

‘Shadow’ Bhagavan

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The source of the incidents described in this article is an interview with Annamalai Swami, recorded on behalf of Arunachala Ashrama in New York in 1989. The full interview can be viewed on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zYdDsWlnYcY&t=1152s>.

ANnamalai Swami came to Sri Ramanasramam in 1928 and for the next 10 years or so, under the tutelage of Sri Ramana himself, was responsible for planning and supervising the construction of many of the ashram’s most important buildings, including the imposing dining hall and *gośala*, or cowshed. At a certain point, however, the events of his life began to be, as it were, orchestrated in such a way that they led irrevocably to his decision to leave the ashram, with Sri Ramana’s hearty approval, it may be added, and to go and live in solitude in an area of land adjoining the ashram called Palakottu, where a number of *sādhu*-s and devotees of Sri Ramana lived. There is little doubt that Sri Ramana felt this to be the best course of action for Annamalai Swami or that he felt that his own physical presence (or rather the presence of an embodied form that bore the label ‘Sri Ramana Maharshi’) had become by then an impediment to Annamalai Swami’s further spiritual progress. Should any doubt linger as to this however, the following incident, surely puts paid to it.

Swami (as we shall refer to him henceforth), in spite of his self-imposed exile, did not become a stranger to the ashram and to Bhagavan (as we shall henceforth refer to Sri Ramana). On the contrary, he would regularly go over to the ashram at around 8 o'clock, after his evening meal to have Bhagavan's *darśan* and would remain there until around 9 o'clock, before returning to resume his solitary *sādhana*. Bhagavan, to use Swami's exact words in the aforementioned interview, *āṇandamā, piriyamā mugam kuḍuttu pēcuvāru – would turn his face to me and speak to me with happiness and love*. A time came, however, when all that changed. One day, immediately upon seeing Swami, Bhagavan covered his entire face up to the eyes with a cloth, in the manner of a Moorish or Muslim woman and did not speak a word. This continued for two or three days, according to Swami's own account, before he plucked up the courage to question Bhagavan about his conduct towards himself. Bhagavan's reply was curt, to say the least, *nan civaṇēṇṇu kiḍakkirēṇ. eṅkiṭṭa edukku pēccu koḍukkira – I am lying here like Śiva (minding my own business – a colloquial expression)*. *Why are you trying to chat with me like this?* Swami attempted then to gain some further clarification of his new, no doubt somewhat surprising, equation with Bhagavan. 'Why? You seem to be saying that I should not come here?' he ventured to ask but to no avail. Bhagavan remained silent.

Swami got up and left the Hall and went to stand in a corner of the flower garden nearby, where it began to dawn upon him ever more clearly that his supposition regarding Bhagavan's motive was indeed the correct one and that he should henceforth confine himself to Palakottu and his solitary *sādhana*. There was no one about by now. Suddenly Bhagavan called out, 'Annamalai Swami!' Swami returned to the Hall. 'If someone, at the time of spiritual maturity, thinks that he and god are different,' Bhagavan said, 'he will meet the same fate as an atheist (*nastigan*), who does not believe in god.' Swami was now convinced of Bhagavan's meaning and ended his regular visits to the ashram. Convinced of his meaning certainly, but perhaps (and this is only supposition on the part of the author of this article) not quite realising the full implications of Bhagavan's words, as the next incident we are about to relate suggests.

We now fast-forward to a later time, possibly some years later, Swami does not say. A film has been made featuring Bhagavan and

is to be shown in the ashram in the presence of Bhagavan for the entertainment and edification of the ashram inmates. The ashram postman, Raja Iyer, hails Swami, in some excitement no doubt, and tells him about the showing of the film. Although quite aware of Bhagavan’s interdiction on ashram visits, Swami feels that this is after all a film about Bhagavan, a pious endeavour of sorts, hardly a dereliction of his *sādhana*. In any case it will at least give him a pretext to make a rare prostration to his beloved Bhagavan. In short, he convinces himself that it will be acceptable to Bhagavan for him to attend.

We shall leave Swami there for now and consider Bhagavan’s conduct towards him in a little more detail. We know that, for the entire duration of Swami’s stay in the ashram, some 10 years or so, Bhagavan had discouraged any attempt on his part to engage in solitary meditation or contemplation of any kind but, on the contrary, had handed him project after project, never allowing him any respite, insisting, however, that this work be performed in the conviction that he was not the ‘doer’ of those actions but that they were all performed by the Self. It seems that Bhagavan now judges that Swami has reached a degree of spiritual maturity where he might profitably devote himself to a solitary *sādhana* and, moreover, that (in Swami’s case at least) his own physical presence can only be a barrier to further progress. To quote Bhagavan,

The meditation on the guru’s face or form is only for beginners.

The advanced disciples should concentrate inwards on the Self—
this is equal to meditating on the guru, for he is one with the Self.¹

Swami’s mental conditioning, *vāsanā*-s, to use the traditional term, had now been attenuated, as we might assume, to the point where intense dwelling upon the Self, the ‘I’ current, could now be fruitfully undertaken. Swami here recalls Bhagavan’s words to him when he first relocated to Palakottu: *eppavum eṅgayum pōgādē. irunda idattilē iru. aḍutta rūm kūḍa pōgāde. eṅgayum pōgāde – Don’t go anywhere, ever. Stay where you are. Don’t even go to the next room. Don’t go anywhere.* In the same section of *Conscious Immortality*, Bhagavan describes the process to be undertaken as follows:

¹ Brunton, Paul, *Conscious Immortality*, Chap.16, ‘Sagehood as an Ideal’, p 131.

By repeated practice one can become accustomed to turning inward and finding the Self. One must make incessant effort always until one has permanently realised. After that all effort ceases, the state becomes natural, the Supreme takes possession of the man with unbroken current. Until it has become permanently natural, your habitual state, know that you have not realised the Self, only glimpsed it.²

Bhagavan is here referring to the effort of dwelling on the sense of being, the 'I' sense, otherwise known as *ātma-vicāra*, self-enquiry. To return to our little vignette of ashram life, when Swami rolls up at the ashram to watch the picture show, Bhagavan's demeanour, as one might imagine on reading the previous quotation, is less than welcoming. In fact he is angry, anger feigned, no doubt, for the benefit of the hapless Swami. In Swami's own words, '*ō niḷal paḍam, niḷal bhagavānai pākka vanduṭṭiyā, pirattiyakṣa bhagavānai viṭuṭṭu,*' *appaḍiṇṇu bhagavāṇ kōvamā pēciṇāru* – 'Oh, a moving picture. You've come to see the moving picture Bhagavan, have you, abandoning the real (pratyakṣa) Bhagavan!' Bhagavan said angrily. Bhagavan uses the words *niḷal paḍam* – *shadow picture* to mean *film, movie*. Prior to the invention of cinematography a form of primitive animation was created by skilfully manipulating flat, articulated cut-out figures between a source of light and a translucent screen, an art which still survives today. Presumably the term *shadow picture* was applied to movies in their early days. Swami doesn't say if he stayed to watch the film but he does say that he suddenly became aware of the unruly crowd in attendance and that after that he never visited the ashram again. Reading between the lines, one might conjecture that he was not a little disgusted with himself and the entire situation he had put himself in.

Our initial reaction is to think that Bhagavan was chiding Swami for paying more attention to the celluloid Bhagavan than to the real, flesh and blood, one. But we soon realise that, given Bhagavan's state, merged with the Self, this cannot be the case. When Bhagavan uses the words *niḷal bhagavāṇ* he must, by implication, be referring to both Bhagavans, the celluloid one and the 'flesh and blood' one, both of which are entirely, and equally, unreal from the point of view of the

¹ Ibid., p.133.

Self. There is a certain irony in the situation. Bhagavan was fond of using the metaphor of the cinema screen and the film playing upon it to describe the relationship between the Self, the underlying reality, and the unreal world picture projected upon it by the ego-mind. We read in *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk§13:

Yes. It is like a cinema-show. There is the light on the screen and the shadows flitting across impress the audience as the enactment of some piece. Similarly also will it be, if in the same play an audience also is shown. The seer, the seen, will then only be the screen. Apply it to yourself. You are the screen, the Self has created the ego, the ego has its accretions of thoughts which are displayed as the world, the trees, plants, etc., of which you are asking. In reality, all these are nothing but the Self. If you see the Self, the same will be found to be all, everywhere and always. Nothing but the Self exists.

Somewhat comically, it seems that not only has Swami committed the error of taking that first picture to be real, along with the image of ‘flesh and blood’ Bhagavan playing upon it, he has compounded his error by coming to observe that unreal Bhagavan in the processing of observing another unreal ‘shadow’ Bhagavan, projected upon another screen within that original one. Shades of an infinite regression here! Having referred at first, ostensibly at least, to his image on the screen as ‘shadow’ Bhagavan, we now see that ‘flesh and blood’ Bhagavan refers to himself as ‘*pratyakṣa Bhagavan*’. In philosophical terms *pratyakṣa* means basically ‘that which can be directly verified by the senses.’ But is this what Bhagavan means here? Both Bhagavans, the ‘flesh and blood’ one and the ‘shadow’ one, are *pratyakṣa* in that sense, are they not? One verifiable by all the senses and the other by two only, sight and sound. This is how the *ajñāni* sees things. But to Bhagavan, a *jñāni*, what is *pratyakṣa*? The only ‘sense’ he has is the sense of being and the only thing verified, Self-verified, in fact, is the Self. We might imagine that Swami here did a ‘double-take’, as the full implication of Bhagavan’s words dawned upon him. He had indeed abandoned the real Bhagavan, the Self, and gone running after ‘shadow Bhagavans’, celluloid or otherwise, in direct contradiction of his master’s earlier express advice. We may assume that he retreated, as they say, ‘with his tail between his legs’, a chastened and wiser man. ▲