Eighteen Days with Sri Poondi Swami

RAM BROWN CROWELL

No reason can be given for the nature of god, because that nature is the ground of rationality. — Alfred North Whitehead

In November 1976, I had the rare good fortune of staying eighteen days in the presence of Sri Poondi Swami, the legendary avadhūta and ajagarabhāvin, who remained unmoving for eighteen years before his mahasamadhi in 1978, now almost forty years ago. There will be few left alive who saw the Master then, fewer still who have left a record of meeting him in English, and none who stayed so long in his company. Accordingly, much that is related here is not found elsewhere. Therefore, I feel duty-bound to record my account to venerate the Master’s memory before time forever removes the

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Sri Babuji observes that Shirdi Sai Baba’s guru seems also to have been an ajagarabhāvin. Cf. Shri Sai Baba by Swami Sai Sharan Anand, Tr. V.B. Kher (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1998), p.22; and (in more detail) his Shri Sai the Superman (Shirdi: Sai Baba Sansthan, 5e 1998), pp.16-17, where his immobility is clearly stated.

I heard of Poondi Swami long before I met him from numerous Indian saints and sādhus, but never from Westerners, as it seemed few had ever met him. This corresponds with what I was told when I left, that I had stayed the longest of any foreigner up to then.

Avadhūta comes from the Sanskrit prefix ‘ava’ meaning ‘away, down, off’; ‘dhūta’ is an adjective meaning ‘shaken (off), removed, abandoned, deserted’. An avadhūta is one who has ‘cast off’ his body consciousness and worldly conventions, and wanders homeless, alone, often naked (digambar), over the world. He belongs to the highest class of ascetics called Paramahamsas or Digambaras (‘sky-clad’), who are freed-in-life (jīvanmukta) and continue in liberation through laya (mergence) or yoga (union). They are self-reliant, requiring nothing from the world or society. They may not even beg for food, but live on leaves and herbs of forests as Bhagavan Ramana himself did during his early years on the hill.

Ajagarabhāva (‘python-mood’) is the yogic term for an avadhūta who remains unmoving for long periods; their historical incidence is very rare. ‘Ajagara’ means ‘unmoving’ in Sanskrit (a-jagara), and ‘python’ in Hindi; ‘bhāva’ means ‘mood’ in both languages; the term acquires its aptness because a python can live for months without food, being content to wait until its prey comes to it. In the whole spectrum of ascetic phenomena perhaps nothing fascinates so universally as the phenomenon of immobility, no doubt because we intuit it is not humanly possible to remain unmoving for days together without some kind of divine assistance. It is clearly superhuman, so some kind of superhuman aid is needed to do it. When this power is combined with jīvanmukti and various siddhis, as with Poondi Swami, the effect is irresistible. To be in his company was to experience the vibratory field of his sannidhi (presence) and its vacuum-esque, mind-numbing power, with concomitant experience of deep peace and security.1

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I first heard of Poondi Swami from Sri Pada Baba, known as ‘Sri Padji’, in Brindavan, in April 1975, when I was fortunate to stay at Jai Singh Ghera, the ancestral home of Srivatsa Goswami, whose father, Purushottam Maharaj, was a distinguished ācārya of Bengali Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism (achintya-bhedābhedā-vāda). In their beautiful garden saints and sadhus could hold satsang in privacy, and there one moonlit night I had darshan of Sri Padji. He told me that once when travelling in South India he was passing the night on Arunachala when suddenly a beacon of white light shone in the distance towards Kalasapakkam. Coming down from the mountain, he had followed the light until he found it emanating diamond-like from the body of Poondi Swami! Sri Padji was reputed to be a great adept so his story made a deep impression.

At this time, also at Jai Singh Ghera, I met a young Tamil sadhu known as ‘Siva Baba’, a brahmachārī of the Giri order from Jyotir Math in Badrinath, who was on pilgrimage to holy places since his guru’s mahasamadhi some months before. He befriended me and allowed me to travel with him over the next two years, doing yatra (pilgrimage) on the sadhu circuit through the holy places and byways of Hindustan. I learned how to live in remote areas by carrying my own food or live on prasād left over from temple pujas, sleeping inside dharamsalas or outside in gardens or on temple maṇḍapams or ghats. Baba also taught me how to navigate the sadhu code of conduct governing behaviour at temples, ashrams and holy places (tīrthas), which was helpful to me later in Kalasapakkam.

Siva Baba’s Guru was Sri Gnanananda Giri of Tirukoilur, the great Jñāni and Siddha (Tamil Cittar), who possessed all eight major powers (aṣṭa-mahā-siddhis); Baba had once watched him disappear “body too” before his eyes into mist! He was also an adept in rasāyana (Siddha Alchemy) who had mastered the kaya kalpa (body immortality)\(^2\)


\(^2\) An extraordinary account of this secret science occurs in Maharaj: A Biography of Shriman Tapsviji Maharaj, a Mahatma Who Lived For 185 Years, by T.S. Anantha Murthy (San Rafael, California: Dawn Horse Press, 1986). Unfortunately, it is now out of print and very rare.
through which he extended his lifespan to 160 years, before taking *mahasamadhi* in January 1974. Baba said Gnanananda often spoke of Sri Poondi Swami, praising him as “Topmost of the Top”, and had sent him several times for his darshan in Kalasapakkam.

Over the next year with Siva Baba I had darshan of many masters not yet known in the West – Sri Anandamayi Ma (in Rajpur and Kankal), Sai Baba (in Samadhi Mandir) and of Chōṭani Baba in Shirdi, Sri Godavari Ma in Sakori, and Mummidivaram Balayogi, also an *ajagarabhāvin* sitting near Rajahmundry, in Andhra Pradesh, whose body glistened like gold. Baba then took me to see Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswati of Kanchi Kamakoti Pitha, widely respected throughout India as a great *tapasvin* and *jīvanmukta*. A great admirer of Sri Bhagavan, he had also often visited Poondi Swami, about whom he is said to have remarked, when asked about the latter’s status, “If you think of saints like lightbulbs, then he is the transmitter behind giving them current.”

Considering the Sankaracharya’s stature as virtually the Pope of orthodox Hinduism, there could be no higher seal of approval.

By April 1976 my funds were running low and I had to stop travelling. Reluctantly, I parted from Baba and accepted a friend’s invitation to stay at the Theosophical Society in Adyar until I could make further arrangements. One night at a dinner given by the President in his quarters at the Society, I met a Swami from Sringeri Sarada Pitha named Hamsananda Saraswati who had a double M.A. in Sanskrit and English from the University of Madras, and was an adept in *Cittavaītītiyam* (Siddha Vaidya), the Siddha system of medicine native to Tamil Nadu. It traces its origin traditionally to Agastya (*Akattiyar*), and the works on worship, medicine and alchemy ascribed to him. It is held to be *sui generis*, not derived from Ayurveda. In contrast to Ayurveda’s use of herbs and organic compounds, it makes more use of salts, metals, mineral poisons, and inorganic elements such as mercury, sulphur, gold, copper and iron, though herbs are not excluded. Alchemy in Siddha medicine has a soteriological function, and uses the occult correspondence between

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3 This compliment was repaid by Sri Poondi Swami using the same metaphor according to Bharanidharan, *Six Mystics of India* (Madras: Ganesh & Co., 1996), p.207.
matter and man’s subtle psycho-physical bodies to attain jīvanmukti. Hamsa was an adept in rasavidyā who, after many failures, had finally succeeded in transforming base metal into gold. When I asked him if he could show me, he said he had been compelled to give up the practice as the tiny amount of gold it produced was not worth enough at current prices to recover the cost of making it. How far his psycho-alchemical interests had taken him became clearer later in his connection with Poondi Swami.

Haṁsa was ardently devoted to Poondi Swami, with whom he had a long and intimate relationship, and whom he considered his anugraha guru, one who teaches just by sheer grace. When Hamsa heard I wanted to visit him, he graciously offered to accompany me and act as my guide. This was fortunate because without his knowledge, assistance, and skills as a translator, much of my visit would not have been possible. By this time my remittance had come and I was again free to travel. We decided to leave Adyar for Poondi in the first week of November 1976.

I said good-bye to my hosts and left by bus with Swami Hamsananda for Kalasapakkam, the tiny agricultural hamlet about 30 kms from Tiruvannamalai, where Poondi Swami was living. Here we put up in the dharamśala (which is still to be seen), across the street from where Poondi Swami was sitting, which was actually the local bus stop. The village consisted then of little more than about twenty small, tiled houses lining both sides of a single-lane country road running alongside the Cheyyar (Seyyar) river basin. It was an extremely remote, rustic place, with no shops, eating places, bathrooms, indoor plumbing or electricity. There were only two wells and the water in the biggest was not potable when I was there. When the sun went down there was only candlelight. Locally, Poondi Swami was called ‘Poondi Mahan’, ‘Poondi Deva’, ‘the Master’, or ‘Attru Swamigal’ (River Swami).
The Master sat a few feet back from the roadside in a small, tiled house with two pyals (verandahs) on either side; the right one was a square, four by four feet; the left one where Swami sat was rectangular, two feet wide by four feet long. Only remains of the right pyal now exist, where a mūrti of Swami has been installed. Next to it was a small room which functioned as a godown during Master’s time. It had a door opening on his left where he tossed everything he received from visitors. Since he seldom returned what was offered, it was filled to the rafters with old garlands, fruits, plantain leaves, cigarette packets, match boxes, bits of paper and leftovers, but strangely enough, there was no bad smell, nothing rotted or decayed, and I saw no ants or flies. No one dared to touch or remove anything without his permission. Anything accepted by the Master appeared to remain fresh indefinitely.

Two wooden stakes about four feet high and a yard apart were set in the ground about eight feet in front of the Master, connected at waist level by a wooden crossbar; from here one could stand and take darshan during formal times set for visitors, morning and evening. At other times, when the Master was not in ‘yoga’ or ‘niṣṭha’, explained below, one could approach him directly to give an offering and say something or touch his feet. Cats and dogs slept peacefully near him, enmity forgotten. Cats were especially drawn to him and often curled in his lap, as can be seen in many photos, and were constantly frisking about or sleeping blissfully at his feet. Sparrows flew in and out, settling in his hair, which he kept in a huge jati (matted hair) wrapped around his head like Lord Siva’s, whom indeed he resembled in every way, with long dreadlocks falling down his shoulders. There was a regal bearing about him which some thought meant he had been in the army long before. I’ve seen pigeons alight on his palm and remain motionless until it was moved again. While I was with him the Master was served by two devoted attendants, Chimta Swami and a former tailor named Subramaniam, one of whom was always at his side.

When I was there, Subramaniam Swami brought food to the Master mornings and evenings, but I was told the Master had often refused to eat for long periods, and until three years before he had let none near him. One never knew what he might do next, or whether he might stop eating or speaking, and if so, when he might start again. His ways were mysterious and unpredictable; sometimes he would talk freely
when approached if he was in the mood, replying directly, sometimes with ‘hmmm’ or some oblique, cryptic remark, or saying “Nalladu, poi-tu varain” (“Good, go and come.”). But much of the time he kept a stoic silence, looking indifferently upon whoever came before him, whether the visitor be familiar or new. If he was not inclined to give vibhūti (sacred ash) or prasād it was impossible to get it from him, no matter how hard one begged or tried.

He never asked for food; when it was brought he would eat only if spoon-fed, like a child; sometimes he refused it outright. He sat through the day and never seemed to sleep at night, but remained awake in niṣṭhā, gazing into space, or leaning on a wall cushion until Subramaniam prevailed upon him to recline on the ledge beside him for a few hours. Then a curtain was let down concealing him from frontal view, although one could see around it from the side. Often it was reported next day he’d been seen that night on a nearby riverbank or spotted in a town far away; such bilocation reports were routine.

Swamiji’s morning began typically at 4 am. Bharanidharan’s account describes well what I observed: “We heard the Swamiyar cracking his fingers. Soon afterwards, the boy from the tea-shop arrived with a cup of hot tea, calling out ‘Swami!’ The Swamiyar sat up immediately. After he finished drinking the tea, he coughed noisily. Subramaniam went up to the Swamiyar, wiped his face with a piece of wet cloth, changed his shirt, smeared his forehead with vibhūti, applied chandan (sandal paste) and kumkum (sacred red powder) between his eyebrows, garlanded him, removed the curtain and performed his usual pūjā. Those who were standing around and the people who had arrived by the first bus offered their worship. The Swamiyar had opened his ‘shop’ for the day. The lucky ones would benefit by stopping there and getting blessed.”

In form, he was a giant of a man, nearly seven feet tall, with penetrating eyes, an unkempt look, and a totally unfathomable, unpredictable manner, with six toes on his left foot (faithfully

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5 Niṣṭhā is an important technical term in yoga and Vedanta, meaning ‘steadfastness or stability of state’, or ‘self-absorbed’. It is the first of two dakṣiṇās (with saburī, patience) asked of his devotees by Shirdi Sai Baba, and is a meditative term in Indian Sufism.

6 Bharanidharan, op.cit., p.209.
portrait on his two *arcā-mūrtis*). His arms were very long, like depictions of Lord Rama’s, perhaps reaching below his knees, and his hands were huge, the biggest I’d ever seen. His eyes were large and laser-like; at times, especially in formal darshan, they shone with a reddish glow like embers: an unforgettable sight!

The Master had a number of idiosyncrasies. He had a quizzical, right-sided look, head poised obliquely, stroking his beard (see photo on the previous page), which seems the converse of Sri Bhagavan’s typical, left-sided gaze. When he drank coffee, instead of tilting his head back, he put the cup to his lips head upright and slurped the coffee with his tongue as a cat does milk, not removing the cup from his lips nor stopping until it was empty. When he smoked, he would puff on the cigarette or bidi without pausing like a steam engine, moving the cigarette back and forth to his lips between puffs until it was finished. Sometimes he did this serially with three or four cigarettes at a time offered by successive devotees. I have seen him with three cigarettes alight in his left hand, given by successive devotees, holding them with every two fingers, then begin to smoke them furiously one after the other. Even odder was the indisputable fact that very little smoke appeared to be exhaled – what happened to it?

There were two times when it was not possible to approach the Master. The first I witnessed during the first ten days I stayed with him, when he would spend several hours each day making facial contortions, shutting his eyes, clenching his teeth, moving his eyebrows up and down, shaking his head, and performing a series of rapid, jerky, disjointed movements with his arms, then whirling and flailing them about at a speed not thought humanly possible – which might continue for hours! Some visitors who witnessed this eccentric behaviour – which with all respect could only be construed as insane – would, after getting down from the bus and watching for a few minutes, simply turn around and get back up again, shaking their heads. At these times he was said to be ‘in yoga’ and could not be approached. I must say it ceased after the first fortnight of my stay.

The second time was when he was in profound absorption, staring into space, oblivious to his surroundings, obviously in some kind of trance (*samādhi*). At these times, which occurred anytime day or

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7 Bharanidharan’s 1971 account says he also witnessed this. (*Ibid*, p.213).
night, sometimes for hours, he was said to be ‘in niṣṭhā’ and could not be disturbed.

The story of his discovery on the banks of the nearby Cheyyar [Seyyar] river has achieved the status of legend and there are various versions. Hamsa wanted me to hear it firsthand so he introduced me to the family of farmers to whom it occurred. The farmer who originally found him was no longer alive but I was introduced to his wife, I believe, and another old woman who had been present when it happened. Hamsananda translated the story as they related it in Tamil, as follows. Around 1957, a local farmer was driving his huge, black buffaloes down to the Cheyyar river for a drink when one of the animals’ rear hooves caught in the soft mud and was sucked under. When the farmer bent down to release the hoof, he noticed blood on its underside, so he looked at the mud below to see its source. And, lo! he discovered the blood was coming from a human skull where the buffalo’s heavy hoof had grazed it! Calling out for his friends to help, he began digging feverishly to excavate mud from around the head, until they were astonished to uncover a giant of a man, almost seven feet tall, sitting in a deep samādhi from which he could not be awakened! Since previously Poondi Swami had been seen sitting in the riverbed for weeks without moving, it was speculated that when the river flash-flooded after the recent monsoon he became immersed in mud while sitting in the sand of the riverbank.

Four men with difficulty lifted him up in his sitting position onto a palanquin and carried him to the rear porch of a nearby house, and thence to the local burial ground where he spent the next three years in a lean-to constructed by the villagers. In 1960, he was taken to a pyal (veranda) of a house opposite the bus stand, so the growing crowds could more easily see him. He remained day and night there without moving, periodically not even speaking or eating, apparently requiring nothing external, and continued in this condition up to his mahasamadhi in 1978, more than eighteen years later.

A fluctuating assortment of resident sadhus were in regular attendance upon the Master, perhaps thirty in number, who stayed for days or weeks at his feet. Many slept in the dharamsala where I stayed, sleeping in rows on the floor, while others slept in the nearby forest or by the roadside. No prepared food was available, so itinerant
sadhus had to fend for themselves or beg bhiksha from the few local householders. Some yogis lived off leaves and herbs in the forests, others appeared to live solely on chai made by a nearby chaiwala or by Chimta Swāmī who acted as factotum for the sadhus. One sadhu called Bombay Baba lived by ingesting four or five smooth stones each morning the size of golf balls, then passed them harmlessly in his stool the next day, as a way of assuaging his hunger while effectively fasting. It saved money and seemed a useful practice in a place with no food. I was invited into local homes for meals several times out of curiosity, for foreigners in those days were still rarely seen. But mainly I took my meals with Hamsananda by invitation from Subramaniam Swami. These were served in a large tent erected behind the master on the site of the present Samadhi-mandir. It was after one of these that I was shown a specimen of Master’s nirmālya prasād that was uniquely unforgettable. Nirmālya prasād is normally the remains of an offering presented to a deity or holy person, usually fruits, food or flowers. In this case it was a specimen of the master’s stool (excreta), the size of a chocolate-coloured laddu or golf ball, kept treasured in a silver bowl wrapped in cloth, and brought out for me with great reverence. To my unimagined surprise, when bidden to smell it, its fragrance was so divinely intoxicating that it produced ecstasy! Strange as it sounds, I found later that this was not an unknown phenomenon in hagiographical literature. 

After about a fortnight I could distinguish two groups among the Master’s resident devotees. The first was a small class of siddhas, or advanced adepts, who wore only lungotī or a single, nondescript

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8 Similar, well-attested prodigies of supermundane bodily purity can be found in the Catholic Church involving a class of saints called Incorruptibles or Beati (‘The Blessed’). Their deceased remains remain undecaying and life-like, with some bodies (mostly female) exuding an essential oil whose supernatural fragrance likewise induces ecstasy. The oily exudate is preserved in vials treasured by devotees, often passed down reverently for hundreds of years. I witnessed this for myself in Vancouver in 1983, with oil obtained from the 18th century tomb of a Russian orthodox woman saint, and can testify to its divinely-exhilarating fragrance. There is a fascinating scholarly study on the subject: The Incorruptibles: A Study of the Incorruption of the Bodies of Various Catholic Saints and Beati by Joan Carroll Cruz (Rockford, Illinois: Tan Books & Publishers, 1977). As with stigmata and ajagarābha, it appears a saint’s spiritual purity can be so powerful as to divinize even his body, should divine grace be so inclined.
piece of cloth, usually white in color. They were not seen in the day but came and went at night like bats. They never spoke and were not approachable. What kind of benefit were they getting? It must have been in silence from the Master’s *sannidhi*, itself the priceless *cintāmaṇi* or wish-fulfilling jewel of liberation. As Sri Bhagavan once said to Muruganar, “A Jñāni has no *sankalpas* (intentions) but his *sannidhi* (presence) is the most powerful force. It can do wonders: save souls, give peace of mind, even give liberation to ripe souls.”

The second was the much larger group of itinerant sadhus of various denominations, Saiva, Vaiṣṇava and Śākta, or of no obvious affiliation, who dressed according to their inclination or *sampradāya* (tradition). Among these, with Hamsa’s and Chimta Swami’s help, I could identify the following types (I consult my notebook from the time):

1. Daśnāmi sannyāsins from one of the ten renunciate orders founded by Adi Sankaracharya (788-820 CE), who was their main guru;
2. Non-Daśnāmi sannyāsins whose main guru is Dattātreya (‘Guru Datt’);
3. Nāth yogis who follow the Goraknath Sampradāya (c. 9th-13th cent. CE). They have big wooden earrings called *kundals*, wear black *poonals* (sacred threads) and dress in any color but never blue or white. Their main guru is Goraknāth (an historical figure, said to be the ‘inventor’ of haṭhayoga) and are often good haṭhayogis;
4. Vairagis (Vaiṣṇava) sannyāsins, who put *nāma* on their forehead, wear gerua (orange), and whose main guru is Sri Ramanujacharya (1017-1137 CE);
5. South Indian sadhus of no obvious affiliation (“no *sampradāya* in South India”), including some Nāgas (generic for naked ascetic) and Avadhūtas; this includes Tamil adepts of the first class mentioned above. “The first three groups put *vibhūti* only (on forehead); if they do *Devi pūjā* they put *kumkum* also.” (Chimta Swami);
6. Aghoras (fire-worshippers) who keep fire with them, and Rāja-yogis, given to meditation (*dhyāna*), who are always sitting;
7. Tamil *Cittars* (Siddhas) who practice Siddha medicine (*Cittavaittiyam*) and alchemy (*Rāsayāna*). They were adept in

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haṭhayoga, and knew herbs and potions. Some could be seen in the mornings like the Nāth yogis performing āsanas and shatkarmas like dhauti (cloth-swallowing), neti (nasal cleansing), and bandas like uddhīyāna and nauli (stomach lifting and rotation of the abdominus recti). These were the largest sub-group.

There were also day visitors who came by bus or car and went back again, perhaps two or three dozen daily while I was there, dozens more on weekends. But this transient traffic did not disturb the deep current of continuous darshan taken by resident devotees. The Master was the unbroken cynosure of all our attention and his regal presence palpably dominated the atmosphere around him for a radius of many metres, even kilometres. His presence had a field-like quality, like magnetism, that subdued thought and was felt most strongly at night. Nighttime was thus a special time for resident devotees and many things happened then around the Master. He was said frequently to give swapna (dream) darshan or impart upadesha (instruction) at night in dreams. To embrace this possibility some sadhus even slept or meditated recumbently in the daytime as well, a practice I have not seen elsewhere before or since.

I should like to close this account with my personal experience of the Master’s divine power and grace. On the sixteenth evening of my stay I was standing at the bar for the evening darshan, gazing intently into the Master’s right-sided look. Suddenly a tiny shaft of white light shimmered serpent-like in the Master’s left eye, then shot into both of mine. It went down immediately to the bottom of my spine, then rose slowly up it as though someone were blowing softly into the bottom of it like a tube. When it reached the back of my head I experienced such intense bliss I lost body consciousness, and fell in a swoon at the Master’s feet. Luckily, I was standing between two sannyāsins who grabbed me as I fell and held me upright until I regained consciousness. The whole drama lasted less than a minute; never before or since have I felt such ecstasy.

That night I had divine dreams and saw coloured lights flickering inside my body. I realized that what I had been searching for was available here with this great Master, and I determined to surrender to him and ask to be accepted as his disciple. Hamsananda had seen what happened and agreed to help. I wrote a note of request to Poondi
Deva, collected traditional firewood (as sacrificial fuel), *dakṣinā* (a $1 U.S. bill and 8 cents) and some lemons (considered auspicious to offer an *avadhūta*). I planned to approach him at night in the traditional manner. Hamsananda agreed to accompany me and translate my request into Tamil, acting as interpreter. Swamiji’s attendants, who had also witnessed the incident, agreed to seek the master’s permission to approach him the following night to make my request; this was given.

Accordingly, at 3.30 am the following night, I stepped behind the curtain accompanied by Swami Hamsananda. Master was sitting upright exactly as before, Subramaniam and some other men were standing nearby, arms crossed, waiting to serve. Placing my note, firewood, lemons and *dakṣinā* (gift) at his feet, I did *daṇḍa namaskār* (body flat on ground like a stick). When told to rise, I knelt at his feet with a beating heart while Hamsananda read out my note, stopping now and then to translate it into Tamil.

The Master accepted my *dakṣinā*, then returned it to me; the lemons he held for a moment and also returned; one is still intact, unspoiled on my *pūjā* altar. There was then a long pause. Then he began speaking in short, simple phrases, pausing so Hamsa could translate what he said, which I noted down afterward so I wouldn’t forget. He said, “My son, I’m not your guru. There’s a *akṣara* (letter) on your forehead [called *Brahma-likhitam*, the destiny Brahma writes on the forehead of each creature]. By this I know I am not your guru.”

Sadness overwhelmed me. But worse was to come. He said, “Soon, you will leave India. You will go [pause] to Ca-na-da [pronouncing each syllable distinctly, as though saying it for the first time]. There you will meet one woman and marry her.”

At this I was devastated: I’d never been to Canada and had no desire to go; leaving India and marrying were the last things I wanted to do. Master’s words sounded a death knell to all my hopes and dreams. I broke down, I’m ashamed to say, and began sobbing, drowning out Master’s last words. Thank god, Hamsananda remembered them: “After marriage you will return to India, and in 1998 you will meet your guru.”

When I was told this later, I recall being unimpressed: 1998 was so far away from 1976 it might as well be in another life. Now I shudder
to realise how immature I was then not to appreciate the import of what had he told me: he’d assured me I’d meet my guru this birth, actually granting me the request I’d been praying for.

As implausible as it seemed at the time, each of Master’s predictions came true. I did leave India, I did go to Canada, I did meet and marry my wife there. In 1991, we returned to India where we have lived since. At last, on April 1st, 1998, I had my first darshan in Shirdi of the great saint who became my guru – Sri Sainathuni Sarath Babuji – the very one who attained realisation in Poondi Swami’s presence two years before my visit! When I learned this, the final ‘coin dropped’ and I realised Master’s last prediction made so long ago had now also become true! The wheel of time had revolved full circle to another level: the Master was not my guru, but my guru’s guru (paramaguru), or guru once removed. Truly, the Master had seen this from the start, for him past and future alike held no secrets. He had used his divya drṣṭi (divine vision) graciously to foresee what I had prayed for, but did not have the maturity to realise then.

By the time Poondi Swami entered mahāsamādhi on November 3rd, 1978, he had touched and transformed inexplicably the lives of many thousands from all walks of life. From all over India sadhus, seekers, saints and sages of every description and stage of attainment, were drawn to him and blessed by his grace, while his distinguished peers like Sri Bhagavan, Sri Gnanananda Giri, and the Kanchipuram Sankaracharya, regarded him with utmost respect. He was a veritable jñāna-sāgara (ocean of knowledge), from whose boundless depths any cup could be filled.

The virtual ‘University of Yoga’ conjured into existence by the power of Master's brooding presence during his lifetime no longer exists, and learned discussions of his divine state are no more to be heard in the shadowed precincts of his Samādhi. Yet his presence there is alive and active as before, and can be felt emanating from his Samādhi now as palpably as it did then from his living presence. Many today who have never met him find in his Samādhi a fathomless source of mystical experience and truth beyond name and form. No visitor to Sri Ramanasramam should miss visiting it if at all possible; it is a worthy companion-site to Sri Bhagavan’s own celestial ‘living’ Samādhi.
As for me, I remain forever grateful for the three blessings that fulfill my life by the Master’s grace: my wife, my Guru, and my long association with sages and beloved kalyāṇ-mitrās of India, which continues to the present day by Śrī’s grace.

My prayer is,

“Bless me, O Lord, that I may have more and more love for Thee, and whatever different births I may undergo hereafter, may I be born in the house of those who love Thee and associate always with holy men and true lovers of God. This is my only prayer.”

Dedicated with deep gratitude to
Swami Hamsananda Saraswati of Sarada Pitha, Sringeri

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10 Śrimad Bhagavatam Mahapurana, I.19.16, King Parikshit’s prayer to Sri Krishna.
Among all the various groups of sadhus resident around Sri Poondi Swami the chief activity in common was attempting to account for the Master’s superhuman state. There was constant, ongoing discussion and speculation as to what exactly had taken place and how it had resulted in his jīvanmukti and phenomenal manifestation of ajagarabhāva.

The Tamil Cittars (Siddhas) proposed homologizing his internal process to a form of alchemy by which the seat of mind in the subtle body is distilled by drugs (Tamil moolagars) into the finest essence of consciousness, chiḍākāśa, using the gastric fire (jvālā-agni) of the manipūra as an alembic while in meditative trance (samādhi). The mind so transformed shines like white light (ṭējas), fire’s subtlest state, said to be the ‘body’ of the Supreme Being manifest in a dense form of bliss called technically in Advaita, chidghana.¹

¹ Chidghana - lit. ‘massed, luminous consciousness’; an important technical term in Advaitasastra for the highest bliss of Brahman and the unmani-avastha (no-mind state) of the greatest avadhuts. It is synonymous with Paramananda-Sandoha, lit. ‘mass of bliss’, or Bliss Infinite, the state of final beatitude (v.s. Pancikaranam, Glossary, p.63, in edition cited below, footnote 6.)
For the Yogins, Sri Poondi Swami’s state was ascribed to the science of herbs and drugs (Skt. oṣadhi), practised as an adjuvant to yoga, and said by Patanjali in Yogasūtra 4.1 to give rise to siddhis or supernormal powers (though properly speaking the eight major aṣṭa-mahā-siddhis arise not from drugs but from reliance on the Self (svātantrya), and manifest only in those free from desire (vāsanā); for this reason they are the mark of the true adept). There was much knowledgeable discussion of herbs by this group – my journal lists a half-dozen with their Tamil names and corresponding benefits – and one Cittar interviewed with Hamsa’s help referenced a text called Agastya Periapuranam, which is perhaps to be identified with the Pūraṇacūttiram, a late alchemical work ascribed to Agastya. Transubstantiation theory has a long history in India. It is central to the Āgamas (Tantras) and Vaishnava/Buddhist Sahajiyā/Vajrayāna Tantras, as well as the Tamil Cittar tradition, the pan-India Siddhāchārya movement, and the medieval Nath Sampradāya. So its prominence as an explanation for Poondi Swami’s state should not be surprising.

The Yogins also revered the Master because he exemplified to perfection Patanjali’s two sutras on posture in his Yogasūtras (II.46-7). These sutras state that posture is perfect when it is dhīra (steady) and ananta (endless), both qualities Poondi Deva clearly exhibited. When perfection of posture is attained, Patanjali says (YS II.48), its fruit (yogaphala) is freedom from the dvandvas, or pairs of opposites, the source of all suffering. Since experientially this state entails ego-transcendance, the Yogins rightly saw Poondi Swami’s ajagarabhāva as tantamount to mukti, which it surely was. It is worth noting that Lord Vishnu as Narayana, the Cosmic Man or Satpuruṣa, is typically

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2 Swami Hamsananda’s background is given in the parent article to this paper, ‘Eighteen Days with Sri Poondi Swami’, appearing in this issue.


depicted as resting on the serpent of Time, Ādi Śeṣa, who is praised also as dhīra and ananta, again equating rest and immobility with timelessness and bliss.

Of all groups, I had most contact with the Daśnāmi group because my guide was a member of it; as I recall, three others were also his brother-disciples from Sringeri Sarada Pitha. As a group, they were articulate and well-educated, proficient in Sanskrit, and learned in Advaita scriptures such as Pañcadaśī, Vedāntasāra, Vivekachūḍāmaṇi, Upadeśa Sāhasrī and Brahmasūtra-Śāṇkarabhāṣya, upon which they held long, animated discussions. Several could speak English when they wished.

Of all explanations for Sri Poondi Swami’s state, the most intriguing was Hamsananda’s own, because it revealed the depth of Poondi Swami’s wisdom as both saint and teacher in a new light. Hamsananda said the Master’s state resulted from “firing his pañca bhūta tattvas” (five body-elements) by a meditative process (upāsana) known as Paṇcīkaraṇa-vidyā (quinduplication-science). This was a secret knowledge that enabled the incomparable Asparśa-Yoga (‘touchless yoga’), introduced by Gauḍapāda in his Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad Kārikā (at MK III.39 and MK IV.2), to bear fruit. But there it is explicated primarily as a theory (darśana), not as a practice (sādhana).

Hamsa said Paṇcīkaraṇa is the practical sādhana meant to accompany Gauḍapāda’s Māṇḍūkya Kārikā and engender the experiential realization of Asparśa Yoga as the final view (Siddhānta) of Ajātivada, the crown jewel of Advaita Vedanta. In essence, Paṇcīkaraṇa forms the prayoga śāstra for Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad with Gauḍapāda’s Kārikā and Śāṇkarabhāṣya (commentary) and, as such, forms a sādhana manual for Aśparśa Yoga. But, whereas the Māṇḍūkya Kārikā is an ‘open’ text that may be studied without initiation, Paṇcīkaraṇam is a ‘closed’ text (gupta-vidyā), whose meaning is restricted to a qualified disciple (adhikārin) hearing it directly from a realized guru, ear-to-ear, in so-called ‘hot’ transmission, as Hamsananda

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5 *Asparśa Yoga* is a key soteriological term in the Māṇḍūkya Kārikā and occurs also in Sankara’s commentary on MK.IV.2. For discussion see *Gaudapada: A Study in Early Advaita* by T.M.P. Mahadevan (Madras: University of Madras, 4e 1975), pp. 197-199; 216-218; and *Asparśa-Yoga: A Study of Gaudapada’s Māṇḍūkya Kārikā* by Colin A. Cole (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2004), pp. 103-112.
claimed to be doing under Poondi Swami. Even though secret, Hamsa said printed evidence of the tradition existed in an obscure Sanskrit text called *Pañcikaraṇam*, a brief prakaraṇa (manual) ascribed to Adi Sankara. There is also a vārttika (specialised commentary) on it by Suresvaracarya, a direct pupil of Sankara, called *Pañcikaraṇa-Vārttikam*, attesting to its authenticity and importance.

*Pañcikaraṇam* (I’ll use final ‘m’ for the text, final ‘a’ for the process) is a very short work of seven verses, which, unfortunately, is unfinished, so its meaning is lost to scholarship. Consequently, it has been little-noticed in scholarly literature, both in India and the West. The text however exists in a printed edition published by Advaita Ashram in Calcutta, cited by Hamsa. A scholarly discussion of the Sanskrit text in French with an Introduction in English is published by Motilal. There is also an English translation of *Pañcikaraṇa-Vārttikam* by A. Mahadeva Sastry and a redaction of it by Karl Potter in Vol. 3 of his *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies*.

Hamsananda said preservation of *Pañcikaraṇa-vidyā* has traditionally been entrusted to Sringeri Sarada Math, as it is for Śrī
Sannidhanam (Samadhi) of Sri Poondi Swami
MOUNTAIN PATH

Vidyā, the secret science of Śakti worship discussed below, which Ḥaṁsa used devotionally together with Pañcīkaraṇam, though the exact nature of their relationship remains a mystery. It must be remembered that I was a foreigner, uninitiated, and a mlechha (ritually impure), and thus thrice-unqualified to be taught much, a situation I had to respect. Indeed, I remain grateful for the modicum I was permitted to learn by the Master’s grace, which I record here in loving memory and testimony to his greatness.

In Adi Sankaracarya’s Pañcīkaraṇam, the quinduplication process is first related to the five elements (pañca mahābhūta tattvas), then to the four states of consciousness by a process of sublation (bādha), wherein each state merges by laya (dissolution or absorption) into the next subtler state, until all are resolved into the subtlest tattva, ākāśa, the vehicle of pure sound (Śabda Brahman). Pure sound is Praṇava (AUM), the highest bīja, ‘literally’ the sound body of Brahman, which is asparśa (‘touchless’), thus is the yoga so-named. The mind’s laya into this state produces a bliss (rasa) so intense it sublates even the need to eat or move.11

Pañcīkaraṇa is defined as the five-fold combination process by which the five subtle rudimentary elements (pañca-mahābhūta tattvas) become gross and create the physical universe of Nature and inner world of conscious awareness. The basic process is described in Suresvara’s Vārttikam as follows:

“Each of the five elements must be divided into two equal parts. One of these two parts should be further split into four equal parts. Now to one half of each element should be added one quarter of each of the other four halved elements towards the formation of one gross element. Thus in Ether (Ākāśa) there will be five constituent parts. Half of it will be Ether and the other half will consist of the four parts contributed together by all the other four elements. Thus it is to be known in the case of each of the other four elements, like Air, etc. This process is the five-fold combination (Pañcīkaraṇa) according to the wise.” – Pañcīkaraṇam-Vārttikam, 8-10.

11 “Oṃ is the eternal truth: that which remains over after the disappearance of objects is Oṃ. It does not merge in anything. It is the state of which it is said: “Where one sees none other, hears none other, knows none other, that is Perfection.” Talk§634.
[This means that Ākāśa has 50% itself and one-eighth of each of the other elements. Jñāna is said to be a kārya of Ākāśa, so has in it the four other mahābhūtas also: it is 1/2 Ākāśa, 1/8 Vāyu (Air), 1/8 Vahni (Fire), 1/8 Āpaḥ (Water) and 1/8 Prthvī (Earth). Nota bene: It is not meant that physical ether (Ākāśa) is consciousness, but that pure consciousness is, like ether, an all-pervading continuum.]

In Adi Sankaracarya’s Pañcīkaraṇam, the process is taken further and amalgamated to the four states of consciousness, meditated in correlation with the three and one-half mātrās (units) composing OM (A+U+M+ dot, anusvāra = silence, turīya), the sacred Praṇava. The mātrās are homologized to the three states of waking (jāgrat), dreaming (swapna) and deep sleep (suṣupti), with the fourth state (turīya) as their substratum. Adi Sankaracarya states as follows:

“Now ‘A’, the waking personality (state) (jāgrat), should be resolved into ‘U’ the dream-personality (swapna), and the ‘U’ into ‘M’, the deep-sleep personality (suṣupti). Again, the ‘M’ should be reduced to ‘AUM’ and the ‘AUM’ into ‘I’ (turīya). ‘I’ am Ātman, the Witness of all, the Absolute, of the nature of Pure Consciousness; I am neither Nescience (avidyā) nor even its effect, but I am Brahman alone, Eternally Pure and Free, Ever Enlightened, Existence Absolute. I am Bliss Absolute, One without a second (Advaitam) and the Innermost Consciousness (Antaryāmin). Remaining in this state of absolute identification is called ‘Samādhi’ or the Super-conscious state.” – Pañcīkaraṇam, op. cit., v.6.

The sādhaka who knows Praṇava in this way attains identity with Turīya or Brahman immediately. Realisation of Turīya is said to occur by Adhyāropa-apavāda, a form of meditative sublation (bādha), defined as “the negation of illusory super-imposition (adhyāsa), consisting only of name and form (nāma-rūpa), and consequent discovery of Brahman, the underlying Reality.” (Pañcīkaraṇam, op.cit., p.30, n.1). In truth, Sat (Reality) doesn't change, only what is false disappears, leaving Brahmānubhāva, the ultimate experience of realisation.

However, while these theoretical discussions are ‘open’, the experiential practice they entail, called Pañcīkaraṇa, is ‘closed’ (rahasya). It appears to be a kind of visualization process, as outlined by Hamsa in rudimentary terms as follows, which I record from notes kept at the time:
“Each of the elements gives rise to an antaḥkaraṇa (mind factor); ākāśa creates ākāśa in you. When you see space outside you create space inside. When the great ones sit staring into space, they are doing Paṃcīkaraṇa, coming down into heart. Paṃcīkaraṇa involves something higher than the subtle body; its field is higher than the sūkṣma. Earth (Prthvī) gives rise to manas. Water (Āpaḥ) gives rise to buddhi. Fire (Agni) gives rise to citta (memory). Air, prāṇa (Vāyu) gives rise to antaḥkarana (mental faculties). Ākāśa is connected with Jñāna-svarūpa and Ānandamaya-kośa (bliss sheath). Beyond the bliss body only Ātman is. If you create ākāśa inside, everything else is created – that is the theory.”

“When Paṃcīkaraṇam happens for a man who is extrovert, his inner experiences are lost; for an introvert, his outer experiences. Introverts are essentially ascetics, unconnected with society; extroverts are connected to society, it’s more difficult for them to become free. Paṃcīkaraṇam establishes a balance between these two tendencies, called sahajabhāva, the natural, effortless state of liberation.”

“The process of Paṃcīkaraṇam involves visualizing your astral body (sūkṣma-śarīra or linga śarīra) or mental body (vijñānamaya-kośa) as seated in front of you, and receiving subtle ojāhsic [astral sunlight] energy down through the fontenelle to the sahasrāra with your breath (vaśi, that is, Śiva reversed). Visualize the breath descending into your body, imagined as seated in front of you, not as coming into your own body. Think of the element (tattva) as being drawn down into the body with the breath. The subtlest element (ākāśa) contains all the others through Paṃcīkaraṇa. When the subtle mind purified by laya merges into ākāśa you experience liberation.”

To accomplish Asparśa Yoga, ‘objectless seeing’ is necessary.

“For ‘objectless seeing’ first locate your sight not on the object but on the space itself in-between. Objects are only what obstruct your sight; normally our vision rests on them only. Here, you must let your sight come to rest on space itself – ‘subtracting’ the object – and try to see that space. You’ll have seen that blank look of Swami – he’ll suddenly go blank with a man in front of him – he’s looking at the space between them, this creates a space within. While gazing into this objectless space, ask yourself, ‘how am I seeing, how does seeing take place?’ – because subjective consciousness occurs in
that question. Then just observe. Not to murmur [the question] but actually to think how you see: it's attuning to a certain frequency of thought. Ask yourself, then just observe. You can’t hear the question, but very subtly it is asked.

“Then ask, ‘Who’s the seer?’ ‘Who sees?’ This breaks the identification of the seer with the instrument of seeing, like the vichara of Sri Ramana in a slightly different context. When you find out who sees, immediately you’ll descend to the heart center – not the physical heart, but the spiritual heart on the right side of the chest, which you spontaneously point to when you refer to yourself. This situation is called ‘Niṣṭha’, it is the Master’s state. Then you do your meditation (dhyana) from there. This is Asparśa Yoga, the ‘touchless union’, of which Gauḍapada speaks in his Kārikā.”

Hamsa said his understanding of Pañcīkaraṇam was confirmed by the Master and that he had been guided by him in its practice over many years. While Hamsa gave me to understand that the Master had confirmed his understanding of Pañcīkaraṇam, he did not claim that Poondi Swami ever said it was the medium of his own attainment – I should make this clear – although Hamsa clearly felt it accounted for his ajagarabāva, and was himself practising it for the same reason.

Features of the Master’s state could also clearly be correlated with this ‘firing’ of his paṇcha-mahābhūta-tattvas, like his so-called niṣṭha and ‘yoga’ states and his bizarre manner of smoking. For Hamsanandaji, at any rate, Sri Poondi Swami was India’s greatest modern exemplar of the secret science of Pañcīkaraṇam, handed down in unbroken succession (paramparā) from Adi Sankara. What I report here is evidence of a living tradition at the time of writing (1976), operating in the presence of Sri Poondi Swami. Who would have thought such an advanced teaching was the subject of attention in such rustic circumstances in the presence of an (apparently) unlettered avadhūta?

Pañcīkaraṇam also appears to have a connection to Śri Vidyā, forming a kind of adjunct to it as well as to Asparśa Yoga. In Śrī Vidyā, the Mother is worshipped as the active, saguna form of Siva, the unmanifest, nondual Absolute (Advaitam), so Nonduality as a doctrine is formally maintained. This form of advaitabhakti or Devotional Nondualism is termed Śāktādvaita. The goddess in one of her arcā (worshipful) forms, as Lalita Tripurasundari, is made the
esoteric focus of ritual worship because of the recognition that “she is the source of the individual Self’s own self-cognitive reflection as ‘I’”. It is therefore Her grace that actually (energetically) confers liberation. The subtle form of the goddess consists not of words but of pure akashic sounds called bījas (Skt. ‘seeds’), indeclinable seed-syllables (bijaksaras), like AUM (Praṇava), that give experiential access to the wordless dimension of her Self-nature (svabhāva) and, thereby, access to her soterial power.

Śrī Vidyā, like Pañcīkaraṇam, is a secret science (rahasya vidyā) made kinetic only through qualified initiation (dīkṣā). Because it consists wholly of bījas, Śrī Vidyā is considered the purest, most powerful form of mantra-vidyā. Mother’s yantra, known as Śrī Cakra, is also used. Later, I was amazed to find the guru-vandana mantra used by Hamsananda to adore (vandana) Sri Poondi Swami was almost identical to that of the Kamarāj (or Kādi-vidyā) School of Śrī Vidyā used for the same purpose.

The historical results of Śrī Vidyā worship are impressive. It is said to have been the form of devotion Adi Sankara himself used to become free. Indeed, two of Śrī Vidyā’s canonical texts, the Saundarya Laharī (Waves of Divine Splendour) and the Śivānanda Laharī (Śiva’s Waves of Bliss), are ascribed to him. Śrī Vidyā is considered queen of the mantra marga, the most effective way to induce Devi’s grace (Śaktipāta), which bestows the state called chiḍghana (lit. ‘massed consciousness’) – a bliss so intense it gradually renders the body immovable.

This actually happened to Sri Chandrasekhara Bharati Mahasvaminah of Śringeri (d.1954) who was unable to complete his famous commentary on Sankara’s Vivekachūḍāmaṇi due to deepening samādhi during his conduct of Śrī Vidyā pūjā. His guru and predecessor as the pontiff of Sringeri Sarada Pitha, Sri Siva Abhinava Narasimha Bharati Svaminah, as also the late, much-beloved Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswati Svaminah of Kanchi Kamakoṭi Pitha, have both been notable votaries of Śrī Vidyā; both were also renowned jīvanmuktas.

13 Ibid., pp.89-91; 93-94; 104-107. I am indebted to Brooks for several points in this paragraph that supplement what Swami Hamsananda told me.
How far the amalgamation of Pañcīkaraṇam with Śrī Vidyā is a valid hermeneutic for explaining Sri Poondi Swami’s state, I am of course unable to say; I only recount what I saw and heard. It seems very unlikely that Poondi Swami was a member of a traditional ashram or math where he learned Pañcīkaraṇam at a guru’s feet. But certain cryptic remarks made by him and others suggest further possibilities.

Poondi Swami could have received guidance in Pañcīkaraṇa from siddhas in sūkṣma on the subtle plane: Siva Baba, mentioned in the previous article, said Sri Gnanananda often said he communicated with Poondi Swami ‘in sūkṣma’ (subtle body). And, in both Bharanidharani’s and Sri Babuji’s accounts, high siddhas are spoken of with whom Poondi Swami apparently interacted at various times, whether at the Eswara shrine in the Parvatha Hills or at Kasi in the North before his mahāsamādhi. Sri Babuji’s account specifically quotes Poondi Swami as saying just before his mahāsamādhi that he had gone north to meet various siddhas, eighteen in number, and had returned south only to leave his body in Kalasapakkam (in view of Mt. Arunachala?).

Or, Sri Poondi Swami’s state may have been precipitated by an irresistible descent of divine grace (Śaktipāta) called tīvra-tīvra (‘intensely intense’) in Trika-śāstra (Kashmiri Śaivism), a Śivādvaita form, one could say, of Śrī Vidyā. In Trika, this mode of Śrī’s grace produces such intense ecstasy it precludes even the need for food and movement, i.e., ajagarabhāva.

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15 The Trika scholar B.N. Pandit gives a fascinating account of the most intense form of śaktipāta, which could possibly apply to Poondi Swami: “Such people need not perform any rituals, nor practise any yoga to attain this state. Their realization of the highest aspect of the Self is absolutely spontaneous…. They become impatient to merge into their purest aspect, to shed off their physical form and become one with the Absolute. This type of liberation is known as videhamukti, or liberation without having a body....Aspirants under the effect of the intensely intense form of śaktipāta may also stay in their bodies, but will linger on in a state of complete inaction, insentient like a log of wood. This highest type of Self-realization results in an extraordinary ecstasy that obliterates all interest in anything impure in nature. In this way, tīvra-tīvra śaktipāda brings about immediate release from all bondage.” — B.N. Pandit, Specific Principles of Kashmir Śaivism (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1997), pp. 86-87. Personally, I would agree a spontaneous descent of grace is more likely as an explanation for Sri Poondi Swami’s state than Pañcīkaraṇa.
The Nārada Bhakti Sūtras also state that intense love of god has a similarly intoxicating effect (Yajjñatva mattō bhavati...).16

Finally, there is an interesting ramification of Pañcīkaraṇa theory in connection with Sri Bhagavan himself. In answering questions from learned visitors, Sri Bhagavan portrayed an extensive knowledge of Pañcīkaraṇa’s operation in creation theory, one of the two great questions, along with the nature of karma, unresolved in the Vedic corpus; no fewer than six theories of creation are proposed in Vedanta and the six orthodox schools of Indian Philosophy (āstika-darśana). How the One becomes two and, given two-ness (plurality), how they become One again, are the two great concerns of Vedanta metaphysics, along with enquiry into Brahman. The movement from Zero to One (śūnya to pūrṇa) and back again, the haṁsa or breathing-in and breathing-out of the universe (aḥaṁ-sphūrṇa/Sṛṣṭi-Pralaya), implies apparent change, if only from absence to presence, avidyā to jñāna. Pañcīkaraṇa is the theoretical device used in Advaita metaphysics to explain and account for the categories of change and difference on every level, from macro to microcosmic. Indeed, it is difficult to speak about liberation without talking of change, considered real or apparent, and Sri Bhagavan shows great skill and his characteristic lucidity in utilizing the principles of Pañcīkaraṇa to account for the so-called changes in the states of consciousness. In Talk§292 Sri Bhagavan mentions Pañcīkaraṇa by name, a talk which Hamsananda recited entirely from memory.

Bhagavan also alludes to Pañcīkaraṇa when he states, “The mind which comprehends space is itself space (ākāsa). The space is physical ether (bhūtākāśa), mind is mental ether (manākāśa), which is contained in transcendental ether (chidākāśa). The mind is thus the ether principle (ākāśa tattva). Being the principle of knowledge (jñāna tattva), it is identified with ether (ākāśa) by metaphysics .... Pure mind (shuddha manas) is ether (ākāśa); the dynamic and dull (rajas and tamas) aspects operate as gross objects, etc. Thus the whole universe is only mental.”17

Again, in various Talks,18 Sri Bhagavan discusses the different mind-factors and changes in conscious states, sometimes at length (Talk§579), in terms broadly related to Pañcīkaraṇa theory.

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When Pañcīkaraṇa is applied to the four stages of consciousness, the key soteriological state to emerge is suṣupti, since it forms the doorway or bridge to turīya. It is therefore of interest to note that Sri Bhagavan, in describing his own state (that of the jñāni), refers to it in terms of suṣupti. In a fascinating passage, Sri Bhagavan says the jñāni’s state is “neither sleep nor waking but intermediate between the two. There is awareness of the waking state and the stillness of sleep. It is called jagrat-suṣupti. Call it wakeful sleep or sleepless waking or wakeless sleep. It is not the same as sleep or waking separately. It is atijagrata (beyond wakefulness) or atisuṣupti (beyond sleep). It is the state of perfect awareness and perfect stillness combined. It lies between sleep and waking; it is also the interval between two successive thoughts. It is the source from which thoughts spring [italics added]. It is Bliss, not transitory but eternal. From that the thoughts proceed.... If you are free from thoughts and yet aware, you are That Perfect Being.”

But, ultimately, except for adhikāri adepts like Hamsananda, Pañcīkaraṇa theories “create confusion where no confusion need exist.... They are mere conceptions. When and where will such conceptions end?” Sri Bhagavan is firm in disparaging all such talk: “Ah! Fortunate is the man who does not involve himself in this maze!” Rather, they serve as metaphors for the alchemy of self-transformation inherent in the very idea of Realisation. Release from ignorance is at the heart of the soteriological process signified by Pañcīkaraṇam. Sri Poondi Swami and Sri Bhagavan each exemplify in different ways the significance of Pañcīkaraṇam's esoteric rôle in the ultimate transformation of Jīva into Śiva, or Brahman.

Oṃ Tat Sat Brahmārpanam astu.

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18 Talk§392, Talk§510, Talk§567, Talk§579 and Talk§ 609.
21 Ibid., Talk §392.
Bibliography of Publications in English and Telugu on Sri Poondi Swami

1) The first notice of Poondi Swami to appear in English outside India to my knowledge was written by the controversial American teacher, Bubba (Da) Free John, and published in 1974 in his magazine, *Vision Mound*. It records a day-visit to Poondi Swami from Ramanasramam in August, 1973, with one or two photographs. It is no longer in print.

2) *The Way That I Teach: Talks on the Intuition of Eternal Life* by Bubba Free John (Middletown, California: Dawn Horse Press, 1978). In this early series of talks, Bubba Free John mentions Poondi Swami: “I went to the Poondi Swami and gave it all to him, because he represents the cultic figure in its most classically absurd form. The Poondi Swami is really what it is all about for the Indian who makes an idol of subjectivity out of the Divine. The subjective idol is not Truth, not God.” (Pp. 29-30.) In my view this betrays a rather superficial understanding of Poondi Swami. In a footnote John writes with less bias, “The Poondi Swami is a classic representative of the traditional practice of Kundalini Yoga, which seeks to awaken the dormant life-force, or creative power of the universe, that lies coiled at the base of the spine in man, and merge it into the subtle light of the brain via the manipulation of internal energy processes. The Poondi Swami’s practice is to give yogic initiation into this awakened energy through ceremonial ritual. He is literally approached as a Divine statue or object, and ceremoniously worshipped in the classic South Indian manner – ritually bathed with butter, sandalwood paste, honey, milk, and other foods, and then ritually washed, in the same manner as a piece of statuary considered to be a representation of the Divine.” (*Op. cit.*, p. 31, n.5)

3) *Six Mystics of India* by Bharanidharan (Madras: Ganesh & Co., 1996); Chapter 6 is on Poondi Swami. It is an accurate, informed account of the author’s interactions with the Master over several visits from 1969-1971. It provides a multi-faceted portrait of the Master as I knew Him, and his many moods and idiosyncrasies, along with much interesting anecdotal material.

4) *An Example of the Perfect Saint – Sri Poondi Swamy* by Sri Sarath Babuji (Shirdi: Saipatham magazine, 1988); reprinted in this issue.


6) *Purnavadhuta Sri Poondi Swami* by Smt. Sainathuni Anasuya Ammagaru (Shirdi: Saipatham Publications, 2014). A revised Telugu translation of Sainathuni Gunashekar’s original Tamil anthology of devotees’ experiences (Chennai: A. Gunasekhar Rao, 2011). It is currently the most complete account of Sri Poondi Swami yet published, but unfortunately is not yet translated into English. The revised Telugu edition reprints an earlier version of this article written without access to my journal at the time; it requires correction and is superseded by this article. ▲

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January - March
Sri Poondi Swami: An Example of the Perfect Saint

SRI SAINATHUNI SARATH BABUJI

Sri Poondi Swami was first seen around 1935 in a village called Kalasapakkam about 20 miles from Tiruvannamalai in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. He assumed the mien of a mad person when he first revealed himself to public gaze. With his well-built physique and gait, he appeared to the villagers to be a retired military man. He stayed first in the Kakkumkarai Vinayagar temple and then later in a dilapidated mosque by the side of the road. He later stayed in the Draupadi temple and under the trees by the side of the road. He used to wear a long shirt-like garment reaching below his knees and would never remove it even when it became torn and bedraggled. If someone gave him another shirt, he would not remove the old shirt but wear the new one over the old. His shirt pockets would be filled.

Sri Sainathuni Sarath Babuji (1954-2010) was an eminent devotee of Shirdi Sai Baba who became by Baba’s grace a Sadguru himself for thousands in India and abroad. In 1974 he spent a month with Sri Poondi Swami which culminated in his experience of realisation before the great avadhūta when he was barely 20 years old. His testimonial was originally published privately in Saipatham magazine in 1988; it is reprinted here by permission.
to bursting with old, empty cigarette packets, cigarette stubs and old scraps of paper that he would stuff into them. He would never ask anyone for anything – even food or water. Even if anyone offered him food, they would have to feed him as they would a child. He would never feed himself. If someone put a cigarette in his mouth and lit it, he would smoke it.

He never talked to anyone on his own. As he never bathed, his body would be dirty and his hair matted with grime. Flies would be swarming over him, attracted by the grime and dirt, but he would never bother about them. If he started to walk, he would keep walking for miles together without stopping to rest. If he once sat down, it might be days or weeks and maybe even months before impulse took him to get up again. Once he got up, he would again move off and go where fancy took him. Nobody could foretell when he would sit still or move or where he would be at any time. Nobody knew his antecedents, his parents or where he came from. None knew his caste, creed or even his name. None ever heard him take the name of God or speak of spiritual matters.

The people of Kalasapakkam village dismissed him as just another mad man. It took a miracle to show them that he was not a mad man but a great Mahātma who had assumed the form of a mad man for his own mysterious purposes. A river named Cheyyar flows by the side of Kalasapakkam village. It is a seasonal river, which flows whenever it rains in the nearby hills, but remains dry for the rest of the time. The Swami used to sit in the burning sands of the riverbed. Earlier, we have seen that if the Swami sat in a place once, he would continue to sit there for days or even weeks. The sand of the riverbed was burning hot because of the fierce heat of the Indian summer. It was very difficult to walk across the riverbed because of the burning sand, which would sear the feet like a coal fire. But the Swami used to sit upon the sand, with no cover whatsoever, as if he were lolling on a silken mattress under the cool light of a full moon. It was normal for the river to have flash floods whenever the surrounding hills got a heavy shower of rain.

Once, when the Swami was sitting on the riverbed, a flash flood occurred. All those who saw the Swami sitting on the riverbed thought that he must have been swept away and drowned in the flood. Once
the flow ebbed, the villagers rushed to the spot where they last saw the Swami. To their amazement they saw him still alive and buried up to his neck in the sand. They dug him out of the sand and the Swami walked away calmly as if nothing extraordinary had happened. When the villagers saw the Swami was still alive after being submerged in the flood for so long, they realized he must be a great Mahātma and not merely an ordinary man. The Swami became famous in the surrounding areas and they started calling him ‘Attru Swamigal’ or ‘River Swami’. Āru in Tamil means river.

The villagers erected a small lean-to in a cemetery on the riverbank for the use of the Swami. The Swami spent most of the next three years in this lean-to. A villager called Manikya Nayanar, who was mad after money, thought that since the Swami was a Mahātma he knew the secrets of alchemy and could create gold. He used to pester the Swami to reveal the secrets of alchemy to him and fed him regularly in the hope that he would gain monetarily by the Swami. The Swami told him that he knew nothing of these arts and he used to advise him not to debase himself by this rapacious greed for gold. The man waited for a long time in vain for the Swami to teach him the secrets of gold making, which he was convinced Swami knew. Finally, unable to bear his disappointment, he tried to assault the Swami. The Swami calmly walked away from there and soon reached Poondi village, which was about two miles from Kalasapakkam. This happened around 1960.

He roamed hither and thither in that village until one day he sat down upon the raised porch of a house by the side of the road. He never left that porch again for the next eighteen years until he attained mahāsamādhi in 1978.

If someone put a fruit or food or drink in his mouth, he would eat it. No matter how many people fed him; he would eat on and on, and one wondered where all that food went. If anyone placed an offering in his hands, he would place it on the porch at once. No one would remove it from there. He would never give back the offering as his prasād. As time passed, the porch became so full of the offerings that there was no place for the Swami. His devotees lifted him and put him on another porch in the same veranda. Even then, the offerings kept pouring in and soon filled the house. The owners of the house gave the house to the Swami and vacated it to make room for the offerings. But the...
Swami never left the porch nor did he ever enter the house. The porch, which was six feet by three, became the residence of the Swami. The devotees would throw the offerings into the house [godown] abutting the porch where they would lie in heaps but, amazingly, the offerings dried and lay there but they never rotted or stank.

If the devotees put him to sleep, he would sleep. If they woke him, he would sit up. He used to answer the calls of nature there itself, just as a child. The devotees would wash him and clean the place. He would talk briefly if anyone spoke to him, answering succinctly if anyone asked him anything. He was a perfect mirror in his conversation. If one talked to him informally, he would reply informally. If one talked to him with awe and respect, he would reply briefly with awesome gravity. The sastras say that the mind of the perfect sage is like a mirror which reflects truly the feelings of those who approach him. The Swami was a living definition of this spiritual truth revealed by Mahātmas such as Sri Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi. He was the personification of the state of ajagarabhāva or passive immobility as defined in the Avadhūta Gita and Aṩṭāvakra Gita.

The śāstras say that the Mahātma who has realized oneness with God seems to the untrained eye as a person immersed in the darkness of ignorance and passivity born of indolence. If one saw the Swami sitting on the porch by the road, it would seem that he sat there with golden heaps of knowledge to distribute to all comers. His royal court was always open. He was freely accessible to all devotees. There were no obstructions created by formality or ceremony or protocol between him and his devotees. Of the hundreds of devotees who visited him daily, it is not possible to find out why they had come to see him or what benefit they obtained by his darshan.

One is reminded of Sri Sai Baba’s guru when one sees Sri Poondi Swami. It is recorded that Sai Baba said, “I served my Guru with my heart and soul for twelve years. The duty, which I had enjoined upon myself for his service, was very arduous. He would never get up from his place for anything – even to answer the calls of nature. He was so immersed in the experience of God that he was not aware of the body or the mind inhabited by him. He used to eat, defecate and urinate in that state without moving from that place. I used to feed him, clean him up and change his clothes whenever necessary and serve
him.”¹ Once, a devotee showed a photograph of Sri Sai Baba to Sri Poondi Swami. The Swami looked with graciousness and pleasure at the photograph and said, “Oh, Sri Sai Baba! He is a very good man, worship him,” in a voice filled with kindness.

Three days before the Swami attained mahasamadhi, he told his close devotee, Sri Subramanian, that he would go North to finish some tasks and later come back to stay forever at Poondi. He told him again two days later that he had met eighteen Mahātmās in the North and told them whatever had to be told. The Swami was in normal health until nine a.m. on the third day, 3rd November 1978. His breathing slowed gradually from nine a.m. onwards and in fifteen minutes he peacefully left his body.

Even though the sky was clear, it became overcast and started raining heavily. The rain continued without letup for three days and it was not possible to do anything with the body of the Swami. However, this gave the opportunity to his devotees from even far-off places to come and have his darshan for the last time as they were informed by the radio. The body of the Swami was put in samādhi in a place close to the porch where he spent his last years. Even though three days had elapsed since the life had left the body of the Swami, it did not decay. It did not emit any foul smell nor had rigor mortis set in. The body was supple and his face had the same pleasant, lively look it had when the Swami was alive.

Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi and the Purāṇas define an area with approximately a thirty-mile radius, having Arunachala as its center, as a circle of great spiritual power, within which they have said a realized soul of great power would always be living. One wonders who the present living Mahātma is within this circle after the mahāsamādhi of Sri Poondi Swami.

I (Sri Sainathuni Sarath Babuji) have had the great good fortune of staying in the presence of the Swami for a month in 1974.
