put on a spectacular show this evening. The heat of the sun set fire to the dry grass on the Hill and it spread up and down both sides of the mountain. Arunachala looked as though it had been framed in neon lights. It might be called a fierce beauty in view of the danger involved. Mrs. Syed said all the snakes and scorpions would make for the lowlands and warned never to go out in the dark without chappals.

1948 Sun Apr 04

This was the morning set aside to go to the top of Arunachala, the Hill of the Holy Beacon. At 4:30 A.M. I made my way in the dark to Chattopadhyaya's gate. Harin and the three boys, piece by piece got their things together, and after sometime we were on our way to meet Elisa and to take leave of Bhagavan before starting our adventure to the peak of Arunachala. We waited until 5:30 A.M. when day began to break so that we would be certain not to step on any of the snakes or scorpions which were supposed to be on the march after the big fire. Pandra, who had been there before, assured us he knew all the short cuts and proceeded to take us the long way around to Skandashram. Everywhere were evidences of the path the fire took. Anyone trying to descend from Skandashram during the fire would have been trapped.

The little boy Mana age four (Harin's version of his second childhood) came along to keep the crowd in a merry mood. From Skandashram we had to go down, down, down to get UP, sometimes with great difficulty. But Mana was Johnny-on-the-spot to relieve the tension and to prevent our taking the journey too seriously.

Deendayal was on our trail for pictures all the way, always wanting us to get out on some dangerous cliff. That stopped however when we reached seven wells where Rajaram nearly slipped over the side of a rocky precipice. Everyone's heart was in his mouth and only Bhagavan's grace saved him. From that moment on everyone was more careful. Elsa came all the way without chappals. She is more courageous than I could be.

MOUNTAIN PATH

At the summit we were rewarded by a darshan of 'Arunachala's Lotus Feet' where the Holy Beacon is lighted on the full moon day of Karthigai each year. Into a large metal pot mounds and mounds of sacrificial ghee are poured and at a given time or signal the beacon is lighted. The beacon which is said to burn for nearly a week can be seen for miles around. We too could see many miles in every direction.

After a hot, tiring descent we were happy to reach seven wells to get out of the sun. The three boys insisted upon cooking while Harin and I supervised from the shade of the nearby cave. He was in a jolly mood and told us many interesting experiences of his colorful career. We were nearly famished by the time lunch was ready. It was a full-fledged Indian picnic. No wonder it took the boys until 2:30 o'clock. They had boiled rice and made a very delicious curry. We forgot plates and so two of us used pot lids, two used the cooking pans and Pandra used a rock for his plate.

At 5:00 o'clock we started our descent which though easier seemed much more difficult for the limbs that had already become stiffened from the morning's exertion. Mana came to our rescue again and showed us how he slid down the big rocks seat-wise. We descended via the temple in the town and stopped nearby for some buttermilk and hot coffee, and then we took a cart home.

1948 Mon Apr 05

Much as the body revolted I got up and went to 5:00 o'clock parayana. The rest of the crowd slept in. Bhagavan seemed to get a kick out of my face this morning which looked like an over-ripe tomato.

1948 Fri Apr 09

That's one Indian custom difficult to adjust to – no privacy – at any hour of the day or night. No matter who calls, curious ones gather round and stand like statues listening to every word and watching every movement. Nor would any one of them think of announcing himself or knocking before entering. They come so quietly in their bare feet, a person can never be sure whether he is alone or not. I blush how naively they ask some of the most personal questions that we wouldn't even ask our nearest friends. ▲

(To be continued)

The Fire of Love

LINDA S. BONNER

Ah, one spark flew
And burned down the house of my heart.
– Rumi

What is that mysterious spark that ignites the heart, allowing one to focus effortlessly on an object of attraction such that, with luck, it sets off an explosion that shatters and annihilates the individual self? What sets alight the spark that turns into the fire we call love?

Love is probably the most over-used word in the English language, meaning anything from intense feelings of affection and attraction to deep romantic attachment or simply to finding great pleasure in something. Reasoned definitions of love often do not suit but instead people seem to find its expression best in poetry and music – the language of the heart, the seat of emotions beyond all human understanding and control. Thus, neurobiologists speak of love as arising in the limbic system rather than the lexical [linguistic], in other words, as sensed rather than explained. Most people are familiar with, and can relate to, a state of ‘being or falling in love’, even though they may find it difficult to define.

In general, the concept of love involves an emotional bond to someone or something for which one yearns. On a human level this attraction is a vital expression of life ensuring continuation of the

species, but in its most rarefied form as love of truth, knowledge, or God, it can take one beyond the confines of the ego-construct to Self-realisation, Nirvana, Divine union, or whatever one wishes to call that exalted state. In the experience of love, we feel helplessly overwhelmed by a great force that eliminates all boundaries and shakes us to our very foundations. Aflame with love we burn, we long, we thrill. We yearn for our beloved object beyond all things until it becomes everything, and obsessed, we long for union and want to be consumed.

Sri Sarath Babuji ('Guruji') once said the whole gamut of spiritual life could be summed up as "the experience and expression of love." The wisdom from his own experience pointed to the mobilization of that great force, love, the fire that fuels our seeking and yearning to solve the mystery. To surmount the many obstacles on the spiritual path, especially the ego's conditionings, a power beyond our own volition and choice needs to be awakened. This need only love can fill, Guruji said, because,

"When it comes to love, you forget yourself, everything is forgotten. You don't mind what people think or say about you, love expresses itself like a flood. There's no language, no sastra, no discourse, no book that can describe the outpouring of love. It's the act of forgetting ourselves, of forgetting everything, of giving up everything. Nothing you remember, nothing. There's only you and your object of love. The heart knows what it needs and wants without the mind interfering."

Most of us feel something missing in our lives and seek to be whole and fulfilled. Even though it may be unknown and subliminal, we usually have a vague sense of that missing part, but this sense remains abstract until it becomes tangible in some object or person. Until then, the love remains dormant even though the potential is always there, residing in our hearts. Love becomes actualized when we come into contact with the object that seems to embody what we desperately seek and we can't help but feel ourselves bursting with love for it. At first, it may be for some worldly object like a good job or relationship. But when these lose their attraction and inner lack is still felt, then people turn to spiritual life for more lasting fulfilment. Here also, as in so-called worldly life, Guruji said,

Your object of love depends on your need, because you love what you need, that's all. So, first you should know what you need.

Need was a special point for Guruji. For spiritual life to be fruitful it has to arise from deep, personal need based on honest self-discovery: Do we really need to know who we are or to solve life's mystery? Do we really need to know the truth or do we need peace? One's degree of need is important also because it correlates with effort.

Guruji always insisted that, whether the attraction was to Truth, the Self, God, or one's Sadguru, the 'right' effort was always infused with love and strong need; it is this combination which makes the path seem effortless, choiceless and spontaneous. Buddha's need was to find answers to life's suffering, old age and death, and this longing made him feel so restless that all his attachments became trivial, and he left his palace, family and kingdom behind. Guruji said his act of leaving was not an effort of renunciation but an expression of love – his love of truth, his longing to find the answer to his need. In the same way, Ramana Maharshi left home not out of renunciation but out of a need 'to know his Father', as he said in his note of departure. Bhagavan said, regarding giving up one's 'I-identification', that "the eagerness to do it must be equal to a man drowning, trying to rise to the surface for his life."¹ The great *jñāni*, Nisargadatta Maharaj, said, "You may choose any way that suits you, your earnestness will determine the rate of progress,"² and Dilgo Khyentse Rimpoche remarked, "The practitioner with the greatest yearning receives the greatest blessing." Masters of many lineages, Hindu, Buddhist and Sufi, have emphasised intense need and devotion as the essential qualities that urge one forward to realisation and fulfilment. Shirdi Sai Baba's recollection of his relationship with his own master, recounted in *Sai Baba's Charters and Sayings* by Narasimha Swami, is testimony to the level of intensity that animated his own *gurubhakti*:

I sat and gazed at him; we were both filled with Bliss. I cared not to turn my eye upon anything else. Night and day I pored upon his face with an ardour of love that banished hunger and thirst. The Guru's absence, even for a second, made me restless. I meditated upon nothing but the Guru and had no goal or object other than the Guru. Unceasingly fixed upon him was my mind.

¹ Munagala S. Venkataramiah, *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk§28.

² *I Am That: Talks with Nisargadatta Maharaj*. Trans. by Maurice Frydman (Duram, North 2 Carolina: Acorn Press, 1988), Ch. 16, p.52.

Wonderful indeed, the art of my Guru! I wanted nothing but the Guru and he wanted nothing but my love.³

Beings of such calibre as Shirdi Sai Baba, Sri Ramana Maharshi or the Buddha are rare indeed; most of us don't have such an all-consuming need or earnestness. Nonetheless, Guruji encouraged us to start where we are in complete honesty and integrity, saying spiritual longing often begins as a small spark. Initially, it may feel like a subtle stirring, a smouldering of love in the heart. Guruji advised us to fan it into flames through expression so it grows gradually into a blaze that burns away our sense of separation from true nature. It is only through expression that love is strengthened enough to overcome the complexities of human nature and make us lose the parts of ourselves that are obstacles to fulfilment. Guruji called this fanning of the flames the great 'express-way' of love:

We each have a small iota of love: try to express it! By expressing it, it grows. Because that love has been pressed in your heart due to so many fears, patterns, wants and desires, you have to ex-press it – to bring it out – from your heart, the seat of emotions. This is the express-way of love. It is what Vedantins call untying the *hridaya granthi*, the knots of the heart. Then you'll find that true love that lurks there.

In the act of expression, we may encounter the limits imposed by our 'heart-knots', but they only become fuel for further transformation. After all, if we give ourselves over, all we can lose is just another idea of ourselves. Through exposing these false ideas to the fire, they are made transparent and they become simply more fuel for the fire of love. As Guruji said,

It is in the ego the love is kindled. And when the love grows, then the ego is burnt in the fire of love, it's no more there. It's just like fuel. Fuel is the support for fire but after some time it is no longer there. In love we forget ourselves. That is the sign of love. We lose ourselves. And it is only in love, that by losing one gains. In that self-consuming love, the experience of love itself is the fulfilment. It is the beginning, it is the means, and it is the end. It is not a means to an end, it is an end in itself.

³ *Sri Sai Baba's Charters and Sayings* by Narasimhaswami (Mylapore: All India Sai Samaj, 1999), Nos. 3, 137 + 178, pp.44 +72.

When love and its expression become the motivating force of one's life, the path itself gives fulfilment at every step of the way. Guruji therefore saw no need to give techniques or practices, since he saw no dichotomy between living in the world and spiritual practice. So, whether one calls it life or *sādhana*, everything effortlessly becomes an expression of love. Every aspect of existence – work, family life, devotional service and spiritual practice – becomes enhanced, unified, meaningfully complete in itself. Then everything we do, even going to the store or office, becomes *sādhana*, and meditation ensues naturally:

Simply experiencing and enjoying the happiness that comes – that is meditation. If the intensity grows and grows into ecstasy, you forget yourself and only bliss and the joy of love remains. When there's love, the mind automatically becomes concentrated, concentration is a by-product of love. It's the natural function of the mind to be always concentrated on whatever or whoever we love. Is there any effort in love?

True unconditional love is recognised most palpably in the form and presence of a realised being. When we meet an embodiment of that which we seek, an embodiment of love, we feel a quickening in our hearts and souls, a deep resonance. Love calls to Love. A spark enters the heart and sets afire the love that has been quiescent there – we slowly become the very thing we desire. In guru-centric paths like the Shirdi Sai Baba tradition, the devotee's transformation catalysed by his object of love is termed '*Guru-apana sarika karitat*',⁴ that is, 'turning the disciple into the likeness of the teacher'. Guruji said,

You all crave for love. You give it different names: freedom, the unconditioned, liberation, nirvana, and all these things. But in your heart of hearts what you really crave for is to be loved. If you are really loved by somebody, the experience of love starts springing in your heart. Once it's triggered, it catches hold of you and swallows you completely, because it's your abstract sense of fulfilment made concrete. That triggering is not in your hands, there has to be someone capable of unconditionally loving you. And that person should be an embodiment of love.

⁴ *Life of Sai Baba* by Narasimhaswami. 3 vols. (Injambakkam, Madras: Sai Baba Charitable Trust, 4 2001), 2: 219; *ibid.*, Glossary, p. 323.

The Sadguru's love is a mysterious paradox, both personal and impersonal – it feels so familiar we intuit it residing within ourselves, yet it seems so strange it exerts a magnetic power of attraction. This feeling of 'strange familiarity', Guruji said, is the first pull of the magnet bringing us into the orbit of the Sadguru, whom Guruji called the 'Familiar Stranger'. The subsequent process of exploring and deepening that love in the Guru's presence, of making it more familiar and concrete in our life-experience, Guruji called 'the concretization of our abstract sense of fulfilment', and it constitutes the cornerstone of his approach to spiritual transformation. Sai Baba and Guruji offered and nurtured that love, meeting devotees exactly where they found them, answering their prayers, satisfying their desires, and miraculously blessing their lives, solely for the purpose of their self-transformation. Guruji explained,

A miracle immediately gives the seeker the experience of faith and it confirms the reality of the saint or sage of being one with the whole universe, which is the goal of Realisation itself. Based on that sense of increased faith, the seeker can surrender more and more and eventually become one with the whole universe. Baba's way is to make all people like him.

On the path of the Sadguru like Bhagavan or Sai Baba, when one experiences fulfilment of prayers, whether mundane or spiritual, or witnesses a miracle, then faith, trust, and a bond of love develop. When these qualities grow, one is more likely to submit the mind to the Sadguru, to be 'struck'! The resulting loss of ego is a kind of death experience which only love can give the strength to bear, for it is only in love that we say, "I want to lose myself, I want to become one with you." We long for unity, to finally lose our ego-identity, to transcend all duality. When one is deeply in touch with that longing, it feels like being magnetically, gravitationally pulled towards our Beloved, towards our own heart. Not only are we drawn to truth, to God, to the Absolute, they are also drawn to us. The two are pulled together, because at the centre they are one.

The ultimate goal is always to become one with our Beloved, to merge into the infinite sky of our true nature. Guruji speaks of the Sadguru as a 'window to the sky' saying,

If you are sitting in a room with no windows, to see the sky a window is needed, and that is the form of the Sadguru. And

when you look at the window, you are actually looking through the window, and what you see is the formless, unbounded sky outside. Sai Baba or Sri Ramana is such a window. When you look at him, it's not just his form, it's what you can see beyond it. So a Sadguru – the form of the Sadguru – is a window through which you can see your true Self, the realisation of your abstract ideal of fulfilment.

Whether one's path is through the form of a Sadguru or a deity or a practice like Self-enquiry, finally it is the burning fire of our love that will take us through our chosen 'window' to our boundless nature beyond. Guruji said,

If someone is burning to know the truth or for the vision of the divine, or for any great, profound object – when the desire is so strong, it creates a burning in them, a fire. And tending the fire and making it grow and grow, that is tapas. Actually, the word tapas comes from the Sanskrit root 'tap', meaning 'to heat or warm up'; it is the heat from the fire of enquiry and love. Love itself is a kind of tapas, a burning. It is that fire which one has to keep up. Always keep it up – make it a perpetual fire, until you get that which you seek.

The fiery discipline of orienting one's whole being towards truth or the Beloved is only possible with the unquenchable fire of love. Guruji would often say that the triggering of love is just the beginning of a very long, unending love story, in which truth infinitely reveals itself in the quiet of our own heart. In other words, the heart's fulfilment is the unfolding story of our experience and expression of love. Or, as stated in the *Narada Bhakti Sutras*,

Trisatyasya bhaktirēva garīyasī, bhaktirēva garīyasī.

In past, present and future, love is the greatest,
indeed, love is the greatest. (81). ▲

Linda Bonner (Bhakti) is a Canadian devotee of Sri Ramana and Arunachala who met Sri Sarath Babuji in Shirdi in 1997 and moved to Tiruvannamalai in 2005 to attend his *satsangs* given until his *mahasamadhi* in 2010. She was Assistant Editor of *Rose Petals: The English Satsangs of Sri Sarath Babuji*, where her essay originally appeared as the Introduction to Vol. 5 (2016). It has been abridged and edited especially for readers of the *Mountain Path*.



Zen Master Bankei

SOL SANDPERL

It is not often that one can claim two great enlightened masters as one's teachers. Such was the case for me. In 1973, as a young man living in Montreal, after returning home from my late night shift as a taxi driver, I decided to look through my roommate's book collection before going to bed. I randomly pulled out one particular Zen book. In the book I came upon, I discovered an essay about a Zen Master named Bankei. In it was the compelling story of his great efforts to penetrate to a boundless awakening, which he finally achieved.

When still a young boy, Bankei became interested in Confucianism, which was current at that time in Japan. The essence of Confucian texts said that the path of great learning lies in clarifying 'illustrious virtue.' This proved to be insufficient for his inquiring mind that wanted to get directly to the Truth. This led him ultimately to Zen, where he finally met a Zen Master who told him to sit in Zen meditation (*zazen*). He lost no time. He spent arduous years exerting himself in *zazen* – often going into the mountains and meditating for days on end, at times taking no food until he toppled over. His exertions eventually took their toll on his body, and he became seriously ill. In describing that

period, he said, “One day I spat on the wall and watched fascinated as the lump of blood rolled down. I was in bad shape I can tell you.”¹ He was not particularly attached to anything anymore, but he was regretful that he might now die without obtaining his old desire. Upon contemplating this at the very depths, he explained, “Suddenly it struck me like a thunderbolt that *I had never been born* and that my birthlessness could settle any and every matter.”²

After reading that, I danced around the room in great joy! I had stumbled upon a great awakened Master! Zen Master Bankei Eitaku lived in Japan in the 17th century and taught for over 40 years, mostly in the city of Kyoto, a holy place filled with many Zen monasteries both large and small. His teaching was based entirely on his initial enlightenment. Bankei, like Bhagavan, had complete and utter enlightenment with absolutely no going back. From then on, his teaching was very direct and explicit. He exhorted one and all to remain in what he now called ‘the Birthless Buddha Mind,’ ever deepening, but completely liberated.

Although stories about the Buddhas and Patriarchs were inimical to him, Bankei often illustrated the wondrous power of staying in the state of non-birth through numerous stories from his encounters with and recollections of students, monks, and lay people who came to him. His teaching was open to all beings, whether men or women, rich or poor, educated or illiterate. At first, very few came to see Bankei (as he said, “They thought me a heretic, as bad as a Roman Catholic”³), but gradually his audience grew. They loved his stories and recollections, all imbued with his warmth and charisma.

One time, when speaking of sin, he recalled a pickpocket in his hometown who was so skillful that he could tell at a glance how much money was being carried by someone approaching. When he was eventually caught and sent to prison he heard about Bankei’s Zen teaching, applied it, and started to change his ways. He became a skillful sculptor of Buddhist statues, and he died a holy death. Bankei used this story as a case in point of what is possible, if one used one’s

¹ *Zen: Poems, Prayers, Sermons, Anecdotes, Interviews*. Eds. Stryk, Lucien; Ikemoto, Takashi. Ohio University Press, 1982. p.76.

² *Ibid.*, p.79.

³ *Ibid.*, p.81.

will to turn to the Birthless Buddha Mind whenever the mind strayed. In a similar vein, he told of a young monk who came to him for help in getting rid of a bad temper. Bankei, always direct and present said, “Show me your temper, and I will cure you of it right off.’

The monk replied, ‘I don’t have it at this moment’.

‘Then you weren’t born with it,’ Bankei answered. ‘If you were, you would have it at all times, else, where can this hot temper possibly be? Your mistake is one of self-love which makes you concern yourself with others and insist that you have your own way.’⁴

Bankei, the great master that he was, could see into all minds including that of the young monk.

A testament to Bankei’s character and compassion is exemplified by the words of a blind man who lived near one of Bankei’s temples. He said, “Since I am blind, I cannot watch a person’s face, I must judge his character by the sound of his voice. Ordinarily when I hear someone congratulate another upon his happiness or success, I also hear a secret tone of envy. When condolence is expressed for the misfortune of another, I hear pleasure and satisfaction, as if the one condoling was really glad there was something left to gain in his own world. In all my experience, however, Bankei’s voice was always sincere. Whenever he expressed happiness, I heard nothing but happiness, and whenever he expressed sorrow, sorrow was all I heard.”⁵

I have learned great lessons in my own spiritual practice from this Zen Master. One time in his later years, when his body became more and more infirm, no doubt due to the intense exertions of his early depredations, Bankei spoke of illness and pain. His teaching was to allow yourself to feel pain, to be sick when sick, to ‘go ahead and groan,’ but to always abide in the birthless mind and not get involved with the pain.

When I was in my twenties, I spent time doing training at Hoshinji Monastery in Japan. It was during the Rohatsu Sesshin (a rigorous seven-day meditation retreat), that I decided to put Bankei’s words to the test. Early on the second day of sitting, I had no choice if I wanted

⁴ Ibid., p.84

⁵ Haskel, Peter, *Bankei Zen*, Gove Weidenfeld, New York, 1984. p.52.

to continue. Up until then, I could do nothing but focus on the pain in my legs that was, at times, excruciating. In the second meditation sitting period that morning, I decided to wait for the pain to arrive and see what I could find as a solution. Soon I became enveloped in it, and I observed my thoughts as they started to appear as the pain intensified. I could see thoughts of panic and dread arising. I did not move at all or try to get away. Instead, I remained as I was... slowly realising that *it was those thoughts that were the cause of suffering*. The pain itself did not go away, but I was not as afraid of it. I suddenly realised what Bankei meant when he said *not to get involved with the pain*. And that is the crux of Bankei's dharma – adhering to the Unborn and letting everything be, 'Like a great blockhead of the universe!' as he liked to say.

There are not many who wake up from the mesmerizing illusion of duality. It is a profound challenge to attain absolute stillness because in true stillness, 'you' disappear. That is tantamount to death for most humans, but nothing is lost in stillness. The separate self is an '*I-thought*', as Bhagavan's teaching points to repeatedly. To differentiate between your true self and the *I-thought* cannot be done through thinking. If you intend to be aware of the *I-thought* for what it is, that very intention will interfere with awareness since it is another thought. Bhagavan was aware of this, and referred to it as the ego pretending to be a policeman trying to catch the thief that really is himself. It just will not work.

Bankei puts it this way: "It's as if you were pursuing something that's running away. As long as you deliberately try to stop your rising thoughts, the thought of trying to stop them wars against the continually arising thoughts themselves, and there's never an end to it."⁶

So what is the solution? These two self-realised masters have answered this problem and have given us the most direct teaching that, if adhered to, is an utterly direct means to know yourself as the 'Self-Existent Uncreated Absolute' (as said by Huang Po, an ancient Chinese Zen Master), for the first time... and for all time.

Bankei did not care for any of the 'artificial' means of Zen practice that were prevalent at that time in Japan. He had no use for

⁶ Ibid., p.52.

Koan practice (questions from the Zen Master to be contemplated by the student, that created great doubt, by which awakening was to be achieved when the doubt was finally broken through). He even considered meditation to be unnecessary as long as one stayed in the birthless mind. He would say, “When you are abiding in the Unborn, all the time is *zazen* (sitting meditation).”⁷ In the same vein, Ramana Maharshi was heard to say to a devotee that setting apart time for meditation was for ‘mere beginners’. Ramana also wanted us to go directly to the Source and see through the illusion of the *I-thought*, using self-inquiry and abiding in the Self. In each case, the masters were asking us to penetrate who we really are at our very essence. Although meditation is one path for many spiritual seekers and very helpful in one’s *sadhana* (I myself have been practising meditation since 1972), there is nothing like the direct route.

This awakening is available to all, but requires a great sustained effort. D.T. Suzuki (a Japanese author of books on *Buddhism and Zen*), in describing Bankei’s intense battle, said that the ‘I’ of *I am* is not the ‘I’ of *I know*. This separation is the cause of all our spiritual vexations. To be released from these aggravations, ‘I’ groans. For the ‘*I know*’ to become the ‘*I am*’, Bankei had to exhaust himself and almost died to be released of these groans. Bankei was so direct that he never told stories about the Buddha or even the Patriarchs and Bodhisattvas. He said, “They are mere names for what has been born. To live in a state of non-birth is to attain Buddhahood. It is to keep your whereabouts unknown. A blessed state!”⁸

Because his teaching was so direct, not all could keep up with it. Their habitual thinking was too strong. Yet his enlightenment was so utterly complete that to be around him was to be lifted out of your despond and to give yourself to the practice of returning to the *Birthless Buddha Mind* whenever you caught yourself straying from it. In Ramana’s parlance, our *vāsanā*-s (habitual thoughts) are quieted around the Master and the peace we experience allows for spiritual progress as well. Both Bhagavan and Bankei left us with teachings that would benefit us, even after they were gone. Bankei’s teaching


⁷ Ibid., p.52.

⁸ Op.cit., Stryk, Lucien; Ikemoto, Takashi. p.76.

MOUNTAIN PATH

of non-birth directly transcending birth and death produced a number of awakened students inspired by and infused with his light.

After Bankei died, the teaching started to fade in Japan without his enthusiasm and magnetism. It was difficult for most to practise because our *vāsanā*-s are too strong. Both teachers go right after the thoughts that arise and lead us astray. The question of who is suffering from the particular disturbing thought or image leads to the recognition that the sufferer is a thought himself. I strive to recognize this continually as my errant thoughts arise, and hope to advance steadily towards awakening to the Self, otherwise known as the Birthless Buddha Mind!



Devotee (In Memoriam N.S.)

Upahar

This world's aflame;
long hair of the wise ones burns like grass;
the bones of ignorance return to dust.
Priests of the inner space traverse the land,
chanting the mystic names. Who knows, is still.
The sacrifice is made; you could not choose it.
Who drew you here will guide you through the fire.

To some, the subtle lovelight of His glance
brightens the lonely quest a timeless moment;
some He dumbfounds in helpless adoration,
circling like angels in a cosmic spell.
To some He grants the mystery of service,
lifelong, undoubting; undisturbed by death.

This world's aflame;
The heedless prophets cry in ecstasy;
hearts blaze in secret joy. Who knows, stands free.
And still your love is true; there was no choice.
Who drew you here will guide you through the fire.

Purusha and Prakṛti

The Two Entities That Govern Our Lives

Part Two

M.R. KODHANDRAM

At the conclusion of Part One, we spoke about the famous song of Saint Pattinattar that says Prakṛti, which is the Śakti of Īśvara, is the real doer and we are merely an instrument in its hands.

என் செயலாவது யாதொன்றும் இல்லை இனித்தெய்வமே,
உன்செயலே என்று உணரப்பெற்றேன், இந்த ஊன் எடுத்த
பின்செய்த தீவினை யாதொன்றும் இல்லை, பிறப்பதற்கு
முன்செய்த தீவினையோ இங்ஙனே வந்து மூண்டதுவே.

The saint says that he has realised that everything is done by the Lord and is based on his past karmas, and he has not added any bad karmas in this birth. Thus whatever situation he was facing (when he was being impaled in a stake and set on fire due to an error of judgement by the king who mistook him for a robber) was only due to his bad karmas in his past births. Due to this understanding, he was able to face his situation without any agitation by holding onto the

M.R. Kodhandram is a postgraduate from the IIT, Madras, who settled in Tiruvannamalai 19 years ago to do *sādhana*. He has translated into English and written commentaries on Andal's *Tiruppavai*, Bhagavan's *Upadeśa Saram*, *Bhagavad Gita Saram*, *Atma Bodha*, *Aksharamanamalai* and *Dakshinamurti Stotram*, and the great Tamil scripture *Tirukkuṛaḷ*.

Lord in surrender. By the Grace of God, the king Bhadrakiri realised his mistake, put out the fire and released the saint. He apologised to him for his blunder and renounced his kingship and became his disciple.

Bhagavan Ramana also made a statement about destiny in his first written message given to his mother who tried to persuade him to come back to Madurai with her:

அவரவர் பிராரப்தப் பிரகாரம் அதற்கானவன் ஆங்காங்கிருந்து ஆட்டுவிப்பன்; என்றும் நடவாதது என்முயற்சிக்கினும் நடவாது; நடப்பது என் தடை செய்யினும் நில்லாது. இதுவே திண்ணம். ஆகலின் மெளனமாயிருக்கை நன்று.

The Ordainer causes the *vāsanā*-s that are waiting to act, to move (up) (ஆட்டுவிப்பன்), moment to moment (ஆங்காங்கு), in accordance with the *prārabdha* karmas of the individual. Here the word இருந்து also has a dictionary meaning of ஆயத்தமாயிருக்க which means ready or waiting (to rise) or to be on the point of acting. Thus, the *vāsanā*-s that are waiting to rise will move up, moment to moment, from the Heart as ordained and enter the mind and make us act or experience accordingly. We experience pain and pleasure as a consequence. In this verse, the Ordainer who makes us act daily is referred to as the Prakṛti which is the Śakti that creates everything in the world including our body, mind, *prana* and the senses.

The same Śakti also known as Māyā Śakti makes us perform acts as per the destiny using the body and its instruments it has created, which include the mind, intellect and the senses. For all the acts being performed by us, there are results or fruits which are the consequences. These fruits are bestowed upon us as per the Divine Law, created by the Supreme Purusha or *Purushottama*. He bestows the fruits of our karmas and makes us experience them in the mind as pain or pleasure at the appropriate time. Thus we can see that we are NOT the doer but it is the Prakṛti which makes us perform the various acts as per our *prārabdha*.

We, the individuals, are governed by some higher force. We are like puppets in the hands of the Lord. The *Śrī Bhagavad Gītā* (Ch. 18.61) states, “The Lord dwells (unattached) within every being and always shines in their Heart (as the Self). He mounts all the beings on the wheel (of life) and with the rope of Māyā spins them continuously

(like marionettes upon a wheel).” The rope of Māyā is the Prakṛti which makes us act without any letup.

How to handle life when nothing is in our hands? The answer is given in the very next verse wherein Lord Krishna tells us to surrender to the Lord in every possible way. It means we should accept everything that happens to us and face every situation in life through surrender without reacting. We then will not only be able to retain our equanimity but also attain *mukti*.

With this understanding we will realise that the best way to conduct our life is to face our situations without getting affected. If we are holding on to God through *bhakti* and faith, we will not drown in anxiety and confusion.

This is the understanding Arjuna derived from Krishna on the battlefield. Arjuna was despondent at the grievous task he had to perform on the battlefield as a *kṣatriya*, which required him to kill his own uncles, cousins, friends, gurus and grandfather too. His grief weakened his mind and he could not perform his duty. In this state of agitation, Lord Krishna gave him the spiritual knowledge that enabled him to overcome his ignorance and fulfil all his allotted duties with equanimity. We too are in the battlefield of life facing everyday so many situations according to our destiny and if we follow Lord Krishna’s teaching, we too will be able to see through our karmas without getting affected.

Though it is Prakṛti that makes us act to fulfil our *prārabdha*, how we perform the act is in our hands. There is a difference between the word ‘act’ and ‘action’. Action is the way we perform our act. *If we perform our acts sincerely with dedication and perseverance, without the sense of doership, then we will be able to do them properly.* Whether we succeed or fail is not in our hands but in the hands of the Purusha, the Self, who is the bestower of fruits.

But if we do it as karma yoga, without any expectations or attachment, then it does not matter what the results are. We should do our best in an attitude of surrender and leave the rest to God. When we perform everything with the right frame of mind, spontaneously we will be given the necessary strength and skill to finish all our tasks, without leaving any residue.

Then what about the various things we do in our daily life based on desires, ambition, selfishness, greed, anger, jealousy, hatred, pride, etc.? These actions are not due to Prakṛti but due to our wilful ignorance. These actions create fresh karmas that become *āgāmi* karma which will bear fruit later on. Then we will not get *mukti* as we have added more karmas which will lead to more *janma*-s (births) for their fulfilment.

In Bhagavan's message to his mother, he says that what has to happen will happen and you cannot stop it. And what is not destined to happen will never happen however much we may try to make it happen. So the best course, he tells us, "Therefore, it is best to keep quiet." It means we should not allow the ego to rise and spoil the act through reaction. We should act with a peaceful mind without the intervention of any thought. This is the meaning of keeping quiet. If at all any thought arises, we should only think that it is the Lord who is doing everything by using our body, mind and intellect. We are merely the instrument of the Lord. This remembrance will make the mind quiet and allow the act to take place.

Therefore we should surrender everything to the Lord and just do whatever has to be done. We should realise that Peace is our real Self which is at the substratum of the mind. Whatever is happening happens above that level of unshakable peace. Actions are superimposed on our real Self. It is like the waves above the waters. We are not the waves but the water. The water that is underlying the waves is unmoving while the waves are moving.

Similarly, the real Self that underlies the body-mind complex does not act. It is the actionless state. All activities are only taking place at the surface at the level of the body or mind. Let them do whatever they are supposed to do. Why should we worry as we are not the waves but the water? Thus, we can actually experience the truth that whatever activity that is taking place is only on the surface.

When for example I cook, it is done while praying to Bhagavan and the dish is cooked properly. Thus, when I fulfil my karma without resistance, thinking of the Lord, I will get the strength, skill and the Grace to execute it. If we can do like this, all the karmas we are destined to perform or experience will get fulfilled and erased without any memory. It is like how we daily brush our teeth or have our bath.

No thought is involved but the work gets completed by itself. But if we think it is so painful to do all these household work due to laziness, then the karma will become unfulfilled.

Thus, when the ego intervenes and tries to spoil the act, we should be vigilant and through enquiry and prayer cut it off and proceed with our duties with understanding. Thus, while fulfilling our karmas we have to overcome all our reactions which are due to ego and ignorance. That is why Bhagavan is telling us that it is best to keep quiet.

If we are not the doer, then we are also not the real enjoyer of the fruits. The fruits are enjoyed or experienced by the *jīva* through the mind. We are not the *jīva* but the Self that is beyond the *jīva*. It is only the witness to what the body is doing and the mind is experiencing. The *jīva* is limited in nature whereas the Self is infinite. Thus, if we perform our acts as indicated by Bhagavan Ramana and Lord Krishna, even if it gives us some pain or pleasure, it will not affect us as we will be able to retain our peace.

Thus, we should not think that the joys and sorrows, pain and pleasure we experience in life are experienced by us. They are not experienced by our real Self which is always in the state of peace or bliss. It is detached from all our experiences of joy and sorrow. If the Purusha is merely witnessing the mind experiencing pain or pleasure, then will it not help us when we are suffering as compassion is its nature? How do we receive God's Grace to tide over our difficult situations? How do we manage when we are facing misery due to our bad karmas of the past?

When an individual is experiencing misery and is praying to the Lord, he will give us the strength to bear the pain if we make the effort to pray. When you pray strongly with faith, the mind gets the strength to see through every situation without getting agitated. This is his Grace. While extending Grace, the Lord takes into account our practise of his teachings, how much we have changed in life, our repentance of our past acts, our devotion and surrender towards him, the extent of our karmas and our holding on to him. Holding onto God or Guru firmly is very important and needs relentless practise.

We should also lead our life gracefully and graciously in thought, word and deed. Grace will be waiting and watching when you are in trouble. It will allow you to face it till you can manage. When

the matter is beyond your control, it intervenes through others who are used as its instruments. Somebody will come and help us. But Grace comes only when there are *punya* (good) karmas which is very important to win God's Grace.

The *punya* karmas we acquire will help us to see through the difficult situations we have to face due to our past karmas. That's why it is important to do all our duties properly and be kind and helpful to others so as to generate many *punya* karmas. This is the best insurance for our protection in life. The *punya* karmas protect us like how a helmet protects a motorcycle rider. For instance, when we are facing a terrible, unbearable pain, God's Grace makes us unconscious so that we do not have to feel the pain. If the damage to our system is beyond remedy, God gives us death to permanently end the misery.

Thus, we need to make ourselves deserving of His Grace by doing a lot of *punya* karmas. We will be able to do even meditation well if we have done many selfless actions, as the obstructing *vāsanā*-s would have softened considerably. Thus, the Lord helps his devotees to see through their bad karmas and gives them the strength to bear the pain. Thus, based on the understanding we have received through the teachings of Bhagavan Ramana and Lord Krishna, we should reorder our life and change our priorities.

We should realise that nothing belongs to us and everything is happening only as per the karmas we had created in our ignorance. We cannot change the karmas we have created as it is not in our hands. So, we have to endure them with understanding and strength of mind. We have to take responsibility for the state we are in and try to improve ourselves by overcoming our ignorance by acquiring the right knowledge. We have to change our life and thinking based on the knowledge and understanding we have received so that we can create a better future based on intelligence and awareness. Then, we will be able to lead a life of peace and maturity and proceed on the path of realising the supreme goal of life which is Self-Realisation and end our lifecycle.

May Bhagavan Ramana grant us his blessings and Grace to achieve our goal! ▲

ADVAITA PRIMER

What is Advaita Vedanta?

Part One

M.GIRIDHAR

Introduction

This is the first of a series of articles designed as a primer to Advaita Vedanta. The series aims to address the epistemology, ontology and other aspects of this philosophy but in this first article, we try to answer the question ‘What is Advaita Vedanta?’ and why we should study it. In this process, we will mainly use the teachings of Adi Sankaracharya and Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi, in addition to parables.

The *Vedas*,¹ the fundamental texts of *Sanatana Dharma*,² grouped the *Samhitas*³ and the *Brahmanas*⁴ as the *karma kanda* and the *Aranyakas*⁵ and *Upanishads*⁶ as the *jnana kanda* of the *Vedas*. While western philosophy represents the intellectual quest for truth, Indian

¹ Vedas are not the creation of any human being, and only visualized by the ancient seers, and thus called *Apaurusheya* (unauthored). The Rigveda describes the Veda as eternal and *Apaurusheya*– ‘*Vachaa virupa nityataa*’– *Rigveda* 8. 76. 6. The Vedas are just like expiration (*Nishvasha*) of the great ‘Brahman’. The *ṛsi*-s of the Vedas are not the authors, but only the ‘seers’ of the Mantras (*rsayo mantra-drastarah*). Consists of the Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Sama Veda and Atharva Veda.

² Eternal Dharma, the more correct name for Hinduism.

³ *Samhita* literally means a ‘collection’. They consist of mantras, hymns, and prayers. Each Veda has a *samhita*; *Rig* means a verse, *Sama* refers to mantras that are sung, while *Yajur* refers to mantras that are pertaining to sacrificial rites.

⁴ The *Brahmanas* are works attached to the *Samhitas*. They deal with the rules and regulations laid down for the performance of the rites and the sacrifices.

philosophy is concerned with the practical realisation of the truth. There are mainly six schools of thought and are called *Darshanas*.⁷ The pursuit of happiness is fundamental to these philosophies. The whole point of learning about Dharma from the *karma kanda* is to achieve *aihikam* and *amushmikam*, happiness in this life and heaven, respectively. But learning about Brahman from the Vedanta is very different – it is to achieve *nissreyasam*, the *paramananda* (supreme bliss) of *moksha* (liberation).

‘Vedanta’ means ‘the end of knowledge’ or ‘the knowledge of the ultimate’. Among the several schools of Vedanta, Advaita (Non-duality) differs from the others. Most other philosophies require belief in some external ‘object’ such as a God, rituals or ideas. Whereas Advaita is concerned only with the subject, the Self. The Self (that may be called Consciousness, Atman, Brahman, etc.) is the only truth and there is nothing else.

Advaita starts with the simplest question. Who are you? Certainly, you cannot define yourself with something external to you like your position or career or relationships. Neither can you be defined by your body nor the mind, as they are ever-changing and disappear in deep sleep. Yet, you exist. Vedanta asserts you are the Reality. Advaita goes a step further and says that you are not just that consciousness but it is the same universal consciousness that exists everywhere and in everyone. In fact, there is nothing else.

Ramana Maharshi says:

The ‘I’ is always there – in deep sleep, in dream and in wakefulness. The one in sleep is the same as that who now speaks. There is always the feeling of ‘I’.⁸

⁵The appendages to these *Brahmanas* are called *Aranyakas* mainly because they were composed in the calmness of the forests and mark the transition from the ritualistic to the philosophic thought. They present a mystic interpretation of the Vedic sacrifices.

⁶The concluding portions are called the *Upaniṣad-s*. These are intensely philosophical and spiritual and may be regarded as the cream of the Vedic philosophy.

⁷*Darshana* (*darśan*) means to see or have a vision. It refers to how each school ‘sees’ or receives a vision of the Reality. *Ātmā va are drastavyah* (the self alone, dear one, is to be seen) is the cornerstone of these philosophies. These six *darshanas* are Vaiseshika, Nyaya, Samkhya, Yoga, Mimamsa and Vedanta. Vedanta has several sub-schools.

⁸Munagala S. Venkataramiah, *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk§198.

He continues:

A man can realise the Self, because that is here and now. If it were not so, but attainable by some efforts at some other time, and if it were new and something to be acquired, it would not be worthy of pursuit. Because what is not natural cannot be permanent either. But what I say is that the Self is here and now and alone.⁹

Thus, Advaita Vedanta is the process of finding out who you really are. The only faith that is required is trust – as in trusting a respected friend. For example, if that friend gives the directions for travelling from Tiruvannamalai to Mumbai, one implicitly follows these directions to arrive at one’s destination. Similarly, the authority for the journey is the *Upaniṣad*-s. They have been validated by sages such as as Ādi Śaṅkara, Ramana Maharshi and others time and time again over several centuries. In this case, the journey is even simpler. It is as if, in our confusion and ignorance, we start at Ramana Ashram in Tiruvannamalai but think that we are elsewhere and therefore ask for directions to the Ashram. Finally, after much effort, we realise that we were there already. As Bhagavan said, “There is no greater mystery than this, that we keep seeking Reality though in fact we are Reality.”¹⁰ “Holding a begging bowl, a man with amnesia knocks on his own door,” says Kabir.¹¹

Thus, it is realising the Reality in ourselves. The whole teaching of Advaita is this knowledge that removes ignorance. We are ignorant of our Reality and think we are bound and helpless. “Realisation is not the acquisition of anything new or a new faculty,” says Ramana Maharshi. “It is only the removal of all camouflage.”¹²

This is illustrated by a parable.¹³ In Indian villages, a *dhobi* (washerman) collects dirty clothes, loads them on a donkey and takes them to the river. On reaching the river, he ties the donkey to a tree with a rope and washes the clothes in the river. The washerman then

⁹ Ibid., Talk§17.

¹⁰ Ibid., Talk§146.

¹¹ Ladinsky, Daniel, *Love Poems from God. Twelve Sacred Voices from the East and West. Kabir’s Life and Poems.* 2002. p.216.

¹² Op. cit., Talk§96.

¹³ Adapted from the talk, Vedanta in five parables by Swami Sarvapriyananda, <https://youtu.be/BMRbh3M4AGw>

loads the clean clothes on the donkey, unties the donkey and comes back to town. One day, the washerman forgot to bring the rope with him. A wise man suggested a solution, "Pretend to tie a rope around the donkey's neck to the tree." When the washerman did that, the donkey did not move, thinking that it was bound. As dusk approached, the washerman loaded the clean clothes on the back of his donkey and asked it to move. But, alas, the donkey still thought it was bound to the tree. Therefore, the washerman had to pretend to untie the (non-existent) rope. Then the donkey came with him. This is similar to our condition as we think we are ignorant. This ignorance itself is non-existent but we are bound by it until a sage comes along and shows us our fallacy.

Due to our ignorance, we are unable to realise the Reality that always exists, independent of time, and blissful.

A person¹⁴ was searching for a key in the street. He said though he had lost the key inside the house, he was searching for it outside because there was more light on the street. Most of us search for the key (happiness) outside of us either from other people, or through the accumulation of material goods or the development of our personality. *Happiness cannot be obtained from anything outside us, but only from understanding who we really are.*

Unfortunately, we are habituated to looking for happiness in the outside world, even though our everyday experience tells us otherwise. Bhagavan says:

If a man thinks that his happiness is due to external causes and his possessions, it is reasonable to conclude that his happiness must increase with the increase of possessions and diminish in proportion to their diminution. Therefore, if he is devoid of possessions, his happiness should be nil. What is the real experience of man? Does it conform to this view? In deep sleep the man is devoid of possessions, including his own body. Instead of being unhappy he is quite happy. Everyone desires to sleep soundly. The conclusion is that happiness is inherent in man and is not due to external causes. One must realise his Self in order to open the store of unalloyed happiness.¹⁵

¹⁴ Adapted from <https://www.speakingtree.in/blog/the-lost-key-a-mulla-nasrudin-story>.

¹⁵ Op. cit., Talk§3.

This unalloyed happiness is something that does not fade with time. To understand and ultimately free ourselves from all suffering, we must therefore develop minds that are impervious to the transitory nature of the outside world. We need to recognize what is ephemeral versus what is eternal and cultivate the dispassion necessary to be able to reject that which is ephemeral, in our pursuit of the eternal. *This means that if our goal is to live a truly happy life, we must stop seeking happiness in what is transitory.*

What is worth seeking and discovering is the truth of Self. Such knowledge comes only to the still, clear intellect not muddled by strenuous search [outside] but questing for the Truth [inside] in silence. Thus Bhagavan continues,

An examination of the ephemeral nature of external phenomena leads to *vairagya*. Hence enquiry (*vichara*) is the first and foremost step to be taken. When *vichara* continues automatically, it results in a contempt for wealth, fame, ease, pleasure, etc.¹⁶

The problem is that the mind/ego thinks that it can satisfy itself by the acquisition of different objects external to itself. However, there are simply too many factors involved in life's unfolding on the material plane though most of them are well beyond our control. Genetics itself controls most of our physical characteristics and the diseases we are likely to have. The family we are born into controls our socioeconomic status. Further, these acquisitions are not attached to us, as we think. This is illustrated by a parable.¹⁷ A cowherd was leading a cow with a rope. The sage pointed and asked his disciples, "Who is the master?" The disciples said, "It is, of course, the cowherd. He is leading the cow with a rope." The sage cut the rope. The cow ran away and the cowherd ran behind the cow, wailing. The sage then said, "The cow had no interest in the cowherd. The cowherd is bound to the cow and not the other way around. Similarly, we are bound to the objects we own, though we think we control these objects. It is only we who run after them, but when the time comes, they will leave us."

Irrespective of our acquisitions, no bolstering can reassure the ego/mind, as it knows it is only a construct and not real by itself. It

¹⁶ Op. cit., Talk§27.

¹⁷ Adapted from the Sufi parable, Who is the master? Identification is misery. <https://solancha.com/sufi-stories-15-ancient-wisdom-tales-from-sufi-dervishes/>

is only a collection of thoughts, memories and feelings without any real existence. Thus, Bhagavan says the ego is just a “shadow cast on the ground” by a person and does not really exist by itself.

For the ego, ignorance of the Self really is bliss. Because, realising the Self actually means the death of the ego. Therefore, for its own survival, it keeps us away from the search of the Self by keeping us busy with the world and ensures our suffering. Thus, Bhagavan’s teaching is entirely focused on self-enquiry (or self-surrender) and thus on the renunciation of and the destruction of the ego-mind. Our ignorance is merely a projection of our mind into the world, which is strengthened by our clinging to the objects in our projection, though the objects are not attached to us. *We are attached to them.*

The point of spiritual awakening is not to maximize your assets and minimize your losses, but *to be free of attachment to either gain or loss and to be peaceful and blissful amidst the vicissitudes of life.* The Advaita teachings are therefore best viewed as laboratory manuals detailing the nature of consciousness and the human mind. This method can be practised and the changes that result from this practice can be experienced. Though the primary aim of Advaita is to teach us the ways to remove our ignorance, give up all the anxieties of the mind¹⁸ and abide in the Self, as a philosophy it has a metaphysics, an epistemology and ontological perspectives. These will be discussed in future articles.

Śāṅkara says that to be born as a human being is rare indeed, when there are millions of life forms available for birth.¹⁹ Having been born as a human being, to also have the desire for liberation is even rarer, as emphasized by Krishna’s teaching in the *Śrī Bhagavad Gītā*.²⁰ Finally, getting the opportunity to learn Advaita Vedanta, as taught by great masters like Bhagavan, is extremely rare indeed. Dattatreya says that it is only by the grace of *Īśvara* that one has the inclination to study Advaita Vedanta.²¹ We are therefore greatly blessed to have this rare opportunity to study and practise Advaita Vedanta. As Śāṅkara says in the *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya*, there is no beginning to this path; one picks up from where one left off in their previous life and continues the journey. This should encourage us: *we have already started on our journey.* ▲

¹⁸ *Guru Vachaka Kovai*, v.1191 ¹⁹ *Prabodhasudhakara*, v 1.17: The Nectar-Ocean of Enlightenment, Samata books, 2002. ²⁰ *Śrī Bhagavad Gītā*, 7.3. ²¹ *Avadhūta Gītā* 1.1. *Īśvarānugrahādeva puṁsām advaita vāsanā.*

Vairagya Catakam

The Hundred Stanzas on Dispassion

Part Four

TAVATTIRU SANTHALINGA ADIGAL
TRANSLATED BY ROBERT BUTLER

Mind, whatever joys or sorrows come, you become one with them. Therefore, whenever you taste the fruits of whatever deeds you perform, you should find delight in the holy feet of Him who used Mount Meru as a bow.¹ The body that originates in the womb and takes birth is like a bubble in the ocean. As long as it exists, you should

¹ It is not the joys and sorrows that the *jīva* experiences that are the problem but its tendency to identify with them, to ‘buy into’ them. Therefore as each experience arises it should be experienced as a manifestation of the blissful nature of the underlying nondual Self, here figuratively referred to as *poruppu villi tāḷ viruppaṃ* – *delight in the holy feet of Him who used Mount Meru as a bow*. Compare *Muruganar, Cādakarkkuriya cattāṇa neṟiḷaḷ* – *The Disciplines that are essential in the Spiritual Aspirant*, 72:

That which is actually being experienced by all in the many and varied sensory experiences that occur continuously, one after the other, is in reality only one, the bliss of the Self, whose nature is peace. Only those *jnanis* who have attained the peace [of the Self] will realise this, not those who wallow in sense impressions as if possessed.

Robert Butler has published, independently and through Sri Ramanasramam, a number of translations and commentaries on works by Sri Ramana, Muruganar and earlier authors of works in the Tamil advaita tradition.

grasp the holy feet of the supreme Guru with true devotion.² This is the correct understanding. (36)

Mind, you did not worship as your sole refuge the holy feet of Lord Somasekharan, He who shares his form with Lady Uma. You did not keep your five senses withdrawn from the harmful objects of sense, just as a tortoise withdraws its precious limbs into its shell,³ nor did you stand before Him weeping and chanting his holy name. All your time has been squandered in vain. (37)

Argument

In this and the following five verses *Vivēkam* counsels the mind against succumbing to the desire for physical union with women.

You did not long for the grace, pure like gold, of Śivaprakāśa, who came like a mother and father⁴ both to offer us his holy feet. What do you presume to achieve by this? Even knowing that the body was an illusion, you desired the embrace of women. On that account, mind, you are indeed a deeply evil one. I know of nothing I might do to remedy this. (38)

² TCS cites *Cēramāṅperumāḷ Nāyaṅār*, *Tirumurai* 11, *Poṅvaṅṅattandādi*, v.64 to illustrate the consequences for those who renounce the world but without true love for and faith in the the Lord:

Those who renounce the worldly life on which they have embarked, without possessing the love for the Lord in which their desires are restrained, will do so in vain. Like an alligator trapped in a ditch, those many deluded wretches will profit neither from this worldly life nor from the Three-eyed Lord, in [the garland of] whose matted locks six-legged flying creatures dwell.

³ TCS cites Umāpati Civācāriyār's *Tiru-v-aruḷ-payaṅ* v. 94:

Restraining the senses, the wise into their Source sink,
as on land a turtle's limbs back into its shell do shrink.

See also *Oḷivil Oḍukkam*, v.209:

Those who have investigated and known [the truth] wander at large, clad only in the four directions; they are like a bird sitting on her eggs, or like a tortoise when someone comes near. Who are their countrymen?

⁴ TCS cites the following verse of Tattuvārāyar in his commentary. He does not give its source:

He is our father and our mother, the path to salvation here below; granting us undying bliss He is the life that lives within our soul; He is our refuge, the gracious King, by the name of 'guru' known.

So many other books have you studied, [as well as those on true *jnana*]. Mind, those books [declare that] for those who have not gained the Lord's grace, there is no other means of ridding ourselves of the bitter pain of bodily birth.⁵ Yet you did not rush eagerly to gain the grace of our Lord who wears a freshly flayed elephant's hide. Instead you have been held captivated all this time by the pleasures of maidens with lightning-slim waists. This is not wisdom but only folly. (39)

You did not lovingly worship Śiva Śaṅkara, who embodies the essence of the Vedas' wisdom. You did not shake and tremble. The hair of your body did not stand on end as you danced about in ecstasy. You did not rush to enter Tillai's holy Hall where He performs his dance.⁶ You did not stand firm, having rejected intercourse with women. Alas, foolish mind, what will become of you if you have to leave your body here and now? (40)

You did not fix your thoughts upon Him who who slew Death himself;⁷ who, on that day, in the shade of a banyan tree, revealed to the four matchless sages the truth path, so hard to attain;⁸ upon Him who is the apple of my eye, Śivaprakāśa. All your painful wanderings, lusting

⁵ TCS cites *Tiru-k-kural*, 10:

Only they will reach birth's further shore
who in our Lord's feet find a refuge secure.

⁶ These words recall v. 1 of Māṇikkavācagar's *Tiru Catakam*, cited in TCS's commentary:

My fleshly frame, tingling, quivers before your fragrant feet.
Hands on high, tears coursing down, my heart grows weak.
Abjuring all that's false, crying 'Praise and victory to Thee,'
my hands shall never rest. Pray, look, my Lord, look now on me!

⁷ TCS cites a verse from *Civāṇandamālai*, a Śaiva work in 414 *venba* verses composed by Sambandha Munivar, who lived at the end of the 16th century:

Why do I go on living and eating, giving not a thought to the compassionate Lord, whose praises the *jnana* guru sang, seeing with the eye of lofty grace, nor to the truth the Vedas love to proclaim, saying, 'Other than liberation, there is nothing else to be gained.'

⁸ Lord Śiva, in the form of Dakṣiṇamurti, seated at the foot of a banyan tree imparted his teaching through the medium of silence to the mind-born sons of Brahmā, the rishis Sanaka, Sanātana, Sanandana and Sanatkumāra.

after women with their perfumed tresses, is a grave error. Mind, I have spoken. Mine is not the blame. (41)

What is it you are seeing when you fix your desire on the form of women and become agitated? If you divest them of their jewels and clothing, what are they, if not but a container for worms and excrement?⁹ Your confusion upon seeing them is due to your mind's confusion. Mind, seek the holy feet of Lord Śankara. We shall reach the ocean of supreme bliss. (42)

What will be gained by the emission of semen? The power of great austerities will decline, but that will not be the end of it. Eventually the very body that you cherish will be ruined.¹⁰ Steeped in ignorance, not realising that you were consciousness only, you held to the belief that the irritation that is this body was actually happiness. But now we shall unite with our consciousness' bliss. Henceforth your love should be only for Lord Śiva. (43)

You craved dishes prepared with jaggery and ghee and all the rest. But whatever you get, whether it be rice or gruel, as soon as you have eaten it, your hunger will disappear and all you have eaten will, through the power of digestion, become the same thing, excrement. If you are in agreement with this, mind, why do you not take it to heart? Why do you go wandering about in confusion, desiring those things and not meditating upon the immaculate Lord?¹¹ (44)

⁹ TCS cites the following v. 46 from *Nālaḍiyār*:

Of these things, what is it that marks the nature of the damsel clad in fresh garlands? Is it the entrails, the fat or the blood? Or is it the connective tissue or skin? Or perhaps the flesh and mucus, appearing here and there?

¹⁰ TCS cites the following verse, stating that it is from *Tīru-k-kaḍai-k-kāppu*. *Tīru-k-kaḍai-k-kāppu* is the name given to the first three parts of the *Tirumuṟai*, composed by Jñānasambandhar, who composed a number of hymns in praise of this *sthala*. However this verse does not belong to any of them.

Abandoning the desire for a life in which you suffer in the arms of maidens with breasts like lotus buds and fixing your thoughts lovingly again and again upon the Lord of holy Puttur, see how your life will be sweeter than sugarcane juice.

Amongst these objects of sense, the moment you think of maidens adorned with fine jewels or delicious foodstuffs, such as the three fruits, the genitals and tongue will display their characteristic behaviour.¹² Therefore, mind, if, realising that there are no enemies greater than these that bring upon us so many painful afflictions, you should eliminate them. Then there will be no obstacle to our gaining the cool shade of the holy feet of the supreme Lord. (45)

If some disease befalls this body, the pleasures of a wife and all the rest¹³ which surround you will become inimical to you and will cease. Even when life leaves the body, relatives will deem it fitting to smear

¹¹ TCS cites another verse from *Civāṇandamālai*. See v. 41, note 1:

When you lick fine foods with the six tastes, the taste goes not beyond the tip of your tongue and when you chew, it extends to no more than two fingers' length. How then, my mind, shall you cross the great ocean of birth, when you will not venture beyond those two fingers' length?

¹² As long as we think we are the body, we cannot fail to be overcome by the body-mind's urges and appetites. But if we see ourselves as the Self, and abide as that Self, here described in line four as *yām parāparaṅ tiru aḍi nīral peral* – our gaining the shelter of the holy feet of the supreme Lord, those impulses will not affect us. See *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk§116:

D[evotee]: How to root out sexual impulse?

M[aharshi]: By rooting out the false idea of the body being Self. There is no sex in the Self.

D.: How to realise it?

M. Because you think you are the body, you see another as the body. Difference in sex arises. But you are not the body. Be the real Self. Then there is no sex.

However, the *jñāni* will be perceived by the *ajñāni* as having a body and thus continuing to enjoy the pleasures afforded by it, even those of sex, to the extent determined by the body's *prārabdha*, karma for the current birth, but this is only from the unrealised perspective. See Talk§209:

So long as there is individuality, one is the enjoyer and doer. But if it is lost, the divine Will prevails and guides the course of events. The individual is perceptible to others who cannot perceive divine force. Restrictions and discipline are for other individuals and not for the liberated.

¹³ *vaṇidaiyar ādi pal bōgamum* – the pleasures of a wife and all the rest. TCS lists the eight things that are forbidden for devotees of Lord Śiva as follows: *vaṇidai* – women, *pañcaṇai* – soft bedding, *caukkiya bōcaṇam* – regular meals, *gandam* – perfume, *āḍai* – fine clothing, *ābaraṇam* – jewellery, *tailam* – oil (for the body) and *tāmbūlam* – paan (betel leaf and areca nut).

it with holy ash and chant the name of the Lord. Therefore, mind, cherish the holy ash and all the rest¹⁴ as your protection until the day you die. Do not cherish those worldly pleasures. (46)

Offer praise, wear the holy ash, and put on *rudraksha* beads, those holy emblems; recite the holy Five Letters¹⁵ inwardly, and bowing down low, make obeisance to the three divine forms, beginning with the guru. If you do these things, mind, we may abolish birth and death. Worshipping the light that is the inner light of the light within us, revealed to us by the holy feet that dance in Tillai's Hall, true life will be ours. (47)

Mind, true life will be ours. Henceforth, weave garlands of verses, whose many flowers are praises to the Lord. Drape them about his shoulders, which are adorned with golden cassia flowers, so that they hang down about his holy feet and bow down low before Him. Do not spend many a day crowing like black crows on a rotting carcass but rather affirm that the golden feet that Vishnu sought are your only refuge. (48)

¹⁴ *nīru ādiya pōrru* – cherish the holy ash and all the rest. TCS lists the eight things which are appropriate for the devotees of the Lord as follows: *vibhuti* – holy ash, *rudrākkam* – *rudrākṣa* beads, *pañcāṭcaram* – the Five Holy Letters, *tīrttam* – holy waters, *piracādam* – *prasād*, *kuru liṅgam saṅgam* – the guru, *liṅgam* and the company of devotees.

¹⁵ *eḷuttu aindu* – The Five Letters refers of course to the five syllable mantra *śi-vā-ya-na-ma*; *śi* represents *śivam*; *vā* represents his energy of grace – *aruḷ śakti*; *ya* represents the *jīva*; *na* represents *māyā* or *tirōdam*, the energetic whirl of impurity in itself, and *ma* represents *āṇavam*, that impurity as operating within the *jīva*. The symbolism of the *mantra* is described in the Siddhānta text *Tiru Aruḷ Payaṅ* – The Fruit of Divine Grace by Umāpati Civācāriyār, a guru in the lineage of Meykaṇḍāḍēvar:

See on one side, the dance of defilement, on the other the dance of true knowledge, and oneself (the soul) in the middle.

As 'ma' and 'na' unfold, uniting with the consciousness (of the *jīva*) they do not permit it to return (to the Lord). If its powerful deeds are cancelled out, it will succeed in returning. *Tiru Aruḷ Payaṅ* vv. 83-84.

Mind, the enemy that is birth will be swiftly destroyed. Sing to Lord Śiva the songs of praise [composed by] the sages of old and they will be as the words of young maidens to amorous young beaus. Do not dismiss them as mere pleasantries but take them as solemn declarations of the truth, for such is the desire of those whose only desire is to obtain the grace of the Lord who burnt up Kama with his glance.

(49)

Mind, listen to me with keen desire. To those who do not serve Lord Śiva, even if they shower gifts upon you a mountain high, do not reciprocate with even the most minute particle of affection. Upon this earth, if you offer your service to those who occupy themselves in serving those who serve the Lord,¹⁶ the highest virtue will be yours, but if you have no belief in these words, you will be an evil one indeed.

(50)



¹⁶ TCS cites Appar, *Dēvāram*, 6:95:10

Though they give me Kubera's treasures, both lotus and conch shell
and make me ruler of the heavens and of the earth as well,
we'll not esteem the wealth of those who're doomed to fade and die,
if their thoughts with our great Lord do not one-pointedly lie.
But even if they're lepers, with all gangrened and part-missing limbs,
or low caste folk who wander eating flesh of cattle they have skinned,
if they're devotees of the Lord who hid Ganga in his matted locks,
behold, 'tis they we'll venerate as our own true Gods.

BOOK REVIEWS



PATH TO BEATIFIC PEACE by Divine Mother Sree Rama Devi. Pub: Rama Sakti Mission, Shakthi Nagara, Mangaluru 575016, Dakshina Kannada, Karnataka. 3rd ed., 2018 (first published 1964). Pages xii + 290. Price not mentioned. ASIN: B07MQTPFSG

The Preface informs readers that this volume is a compilation of letters, 'A Volume of Spiritual Teachings', earlier published as two separate books. It is a virtual handbook, a manual consisting wholly of either instructions in imperative sentences or pithy statements of spiritual wisdom in aphoristic style. This runs counter to the information provided in the Preface that "the author's native tongue is Konkani, studied up to 5th class and that she speaks in English with some difficulty to non-natives." Considering this background of the author-saint, one would expect a non-formal presentation in simple idiom. However, in the entire text, style brilliantly matches substance – scholarly and precise communication in brief, crisply chiselled sentences. It is as delightful to read for its matter as for its manner of presentation, but nowhere it informs us if it is a translation (from Konkani to English, a reasonable assumption), and if so, by whom. Nor does it carry the slightest flavour of its author's native speech idiom of the Konkan, or the semi-formal style one expects from a 'compilation of letters.' Its tight formal style is surely not that of letters, so this must be a linguistically reworked and crisped version of the original letters the Divine Mother had written to her devotees. Readers are kept in the dark as to who did such an admirable English rendition of the highest quality of the spiritual instructions, and the richness of teachings of the Divine Mother. Also noteworthy is its choice of precise diction in rendering Vedantic/spiritual terms in English and a syntax to match the drift of Indian philosophic thought, that deliver the goods without sounding pedantic.

As claimed in its Preface, "The instructions in these collections are centred round one fundamental theme, namely the discovery of

Peace within the soul of man,” declaring near the end that “God, the Guru and the Self are identical.” Divine Mother Sree Rama Devi harmonizes the various paths to spirituality, which she so effectively elaborates: “The infinite ‘I’ of the Knower and the absolute ‘Thou’ of the Lover are one and the same, for both signify the same Reality, Brahman. Thus, both the Knower and the Lover glorify God only. The difference lies only in the mode of glorification. The Jnani glorifies God through silence, the Bhakta through sound.” And she goes on to conclude that the “Profound faith is the faith in the reality of one’s identity with God.”

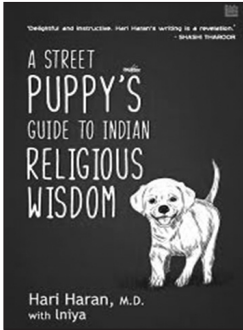
Thus in Divine Mother’s teachings and discourses is a harmonious blending of all Yogas. Nevertheless, she gives primary importance to life in home. Though her words are addressed to the seeker of both genders, more often than not her emphasis is on the female spouse. As when she instructs the aspirant: “Dissolve your separative ego in your husband’s personality. Let his word be your law, his service your worship. What Mother asks you to do is, not to approach the Almighty as your husband but to look upon your husband as the Manifested Divinity and through this sublime vision to enter the realm of ecstatic God-Love.” Her exhortation – recommending domestic subservience as a gateway to nirvana – may not be palatable to female aspirants already a quarter century into the new millennium.

The instructive accent predominant in the first section (earlier published separately) takes a philosophic turn in the second section (also published separately earlier). It’s drift, the harmonizing of the several paths, is captured by a strong metaphoric reminder from her, “You must love silence without hating sound.” Moreover, she goes on to explain, “The real sadhaka should forget the world itself, in his love for the Infinite. This does not mean running away from the world, but shedding worldliness from the mind. The body is the tapo-bhoomi and not bhoga-kshetra... Mind is born out of the illusive notion that one is not Brahman. Body is fashioned by ignorance, for the play of prarabdha.” These words are identical to Bhagavan Ramana’s declaration on the physical (un) reality of the body. But Divine Mother Sree Rama Devi gives us a valuable reminder, that we all need to be reminded of, that it is in this body that “the transmigrating soul [the individual human] receives the education of higher life.”

She accords the highest place to the Sadguru when she declares, “The three paths in spirituality namely, Knowledge, Devotion and Action converge at Sadguru’s lotus feet... Sadguru embodies their respective excellences, a powerful combination of the highest spiritual grandeur.” It is the Sadguru alone who can show your way to the ‘vibrant calmness,’ which is the state of perfect Nirvikalpa Samadhi that resolves reflection into the reality.

This book is a delight to read, more so would be to possess it, being in the nature of a reference volume to which an aspirant may go when in doubt in their ongoing efforts in realising spiritual truth. The combined volume is securely bound and the fonts large and clear enough to assist ease of reading. With few typos that can be counted by the fingers in one hand, Path to Beatific Peace is a priceless possession. (Pun intended, its price is not mentioned anywhere in the book!).

— P. Ramasamy



A Street Puppy’s Guide To Indian Religious Wisdom by Hari Haran with Iniya; Leadstart Publishing Pvt Ltd; ₹199 (₹100 in Kindle); ISBN: 978-9354382437

This book is a short, thought-provoking primer on Advaita written by a dermatologist (Hari Haran) co-authored with his 14-year old student (Iniya). The book has a fictional narrative written by the young master storyteller with philosophical quotes thrown in by the doctor. The book is mostly set in the fast paced, traffic jammed chaotic polluted (as described by the author) Bangalore with several Kannada phrases by the characters. In this midst, an advaitic philosopher, Vasu, is born only to realise that he has taken birth as a street dog!

The fictional element of what the dog experiences is lucid and vivid and the sketches of the dog are wonderful. The story itself is quite emotional with some twists and primarily keeps one engaged. The dog, going through life with all its travails and tribulations, explains the Advaita Vedanta philosophy by quoting from the Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita and from realised masters such as Bhagavan Ramana

Maharshi. The advaita principles are summarized below from the various sections of the book.

1. What defines you? Your job, career, relationships, money, position? These are all outside you; stripped of all this, you still remain. You cannot be the ever-changing body or the mind either. The ideologies, ideas and beliefs etc. all disappear in deep sleep; yet, you exist. You are indeed the Pure consciousness, the Awareness and the Stillness in which all (thoughts, ideals etc.) appear and disappear like waves in an ocean or like a movie on a screen. This awareness is called as Self (or Brahman) by Sankara and Heart by Ramana Maharshi but all mean the same.

2. Rather than coming from our mind, if we come from our Silent Awareness, we experience a profound oneness with the same awareness in other beings.

3. Abiding in this Stillness provides you with more creativity at work, excel in relationships and even face death with equanimity.

4. A person abiding in this Stillness can lead you to the same Stillness. While the dog explains in layman's terms the essence, meaning and practice of Advaita Vedanta, we understand the profound knowledge of Vedas and possibly understand what it really means to self-enquire, Who am I?. The Awareness is stillness and is in the present. There are no intellectual discussions, no past regrets, no future worries and nowhere to go in this state. But this state, though often referenced in the book, is not an easy state to abide in because of the monkey mind.

As the book unfolds from the viewpoint of a dog, we realise that often we take ourselves (as a personality based on physical characteristics, career or status) too seriously. As consciousness, we think we are separate and alone from the world outside and that is just a fallacy. When you see several dogs in Ramana Ashram attending the chanting and pooja sessions, we never know what *jiva* comes in what form as Bhagavan had often remarked.

At the end of the book, you feel satisfied and rested in the fact that the dog, anagram of god, has taught you something that is eternal. We also feel assured that the Vedanta learned now may be carried forward in our future lives, irrespective of the forms we may take.

— M. Giridhar ▲

ASHRAM BULLETIN

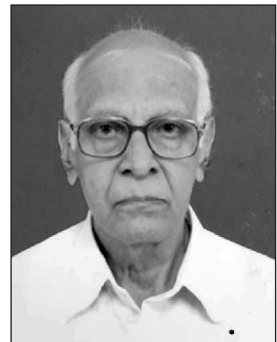
Mahapuja celebrations in honour of Bhagavan's mother took place on the morning of 3rd June with *mahanyasa japa* in the Matrubhuteswara Temple. Unfortunately the live online streaming that had been planned was cancelled owing to lockdown restrictions. However, devotees around the globe were still able to view the celebrations on the Ashram YouTube channel later.

Cow Lakshmi came to Bhagavan as a young calf in 1926. During the course of the next 22 years Lakshmi gave birth to nine calves, three of which, remarkably, were born on Bhagavan's Jayanti Day. On Tuesday, 22nd June a few gathered for Cow Lakshmi's annual Aradhana Day puja at her Samadhi with a monument consisting of a beautiful statue of stone sculptor. An epitaph composed by Bhagavan neatly engraved sanctified the Samadhi. Devotees sang Manavasi Ramaswami Iyer's song dedicated to Cow Lakshmi and two songs written by Ashram's KVS.

The **Covid Delta** variant has been officially detected in Tiruvannamalai. The Central Government's initiative nationwide has scaled up to an average 100 lakh doses per day. Recently one crore in a day was achieved. The goal is to vaccinate at least 70% of the population by early 2022. A recent Indian Council of Medical Research study found that two-thirds of India's population have Covid antibodies. If these results prove accurate, India may be inching toward herd immunity. The Ashram has fully vaccinated 95% of its staff and continues to provide vaccines for devotees.

Obituaries

Sri E. Ramani (1932 – 2021) grew up in Trichy and served with the Southern Railways. Upon retirement in the early 1990s, he settled in Tiruvannamalai. He did proofing of the Ashram's Sanskrit publications and began archiving Bhagavan's memorabilia. Sorting through and classifying manuscripts in various languages, among them, thousands of pages



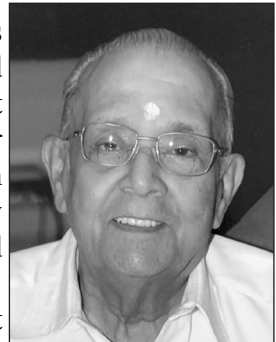
of Bhagavan's handwriting, he oversaw their digitisation starting as early as 2008. In 2016, while handicapped by a broken hip and two corrective surgeries, he continued coming to the archives until March 2020. Members of his family recall that he had been yearning to get back to the Ashram even till a few days before he was absorbed in Aruanchala on the 12th June in Chennai, at the age of 89.

In remembrance of his sterling service and by way of prayer to the bereaved family, chanting of *Śrī Aruñācala Akṣaramaṇamālai* was performed in the Ashram at Archives synchronous with his cremation at Chennai. He had overseen the Ashram archives for nearly two decades and diligently saw to its upkeep with quiet efficiency and utmost dedication.

Sri P.N. Subramanyam (1970 – 2021) was a resident of Bengaluru. A bachelor, his life was wholly centred on devotion to Bhagavan. He visited Ramanasramam often and loved doing *giripradakshina*. He was closely associated with RMCL. A keen photographer, he covered numerous events of RMCL. He had built a small home in Tiruvannamalai, with a beautiful view of the mountain. A helpful person who touched everyone he met, was absorbed in Bhagavan on 5th June 2021 at the young age of 51.

Sri T.S. Nagarajan passed away peacefully in his home in Bengaluru, at the age of ninety four on 14th May, 2021. He had a brilliant managerial business career.

His uncle, Dr.T.N.Krishnaswamy, his father's younger brother, ardent devotee and official photographer of Bhagavan, brought with him and put up in their home, a colour photograph of Bhagavan Ramana seated in *padmasana* on a tiger skin. The young boy was fascinated by the portrait. It was a prized possession to the very end of his life.



He had his first darshan of Bhagavan at the age of four, when he went for the Jayanti celebrations with his father and uncle T.N.Krishnaswamy, having persuaded them with difficulty to include him in the group. On reaching the Ashram he was taken to the meditation room. He entered

and saw Bhagavan, reclining on a couch, serene and silent, with a faraway look, surrounded by a host of devotees and admirers come to celebrate his Jayanti. His daughter Rupa records, father wrote afterward “The whole atmosphere reminded me very much of our visit to Tirupati with Bhagavan as God.”

It was only in the late fifties that he could visit the Ashram again. Half expecting to find the place desolate and empty without Bhagavan he entered the Samadhi area and sat down. The next he knew he was enveloped by a vast Peace and Silence. An hour slipped away in that overwhelming immense calm. It was a profound and precious experience of Bhagavan’s Grace.

When he related this experience to his uncle Dr.T.N. Krishnaswamy, his uncle replied that he too felt a greater peace in the Ashram than he had ever known. Did not Bhagavan say,” Where can I go? I will always be here.”

He became one of India’s top corporate leaders as Vice Chairman and Managing Director of Brooke Bond India Limited and authored books on marketing and introduced instant coffee to India. Though he was on the advisory board of several companies following retirement, his later life centred on spiritual matters. On his trips to Pondicherry to see family he would frequently stopped at Sri Ramanasramam.

His wife of more than 70 years, Susheela, passed away six days later. The couple is survived by their two daughters, Rupa and Rita.

Nadhia Sutara was absorbed in Arunachala on the 6th August. She was 72 years old. She first came to Arunachala in the early 1980s and soon stayed at Bhagavan’s Mother’s room at Skandasramam, before shifting to Guhai Nama Shivaya Mantapam. In the 1990s she moved to the ashram and assisted in editing the *Mountain Path*. She wrote articles, proofed, and organized the magazine. Due to ill health, she returned to Canada but came back around 2015 to spend her days at the foot of Arunachala. She was a brave soul who endured a lifetime of physical debility. She was so bright, intellectual, warm, transparent and aware of the uniqueness of Bhagavan who gave her peace. ▲

