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Divine Names of Arunachala

14. ॐ श्रीमते नमः

om śrimate namaḥ

Prostration to the Noble One.

‘Śrī’ has many definitions, including ‘royalty, majesty, beauty, glory, splendour, and lustre’. The verb root from which it comes means ‘to diffuse light or radiance’.

In the first verse of the *Śrī Arunācala Aṣṭakam*, Bhagavan recounts his own awe of Lord Siva’s majesty as Arunachala thus: “Look, there it stands as if insentient. Mysterious is the way it works, beyond all human understanding. From my unthinking childhood, the immensity of Arunachala had shone in my awareness. But even when I learnt from someone that it was only Tiruvannamalai, I did not realise its meaning. When it stilled my mind and drew me to itself and I came near, I saw that it was stillness absolute.”¹

We are fortunate to have many first-hand descriptions of Bhagavan’s power, beauty and lustre in physical form. According to an early devotee, “Had you seen Him in those days [in the Virupaksha Cave], you would hardly have taken Him for a mere human being. His figure was a statue of burnished gold... He was an enchanting personality, who shed a captivating lustre on all, and a life-giving current flowed from Him, charging all those nearby, while His sparkling eyes irrigated those around Him with the nectar of His Being.” He goes on thus: “Our happiness in the presence of Sri Bhagavan at Sri Ramanasramam was comparable to the joy of the hosts of Siva on Mount Kailasa. Sri Bhagavan used to say ‘Kailasa is the abode of Siva; Arunachala is Siva Himself. Even in Kailasa things are as they are with us here. Devotees go to Siva, worship Him, serve Him, and hear from Him the interpretation of the Vedas and Vedanta day in and day out.’ So it was Kailasa at the foot of the Arunachala Hill, and Arunachala *Paramātma* in human form was Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi.”² — BKC

¹ Translation by Prof. K. Swaminathan.

² Iyer, Sundaresa, *At the Feet of Bhagavan*, p.17 and p.19.

The Ladder

It is rare for us to experience a true moment of stillness unless we deliberately make the space for it. Our lives are constantly in motion and we are never really sure what will happen next as we rise and fall on a seemingly ceaseless roller coaster of the unexpected.

The central thread that runs through all our lives is that we seek that which gives us peace and happiness, be it physical comfort, job security, a happy family or an absorbing hobby! As devotees of Sri Ramana Maharshi we seek a relationship with our guru that will purify and transform us so that we may be absorbed in the radiant light of Ramana Arunachala. For us that is the supreme goal. It is the pearl of great price. The question is not only what are we prepared to pay for it, but how are we to set about achieving it?

The image of the spiritual ladder has a long history in mysticism for it expresses in clear and authoritative terms the journey of the seeker in his or her development from ignorance to knowledge, from *tamas* to *sattva*, from darkness to light. By using the concept of the ladder our progress on the spiritual path can be gauged as to how far we have climbed through the various levels of experience and existence that we all must travel if we are to be infused with that divine light of understanding.

There are many examples in other traditions that speak of the ladder: the 14th century English mystic Walter Hilton's *The Scale (or Ladder) of Perfection*.¹ In the Greek Orthodox tradition, there is the especially influential *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* by John Climacus in the 6th century.²

The great Sufi mystic Jalal ud-Din Muhammad Rumi repeatedly used the concept of the ladder. In the *Mathnavi* he wrote that God put different ladders in the world that are destined for different people. He saw that our five senses are a ladder, though they end in this world unlike the spiritual quest that leads to a transcendental world. He said that even the spiritual master is a ladder, for the aspirant is led by the master towards higher realities, until the doors of grace are opened and the ladder is no longer necessary.³

For us, of all the spiritual texts, the simplest and most effective description of the steps is Bhagavan's *Upadeśa Sāram*.

Bhagavan spoke of two paths which face us: self-enquiry or surrender. Rumi wrote that one of the most important rungs on the ladder is trust in God. However he did not advocate idleness under the pretext that God will do everything. Our trust should be proactive and that means we should participate in the acceptance of God's will and be in harmony with it.⁴ This is not always easy, especially when events seem to go against what we wish. For instance the death of someone who is dear to us is particularly hard to swallow.

Yet through experience we know that the higher we climb the ladder the more we understand, the more mature we become, and consequently the more we are prepared to surrender ourselves and

¹ Incidentally the Greek word *klimax*, literally ladder, is derived from *kleinein*, to lean.

² "But from the lowest to the highest a soul cannot suddenly start, no more than a man who wants to climb a high ladder, and sets his foot on the lowest stave, and thinks he can, at the next step, go up to the highest. But he must go by degrees from one to another till he comes to the highest." Chapter One, Part Two.

³ *Mathnavi* VI v.4125: "The Pir [teacher] is the ladder to Heaven. ... When you make of me a ladder to go aloft, you will ascend to heaven without flying."

⁴ *Mathnavi* I. v.910-15: "Do not grapple with Destiny, ... lest Destiny also pick a quarrel with you./ One must be dead in the presence of the decree of God, so that no blow may come from the Lord .../ The Prophet said with a loud voice, 'While trusting in God bind the knee of your camel.' / ... 'The worker is beloved of God': through trusting in God do not become neglectful as to the (ways and) means."

annihilate our sense of individuality to the mysterious grace that works in us.

We may be impatient or, more to the point, desperate because of the urgency to find a way out of our stagnation, but the path itself is generally a slow step by step progression. There are rare instances when someone rapidly ascends to the top as Bhagavan did when he was still a youth in Madurai in 1896, but for the majority of us it is a slow journey and rightly so.

There are instances in Bhagavan's lifetime when someone pestered him for self-realisation (*ātma sāksātkāra*). He would oblige them if the demand was so strong that they would not listen to reason or take no for an answer. He would then direct towards them the power of grace, and invariably, in those who were not sufficiently mature they would quickly panic and either jump up and flee the room or beg him to stop for they felt like a person drowning in an ocean of overwhelming power or pressure. As with many other aspects of life, if one is not sufficiently prepared, one cannot accept the situation. Someone who has never learned how to cook would be completely overwhelmed if asked to bake a cake.

Bhagavan's Grace at full measure is a raging fire. But like a sensitive, compassionate mother he gives us what we need to overcome our latest obstacle, no more no less. As he commented, Grace is given according to the capacity of the seeker to absorb it. If we bring a tumbler, it will be filled. If we bring a cauldron it will be filled. Our job is to open our hearts wide to receive the ever present Grace. Bhagavan's generosity is as wide as the horizon.

The spiritual path is well defined and though each of us may think our progression is unique, it is not. Though the various challenges, stories and images that unfold are according to our own propensities, the fundamental principles of the path are one and the same. That is why the stories of saints, and the teachings they give us, are just as relevant today as they were 10 years or 500 years ago. The kernel of human nature is universal, for how else could we the stories of those who live on the other side of the world? How else could we identify with the spiritual journeys of those who went before us, however far in the historical past they lived. When we hear the ancient stories of spiritual heroes they give us hope that we too can make the journey.

If we have no faith in a higher purpose, in the transcendent qualities of our thoughts and feelings, then our life is essentially empty of meaning, for we have nowhere to go, no sense that we can rise above the obvious limitations of our daily striving and the suffering inherent in it. The image of the ladder immediately creates hope, for we affirm in our consciousness that there is something greater than the constraints that imprison us.

This is akin to the Four Noble Truths enunciated by The Buddha. They are: the truth of suffering (*dukkha*); the truth of the origin of suffering (*samudāya*); the truth of the cessation of suffering (*nirodha*); and the truth of the path to the cessation of suffering (*magga*). The last Truth is particularly important in view of this editorial. The Buddha says there is a way out of our suffering and he shows the way. Who among us has not felt that elation of the heart when we realise we are in the spiritual presence of a great master who can lead us out of our private valley of tears? Who has not stood before the *samādhi* of Bhagavan and realised that they have come home? It is a genuine experience that has happened to countless seekers.

We should not only recognise the power and grace of Ramana Maharshi but also realise that the state of self-realisation is attainable. We are not on a hopeless quest.

If we were not impregnated with the unequivocal certainty that we are now on the path, why then would we stay near Arunachala, or for those who have no other choice but to live elsewhere, why would they come back to Arunachala again and again? We have all received that conviction, that spark, which marks us for life. Again, this is a universal story, where the seeker in the midst of darkness is radiated with light and now knows for certain that there is a higher purpose. Our inner compass has been realigned to true north. All spiritual traditions speak of that great revelation that turns our world upside down. Instead of digging ourselves into a deeper and darker hole, we turn towards the light and climb out of our quagmire. The word ‘gospel’ means ‘good news’. The good news is that there is liberation. There is a release from ignorant suffering.

Gradually we should realise that the key lies within us. Bhagavan constantly affirms that we do have the resources within us. In that sense we are the ladder. By that we mean the powerful aspiration to

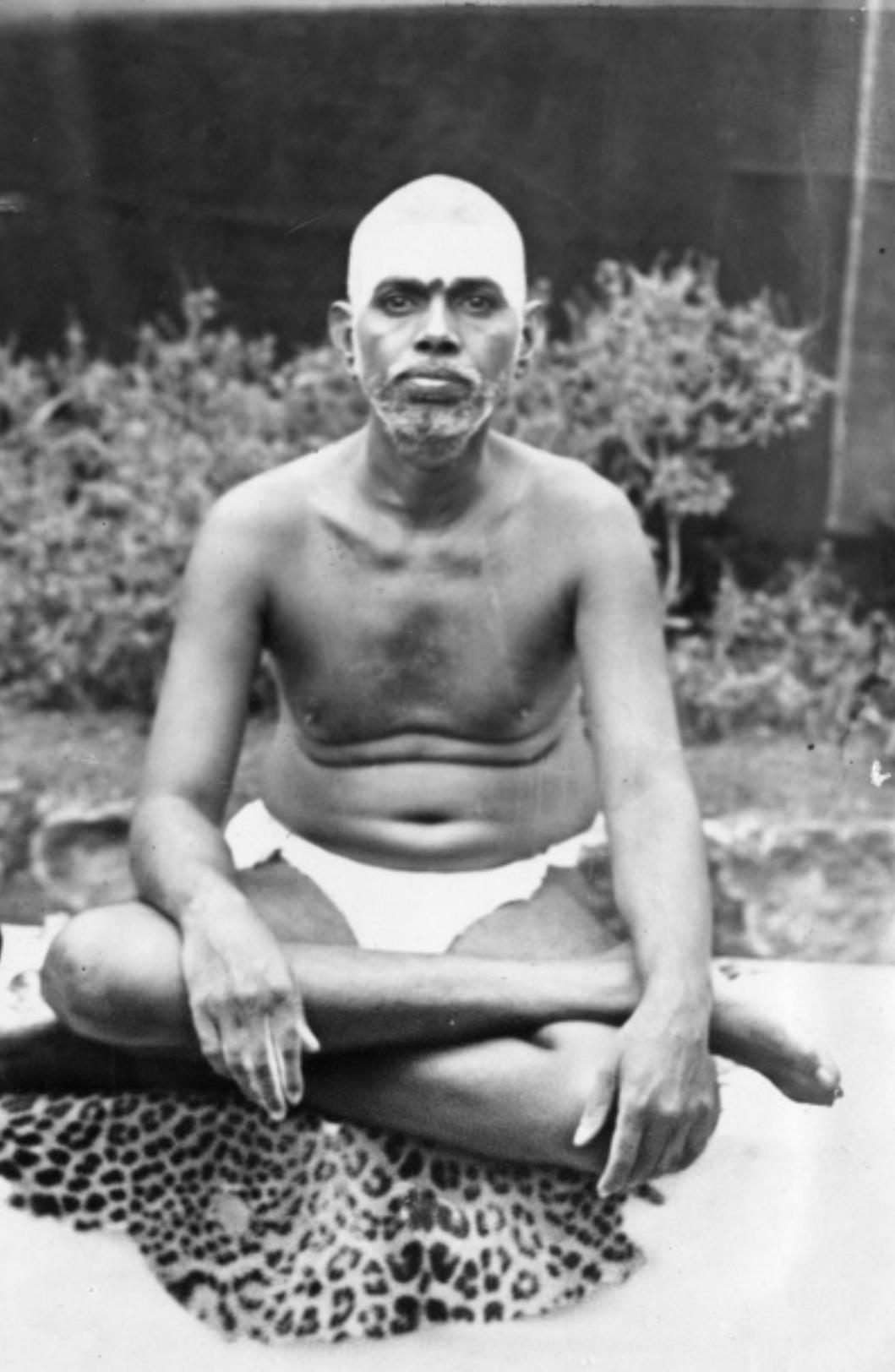
transcend our ignorance and limitations is individually embedded within us. It is part of our DNA. It is what makes us humans rather than animals who are reliant on instincts. Our ambition may range from something basic such as the security of a well-paid job, right up to the other end of the scale, with the determination to achieve *samādhi*, or one-pointedness, total calm. *Samādhi* means ‘equal mind’. It comes from the root ‘*dha*’, ‘to hold’ and ‘*a*’ plus ‘*sam*’, ‘together completely’. The implication is that one is free from wants or desires. Most of us have experienced moments of total calm and serenity when the world disappears and there is pure awareness. The question is how to extend this experience so that our lives are imbued with it.

This is where the *idea* of ascent to a higher realm is essential to this quest. In some traditions they emphasise that the way is the goal. That is, we are not going to suddenly discover gold at the end of the rainbow and everything prior to that reward is irrelevant. Quite the contrary, everything we do is pertinent. Everything we feel, think or do is germane to our journey.

The first step to creating a ladder is to build a foundation that does not shake. That foundation is made of *yama* and *niyama*, the basic tenets of good behaviour. Some of the core precepts are right living, truthfulness, non-stealing, moderation in all things, to be non-judgmental and to carefully weigh situations without bias and if possible, with compassion. But above all, is *ahimsa*, that is, do not harm others by word, speech or action. In fact all other qualities come naturally with the cultivation of the attitude not to harm others.

What is necessary at one rung of the ladder is redundant at a higher level. At each stage of our development other qualities are required. We do not remain stationary but grow and expand using new tools. That is why it is presumptuous to ‘know’ what another person needs by way of development, when we ourselves are often in the dark. For one person it could well be reading and absorbing the written word; for another it is silent meditation; for another *japa*; for another ritual. We all should carefully observe what works for us and then decide the way forward.

But above all, do not just think and talk about it. Climb the ladder, one step at a time. ▲



The Essential Role of the Guru

LAKSHMI SREEDHAR

Why does the guru take so much trouble to teach and try to transform his disciples? It is only his compassion that makes him come again and again and teach. It is not that he seeks to gain anything from his disciples as he is not interested in the material offerings of his disciples. The Guru has a great thirst or a burning desire to see his disciples evolve and attain the Supreme State of no return in the shortest possible time. In fact, the Guru would like to see his disciples excel him. Even in the Mahabharata, there is a fight between Parasurama and Bhishma on account of Amba who wants Parasurama to force Bhishma to marry her. Parasurama who is Bhishma's teacher is unable to defeat Bhishma even after fighting with him for many days and ends the fight by praising and blessing the prowess of his disciple.

The Guru is only keen to see that his disciples do not stagnate on the Path or go astray. Even if they leave him, as they tend to, when

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steeped in their worldly life, he is always waiting for them to come back. In the meantime, he keeps a watch over their life in his own way, waiting to intervene at the right moment. In the *Ribhu Gita*, of which Bhagavan spoke highly, even after teaching his disciple many things, Sage Ribhu comes in disguise to see how his disciple Nidagha is progressing. Nidagha is not practising what his Guru had taught him as he is steeped in *samsāra*.

Nidagha was one day watching a procession in which the king was riding on an elephant. His Guru came in the disguise of an ignorant villager and asked him what they were looking at, Nidagha then showed him the royal procession. The seemingly ignorant villager wanted to know which was the king and which was the elephant! The disciple replied with an irritation that the one seated above was the king and the one below was the elephant. Feigning not to understand the terms ‘above’ and ‘below’, the disciple was made to demonstrate them so that the disguised Sage could understand them. Nidagha made the old man bend down and got on his back and said, “Now ‘I’ am above and ‘you’ are below.” Next, the poor villager pretended that he could not even understand what the meanings of ‘I’ and ‘you’ were.

Suddenly Nidagha realised that it was his Guru who had come to wake him up from his spiritual slumber and put him back on his rails. He had been long lost in the world of sense pleasures. He fell at the Guru’s feet and once again learnt all that he had forgotten.

The Guru is keen that his disciples do not seek the limelight of the world but settle in the light of the Self in the Heart. Bhagavan has said that just as a prey that has fallen into the tiger’s jaws cannot escape, so too those who have come under the gracious look of the Guru shall be saved and never forsaken.

However, the disciple on his part should unswervingly follow the path shown by the Master. Thus it is a two way responsibility. The Guru cannot by himself transform the disciple unless the disciple himself is interested to change and is willing to put in his efforts. Only in sustained *satsaṅga* will one be able to hold on to the Royal Path and make speedy progress. When *satsaṅga* is not there, the disciples tend to slip back from their Path easily. *Satsaṅga* especially with our Guru, is vital to keep our bad *vāsana*-s from rising and also to develop strength of mind. For instance, we make a path in our garden for us to move about. If we are regularly walking on it, grass or weeds will not

grow on it. Suppose we are away for a long time. By the time we come back, a lot of grass and weeds would have grown on the path, totally covering it. Then we have to search for the path and again work on it.

Similar is the case with our *vāsana*-s. If we do not maintain *satsaṅga*, the *vāsana*-s of anger and other bad habits will once again start rising in us, due to weakness of mind and slackness of effort. As long as there is *satsaṅga*, only good qualities like love, generosity, helpfulness and humility will arise in us and we will behave accordingly. We should never allow these good qualities to go down and get buried once again. We should retain them through *satsaṅga*, prayers, and enquiry.

There is an incident in the life of the Buddha to drive home the value of *satsaṅga*: Once the Buddha happened to stay in a place with just one monk, the elderly Meghiya. On their round for alms, Meghiya was one day attracted to a lush mango-grove and wanted to retire to that grove for meditation. Buddha advised him to wait for another monk to arrive to take his place with him.

However, Meghiya soon became impatient and on his voicing the request for the third time, the Master allowed him to go. Meghiya was very happy to receive this permission and went and sat down in the grove to meditate. But soon many thoughts of his past life came to his mind. He began to think negatively about why he had renounced the world to take up the life of a monk. He reflected that had he stayed with his family, he would not have had to struggle for food by begging or leading a life of discomfort. He felt that his brother who had taken over his lands must be having a happy life and felt a little jealous about it. He felt that he should go back and reclaim his property from his brother. In this manner, many thoughts came into his mind when he sat down to meditate.

Soon, by the Grace of his Master, he realised the mischief his mind was playing and rushed back to where his Master was staying and fell at his feet and regretted having left him. Buddha explained to him that till he had stabilised his mind, based on the teachings, he should never leave the shade of the Guru. Thus Meghiya realised the value of *satsaṅga* and never again left his Master's side.

For those who are in samsara, it is important that they go again and again to the Master till their minds become strong and they are firmly stabilised on the Royal Path. Due to the many distractions in

the world, they tend to easily slide back and get derailed. Thus the battery needs to be charged regularly. The Master is only too pleased to give them all the help they need to rid themselves of the dirt that has accumulated in their minds. At times the Guru may appear to be harsh with us, but he is only like the *dhobi* who beats the clothes on a stone to remove their stubborn dirt and not to tear them. The Guru is the instrument through whom God guides his devotees so that they may go back to Him.

The mighty elephant of ego cannot be brought under control except when the lion of the Guru comes into our life. Every person's life will continue to take the path of *prārabdha* unless he takes some steps to change course. The Guru's Grace is the outside force which comes as a *simha swapnam* to wake you up from your dream-life of delusion. Old age comes by itself, no effort is required. But maturity of mind does not come by itself; it has to be earned by hard effort. As long as we are unaware of the true purpose of life, we will only go about filling our stomachs with tasty food, dressing up and going about seeking worldly pleasures.

Bhagavan says that if we want to sustain ourselves on the Royal Path we have to start by giving up our desires one by one with understanding. Otherwise we cannot progress on the path. Worldly desires will only take us back to the world and not to God. Moreover, any unfulfilled desire will lead us back to rebirth. Thus we have to conquer all our desires and attachments and become perfect through enquiry and prayers.

Giving up the worldly desires is *vairāgya* and to traverse the Royal Path is the true *sādhana*. So *vairāgya* is a prerequisite for the *sādhana* to fructify. *Vairāgya* involves detaching the mind from the objects of the world while *sādhana* internalises the mind and focuses it on its source. All attachments lead to misery. Swami Rama Tirtha says that if you hold a cow by its rope, the cow also holds you by the rope. The rope of attachment leads but to bondage. Why do we get attached to persons and objects?

If we develop detachment instead, we will be able to retain our peace. For instance, we are attached to our children. If they don't eat properly or study well we will be much affected and leads to unnecessary arguments with them. However, if we develop some detachment towards them through enquiry and understanding, we

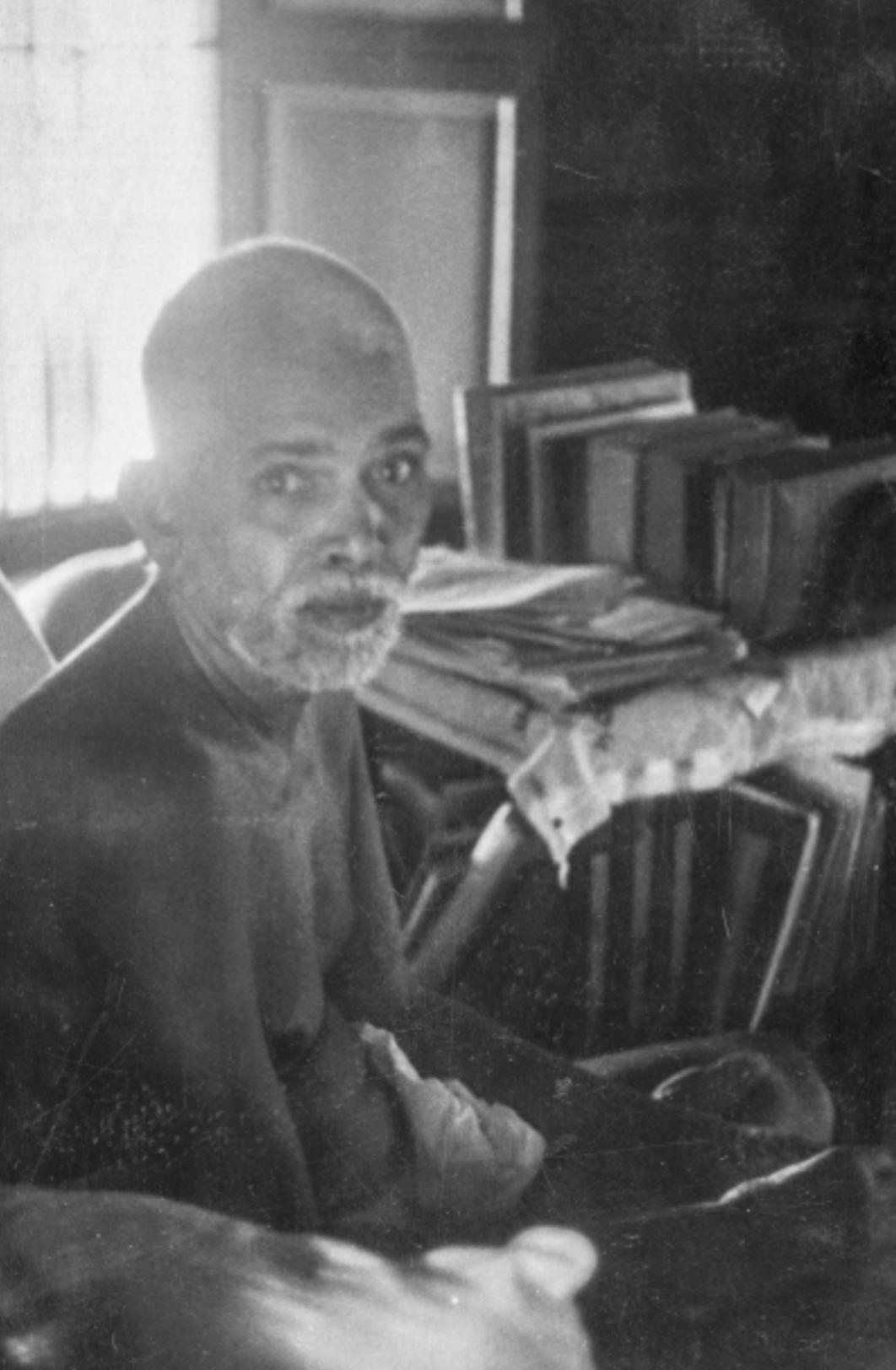
will be able to let go of the problems and retain peace. This does not mean that we will not do our duty of telling our children when they go on the wrong path. It only means that we will not become affected when they do not listen to us. We will then be able to let go of the problem in a spirit of surrender to Bhagavan.

How do we prepare ourselves so that we may lead our life after retirement in a happy and purposeful manner? This is possible if we hold onto Bhagavan and His teachings and learn to see through all the situations in life. By the time we become old, our minds will have grown lighter, calmer and stronger due to our conquering much of our desires, attachments and expectations.

We will be able to easily meditate and conquer all the obstructing *vāsana-s* on the Path by the strength of mind we achieve.

Most people who have not learnt the art of living dread the day when they have to retire as they do not know how to spend their time usefully. They get bored sitting at home not knowing what to do. Some people therefore take up reemployment. Others sit at home and meddle unnecessarily in the affairs of others in the house. Their favourite occupation is to grumble and find fault with others and offer unsolicited advice. Thus they spoil their relationships with other members of their family who begin to see them as a burden. Thus they spend the evening of their life miserably and make an inglorious exit from the world.

We all have to hasten to work out our Salvation with diligence as the Buddha said at the time of his death. Bhagavan says that our time is short and the road is long. Fortunate are those who have found not only a Guru, but a *sadguru* – namely Bhagavan – to lead us to this glorious destination. We should not fritter away this glorious opportunity that has come in this life, probably after numerous rebirths. Earnest effort never fail. So make hay while the sun shines and strike while the iron is hot. Start early, travel slowly and reach safely. Today is the auspicious day to make a start. May the unfailing Light of Bhagavan's Grace guide our every step so that we may fulfil the purpose of life in this very birth. ▲



The Paramount Importance of Self Attention

Part Twenty Nine

SADHU OM

AS RECORDED BY MICHAEL JAMES

24th October 1978

Sadhu Om: If *japa* [repetition of a name of God or some other mantra] or *mūrti-dhyāna* [meditation upon a form of God] is done just to gain one-pointedness of mind, there is not much spiritual benefit to be gained thereby, because name and form are *mithyā amśa*, the false aspects of *brahman*. For *japa* or *mūrti-dhyāna* to be spiritually efficacious, a *satya amśa* [one of the three real aspects of *brahman*, namely *sat-cit-ānanda*, existence-awareness-bliss, also known as *asti-bhāti-priya*, being-illumination-love] must be combined with them, and that *satya amśa* is love, which is the *ānanda* or *priya* aspect. To the extent that they are done with heart-melting love, *japa* and *mūrti-dhyāna* are powerful aids on the path of self-surrender, because they are each a means by which love can be focused and directed back to God

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, happinessoofbeing.com.

or guru, who is its source, and the more our love is focused on God or guru, the more willing we will become to give ourselves entirely to him.

If *japa* of a name of God or meditation on a form of God is done to gain one-pointedness of mind, it would be spiritually beneficial only to the extent that it helps to enkindle love for God in one's heart, but if it does not enkindle such love, it can become more of a hindrance than a help on the path of self-surrender, because it would strengthen the mind's outgoing power, its ability to focus its attention on second and third person objects. The more one does *japa* or *dhyāna* with true heart-melting love, the less one will have interest in other things, and thereby desire for and attachment to anything other than God will gradually drop off. Thus as one's love for God grows, so surrender blossoms in one's heart. Hence the love with which we do *japa* or *dhyāna* will eventually enable us to merge in the reality of the object of our love.

Even though initially we may consider God or *guru* to be a second or third person, the more our love for him grows, the more our love for ourselves as a person, whom we consider to be the first person, will diminish, and consequently the more we will yield ourselves to him. When our love and surrender thus grow sufficiently, it will be easy for God in the form of *guru* to turn our mind back within to face ourselves alone, thereby eradicating our ego.

Of all the names and forms of God, the names and forms of Arunachala and Ramana have a unique power to enkindle love for self-attention in our heart. The only second person that will automatically turn our attention back to the first person is Arunachala-Ramana, as Bhagavan himself indicates in verse 10 of *Śrī Aruṇācala Padigam*:

I have seen a wonder, the magnetic hill that seizes [or forcibly attracts] the soul. Subduing the mischievous activity of the soul who thinks of it once, pulling [dragging or attracting] [that soul] to face towards itself, the one [or peerless] [infinite self-awareness that shines within the heart as 'I'], and [thereby] making it *acala* [motionless] like itself, it accepts [and consumes] that sweet [spiritually ripened and pure] soul as *bali* [food offered in sacrifice]. What [a wonder] this is! O souls, be saved [by] thinking of the great Aruna Hill, this killer of the soul, who shines in the heart [as 'I'].

2nd November 1978

Sadhu Om: Egolessness is perfect humility, so the more humble we are, the closer we are to eradicating the ego. This is why Bhagavan strongly emphasised the need for us to be humble, as he did, for example, in the final paragraph of *Nāṇ Yār?*:

If oneself rises [or appears] [as ego or mind], everything rises [or appears]; if oneself subsides [disappears or ceases], everything subsides [disappears or ceases]. To whatever extent sinking low [subsiding or being humble] we proceed [or conduct ourself], to that extent there is goodness [benefit or virtue]. If one is [continuously] restraining [curbing, subduing or reducing] the mind, wherever one may be one can be.

When he says, ‘To whatever extent sinking low we proceed, to that extent there is goodness’, he uses the term *tārndu*, [an adverbial participle] which means sinking low, subsiding, declining, bending, bowing or worshipping, so it implies being humble and submissive. The lower the ego sinks or subsides, the more do humility and surrender take over.

Humility is divinity. In verses 494, 496 and 497 of *Guru Vācaka Kōvai* Bhagavan says that one becomes great to the extent that one becomes humble, and that the reason why God is so great that he is worthy to be worshipped by all living beings is that he is so humble and free of ego that he considers himself to be the servant of even the lowliest of creatures. He is supreme because he is humbler than even the most humble.

3rd November 1978

Sadhu Om: What we are seeking is always present and has never been lost, because it is our own real nature. To illustrate this Bhagavan often used the analogy of a woman who was searching everywhere for her necklace without noticing that she was already wearing it. Seeing her frantic search, a friend of hers pointed out that it was around her own neck and had therefore never been lost. The friend who thus points out to us that the happiness we are seeking is ourself is *guru*.

We can elaborate on this analogy by saying that instead of pointing out that the necklace is around her neck, her friend gives her a mirror

and suggests that if she looks in it that may help her to find her necklace. She then has a choice whether to look in the mirror or not. If she looks in it, it will enable her to see where she should look to find her necklace, namely on her own neck. The mirror is like Bhagavan's teachings. If we study them carefully, they will show us where to look to find the happiness we are seeking.

Having looked in the mirror and seen where the necklace is to be found, the woman gives up searching for it in other places and feels her own neck, where she finds it was all along. Likewise, having studied Bhagavan's teachings, we should give up seeking happiness outside ourself, and should instead look within to see that it is our own real nature.

When the woman feels her own neck and finds her necklace there, she no longer needs the help of the mirror, because she is now clearly aware that she has all along been wearing it. Likewise, when we look within and thereby see that we ourself are infinite happiness, we will no longer need the help of Bhagavan's teachings, because we will be clearly aware that the happiness we are seeking is what we always actually are and can therefore never have been lost.

Sadhu Om [in reply to a lady who asked whether the *mantra-japa* she had been doing was an obstacle to following Bhagavan's path]: Suppose that you start to ride a cycle in order to reach a certain destination, but after riding a short distance you find that the ground beneath you is moving, and when you look to see why, you find that you are on the deck of a ship that is carrying you to your destination. Your *japa* is just like your riding a cycle on the deck of that ship. It seemed to be necessary before you knew you were already on a ship carrying you faster to your destination than your cycle ever could, but once you know you are travelling on that ship, you will understand that there is no need for you to cycle anymore.

The only thing you need to be sure of is that you want to reach the destination towards which the ship is carrying you. If that is the destination you want to reach, all you need do is relax and enjoy the journey. However, if you want to reach some other destination, you are free to get off the ship and row a small boat towards wherever you want to go.

THE PARAMOUNT IMPORTANCE OF SELF ATTENTION

The ship is Bhagavan's grace, which is carrying us along the path of self-enquiry and self-surrender towards the eradication of ego. Relaxing and enjoying the journey is surrendering oneself to his grace.

In order to surrender oneself we must avoid rising as ego, which we can do most effectively and completely by vigilantly attending to oneself, thereby giving no room to the rising of any other thought, as Bhagavan teaches us in the thirteenth paragraph of *Nāṇ Yār?*:

Being *ātma-niṣṭhāparan* [one who is completely fixed in and as oneself], giving not even the slightest room to the rising of any *cintana* [thought] other than *ātma-cintana* ['thought of oneself', self-contemplation or self-attentiveness], alone is giving oneself to God. Even though one places whatever amount of burden upon God, that entire amount he will bear. Since one *paramēśvara śakti* [supreme ruling power or power of God] is driving all *kāryas* [whatever needs or ought to be done or to happen], instead of we also yielding to it, why to be perpetually thinking, 'it is necessary to do like this; it is necessary to do like that'? Though we know that the train is going bearing all the burdens, why should we who go travelling in it, instead of remaining happily leaving our small luggage placed on it [the train], suffer, bearing it [our luggage] on our head?

Doing any *sādhana* other than self-enquiry and self-surrender, is either like cycling on the deck of the ship, which is an unnecessary effort, or like rowing a small boat in order to go to some other destination. Like a passenger on a train or a ship, we should surrender to the power of Bhagavan's infinite love, which will unfailingly carry us to our destination, unlimited happiness. To the extent that we are willing to surrender oneself to Bhagavan all other *sādhanas* will naturally drop off. ▲

(to be continued)



KEYWORD

Bha: To Shine

B.K. CROISSANT

There are several words in Sanskrit that mean ‘to shine’. One of them in particular, however, is often used in poetry. In the infinitive form it is ‘*bhā*’ or ‘*bhās*’, with an expanded meaning ‘to be bright or splendid, to be luminous, to illuminate.’ Many nouns and adjectives are derived from these two verbal roots. For example, ‘*bhās*’, a feminine noun, means ‘light, lustre, brightness; a ray of light; a reflection; majesty, glory, splendour.’

This article will focus on three verses from Ādi Śāṅkarāchārya’s *Ātma Bodha* in which various forms of these verbs appear. Śāṅkara’s masterpiece was beloved by Bhagavan from Virupaksha days, and his brilliant translation of it, which is included in the Ashram’s Tamil *pārāyaṇa*, was his last composition. Its invocation reads:

*Can Āchārya Śāṅkara, the enlightener of the Self through his treatise Ātma Bodham, be ‘other’ than the Self, the form of Ātman? Who else but he, abiding in my heart as that very Self, bespeaks that this day in Tamil? (What else is there other than Ātman?)*¹

¹ Kanakammal, Smt. T.R., *Commentary on Anuvāda Nūnmālai*, p.230.

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.

Verse 28

आत्मावभासयत्येको बुद्ध्यादीनीन्द्रियाण्यपि।

दीपो घटादिवत्स्वात्मा जडैस्तैर्नावभास्यते॥

ātmāvabhāsayatyeko buddhyādīnīndriyaṅyapi |

dīpo ghaṭādivatsvātmā jaḍaistairnāvabhāsyate ||

ātmā-the Self; *avabhāsayati*-illuminates; *ekaḥ*-alone; *buddhyādīni*-intellect, etc.; *indriyāṅi*-sense organs; *api*-also; *dīpaḥ*-lamp; *ghaṭādi*-vat-like, jar, etc.; *svātmā*-one's *ātman*; *jaḍaiḥ*-inert; *taiḥ*-by them; *na*-not; *āvabhāsyate*-illuminated

*The Ātman alone illumines (avabhāsayati) the intellect, mind and sense organs like a lamp in a jar or pot. One's Ātman is not illumined (āvabhāsyate) by them, which are inert.*²

In Kanakammal's literal translation of Bhagavan's Tamil translation, she expands and deepens the meaning of 'illumine' by emphasizing the *Ātman*'s effulgence both at the beginning and end of the verse.

*Filled with effulgent light the Ātman, shining as the One Vastu without a second, just like a lamp that illumines pots, pans and jars, illumines the mind, intellect and sense organs. By them, being inert and non-luminous, never can the effulgent Ātman be illumined. Know thus and be certain.*³

This truth recalls verse four in Śaṅkara's inspiring masterpiece *Hymn to Sri Dakshinamurti*. It reads as follows:

*To Him the blessed guru Sri Dakshinamurti whose luminous awareness issues forth through the eyes and other sense organs like the bright (bhāsvaram) light of a great lamp placed in a jar with many holes, Him alone illumining (bhāntam) objects and causing awareness of them as 'I know', and after whom this entire universe shines (anubhāti), may this obeisance be.*⁴

Commentators of verse 28 often liken its meaning to a well-known

² Word-for-word and translations of all three verses are adapted from Swami Chinmayananda's *Ātma Bodha*, 2004.

³ Kanakammal, Smt. T.R., *Commentary on Anuvāda Nūnmālai*, p.296.

⁴ Author's translation.

verse in the *Kena Upanishad* (I, 2). Although it does not evoke the idea of shining, it points to the *Ātman* behind the senses we experience in the material world.

*The Self is the ear of the ear,
The eye of the eye, the mind of the mind,
The word of words, the life of life.
Rising above the senses and the mind
And renouncing separate existence,
The wise realize the deathless Self.⁵*

Verse 61

यद्भासा भास्यतेर्कादि भास्यैर्यत्तु न भास्यते।
येन सर्वमिदं भाति तद्ब्रह्मेत्यवधारयेत् ॥

*yadbhāsā bhāsyate 'rkādi bhāsyairyattu na bhāsyate |
yena sarvamidam bhāti tadbrahmetyavadhārayet ||*

yad bhāsā-by whose light; *bhāsyate*-are illumined; *arkādi*-Sun, etc.; *bhāsyaiḥ*-by the luminous orbs; *yaḥ*-who; *tu*-but; *na*-not; *bhāsyate*-is illumined; *yena*-by whom; *sarvam*-all; *idam*-this; *bhāti*-shines; *tad brahma*-that to be Brahman; *iti*-thus; *avadhārayet*-realize, know.

By whose light (bhāsā) are illumined (bhāsyate) the Sun, etc. but who is not illumined (bhāsyate) by the luminous orbs (bhāsyaiḥ). Know that to be Brahman by whom all this universe shines (bhāti).

In other words, Brahman illumines the world and is self-luminous. The last line of this verse is especially meaningful in that it occurs as a *leit-motif* in five previous verses of the *Ātma Bodha* that extol the glory of Brahman and rapturously explain its nature.

Consider the following verse from the Upanishads:

There the sun does not shine (na bhāti), nor the moon nor the stars; nor do these flashes of lightning shine there (bhānti). How can this fire do so? Everything shines according (anubhāti) as He does so (bhātam); by His light (bhāsā) all this shines diversely (vibhāti).⁶

⁵ Easwaran, Eknath, *The Upanishads*, p.213.

⁶ *Mundaka Upanishad* II,2.10; also *Katha Upanishad*, II.2.15. Translation by Swami Gambhirananda.

In a verse from the *Hastāmalakā Gītā* by Sri Śaṅkara, a young child who possesses an uncanny awareness of the *Ātman* and identifies totally with it, points to the source of the Sun's light. The poem was lovingly translated into Tamil by Bhagavan and is also included in the Ashram's *pārāyaṇa*.

*The eyes behold the objects only when illumined (prabhātam) by the Sun and not when there is no light (na ābhātam). By whose light (ābhātaḥ) the Sun thus gives light to the eyes (ābhāsayati), that one, ever-present Ātman, I am – OM!*⁷

Finally, verse 61 evokes verse 7 of the *Uḷḷadu Nārpadu Anubandam*, which is from a Sanskrit composition by Ādi Śaṅkara that Bhagavan rendered in Tamil. It reads as follows:

*Guru: What serves as light for you? Disciple: For me, that which illumines by day is the sun and by night the lamp. G: What is the light that is aware of these lights? D: That I know by the light of the eye. G: What is the light that is aware of the eye? D: I know it by the light of my mind. G: What is the light that knows the mind? D: That is I. Then the Guru said, 'Therefore the Light of all lights are Thou!' The Disciple said, 'Verily I AM THAT.'*⁸

Verse 67

हृदाकाशोदितो ह्यात्मा बोधभानुस्तमोपहृत् ।
सर्वव्यापी सर्वधारी भाति भासयतेखिलम् ॥

hr̥dākāśodito hyātmā bodhabhānustamo 'pahṛt |
sarvavyāpī sarvadhārī bhāti bhāsayate 'khilam ||

hr̥d ākāśaḥ uditaḥ-which rises in the sky of the heart; *hi*-verily; *ātmā*-the *Ātman*; *bodhabhānuḥ*-the Sun of knowledge; *tamaḥ*-darkness; *apahṛt*-destroys; *sarvavyāpī*-which pervades everything; *sarvadhārī*-sustains all; *bhāti*-shines; *bhāsayate*-makes to shine; *akhilam*-everything.

⁷ Venkataraman, Sri Nochur, *The Song of Silence*, p.38.

⁸ Kanakammal, Smt. T.R., *Commentary on Aruṅācala Pañchakam and Upadēsa Nūn Mālai*, p.553.

The Ātman, the Sun of knowledge that rises in the sky of the heart, destroys the darkness of ignorance, pervades and sustains all, shines (bhāti) and makes everything to shine (bhāsayate).

Kanakammal expounds brilliantly as follows:

The state of ātma sākṣātkāra, the attainment of oneness with Brahman, is described in this verse. When jñāna dawns within the space of the Heart, with the experience of being the Self, one finds that Ātman, the Self, pervading all the moving and non-moving objects of the world, in all the objects and matters of prakṛti, and He, the Self, alone remains as the entire world and as all the objects in it as well. Ātman as Brahman is the sustainer of all, the unshakable foundation of the universe and its objects.

The objects of the world become known when the dawn of the sun dispels the darkness enveloping them. In the same way, as the fruit of the intense sādhana of śravaṇa, manana, ātma-vicāra, etc. the sun of Knowledge rises in the firmament of the Heart dispelling the darkness of ignorance and shines as the effulgence of jñāna. Viewed in that light of jñāna, the entire universe appears as His form. Ātman alone, sustaining all, illumining all, shines in Its innate effulgence.⁹

In verse 20 of the *Gītā Sāram*, the lamp of knowledge, which destroys darkness, is shining.

*From pure compassion, dwelling in their SELF,
By the shining (bhāsvatā) lamp of knowledge I destroy
Their darkness which from ignorance is born.¹⁰*

Bhagavan's translation of that same verse gives it fuller meaning and potency.

I, dwelling in the Self (heart/intellect) of those devotees with śraddhā and zeal and who have gained the yoga of enquiry, destroy out of pure compassion, the dense darkness of nescience

⁹ Kanakammal, Smt. T.R., *Commentary on Anuvāda Nūnmālai*, p. 388-389.

¹⁰ *Bhagavad Gīta*, verse 10-11. Translation by Major Chadwick, with corrections by Bhagavan.

– the beginningless ignorance – by the resplendent lamp of knowledge that sheds its lustrous light. Know this.¹¹

In conclusion, the great Sanskrit poet Kavyakantha Ganapati Muni, was very fond of *bhā*, ‘to shine’, and used it frequently in his *Forty Verses in Adoration of Sri Ramana*. Significantly, it appears in the first verse, adding lustre and power to everything that follows.

*I bow down at the Lotus Feet of the Master, the Seer, Sri Ramana who showed me God shining (bhāntam) beyond the darkness.*¹² ▲

¹¹ Kanakammal, Smt. T.R., *Commentary on Anuvāda Nūnmālai*, p.81.

¹² Sankaranarayanan. S., *English Rendering and Commentary on Forty Verses in Adoration of Sri Ramana*, p.5.

Unerring

Neera Kashyap

To feel a dull gnawing unripeness,
yet not give in to haste may be the answer.

The lotus is just a few leaves and a pod
beneath the surface of still waters,
yet waits amid muck and fish and insects
till its stem pushes clear to the surface,
washed clean by the same waters
– slimed, turgid, stagnant.

Emerging,

its head bobs straight up to the sun.

Its petals open one by one, all clean.

The answer may be to live with dirt, be cleaned by dirt
till ripeness comes
without haste.

Sri Mahaswami

The Sage with Eyes of Light

SERGE DEMETRIAN

We continue the series of extracts from a manuscript titled Sri Mahaswami, The Sage with Eyes of Light that relates the direct experiences of the author with Śrī Kāñci Pīṭhātipati Jagadguru Śrī Sañkarācārya, Śrī Candraśekarendra Sarasvati Swāmī which took place from 1968 until the mahāsamādhi of Śrī Mahāswami in 1994.

Vyāsa-pūjā

Kanchipuram, Saturday 18th July 1970

I started towards Little Kanchipuram where the Vyāsa-pūjā was to be celebrated. I reached the local math by 9 am. The Young Sañkarācārya, under a medium sized festive umbrella, had just returned from the river Palar where he had completed the ritual of the shaving. He was preceded by an elephant and by musicians, and some two hundred persons also followed him. They were rather nice, but they seemed to me not very religiously motivated. In front of the main entrance, a coconut was broken on the ground as an offering to Ganapati, the deity with an elephant's head who wards off the obstacles. Sanskrit verses were recited.

I also offered two bananas to the elephant; it is a female with a lame leg; it has been given to the math as it could not work. In between, it has learned to pass the hat round for its mahout. As soon as it gets a

piece of money it gives it to its elephant driver and delicately poses its trunk for one second on the head of the donor, which is taken as a blessing of Ganapati. It is impressive to see what these animals can do with their trunk: for the ancients the trunk was a hand, hasta in Sanskrit; from this comes the Sanskrit name for elephant, *hastin*, which can mean ‘(the one) with a hand’.

I was instructed by the guards to stay just on the threshold of the gate, as foreigners are not allowed inside the compound. I gripped a post trying not to be swept away by the thick crowd that swirled around. By this time, Śrī Mahāswami came from the same Palar River but by another way. He had to enter by a smaller gate as he is not anymore the head of the math. I was well placed and saw him at close quarters. The crowd came near, and almost pushed him, but it is a thing that obviously does not trouble him. He is so different! One would say only he really exists, the others are mere shadows!

Śrī Mahāswami’s head and face are shaved. His features are finely marked and there is a particular gentleness, but also a surprising energy which is that of a powerful man, capable of anything but completely the master of himself, that is, without being needlessly rigid. He accepted all the prostrations, low bows, salutations, the ritual offerings of fire with calm and gracious signs of his head and with his hand open in front of him.

He was stopped every two or three steps, but he finally reached the gate. The short barrel-form drums (*mridangams*) of the traditional musical party, fearful with their sharp and dry noise of broken bones along with the long black flutes (*nādaswarams*) that sent pitched and nasal sounds, launched an orderly attack against my ears. One should be accustomed to high decibels. Despite the resounding obstacle, I continued to hold onto my position. My stubbornness for a good cause was recompensed. Śrī Mahāswami passed by a couple of feet in front of me.

I catch a glimpse of his profile. The non-shaved eyebrows protrude. However, what impresses is his mouth. Both his lips often curved in a so lovely smile are now pursed up and cast in front in an attitude that expresses determination and force before a fight. One could almost think that he enters the math for a vital confrontation and not for a religious ceremony.

I send someone inside with my offerings of flowers and fruits and stay without moving at the point permitted by the guard. Unluckily I am positioned towards the left, near the party of the musicians. In return, from time to time I can see Śrī Mahāswami at the bottom of the courtyard, at some twenty metres, on a lower platform, a kind of stage in between two whitewashed mat-palisades. A curtain occasionally closes off the platform. He will officiate.

In front of the podium, sitting on the ground, were two rows of monks, *sannyāsin*-s, of different ages, clad in ochre. Behind them, there was a corridor between two wooden fences where thronged the devotees who wanted to have a closer look at the *pūjā*. Behind them also, towards the gate, where I stood, were two or three rows of aged persons; then a space of some twelve metres where the public sat. I sprang up on my toes, asked some to sit down as they stood up without thinking of those behind them; I leaned in all directions endeavouring to see the service.

The traditional story of a Tamil devotee came to my mind. Being an outcast, he was not received inside the temple where Śiva, his favourite deity, stood. He prayed with such consistent fervour from outside the temple that the large granite statue of Nandi, the bull, that is traditionally situated in front of Śiva and thus obstructs a direct view from the entrance door to the sanctum, moved sideways so that Śiva could bless his devotee. Subsequently he became a renowned saint. The story does not mention anything of what happened to those who prevented the aspirant to sainthood from seeing his God. We are in India and so we remember only the good...

Finally, I have myself also displayed some determination, because I stood on my feet right to the end: five hours! It had not been easy. The party of musicians observing that a foreigner was among the onlookers surpassed themselves. If my tympanums did not burst it was certainly due to a special protection of Śrī Mahāswami. In addition, there was no thought of eating or even drinking something. Sometimes one becomes an ascetic much as one becomes a hero, by sheer force of circumstances. When the crowd thinned a bit in the last hour, I could come nearer at the only angle from where it was possible to witness the entire spectacle from the front.

I now understood what is meant by a real *pūjā*! When Śrī Mahāswami was tracing certain signs with his hands above his head, a current mounted along my back. The entire atmosphere was charged with a purer air, which had its source on the platform. As usual, for me, only he was alive. I had already heard that during some services he was known to look like Śiva himself; this time he was akin to a *śiva-liṅga*. He was a flame, there was no doubt of this. The heat of his tejas was supremely contained, otherwise it could have burnt to ashes those who looked on. Nearing the end of the service the air became so full of power that one could easily forget one's own name. The end arrived. The climax was the offering of the lights. With the curtain now open, I saw Śrī Mahāswami rising and showing with ritual gestures the numerous lamps and scintillating grand bronze candelabra which was blazed with higher and higher flames. I could hardly distinguish where he was and where the ordinary flame began. I would say that Śrī Mahāswami was the more powerful of the two as he was endowed with a commanding lustre that could subdue the flickering flames.

The *pūjā* onlookers were friendly towards me. They left a place for me, they talked to me, and someone offered me water. This proves that the 'do not touch' of the traditionalists is somewhat exaggerated, and more so that these prohibitions are no longer adhered to by the younger generations.

The service is over. I intend going back to town by leaving all to chance as I do not have sufficient money with me to afford the luxury of a rickshaw. I pass once again in front of the math and although I observe a small group of devotees who seem waiting for someone, I do not give this any importance. After a few steps, comes a new recognition that holds me to the spot for a few minutes. It was enough to realise that the small group was waiting for Śrī Mahāswami who was just nearing the math. Had a new friend not restrained me I would have been a loser. The life is full of such minutely organised fortunes. One must always be attentive: Destiny can guide us by signs which show themselves when one is not prepared. However, let us hurry ... Śrī Mahāswami approaches!

He walked slowly and is nearly stopped at every step by the crowd. The people bow and prostrate. To adore a great Sage coming out of a



temple or of an important *pūjā* seems to be very auspicious; could it be that in the interior of the temples or during certain offices or rituals they are reabsorbed into their own divine nature? After having seen Śrī Mahāswami, I am tempted to believe it.

I quickly chalk out my plan of action. I will prostrate, not exactly in front of him, but slightly to the side, so as not to hinder his progress. I take off my shirt, tighten my shawl round the chest and I am waiting. He comes nearer and nearer; on his route the crowd has somewhat diminished. I look at him and I think, 'If only he would turn his eyes towards me'. Now it is the moment. At that very second, Śrī Mahāswami turns his head towards me! I lean forward to start my prostration, but I still have the time to look at him; an instant I stay frozen. He has recognised me and seems surprised and content: what he had planted in my heart yesterday morning at the temple of the Goddess Kamakshi bears fruits. He has also perceived, I think, that I have witnessed without turning a hair all the long hours of the *pūjā* and that I have lived it inwardly.

The lances of his eyes, in a slow flight, enter my own pupils; the immaterial thrust of these forceful projectiles must have carried also something of his seen body as I feel Śrī Mahāswami piercing me, gigantic, brilliant: he only exists. Having fallen on the ground in front of him, trembling with fervour and overcome by despair to see myself still bound to the Transitory, I embrace, in thought, his feet: they alone can save me. The traditional prostration with eight limbs (*sāṣṭāṅga-namaskāra*) is quite long. Coming up, I have still the time to observe his wooden sandals that had just left: Śrī Mahāswami had waited for me all the time. I quickly dress in order to accompany him, following the example of others around.

A temporary friend, a devotee of Vishnu, who pressed me to stay back and admire a holy statue (*utsavamūrti*) carried on a garuḍa vāhana or golden bird mount that was being carried through the streets, intrigued, asked me:

“Through what magic, Sir, did you stop Śrī Mahāswami in front of you?”

I would have liked to reply: “Through love.”

I looked at him: he would not have understood; I kept mum, leaving with an evasive gesture of the hand.

Śrī Mahāswami, followed by a few assistants and visitors with whom he talked, headed through gardens and by-lanes to the temple Vyasa Shantaleshvara, his place of residence during the observance of the *chāturmāsya*; that is, in the opposite direction of the route I had taken twice yesterday morning. From time to time, the people were prostrating at his passage. Someone threw the water of a large vessel so as to clean the road in front of his feet. I took a few drops after he had passed by and sprinkled them over my head. While walking barefooted I tried to follow as exactly as possible the trace of his sandals, the traces of God with form, the visible deity.

I noticed that two assistants carried the baggage of Śrī Mahāswami. One dark and rough blanket, two mats and a few metal boxes, the kitchen utensils box probably. Another assistant kept somewhat nonchalantly in his hands one pair of worn, heavy wooden sandals of Śrī Mahāswami. At a stop, I discreetly took a speck of dust out of one of them: ‘something’ has passed into me through these minute grains.

Śrī Mahāswami stops now and then. I can see his profile clearly. He is totally relaxed compared to the moment when he entered the math before the ceremony. Although he stood five hours during the ceremonies he seemed very little affected by fatigue. A poor old woman tries to touch his feet, but the assistants interfere in time. However, Śrī Mahāswami halts so that she may greet him in her manner; on his expressive face, I am able to read an immense compassion but also his helplessness. Soon afterwards, a noisy drunkard stands in the way; Śrī Mahāswami stops once again, without a murmur, and waits until the individual finishes his prostration.

We reach the temple in the twilight. A powder of living gold departs from the reddish sun and enfolds the earth, the trees, and humanity. All becomes lighter, vaporous. These places sanctified by the Presence of Śrī Mahāswami have their own contribution to make in the divine process. Nearby is the ancient reservoir where one has to go down several steps to reach the water. Śrī Mahāswami comes there often, sits in water unto his neck and prays ... to whom does he pray and for whose benefit?

This evening he enters straight away into the white and peaceful temple. I stay behind and watch. Through the temple’s porch I notice

MOUNTAIN PATH

that he is heading across the courtyard, on the left side, toward a small and squat construction without windows, where he bends and slips inside through a narrow opening.

Some visitors, of the so-called superior castes, come in luxurious cars that stop just before the gate of the temple. They carry, not without arrogance, rich offerings in the courtyard of the poor temple. They deposit the heavy baskets of plaited bamboo fibre in front of the entrance of the cave-like structure where Śrī Mahāswami stays concealed. They prostrate, recite a list of demands as though in the front of a ticket office and then they come out, sprawl on the seats of their cars and leave, satisfied. In the night, which falls quickly in the tropics, Śrī Mahāswami remains in his dark and cold shelter, a little oil lamp near him. After dining on one or two cups of milk he will lay on a thin mat spread on the ground between slabs of stone, covering himself with his ochre cloth. The Spiritual Emperor of the World will have for pillow his elbow or perhaps a simple brick. ▲

(to be continued)

The Names of Lalitha

Ramesh Menon

Chaitanyarghya-
samaradhya, we offer
you holy water
as worship; we offer you
our souls as holy water.

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

Sri Chakra Puja

Part One

KAYS

jñātr-jñāna-jñeyānām abheda bhāvanam śrī cakra pūjanam

The attitude of non-difference among the knower, knowledge and the known is Sri Chakra Puja. — *Bhāvanopaniṣad*

Love, unalloyed, pure, and ideal that expects nothing in return whatsoever in the human plane is that of a mother, and no less a sage than Adi Sankara celebrates it as follows: *śive, kuputro jāyeta kvacidapi kumātā na bhavati* (Oh Mother! There may be a bad son, but never ever is there a bad mother).¹ The logical extension of the scriptural dictum ‘May the mother be worshipped as God’ gives us its corollary, equally a verity, of perceiving the *paramātman* as Mother.

The inherent human nature of being child-like – a godly trait indeed, for the Upaniṣadic lore wants us to become precisely that – prompts us to look upon God as the Mother with Infinite Love. Does not Bhagavan himself hail Arunachala as one who rains on his devotees solicitous love, supreme compassion and profound Grace, more than one’s own begotten mother?² Manikkavachakar, one of the famous Tamil Quartet of the Servitors of Śiva, hails the Lord as,

¹ *Deviaparadha Kshamāpaṇa Stotram*.

² Verse 6 of *Śrī Aruṇācala Akṣaramaṇamālai*.

“The One that is the Supreme Mother Compassionate” and “Father, indeed, is the Supreme Mother, the incomparable gem.” The idea of universal brotherhood and the epoch-making address that Swami Vivekananda thundered as “brothers and sisters” originates from this profound understanding of the One Source of All.

The very fact that Acharya Sankara, the greatest exponent of Advaita, and Bhagavan, who lived Advaita ever abiding as the plenitude of consciousness, accorded due importance to the worship of the Supreme as the Mother makes it all the more glorious. While Bhagavan calls Devi, the personification of the Grace of Śiva, Sri Sankara, besides hymning the supreme in a name and form in many a litany, consecrated an idol of Mother with a Sri Chakra at Kancheepuram, making it a vibrant centre of powerful spiritual energy. So did Bhagavan consecrate a Sri Chakra and a Meru in the Mother’s shrine at Ramanasramam that has become a locus of Atmic force, beckoning and leading devout aspirants by limitless Grace towards Awareness Supreme and peace beyond our normal range of knowledge.

This brings us to the question ‘What is the significance of Mother worship?’ And ‘What is a Sri Chakra?’

The eternal Brahman, moveless, simply ‘being’ in His own glory, is called ‘eternal splendour’ – *nithya vibhuti*.

The Upanishads say,

so ’kāmayata! bahu syām prajāyeyeti

He (the Self) wished, ‘Let me be many, let me be born’ and the world came about.

idahum sarvamasṛjata

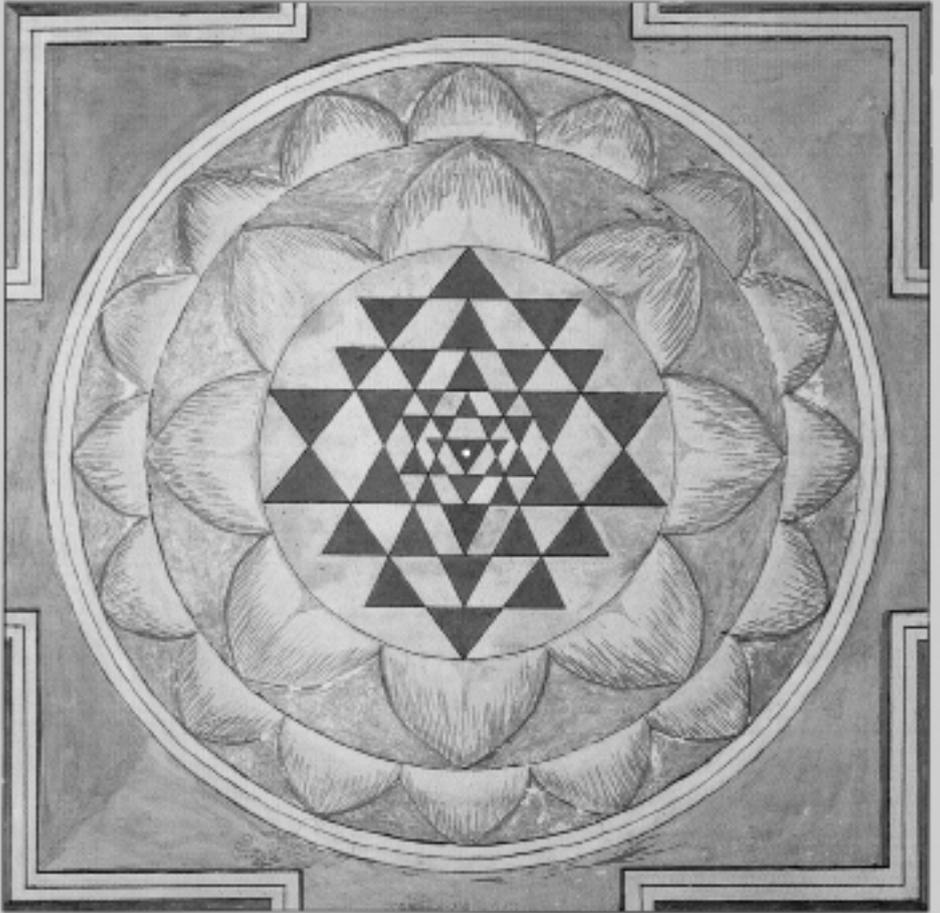
He created all this that exists.³

This movement (*spandha*) in the Supreme Being, that is, the power of Ātman, which results in the phenomenon of manifestation, is called Śakti that is personified as the Divine Mother.

This Śakti is the power of the Ātman that engages the Eternal (*nitya*) in the sport of manifestation (*līlā*). This Śakti of the *svarūpa* (essential nature) is called *līlā kaivalyam*.⁴ She, Śakti, is described as *tasya vibhūti*

³ *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, 2.6.1.

⁴ *Līlā kaivalyam* is the complete detachment from manifestation. It is the state of Liberation.



Sri Chakra drawn by Sri Vaidyanatha Sthapati during 1940s and seen by Bhagavan

cādmutayah (His wonderful splendour.)”⁵

It is indeed significant that Bhagavan gives an identical definition of Śakti in verse 6 of *Śrī Aruṇācala Aṣṭakam* as *uḷaduṇil aladilā adisaya śakti*. “O Arunachala, there dwells in Thee, a wondrous Power which is naught but Thee.”

Śiva is unmanifest while Śakti is manifest. Her manifestation is the display of the cosmos on Pure Consciousness at the macro-level and the individual soul at the micro-level. The One has become the many. She is the Mother of all beings and the creatrix of myriads of universes. “And whatever may be a thing, existent or non-existent, the Power, Śakti, in all those things is Thou. How then, can I praise Thee?” So declares, the Creator Brahma, Himself.

*yacca kiñcitkvacīdvastu sadasadvākhilātmike
tasya sarvasya yā śaktiḥ sā tvam kim stūyase mayā*⁶

Therefore She is *Śrī Mātā* (Mother) as the litany *Lalitha Sahasranamam* declares at the very outset. She abides as the intelligence in the heart of every person. She is the sole source of authority of everything that is manifest. Thus eternal beauty, power and wisdom are all Her manifestations. Hence She is adored as *Śrī Mātā* (Mother, the auspicious and infinite) and *Śrī Mahārājñī* (the Sovereign Supreme).

*śrī mātā; śrī mahārājñī*⁷

But Śakti is not other than the *Parabrahman*. The power is of the wielder of the Power. The *Linga Purana* proclaims: *yatha Siva thatha Devi, yatha Devi, thatha Siva: tāsmādabheda buddhaiva Siveti kathayantyumām*. (As is Śiva, so is Devi; As is Devi, so is Siva. Hence I am called sans distinction as Śiva.) “The One Transcendent Śakti is known by two names; Being, as Ground, and activity because of the works of creation.”⁸ And “That One, the Supreme thing, some call as Śakti, certain learned men call as Self, others as Brahman and yet others as Person.”⁹

⁵ *Devi Bhagavatham*, Sk.4, Chap.19, v. 5.

⁶ Brahma in *Durga Saptasati*, Chap. I, v. 82.

⁷ *Lalita Sahasranamam*, Namavali 1 & 2.

⁸ *Ramana Gita*, Chap. 12, v. 26.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Chap. 12, v. 28.

Thus Śiva and Śakti, however called: stillness and movement; statis and dynamis; being and action; being and becoming; *nivritti* (negation) and *pravritti* (active involvement); *prakasam* (the *aham*, ‘I’ consciousness) and *vimarsam* (‘*idam*’ that is, this consciousness), or as Isvara and Māyā, are but two complementary parts of the same Reality. “Those who hold movement as the characteristic of Śakti have to mention some supreme thing as its support.”¹⁰

Thus this *indra jāla mayam viśvaṃ* (this cosmos, conjured up of beautiful appearances) has no substance except that of Awareness. The Lord Himself is the magician – the Power of projection of the Lord is Śakti – ‘She is the very form of *parabrahman*’ *cidagnikuṇḍa sambhūtāyai*. (One who has appeared from the fire of *chit* (awareness) *jñāna*.)¹¹

Thus by all means the One Supreme is lauded in many ways. Devi Herself declares,

aham devi na cānyosmi | brahmaivāhaṃ na śokabhāk

I am but Brahman, There is none other than Me. ¹²

ekaivāhaṃ jagatyatra dvitīyā kā mamāparā

In this world, I alone exist, who is there as second?¹³

In *Lalitha Sahasranamam* she is hailed as *om mithyā jagadadhiṣṭhānā* (The substratum of the illusory appearance as the world).¹⁴ Sri Bhagavan gives a lucid explanation of this fact in the above mentioned verse in *Śrī Aruṇācala Aṣṭakam*. The manifestation of the world and the individual Self, illumined by the light of Awareness of the Self, like pictures on a screen projected by the lens of the mind, are nothing apart from the Self, whether they continue to appear or cease to appear.¹⁵

But Śakti, this power of the Ātman, by the magic of *māyā* that she weaves, leads us out from the source to the illusory world that teems with triads and dyads. Though spoken of as ‘indescribable, illusory

¹⁰ Ibid., Chap. 12, v. 26.

¹¹ *Lalita Sahasranamam*. Namavali 4.

¹² *Devi Gita* in *Devi Bhagavatham*.

¹³ *Durga Saptasati*, Chap. 10, v. 4.

¹⁴ *Lalita Sahasranamam*, Namavali v. 735.

¹⁵ *Śrī Aruṇācala Aṣṭakam*, v. 6.

and beginningless', hope and endeavour of reaching back to our source need not be abandoned, for *māyā* has an end!

The Mother Supreme who projects Her *māyā* also holds the golden key to the kingdom of Heaven within. Śakti is the cause of return to the source, union with Śiva. "She verily is the face (mouth, door opening) of Śiva, *śaivī mukham ihocyate*.¹⁶

In the context of emphasising the non-difference of Śiva and Śakti they are likened to fire and its power to burn. It is only by entering into the state of Śakti by contemplation free from all differentiation, that one becomes one with Śiva'. Just like the light of the lamp or the rays of the sun illumine space, in the same way Śiva is known by means of Śakti who is the mediatrix par excellence and all the ways and means of attaining union with Śiva are her aspects.

She is full of compassion and Bhagavan calls her, 'Siva's Grace Personified.' Most of the names by which she is adored refer to this quality. She is *karuṇāmṛta sāgarā* (the nectarine Ocean of Compassion).¹⁷

om hayyaṅgavīna-hṛdayāyai

She, with Heart like butter that melts with compassion for the devotees.¹⁸

karuṇā rasārṇavamayā

She, the Ocean of the essence of compassion.¹⁹

avyāja karuṇāmūrti

She is the form of causeless compassion.²⁰

Sorrow indeed is the price of our birth on earth. One must help oneself by drawing from this Divine power to become free from the bonds under which one groans, birth after birth. For one who practises *atma samarpaṇa*, the offering of the ego-self, *Soundarya Lahari* declares, "One's prattle becomes the utterance of Her Mantra; movements gestures of Her worship; walking Her circumambulation; eating a fire sacrifice, to Her; the stretching of the body in sleep and rest, prostration to Her."²¹

¹⁶ *Vijnana Bhairava*, v.18. An Agamic text of Kashmir Saivism.

¹⁷ *Śrī Lalitā Triśatī*, Nāmāvalī 9.

¹⁸ *Śrī Lalitā Triśatī*, Nāmāvalī 179.

¹⁹ Dhyana sloka to Sri Vidya.

²⁰ *Lalitā Sahasranāma*, Nāmāvalī, v. 992.

²¹ *Soundarya Lahari*, v. 27.

She leads the devout aspirants, step by step, to higher reaches of Awareness and luminous wisdom. When the thinking mind, scattered in the activities of sensory objects, is gathered within and made to reach the Source, she ends her sport of *māyā*, and her dance of dualities comes to a halt as She becomes the 'I' within.

ahamityeva vibhāvaye bhavānīm

I meditate upon 'Devi' as the transcendent, supreme 'I'.²²

She, who is the content of Tat (*āho puruṣikā*)²³ leads us to the grandeur of supreme Light, the *daharākāśa*, the ether of the Heart, of which form She is. Established in the serene state of Sivam-Santham and Advaitam, with minds done away with, we can delight in all that She does.

It is true this *māyā* is *duratyayā* – *mama māyā duratyayā* ²⁴ (difficult to be transcended) for

*jñānināmapi cetāmsi devī bhagavatī hi sā
balādākṛṣya mohāya mahāmāyā prayacchati*

She, the Goddess, the divine *mahāmāyā*, draws by force the minds of even the knowing ones and yea, makes them over to delusion.²⁵

Her Grace appears in the most fascinating form amidst the world of names and forms and leads on the devotee to Her transcendental reality.

saiṣā prasannā varadā nṛṇām bhavati muktaye

She gracious, grants the best and shows the way for human being's a release.²⁶

Without Śakti, one's own true form does not carry conviction.²⁷

This conviction that one's 'true form' exists, comes out of Śakti. She is the glow of awareness of 'I' (the support). She is the One who is established in all beings as Awareness: *pratiṣṭhā sarvabhūtānām prajñaiṣā paramesvari*. And, *śuddhā prajñā sundaryuktā* (Pure Awareness is called 'Sundari').²⁸ The term '*Maha Tripura Sundari*' is

²² Dhyana Sloka, *Lalitha Sahasranama*.

²³ *Soundarya Lahari*, v. 7.

²⁴ *Bhagavad Gītā*, ch.7, v.14.

²⁵ *Durgā Saptasatī*, Chap. I, vv. 55-6.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, Chap. I, v. 57.

²⁷ *Sri Ramana Gīta*. v.20.

²⁸ *piṇḍe cāṇḍe jaṅgamasāraḥ śuddhā prajñā sundaryuktā | Uma Sahasram*, v. 937. "She, the Essence of all things that move in the microcosm and macrocosm is Pure Awareness. The female form of the pure Sundari."

itself defined as the most wondrous beauty that pervades and presides over the city (*pura*) of knower, known and knowledge, and the most captivating Awareness, illumining all the three states of waking, dream and sleep.

The *Sri Devi Bhagavatam* reiterates this, *citte brahmakalā nāma śakti: sarvaśarīriṇām*. (Śakti, in the name of Brahmakala, is always existent as awareness in the hearts of embodied beings.)²⁹

The *dhyana sloka* of *Sri Devi Bhagavatham* runs thus:

sarva caitanya rūpām tamādyām vidyām ca dhīmahi| buddhim yā naḥ pracodayāt

She dwells in the intellect as its inmost core She whom the intellect does not apprehend at all, who moves and inspires the intellect. I bow to Her the constant glow of the Heart, the crest jewel of all scriptures.

Thus *jagadeka mātā* (The one Mother of the world) is of the form of one *chidekarasa rūpa* (essence of Pure Awareness). But how to reach Her? The *Devi Kalottaram* provides the clue:

“That form of Pure Consciousness (*chaitanya*) that remains with the single aspect of Awareness, ‘I am’, is called Śakti.”³⁰

The entire universe shines by Its light. When the ego part is broken down, difference is extinguished and there is absence of movement; the mind becomes still, calm and deep except for the glow of awareness of Being. This aspect of Awareness of Existence is called *chit sakti*. This Śakti belongs to the Wielder of the Śakti and the two are identical. The operation called Śakti which is the author of the sensory world full of differences or the world of activities, is not different from one’s true form of Reality. “All this knowledge of differences is considered to be fanciful constructs.”³¹

(to be continued) ▲

²⁹ *Devi Bhaganatham*, Sk.7, Ch.30, Slo.83.

³⁰ *Devi Kalottaram*, v. 31.

³¹ *Sri Ramana Gita*, v. 34.

Self-enquiry is an Anti-Virus Programme

ART BAKER

Log onto your computer, and the wise thing to do is immediately run an update on your anti-virus software. Rather than spending an abundance of time on the internet however, it's best to go deep within, from online to offline and make a beeline onto the inner-net. Turn your attention within, to consciousness itself, to that which is aware. Bhagavan tells us to start self-enquiry from our awareness of the ego. This ego is a foreign entity, a virus. The ego automatically comes attached to the body but is not our true nature. We are told to be in the world, but not of it. Likewise, be in the body, but not of it. How? By running the anti-virus program that Bhagavan has provided. Self-enquiry roots out the ego. It is a delete button for this virus that infects us all.

Control, Alt, Delete. We need to reboot the body / mind complex. The body is our hardware. The mind is our software. The body / mind complex requires a reboot via the anti-virus program so we cease identifying with the virus, the 'I am the body idea', and the 'I am the mind' notion that infects us all. Control, Alt, Delete. Control refers to the discipline required to do sustained enquiry. 'Alt' refers to altering

or correcting our perception. Bhagavan tells us this numerous times, to correct our perception. We misperceive the world as being fixed and permanent. Yet it is always changing. When we switch allegiance from the ego virus as who we are to its source, the non-changing pure awareness that underlies it, we recognize pure consciousness as the non-changing reality. Utilize this app. Constant application of this anti-virus program is the key to freedom.

How does this anti-virus program work? It allows us free access to the best download of all. Continually download silence. It slowly wears away the ego. In this case however, the download is actually more of an upload. Silence does not rain down on us from heaven or from “the cloud” as described in the tech world. Rather, it comes from within. It is already there awaiting our attention in the Heart, in the core of our being. By consciously and regularly running this anti-virus program, our subjective programming, our software in the form of the ego personality is reprogrammed so it only reflects the Heart. This is tantamount to upgrading your operating system from one that is ego-centered to one based on the truth of who you are.

The importance of this cannot possibly be over emphasized. The key to applying enquiry as an anti-virus program is to fully merge the ego into its source, and then consciously abide there. Bhagavan tells us that the mind turned outward becomes the world, and the mind turned inward becomes the Self. Like the river discharged into the ocean, there is no return. Enquiry once it becomes deeply embedded is the great erasure. Quietness and grace however need not be created. They are already present in the very fabric of our being. It’s only the superfluous noise of the surface mind and intellect, the egoic chatter that needs to be squashed. As Bhagavan puts it, “Remove all of the accumulated samsaric rubbish from the mind.” The only important use of the mind is to constantly give itself *satsang*. Through repeated exposure to the non-dual teachings and mulling over them, this is accomplished. Bhagavan says that thoughts may come and go like the various musical notes, but awareness, the underlying *adhāra śruti* (note), remains. Once we learn to take the correct angle to reach the mind’s ever present source, our attention, with repeated practise remains glued to it so long as we treasure that stillness.

Bhagavan repeatedly tells us to destroy the egoic mind. Naturally, the first thought that occurs when we hear such a radical statement is

“If I destroy the mind, will I exist? Will I be in some vegetative state? I won’t be able to think or function any longer.” Is this true? We hear so much these days in the tech world about AI, artificial intelligence, and virtual reality. However, it is actually the ego virus which is the artificial intelligence, and its addiction to the waking state as being the measuring stick of ‘reality’ where, in fact, that waking state is a mere virtual reality when its source remains unknown. True intelligence comes from the Heart, or as *A Course in Miracles* calls it, from the mind of God.

Look at Bhagavan’s life. Reports from Bhagavan himself, as recorded in ashram literature, show that he had what appears to be a mostly normal active life, especially at the present day ashram. He woke up before dawn and cut vegetables each morning in the kitchen. He responded to questions on spiritual sadhana, often wrote prose, answered the letters mailed to him each day from devotees, edited books, translated spiritual texts into various south Indian languages, and regularly walked on the hill. And even before the present day ashram was founded, in Bhagavan’s early days, at Skandashram and Virupaksha cave, he also did occasional masonry work, made begging bowls, walking sticks, did book binding, he sometimes collected edible leaves from the hill for meals, and prepared dried dung for use as cooking fuel. So, will we still be able to think and function after the anti-virus program uproots the ego? Yes, but not from an individual ego sense, rather from the universal source of our very being.

This leads me to a few points of contention. Especially in western culture, this ego virus has recently become so deeply embedded that it has created a society of zombies! Seriously, just over the last few years, the I-thought is now virtually owned by the iPhone. Western culture is basically hypnotized by it. This is a major problem. Walk down almost any busy street, or utilize mass transit in public trains, buses or airports, or enter any shop in the West. What do you see? People stare non-stop, mesmerized, at their iPhones, lost in their virtual reality. Even while driving, people text, send sms messages, and use their iPhone leading to a significant uptick in traffic accidents. If you think this is an exaggeration, it isn’t. People in the West routinely walk off curbs into traffic, walk into glass windows, and walk into other virus infected humans. Barely anyone has eye to eye contact and sincere sustained communication these days. Not to mention the

ubiquitous selfie. In light of our understanding of the Self, the selfie really needs an accurate name. The phony ego virus has so infected us, that the selfie via the iPhone should be known from now on as the ‘phoney’, since the ego virus is the phoney self.

And then there’s Facebook, or as I call it, farcebook. It is mostly a sounding board for the ego virus and is known as the junk food of social media. Just as the internet is useful for research and email, Facebook is useful for ecommerce if you’re a business owner, to network those interested in your services. However, several research articles in respected medical psychology journals routinely describe major depression in those who use Facebook for several hours each day, which is routine in the West. Addiction to social media has replaced genuine social contact. ‘Virtual friends’ are rarely there when needed in times of crisis. Rather than Facebook, we need to face our self, our I-thought and trace it back to its source. Hence, the need for limiting the internet and spending more time on our inner-net. Google is useful, but can it give the experience of infinity? Bhagavan’s self-enquiry can. Continually run the anti-virus program and see for yourself. ▲

Today I Am Here

Suresh Kailash

What will happen to me when I die?
Where will I lie without body or mind?

So many religions to guide my soul,
to which hell or heaven will I go?

Will I be earth bound as dust or ash,
an occasional tear on my love’s eyelash?

A memory shared one distant day,
between friends gone their separate ways?

Ramana, I know not where I will be,
but today, I am here at your feet.

The Bhagavad Gita Saram

Chapter 9, verse 22, Chapter 7, verses 17 and 16

SWAMI SHANTANANDA PURI

*ananyāścintayanto mām ye janāḥ paryupāsate |
teṣām nityābhiyuktānām yogakṣemaṁ vahāmyaham*

Those who direct their thoughts to Me,
Worshipping Me with steadfast mind,
For them I secure what they lack
And preserve that which they possess.

None of the advaitins can interpret this in terms of advaita because this is such a beautiful *śloka*. When you say the Lord is *sarva samartha*: it means He can do anything He likes. That being so then why do you prevent Him from taking forms? You are limiting the Lord after saying that He is unlimited. There are people who have transcended the pairs of opposites – *dvandva* – joy and sorrow, heat

Swami Shantananda Puri, was born on 6th May 1928. At age four, he came into contact with the Paramacharya of Kanchi. In 1957 he met his Guru Sri Purushottamananda Puri, a direct disciple of the great Swami Brahmananda (Rakhal Maharaj) of the Ramakrishna Order. Swamiji attained *mahāsamādhi* and was absorbed into Arunachala Siva on 14th October 2014.

and cold, likes and dislikes. If we look more carefully we see that the two extremities are on the same scale – light and darkness are the same in terms of the scale which measures light.

In the *tāraka śāstra* the sages have included all of the substances into 9 categories – *tej* is included but darkness is not, as they say that darkness is the shortage of light. People whose ego – *aham* (the sense of ‘I’) and the sense of possession (*mama* – mine) have completely gone are always thinking of the Lord, to the extent that they may forget to eat or carry any money when actually they have none, as they are not concerned about a job to earn their livelihood. So who is to look after those things? Even when you are doing a *sādhana* you have to live, in order to fulfil your *sādhana*. There are the minimum needs of the physical body that demand our attention if we are to be successful.

The word *Yogakṣemam* summarises this predicament. *Yogakṣemam* comes from *yoga*: to get united; it infers what I do not have so that I may consider how to get it. It is like a department store where you go to fulfil your wishes by buying certain tools or items that help make life easier. And *kṣemam* means to maintain it – to protect that which you have. So *yogakṣemam* means equanimity in yoga sadhana. Therefore, *yogakṣemam* [is welfare], means benevolence from the Lord.

That is, the Lord maintains our basic needs, so we may strive unencumbered for a higher life. A reliable marker of one who is a true devotee or *bhakta* is constant benevolence. The Buddha also made this distinction, even going so far as to warn the sangha that if you find that your benevolence becomes harmful to yourself due to its excess, then alone it should be moderated.

The Lord has given an unconditional guarantee that He will look after it – *yogakṣemam* – even in this dream life where you can get things done through Him, if not for anything else but to do the sadhana to get out of this dream. So this dream life has to continue till that time, otherwise this dream life we experience now will be replaced with another – that is, rebirth. In order for your dream life to be sustained the Lord will look after the entire sustenance of this dream for your sake. But he has made one or two conditions! A man who is partly with God and going for a partial job – He will not give such people the support they ask for – either He gives all or nothing. Therefore He says – *ye janāḥ* – those people who – *ananyāścintayanto* – who

think of Me, remember Me alone – you be wholly devoted to Me – *ye janāḥ paryupāsate* – those that worship Me by thinking of Me alone, and not anybody else.

For how many hours? We compartmentalise our lives and in the process even compartmentalise God and think that He will not bother. The third one is *nityābhīyuktānām* – those who are remembering Me continuously without cessation – the one who is united completely by every *indriya*. The Lord says that I personally look after his welfare. We have here two aspects to consider: the lower and the higher Self. When the lower self is completely aware that there is a higher Self and tries with all sincere and earnest efforts to merge with it, then the higher Self helps it to make the dream world as comfortable as possible so that it will not be a nightmare. There is no other interpretation for this.

In a remote village there was great *bhakta* of the Lord who would devoutly read the *Bhagavad Gītā*, but he was very poor. Once he and his wife had not eaten for three days and he made no efforts to go out and procure any food. So his wife who was totally disgusted with him said, “You read the *Bhagavad Gītā* every day and it says in that book *yogakṣemam vahāmyaham*, but has the Lord done anything to help us in these three days?” Since he had no answer to his wife’s questions he took a piece of charcoal and in his anger struck off that line in his copy of the *Bhagavad Gītā* and went to bathe in the river.

Meanwhile a young lad came to their house with a push cart full of food and called out to the lady of the house. She was astonished when the lad said that the Master of the house had ordered all the provisions and that she should help him take it inside. While she was helping the boy she noticed that, although unruly he was so beautiful and had skin which was tanned dark. She could not take her eyes off him. She also noticed that he had a scar right across his beautiful face. When she asked him how he got that scar the boy said that the Master of this house had branded him because he was a little delayed in bringing the food. She was aghast as to how her husband could be so cruel and promised the boy to ask him about it. When the man returned he was stunned to see all the food and asked his wife where did she get it from. The wife did not reply but simply asked him how he could be so cruel to the delivery boy for being a little late.

Unable to understand her he asked her to explain and when she did he realized that it was the Lord himself [Krishna] who had come and he wept bitterly.

This is a beautiful story indicating that the Lord does come Himself to help His devotees. In other stories it is shown how He helps through an agent.

Chapter 7 verse 17

*teṣāṃ jñānī nityayukta ekabhaktirviśiṣyate |
priyo hi jñānino 'tyarthamaham sa ca mama priyaḥ ||*
Of them the man of wisdom, eternally steadfast,
Devoted to the One alone, is preeminent.
I am indeed exceedingly fond of the man of wisdom,
And he is fond of Me.

This *śloka* has been placed after the previous one in order to emphasise the condition which teaches that we should not compartmentalise the Lord. So we are asked to ceaselessly and continuously think of Him. There are some people who think that nothing should be asked of the Lord but when a child wants something it is natural that he asks his parents for it. So here is what He is saying: do not think that My devotee is the sole one who says, “Bhagavan, I want you alone.” There are four kinds of devotees and all of them are equal to the Lord. Let us first look at the previous verse [16] in the same chapter.

Chapter 7 verse 16

*caturvidhā bhajante mām janāḥ sukṛtino 'rjuna |
ārto jijñāsurarthārthī jñānī ca bharatarṣabha ||*
Among benevolent men, four kinds worship Me, Arjuna:
The distressed, those who desire knowledge,
Those who desire wealth,
And the man of wisdom, Arjuna.

Here He describes the four kinds of *bhakta*-s The first one is *ārtaha* – the man who has taken a lot of beating from this world. That is, due

to *samskara*-s he had to undergo a lot of suffering so that he becomes completely disgusted with the world. The fellow who is wounded by the world and is crying and now is longing to get out of the world, he is being beaten on the same wound again and again. The second one is *jijñāsu* – this is the scientist who asks how; he is the one who has the desire to know.

Then there is *arthārthī* – this group consists of ninety per cent of the people – here *arthā* means an item and *ārthī* is the one who is begging for it. This is the one who begs for something and asks for various favours concerning worldly goods. Even the best of us when confronted with danger, catastrophe or calamity cannot but ask the Lord for comfort. This is called a state of helplessness. When you are helpless the surrender is total. The last one is *jñāni* – the one who knows I am That – the entire world is a cosmic dream of the cosmic dreamer and in that dream there are so many people including you and I, so we then have no business in telling the Lord: “Why are you doing so much harm to me?”

Now the question came who is the better of them? It is in verse 18 that He says that all of them think of Me but then in this *śloka*, verse 17, He says *teṣāṃ jñānī nityayukta ekabhaktirviśiṣyate* – just as if you ask a mother who has three sons which of them she likes the best she would refute you by telling that her love to them is equally distributed but in her heart of hearts it is always the first or the last one that she generally prefers.

Similarly the Lord here says that although all are equal but there are also those who are *viśiṣyate* – means something special – and who is the one who is special to the Lord? It is the *jñāni* but not all *jñāni*-s. So then who is he? *Nityayuktaha* – as I said this is the repetition of the previous *śloka* – *nityayuktaha*, the one who is always constantly, ceaselessly and continuously united with the Lord and the one who is fixed in constant remembrance of Him, i.e. the *jñani* who has devotion to the Lord.

Not only that but *ekam* – the man who is devoted to one only and that is the Lord – he should think only of the Lord and not of anybody or anything else such as money, name and fame. This is similar to the previous *śloka* where He uses the word *ananyāścintayanto* while here, He uses the word *ekabhaktiḥ*.

Q: So for the advaitins wherever a personal God is mentioned they just replace that with the Brahman?

A: A man who has attained the *brahmajñāna* for him everything is *sarvatra samadarśanaḥ* [His vision is equal in all directions] which is why the founder of advaita, Sankara, has written hymns on almost every conceivable form of the Lord separately.

Priyo hi jñānino 'tyartham – I am the favourite of all the *jñāni*-s; they all like Me. Then He says *aham sa ca mama priyaḥ* – I am his favourite and He is my favourite. ' *tyartham* – they like me, to the very extreme. Even though in the next *śloka* He has said the jnani does not reach Me quickly but that it takes him a long time. So Arjuna then had a question, “Please explain to me clearly Krishna, who among the *bhakta*-s is the greatest?” ▲

(to be continued)

Drop Your Disguise

Suresh Kailash

Lone hill towering over the plains,
Your mystery cannot be explained,
How you entice lost souls like me,
To first enslave and then set free.

Like a magnet pulls an iron piece,
It's you who dragged me to your feet,
And no matter how much I try,
You never let me leave your side.

Fair it was when I was far away,
To show me only your rocky face,
But now that I'm close to you reveal,
Your human form that I long to see.

Arunachala, lord, bless these eyes,
Shine as Ramana, drop your disguise.

Mother

SAVITHRI KRISHNAN

Lord Śiva has as one of his abodes, the ‘śmaśāna’ (the burial ground) also known as ‘*Rudra bhumi*’. It is a place where one experiences *vairāgya* (detachment) to the hilt. It is called *śmaśāna vairāgya* and, quite rightly, the Mother of all *vairāgya*-s. The profound grief of losing a near and dear one drives one to the metaphysical realm, almost involuntarily, and into a burst of intense self-introspection, that is focussed on the seeming futility of life and the desire to realise the true purpose of life. Sadly though, blame it on *māyā*, this *vairāgya* doesn’t last long for most of us, as we blithely get back to a normal routine as if we had never gone through a period of such devastating detachment!

This reminds us of Yudhishtira’s retort to the Yaksha, when questioned as to what the greatest wonder was. He replied, “Though death strikes each day, people live as though they are immortal!” Alas, if only one were to steadfastly hold on to the intensity of this *vairāgya* in all sincerity, one would realise the goal of life ‘here and now’ as some of the great ones like the Buddha, young Nachiketa, and our own Bhagavan Ramana have experienced.

Savithri Krishnan is a devotee of Bhagavan from Bengaluru.

The Buddha's greatness lies in the fact that his mind turned inward at the mere sight of a corpse – not of a beloved one but of an utter stranger. This was among several revelations that seared his mind such as the sight of an ailing person and a decrepit, aged person. Tenaciously, he worked towards the goal and finally tasted success.

There is an apocryphal story about Nachiketa that tells of his time before that related in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*.¹ The direct sight of a dead animal drove his mind inwards. During his *gurukul* days, he was extremely fond of a particular cow, and its death caused him intense sorrow. His Guru's consolation about the inevitability of death of all living beings was of no avail. His contention was that when the physical form of the cow was very much present, 'what' is it that has died? The Guru explained about Lord Yama and his role of carrying the souls away from the earthly abode.

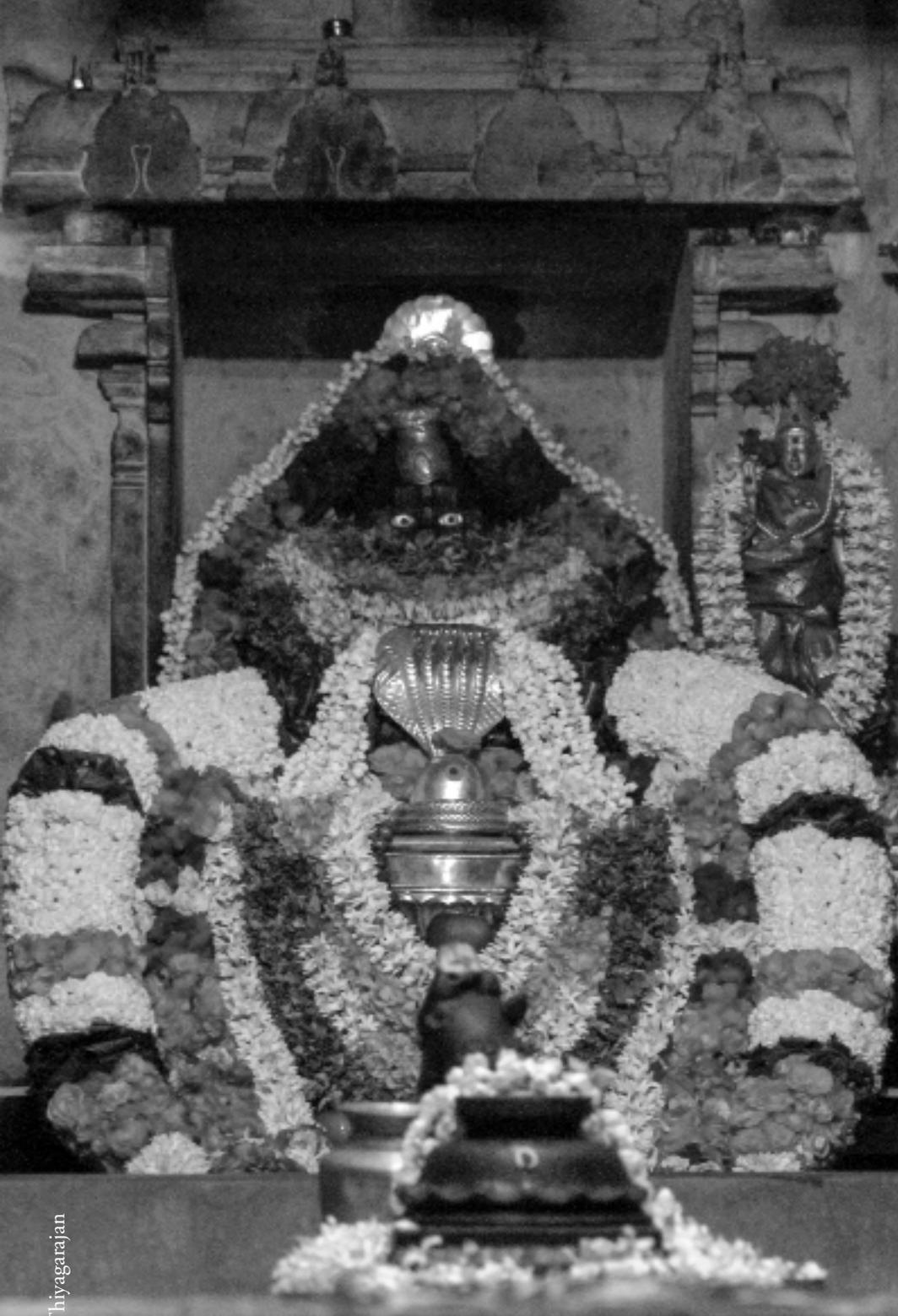
Since then Nachiketa nurtured a burning desire to meet Yama, though his Guru sternly warned him that it would mean facing death. That he later meet Yama and was finally bestowed with the supreme knowledge of the Self is well known from the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*. But what may not widely be known is the fact that the death of a close one, his dear cow, was what made him choose as one of the three boons from Yama, the knowledge of the soul's journey after death,

Bhagavan Ramana also says that though he had his death experience at the age of sixteen, he had pondered over death much earlier at the age of twelve with his father's sudden demise. He was perplexed on seeing his family members weep even as his father's physical frame was very much present. He mulled over it for a long time and hours after the cremation he came to the conclusion that it is the 'I' which makes the body function. He deduced that "I know this 'I' but my father's 'I' has left the body."²

One should take cue from such great, realised souls and strive steadfastly towards the ultimate goal of life – *ātma vidyā* or knowledge of the Self. Time and again, saints have reiterated this Truth. Death can strike anyone anytime, and it is only prudent to take cognizance of the same and mend our ways. Ādi Śaṅkara in His *Bhaja Govindam*

¹ <https://www.hinduscriptures.com/gurus/29337/29337/>

² Brunton, Paul, *Conscious Immortality*. First Edition, 1984. p.68.



hymn says, *samprāpte sannihite kāle nahi nahi rakṣati dukṛṅkarane*. (At the time of death, none of the formal education will come to our rescue, and hence O ignorant mind, pray unto Lord Govinda!)

The Kannada poet saint Purandara Dasa says in one of his poems, *kālana dūtaru kāl piḍidelevāga tālu tālendhare tāluware ...mānava janma doḍḍadu ida hāni māḍalu beḍi huccappagaḷirā...* (Will the attendants of Yama, at the time of dragging you away, wait at your insistence? Human birth is the highest indeed, do not waste it, O fools!).

He adds, *antakana dūtarige kincittu dayavilla cinteyanu biṭṭu śrī hariya nene manave*. (The messengers of Yama have no trace of mercy, therefore shun your worries and contemplate Śrī Hari O mind!)

To the grief stricken Kisa Gouthami who pleads with the Buddha to revive her dead child, he offers solace to her by explaining that there is no household untouched by death. How true! It's a fact which everyone has to face sooner or later. But no matter how rationally one is prepared, the reality is so harsh to bear. When great renunciates like Pattinathār (a Saivate saint) have inconsolably wailed at the passing away of their dear ones such as their mother, what can we ordinary mortals do? The recent passing away of my own mother has left a deep vacuum in me. It has repeatedly made me ponder not only the nature of soul and how the rules of karmic theory bind various souls together by destiny alone and not randomly, but also on the great role of all mothers in shaping their kith and kin.

Mother is the *pratyaksha daivam*, 'living God'. Scriptures and the Vedic texts extol her supremacy and give her the pride of place. The *Chanakya Neeti* says, *na mātuḥ param daivatam* (No deity is greater than one's own mother). The mantras from the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, *Shikshavalli*, proclaims: *māṭrdevo bhava | pitṛdevo bhava | ācāryadevo bhava | atithidevo bhava* | – Honour thy Mother as God, Honour thy Father as God, Honour thy Teacher as God, Honour thy Guest as God (in that order). Yet another verse in Valmiki's *Ramayana* says, *jananī janmabhūmiśca svargādapi garīyasī* (Mother and motherland are superior even to Heaven).

The best blessing given by the Almighty to mankind is one's own parents. Mother perhaps is hailed more as she unabashedly expresses her love and affection. How apt and pregnant with meaning is the

Jewish adage, ‘God could not be everywhere therefore he created mothers’. Ādi Śaṅkara too, in his composition *Devi Aparādha Kshamapana Stotram* repeatedly voices a similar sentiment that *kuputro jāyeta kvacidapi, kumātā na bhavati* – There can be a *kuputra* (a bad son), but there can never a *kumātha* (a bad mother). Mother is the first teacher and is instrumental in shaping the character of her offspring. Since children learn a lot by mere observation, it’s imperative on her part to practice what she preaches. Her life should be her teaching. Her contribution to the overall development of the child to face this competitive material world is crucial. Blessed is the child if the mother is also able to impart spirituality.

I was fortunate to have such a mother. My interest in spirituality is due to her. I owe her my learning by rote, at a very young age of both the popular *Sahasranamams* (on Lord Vishnu and the Goddess Lalitha). Having spent her childhood at Kanchi, it was only natural for her to be devoted to the Goddess Kamakshi. She was fortunate to have been in close touch with the Mahaperiyavar and to have recited slokas in His presence. Her deep devotion towards any form of Devi, in particular Goddess Saraswati, throughout her life, left a deep impact on me. She was blessed by Bhagavan and Matrubhuteshwara with the Śrī Vidyā Havan and Śrī Chakra Puja *prasadam* to adorn her forehead minutes before breathing her last.

For the enormous sacrifice that mothers make for their offspring, it is but obligatory to show them gratitude and to treat them with reverence. In the times we live in, where materialism and economics tend to dominate every other realm or relationship, it’s imperative to instil in children moral values – and the strongest of them all is to revere and to take care of one’s parents when they need it the most.

Mother is a ‘living God’ that every human has, can see and experience! As per our Vedic injunctions, Mother is not only venerable but is on a par with the celestials; *mātru devo bhava*, honour your mother as god. Holding her in reverence is very much part of our spiritual ethos.

Ādi Śaṅkara’s love for his mother Aryamba is exceptional: ‘Anything, anytime for Mother’, was lived by him. Noticing his frail mother’s inability to walk to the river Purna for her daily ablutions, he changed the course of the river to make it flow near their house from

the very next morning through the power of his prayers. Later, when the call of *sannyāsa* struck Sankara, his mother was unwilling to part with him. However when it became inevitable, she reluctantly agreed on the condition that he promised to be by her side during her last days. True to his words, he did come to her during her last moments. Though a *sannyāsi* known for non-attachment, he was heartbroken to see his mother lying on her death bed, and composed an emotional poem, *Mātru Panchakam*. He invokes both the emissaries of Lord Śiva and Vishnu, as she leaves her mortal coil behind and reaches Vaikunta by his grace. He had to face ostracism from orthodox believers as a *sannyāsi* is not supposed to perform the funeral rites enjoined on householders. He was refused wood or fire for igniting the funeral pyre. He, however, resolutely performed the rites all alone, cremating her body at the backyard of the house, making a pyre from the stems of plantain trees and setting them on fire by his yogic power. It is a telling tale about the power of Mother.

Bhagavan's reverence for his mother is no less exceptional. On the refusal of his male devotees to allow his mother to stay with him on the Hill, he said, "If not here, Amma let us go somewhere else, come!" During her stay at the Virupaksha cave with him in 1914, she fell seriously ill with typhoid. Bhagavan prayed to Arunachala, composing a touching poem in Tamil, *Alaya varupiravi...* Needless to say she soon recovered. Interestingly, this is the only hymn where Bhagavan addresses Arunachala as 'Mother' instead of the usual 'Father'.

Two years later, his mother came to Tiruvannamalai for good and spent the rest of her life with him till 1922. Bhagavan used this period to hasten her spiritual growth in order to make her fit for liberation. His mother's affection towards Bhagavan was so profound that she refused to part with him even for a short spell when invited by her daughter for her house warming ceremony. She told Bhagavan that even if he were to throw her dead body in the thorn bushes of Arunachala, she wanted to end her life only in his arms.

On the 19th May 1922, his mother fell seriously ill. Sensing her end fast approaching, Bhagavan sat by her side, placing his left hand on her head, and right hand on her heart for close to twelve hours before she finally attained liberation later that night. When a devotee remarked that

she had passed away, Bhagavan curtly corrected him, saying that she had been ‘absorbed’. She was buried at southern foot of the Hill and a Lingam (Matrubhuteshwara) was installed on her Samādhi. Much later in 1949, the devotees completed the building of a beautiful shrine over her Samādhi, a few months prior to Bhagavan’s *mahāsamādhi* in 1950.

Yet another instance of *Mata-pita bhakti* (devotion to parents) is that of Pundalik. Highly impressed with him, Lord Vishnu decides to bless Pundalik. Vishnu knocks at his door when Pundalik is busy serving his parents. His devotion towards his parents is so deep that despite realising that it is the Lord at the door, he opts to first complete his service to parents and only then attend his visitor – the Lord himself. Due to the monsoon, it is wet and muddy, and hence he throws a brick outside for God to stand on so that his feet will remain dry and clean. The Lord waits for him until Pundalik finishes attending to his parents. Vishnu is extremely pleased with Pundalik’s love for his parents, and grants him a boon. Pundalik requests Vishnu to remain on Earth to bless all his devotees. He agrees to take the form of Vithoba, the God who stands on a brick, and a temple rose up there at Pandharpur. Along with Lord Vithoba, the goddess Rakhumai, that is, Mother Rukmini, the consort of Krishna, is also worshipped there.

Our land is blessed with numerous such noble souls. Shraavan Kumar is yet another whose story is told in the *Ramayana*. He was known for his devotion towards his blind parents. Prophet Muhammed says that “Paradise can be found at the mother’s feet”. Pictures of Mother Mary with infant Jesus are a testimony to this. Mother’s day is celebrated worldwide on the second Sunday of May. Interestingly this date more or less coincides with Mother Azhagammal’s Nirvana date of 19th May.

Kavyakanta Ganapati Muni’s Sanskrit hymn *yāmunīnām trātaram śrī rāmam kausalyeva* to Mother’s *mahāsamādhi* Matrubhuteshwara lingam, extols the beautiful relationship between son and mother of various saints who guided mankind. The English translation runs thus:

Kausalya gave birth to Rama, the protector of the sages,
Devaki to Sri Krishna, the teacher of yoga (attunement);
Renuka gave birth to the teacher Parasurama, a life-long celibate
And Mayadevi brought forth Buddha, the sage of the Sakyas

MOUNTAIN PATH

who gave refuge to all beings.
Mother Mary gave birth to the Son of God
who bears the burden of sin of all devotees.
Likewise, for the welfare of the world,
for the removal of the darkness of ignorance,
for the casting away of all ignorant notions,
for the realisation of the Truth,
thy mother gave birth to thee,
endowed with all these excellent qualities.
To her, to Saundaryamba, the beloved wife of Sundara,
our salutations.
Salutations to her Samadhi
and to the Lord Matrubhuteswara, installed on it.
Salutations to her worshippers and salutations
to the devotees of Ramana.

No matter how great a person is, whether it be a *jñāni* or *jīvanmukta*,
their Mother is greater. All mothers are unique and great and ‘beautiful’
– in every sense of the term. With such respectful attitude towards all
mothers, let us be steadfast in our *sādhana* and not wait for *śmaśāna*
vairāgya to remind us of the ultimate purpose of life.

I conclude with this beautiful verse:

The great ones, free from the mind’s movements,
Are truly happy, never leaving
The Mother’s lap and playing there,
Fed amply with the milk of Bliss.

— *Guru Vachaka Kovai*, verse 995.



Sri R.D. Ranade

A Great Scholar and Saint

S.L.M. PATIL

Professor R.D. Ranade, a saint, philosopher and scholar, was described by George Berch, an American professor, who met him to discuss philosophy as follows, “He was small, slight, frail, a mere wisp of a man whom you expect the slightest breeze to blow away. Nevertheless he was vigorous not only spiritually, and intellectually, but also physically.”¹ This is how another disciple of Prof. Ranade – called Gurudev by his devotees – describes his half-shut, half-open eyes, “I generally wanted to see his eyes like that, and for all I know, there could hardly be anything more beautiful and expressive in the world than those eyes. He wrote volumes on mysticism; I wish I could write volumes on a pair of eyes, which to me defined the spirit of my mysticism more than all the Sakhis and Abhangs of the mystic saints

¹ Silver Jubilee Souvenir, ACPR Belgaum. 1978, Vol 1, pxiii.

² Prof. Shiva Shankar Roy, Divyanam Gurudev Ranade Trust, Nimal 2001, p.79.

Surendra Patil retired recently as a lecturer in English. He is greatly influenced and inspired by A K Ramanujan, especially by his translations, which also are his area of interest. He is presently engaged in translating the poems of singer saint Shivalingavva, the spiritual sister of Gurudev Ranade.

of all times.”² The disciple further says that in Ranade’s presence his disciples were unaware of hunger, thirst and sleep, not that they did not feel the pangs of natural instincts, but rather that they were ready to forgo or defer them. The force of this magnetism was felt both by those whom he had graced, and also by those who merely met him. Another follower of the saint explains how in Gurudev’s presence he felt he had found someone his very own and forgot his father, mother and relatives. Ranade’s face was radiating with joy and peace, and his eyes reflected his inner illumination. He always looked contented and scattered joy around him. He always lived in a ‘God-intoxicated state’.³ Yet he looked simple, so much so that a newcomer to his home would not immediately identify him. Further, he absolutely refused to be garlanded and rarely allowed anyone to touch his feet. Also, his ashram did not flaunt his photographs. In short, he had nothing to do with Gurudom.

Gurudev Ramchandra Dattatrya Ranade was born in 1886 at Jamakhandi, a town in Karnataka state, and at the age of fifteen he was initiated into spirituality by his stern but loving spiritual master Sri Bhau Saheb Maharaj (1843-1914) of Umadi, who belonged to the Nimbargi bhakti tradition. After his schooling in Jamkhandi, Gurudev went to Pune for his college education, where he studied English, Sanskrit, Mathematics and Philosophy which he put to use for his academic, spiritual and writing needs.

The Nimbargi tradition is named after a saint from that village in Vijayapura district in Karnataka on the border with Maharashtra. It was created by Kannada saints based on the Marathi spiritual tome, the *Dasabodha* by Sri Samartha Ramadasa. Thus this tradition is bicultural and bilingual in its practice. A strict moral code, non-violence and long hours of meditation are the basic rules laid down by this tradition. For Gurudev morality became his passion, and long hours of meditation a regular practice, along with unwavering faith in his master. As a result, he was shaped by this tradition to become a God-realised saint, and in turn he gave it an intellectual glow and a rational justification in the light of his sublime spiritual experiences, wide-ranging scholarship and scientific temperament. Thus the tradition was so imbued in him, that he became an living exemplar of the tradition.

³ Portrait of Gurudev Ranade, Centenary Celebration Souvenir, Nimbal. 2001, p .4.



Gurudev began his career as a lecturer in Pune and Sangli initially, and later became professor of philosophy at Allahabad University and ended up as its Vice-Chancellor. But this period was never smooth, owing to his repeated illnesses. In spite of tormenting tuberculosis of the brain cells, bronchiectasis and malaria, he went on with his meditation, teaching and writing. He used to say that he was physically active due to the dynamic energy of meditation.

Gurudev authored twenty one books on the Gita, Vedanta, Upanishads, Gandhi and the Buddha. His trilogy, on *Pathway to God* in Marathi, Hindi and Kannada enjoy a stand-alone status among spiritual writings. His work on Marathi spirituality written in a professorial style is a tribute to his mother tongue. The second book on the Hindi saints is in gratitude for his twenty years of stay in Allahabad. The third book on mysticism in Kannada, creates a new genre of writing, analyzing all the spiritual aspects propounded by Kannada mystics in their songs, which he loved listening to. The book is a great service to the two cultures he and his masters belonged to.

In his *Pathway to God in Kannada Literature*, Gurudev is no more a professorial academic. He writes with supreme ease and confidence, backed by his spiritual experiences. But he carefully avoids discussion of his own attainment. However, one can delicately sense his own spiritual progress here. He was particularly entranced by the Kannada mystics, and held them to be above other mystics of the world. He felt proud to be a Kannadiga.⁴ In his works he exhibits the skills of a storyteller, pares his writing to the bare essentials, puts a new spiritual gloss on the texts and shows new insights into the songs which he had selected. He asked once what was the exact meaning of a phrase used by Purandara Dasa, a Kannada saint-poet, '*nereya nambidavarige*'. The first meaning, 'to keep complete faith' did not satisfy him. But the second meaning 'trusting the neighbourhood' did. He remarked, "We should believe in God going near him, but that is possible only after God-realisation." On another occasion he edited Purandara Dasa's experience: '*Kṛṣṇamūrti kaṇṇa munde nintidantide*' (it is as if the form of Lord Krishna standing before me). He noted that it should not read 'as if standing' (*nintidantide*), but should read 'is standing' (*nintide*), as

⁴ B R Kulkarni, Prof R D Ranade, G R Samadhi Trust *op.cit* p 24.

he was convinced that the Dasa had seen God's form standing before him. He further said that there is no 'as if' in spirituality. Similarly the ritual offering of the three leaves of '*bilva patra*' to Lord Śiva is for him a metaphor for a meditative pose, consisting of the two eyes fixing their gaze on the nose. Similarly the concepts of *Dvija* (twice-born), *Kalpavrkṣa* (wishing fulfilling tree) and Gandhi's wheel to name a few, undergo a change of meaning when seen through the prism of his spirituality.

Like his master, Gurudev was an avid collector of devotional songs. He would ask his disciples and visitors if they knew any and to sing those songs for him, He listened to them closely and contemplated them. He collected some Hindi songs from his barber in Allahabad. He asked some of his servants just to sing them during his meditation to create the *bhava* (the feeling). Thus he found mysticism not only in Patanjali and in Sanskrit texts but also in great local mystics. Sometimes, this practice helped him to gain more knowledge which was not previously known to him. For instance, a song by Manik Prabhu of Karnataka revealed to him the inner meaning of *tatvamasi*. A fakir's song in a street in Allahabad, and a vision of his master in a dream also enlightened him. Once he went to a fisherman, who was a fellow disciple of his master, seeking a clarification.

The *Bhagavad Gita* was Gurudev's spiritual anchor. "It is in my blood," he used to say. Lokamanya Tilak rightly asked him to review his *Gita Rahasya*. But Gurudev felt he was too young for it. *A Constructive Survey of Upanishadic Philosophy* (1926) won him critical acclaim so much so that Ganganath Jha, the then vice-chancellor of Allahabad University, and an accomplished scholar himself, requested Gurudev to join the university as a professor, and that he would consider it an honour upon the university if he did. He eventually rose to be vice-chancellor and retired in 1946. As a teacher Gurudev spoke in class, "Like a convinced and convincing prophet. But he never used the first person singular in his lectures. Never, never, never," recalls his student.⁵

Gurudev shattered some traditionally held beliefs and concepts. One was that God descends on earth in a human avatar. But he asserts

⁵ Ibid., p. 57.

that the form of God one sees in meditation is God's avatar. He disapproved of the bride-bridegroom relation in mysticism. Eroticism has no place in it. Love of God stands in a category altogether different from sexual relationships, he says. He further opines that meditation is the only way to convert sexual energy into spirituality. A mystic is one who holds his tongue, shuts his ears and closes his eyes and silently enjoys God in his Heart. He asserts this is the highest kind of worship.

Gurudev blessed a large number of aspirants by initiating them through giving God's name of their choice. And when they began to get spiritual experiences like the ones he himself had had, he used to say "Truth has been once more confirmed. It is like *putrotsava*, the birth of a son to me." He initiated aspirants of other faiths also. He initiated one Dr. N.S. Christian saying, "I have given you the *Nāma* (Divine Name) with the hope that you will see your Christ in flesh and blood one day."⁶ Later that aspirant testified that he saw the vision of Christ some three or four times. Once when Gurudev was in Baradoli near Vijayapura, he suddenly looked very delighted. The reason was that he had heard the Islamic name of God which was relayed to him. His tradition includes both illiterate and the highly learned pundits, the poor and royal families. Many were after Gurudev for initiation, but Gurudev was also seeking to give it to the right aspirant. He once called his gardener's son and initiated him without the latter asking for it!

Hundreds of his disciples, and even casual visitors have been benefited in their spiritual and worldly lives by Gurudev's miracles. But he was not a miracle manufacturer. He believed saints do not perform miracles but God does. He also warned that miracles should not be confused with spirituality though they may flow from it. His life is nothing short of a miracle. He sustained himself for fourteen years merely on six to eight cups of spicy tea everyday prepared by himself! He used to say "It is not only food that supports a man... I know how to tap other sources of energy, but you don't." He was referring to the oozing of nectar from the central ventricle, which V.K. Gokak, (an eminent professor of English and a devotee of Sri Aurobindo) rightly called 'the milk of paradise'.

⁶ *The Glimpse of Gurudev Ranade*, ACPR Belgaum, 1990. p.46.



Samadhi of Gurudev Ranade at the Nimbal Ashram

The disciples of Gurudev eagerly awaited his informal interactions with them called ‘sittings’, which were held regularly at his residence. He would sit in a corner along with his disciples on the same carpet, and burn a lot of joss sticks and resin. But he never delivered sermons. It was the time to see him, listen to him and be noticed by him. Sometimes obscure songs would suddenly spring to life in the revelatory light that Gurudev shed on them.

Gurudev was a rationalist seeking validity for his mystical experiences, making his body a spiritual laboratory (rationalism is a hallmark of his tradition). In his writing also, “He would weigh every syllable of every word and test it on the touchstone of nothing less than the Absolute Truth. He wrote only what he had experienced. He would emphatically denounce the least distraction from Truth. He would at once exclaim “No, no, nothing irrational. Nothing in the least exaggerated.” Answering a question by an interviewer, Gurudev once said that he did not believe in anything, but only perceived things. But interestingly, he had unconditionally submitted himself to every word of his spiritual master. One of his disciples told this writer recently that even a scribbling on an envelope by his master would send Gurudev to raptures, Further he said that Gurudev had lit camphor where his master had urinated! He also used to wait for his late master’s permission to set out on a journey.

Gurudev’s writings, public speeches and informal conversations were his means of fostering a broad understanding of mysticism. He had read deeply and widely the writings of many mystics from all over the world. He thrills the reader by discussing Buddha’s *dharma chakra* along with the song of the Kannada saint Shishunal Sharif (1819-1889), ‘*hāvu tulidene*’ (I have stepped on a snake). He endorses what Saint Martin says, “All mystics speak the same language, for they come from the same country.” In his consummate reflections, and penetrating analyses the reader forgets the language or region or faith of the mystics. Only their experiences remain that are shared and collectively refine our understanding.

Our mind should revel in meditation, Gurudev used to say. His emphasis was on intensely felt meditation and not on a mechanical incantation of mantra. A meditation of two hours passed like ten minutes for him, he once confided. He avoided self-indulgence and self-torture. He believed the function of a saint was not to be poor,

passive and pessimistic as it is can be made out to be, but a realistic and very active one. His saintly life consisted of incessant inner activity. Gurudev was once asked why he was physically weak. Refuting that comment he said, "I work harder than you youngsters. But my work is not seen from the outside." Quoting Plato he said such a life was the finest occupation of man and that it would be of greatest service to mankind.

Gurudev's conviction was that the aim of human life was to achieve God for oneself and for others. He advised the worship of God both with and without form, because God cannot be attained merely by intellectual construct. For him every situation in life consisting of things and persons was a metaphor, a symbol, a cipher behind which lay the vast undifferentiated realm of unlimited spirit which was enduring and unchanging. He strived to see synthesis in everything. He therefore advocated one God, one world and one humanity.

He built an ashram at Nimbai in 1925, an hour's drive from the town of Vijayapura. Since then it has become a spiritual centre where meditation is a core activity. A visit to the ashram is a lesson in humility, as one may find a more passionate devotee than oneself. It is here Gurudev lived till his death. Days before his death in 1957, he cleansed his body thoroughly, keeping it clean and ready to return it to God as it was given at his birth.

Gurudev readily praised the spiritual advancement of others, but maintained extreme restraint in narrating his own experiences. He confided to his close associates only a few of them. They included the vision of *viśvarūpa* and incidents of him sitting beside God and holding conversations with Him. His attainment is best recalled by a disciple who was a mere boy when the event took place. On this particular occasion this boy in the city of Jamakhandi in northern Karnataka, entered Gurudev's room without knocking, and the sight there sent shivers down his spine. He saw Gurudev standing, stretching both the hands towards the sky like Ramakrishna Paramahansa. His entire body was illumined in a golden hue. The *svaṛṇa puruṣa* characterises the final stage of a yogi, as mentioned in the Upanishads.⁷

⁷ Jayant Dodwad, G R Cent Celebration *op:cit* p.227. The author confirmed this with the narrator of the incident.

To quote Prof. Berch again, “In India, as also in other countries, there are many great scholars engaged in various researches, many great philosophers with deep insights into reality, many great mystics with ineffable visions, many great teachers who inspire their pupils, many great souls whose integrity and personality are radiant. But we seldom see one person who is all these at once. Such a one was Ranade.”⁸

At a time when modern cultures are fast losing out on spirituality and charlatans have crowded today’s spiritual landscape, genuine saints are our only hope as they are the salt of the earth. ▲

⁸ ACPR Silver Jubilee Souvenir, *op.cit.*, p xiii.

In The Evening

Upahar

Beneath a flowering tree the pilgrims gather,
old souls and new, bound by some ancient vow;
speaking in broken tongues, then, with the sunset,
leaning into the common, glowing silence.

Be still.

Love holds us in this vast and homeless moment,
our empty dwellings scattered in His gaze.
How have we come? Where could we go? The river
buries the sky, yet in its endless flow

our inmost, evermost and joyful knowing
shows up, shines through. What are we? Heart, be still.
The spheres are singing; night unrolls her prayer-mat.
A thousand blessings echo down the wind.

Be still.

BOOK EXCERPT

The Scientist and the Saint

From the Subsection 'Consciousness in Indian Thought'

AVINASH CHANDRA

The book was published in UK in March 2018, and the only way to get it in India is through the internet with Amazon or Flipkart. It is of course expensive, due to its size and hard cover. Readers may also see website www.thescientistandthesaint.com and www.archetype.uk.com There is a review in the book review section of this issue.

The Indian subcontinent enjoys a very long and profound tradition of studying the mind and consciousness. A. K. Coomaraswamy highlighted this fact in the following observation: "For every psychological term in English there are four in Greek and forty in Sanskrit." In very few places apart from India has Supreme Reality been spoken of in terms of consciousness. A long line of philosophers and yogis have spent their lives dedicated to using introspection as a means to resolve the mystery of the mind and consciousness.

What was the main focus of all their enquiries, investigations, meditations and teachings? Consciousness. They investigated and

studied almost every aspect of consciousness—the empirical, the linguistic, the immanent and other aspects. This became a living tradition of intellectual life in India. For more than two thousand years the subject of consciousness was the passion of the Indian mind. And a vast amount of information on consciousness, especially transcendental consciousness, came to be stored in various books such as the Upanishads, the Yoga-sutras, etc.¹

According to K. Ramakrishna Rao:

“... the global relevance of Indian psychology may be seen in the context of the failure of psychology in the West to deal with some important aspects of human nature that appear to be simply beyond its scope because of its restrictive assumptions. Contemporary psychology is severely constrained by its biocentric bias, which began with the behaviourist manifesto of J. B. Watson (1913) who waged a war to remove consciousness from the psychological dictionary and fought tooth and nail to drive out subjectivity from the precincts of science in general and psychology in particular. [...] In contrast to the biocentric bias of Western psychology, Indian psychology has consciousness as its core concept. Centrality of consciousness is its defining characteristic. Consciousness is considered to be a primary principle irreducible to brain states. The brain does not generate consciousness; it simply reflects consciousness and often by filtering, limiting and embellishing it.”²

A small but growing number of psychologists, psychiatrists, and western philosophers have begun to turn towards ‘oriental thought’, aware that it offers a more profound and complete understanding of the mind than that offered by modern science. Daniel Goleman recalls:

“I first encountered Abhidharma—and Tibetan Buddhism—in 1970 [...] I was fascinated: here was a psychological system with a radically different set of premises from any to which I had previously been exposed. It was a system that not only explained how the mind worked, but how it could be methodically transformed. And it was

¹ Swami Bhajanananda. ‘Knowledge and Consciousness: An Integral Approach’, in *Understanding Consciousness: Recent Advances*. Kolkata: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 2009, pp. 45-46.

² K. Ramakrishna Rao. ‘Introducing Indian Psychology’, in *Handbook of Indian Psychology*. New Delhi: Foundation Books, 2008, pp. 5-6.

a psychology that held out as the ideal of human development of spiritual values like equanimity and compassion — a vision far more hopeful than that of any modern psychology.”³

For scientific thought today, consciousness appears to be an inexplicable exception in an otherwise unconscious universe. However, in India, consciousness has always been considered a primordial element that is always present and immanent in everything and at all levels of the universe.

Consciousness is thus the connecting thread that can transport us from our individual consciousness to Supreme Reality. As a Sanskrit aphorism says: “Consciousness is our only recourse to attain reality.” “When we turn to the sacred scriptures of various religions, we discover that in every case the origin of the cosmos and of man is identified as a Reality which is conscious and in fact constitutes consciousness understood on the highest level as absolute Consciousness, which is transcendent and yet the source of all consciousness in the cosmic realm including our own. [...] this truth is made especially explicit in Hinduism where the principal Reality which is the source of all things is described as at once Being, Consciousness and Ecstasy.”⁴

This was, then, in a more or less explicit form, the existing worldview in every country and at all times throughout history. What happened to make the concept of the universe undergo such a radical revolution? According to Seyyed Hossein Nasr:

“The privilege of denying the primacy of consciousness wholesale remained for the modern world, especially with the advent of the materialistic and scientific philosophies which came to the fore after the Scientific Revolution in the 17th century. [...] By taking away from corporeal existence all its qualitative aspects and reducing it to pure quantity, these men, followed by many others, created a worldview in which there was such a thing as pure inert matter divorced totally from life and consciousness but somehow mysteriously known by the knowing subject or the mind. [...] In traditional cosmologies Pure

³ Daniel Goleman, in *MindScience: An East-West Dialogue*. Wisdom Pub., pp. 6, 91.

⁴ Seyyed Hossein Nasr. ‘In the Beginning Was Consciousness’, in *The Essential Sophia*. Bloomington Indiana: World Wisdom, 2006, p.199.

Consciousness, that is also Pure Being, descends, while remaining Itself transcendent vis-à-vis Its manifestations, through various levels of the cosmic hierarchy to reach the physical world whereas in the modern reductionist view, things ascend from the primordial cosmic soup.”⁵

Often intellectuals, scientists and philosophers are irritated by the fact that ‘oriental’ thought is inextricably linked to ‘religion’. For traditional thinkers on the other hand, for whom a sharp and insurmountable break between religion, philosophy and science has not occurred, this is a great advantage, because it contributes to the preservation of unitive knowledge lost by the West when knowledge became split into many isolated branches.

“What distinguishes the Indian way of thinking from what we today call the Western way of thinking is the curious connection present in *darshana* [philosophy] between theoretical, experiential and transcendental issues. It is also this distinguishing feature of Indian thinking which is often misappropriated as ‘mystic’ and ‘other-worldly’.”⁶

The Distinction Between Mind and Consciousness

One of the basic differences between Indian and western thought with regard to this subject is that the former has articulated a radical separation between the mind and consciousness. Whilst in Europe, especially following Descartes, it was thought that man is composed of body and mind (also called spirit), in India—as in all traditional thought—the division is threefold: body, mind and consciousness. However, the main separation is not between the body and the mind, but between these two parts and consciousness.

In Indian thought, the body is made of matter; the mind, for its part, is also ‘material’, though composed of a much more subtle matter. Indeed, all that pertains to the reign of multiplicity and change belongs to nature (*prakṛti*) and is composed of parts that for want of a better term, could be called material. The mind makes up part of the subtle or psychic world, much more complex than the physical

⁵ Ibid., pp. 200, 201.

⁶ Sangeetha Menon. ‘Binding Experiences for a First-Person Approach’, in *On Mind and Consciousness*. MiCon2002 Conference. Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2003, p.101.

one, yet like the latter it is, in the last analysis, unconscious. The mind, unconscious? The mind, made up of thoughts, sensations and sentiments, is only visible by virtue of the existence of consciousness which, like the sun, illuminates everything under it in this world. Consciousness is not material nor can it be observed objectively; it is witness to the mind and to everything else. The human being is therefore a physical-mental complex vivified by consciousness. By contrast, the West has been ruled in the past by Descartes' concept: *cogito ergo sum*, 'I think, therefore I am', identifying thought with man's ultimate being.

For his western readers, Swami Prabhavananda found himself obliged to explain the fundamental differences of perception that could give rise to errors of interpretation:

"We should call the attention of Western readers to the fundamental difference between the psychology of India and the psychology of the West. This difference lies in the fact that Western psychology identifies consciousness with mind, being with thought, and thought with the soul, or the Self; whereas Indian psychology distinguishes mind from consciousness. This distinction is due to the fact that Western psychology recognizes only one plane of experience, and gives no consideration to what Hindus call the pure *chit*, the supreme unconditional consciousness, the Being, which they regard as the real Self, or the soul, different from the rationalizing mind and realized in the superconscious, or transcendental, state. Pure unconditional consciousness cannot be the property of the mind, they believe, for it is the source of the mind's apparent consciousness."⁷

Thus, from the Indian perspective, the confusion between mind and consciousness that occurs in modern thought is a tremendous error, a lack of discrimination that confuses consciousness with its contents. This confusion is surprising and disconcerting to Indian scholars:

"No distinction is made in the West between consciousness and mind, so the words 'mental', 'psychic' and 'conscious' have become synonymous in English language and Western tradition..."⁸

⁷ Swami Prabhavananda. *The Spiritual Heritage of India*. Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1981, p.201.

⁸ Jagdish Prasad Jain. 'Jaina Psychology', in *Handbook of Indian Psychology*, op.cit., p. 68, (1996).

“One can read numerous psychology texts and not find any that treat awareness as a phenomenon in its own right, something distinct from the contents of consciousness. [...] When the topic does come up, consciousness in the sense of pure awareness is invariably confused with one type of content or the other.”⁹

Attention (when we turn our consciousness towards a specific subject) is very different from thought. It is this same attention that determines what we perceive and what we do not. Although someone may be talking, if we have our attention turned elsewhere we will not hear anything.

What then is consciousness? If we focus on it, on the subject that sees, abstracting from it any thought or other content, we might get a glimpse of it. But we will never be able to contemplate it objectively given that it is inevitably the subject that contemplates everything else. This consciousness that we spontaneously identify with our being has no spatial limitation—space is a concept which simply cannot be applied here, but neither does it appear to be subject to time, for it is always experienced in the present. What is more, it is its very presence that determines what ‘the present’ is. Time is inextricably linked to movement; without movement there is no time. Now, consciousness is not characterized by any kind of movement: the latter belongs to the realm of the mind. Time is produced by the mind and its incessant movement; consciousness simply makes it visible.

In Indian philosophy the mind is situated on a lower level to that of consciousness, which is the ‘place’ from which the former can be observed. It is not the physical body and the mind that create consciousness: they are factors that limit it; thus they constitute, in a manner of speaking, the banks of the river which, thanks to the boundaries they enforce, permit the river to exist and flow in its particular course. The limitations of each and every thing, whether it be mineral, vegetable, animal or a human being, act as a dense veil that impedes consciousness from manifesting itself in all its plenitude.

Not only does Ramanuja’s theory posit that everything in this universe has consciousness, but that the consciousness cannot function

⁹ Arthur Deikman, “‘I’ = Awareness”, in *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, vol.3, no.4. 1966. pp.350-56.

so well in them because of the limitations of the body which possesses this consciousness.¹⁰

“Thus, the classical Indian psychology adopted a practical stance so that the person might thereby be aided to attain a true understanding of his being: the ‘person’ is consciousness embodied. The person functions as a composite of consciousness, mind and body. Mind and body have the effect of limiting, obscuring, veiling, and distorting consciousness. [...] It is contended therefore that the business of psychology is to understand how the mind-body complex limits human potentials, corrupts one’s understanding of truth and causes suffering so that remedies may be found and humans elevated to higher levels of awareness, achievement and happiness.”¹¹

The ‘Field’ and the ‘Knower of the Field’

Parallel to the distinction between mind and consciousness is the distinction between ‘field’ (*kṣetra*), or all that is observable, and the ‘knower of the field’ (*kṣetrājñā*). According to the *Bhagavad Gītā*: “This body is called the field, and he who knows it is called by the wise the Knower of the field. Thou shouldst know that I am the Knower of the field in every field. Knowledge of the field and of the Knower of the field is considered by Me to be true knowledge.”¹²

Indian thought makes a sharp division between consciousness and the contents of consciousness. All that we perceive and know belongs to the contents of consciousness: exterior objects, our thoughts, feelings, emotions and sentiments, even our sense of individuality. What then remains outside the field? The knower of the field, the witness of all, the light that illuminates all that is perceived and makes it possible to be known. This observer, this ‘primordial I’, is before everything else; without it, no experience is possible.

In spite of appearances, this witness (*sākṣī*) is not individual but universal; that is why Krishna (as personification of Supreme Consciousness) says in the *Bhagavad Gītā* that He is the knower of the field in every field.

¹⁰ M. A. Lakshmithathachar. ‘Discussion’, in *Understanding Consciousness*, op.cit., p. 360.

¹¹ K. Ramakrishna Rao. ‘Introducing Indian Psychology’, in *Handbook of Indian Psychology*, op.cit., p. 7.

¹² *Bhagavadgītā*, XIII.2-3. (S. Radhakrishnan: *The Bhagavad Gita*.)

S. Radhakrishnan comments:

“*Kṣetrajña* is the light of awareness, the knower of all objects. The witness is not the individual embodied mind, but the cosmic consciousness for which the whole cosmos is the object.”¹³

Normally, we all identify with our body first, and then with our mind. However, if we discern, we can see that the body as well as the mind belong to the field and that our most profound being is that which perceives the body as well as the mind. Sankaracharya conveys this in the very title of one of his works, *Dṛg-dṛśya viveka*: “Discrimination between *dṛk*, the subject, and *dṛśya*, the contemplated.” John Grimes explains from another of Sankara’s works entitled *Ātmabodha* (Self-knowledge): One usually refers to the physical body when one speaks of ‘I’, but a little reflection will reveal that the ‘I’ cannot be the physical body. The body itself cannot say ‘I’, for it is inert. One says, “this is my coat, this is my body”. What is ‘mine’ belongs to me. ‘My’ is a personal possessive pronoun implying ownership. What belongs to me is not me. I am separate from it; I possess it. Whatever I possess, I can dispense with, and still remain who I am. On a deeper level, when one says ‘I’, one is referring to the faculties of thinking, feeling, and willing. Yet the same analysis applies.”¹⁴

That the body is inert is easily understood. However, that the mind is also inert becomes problematic for us. But Indian thought is categorical in this respect: the mind is ‘material’ (though made of a different kind of matter, more subtle than the physical and beyond science as it is conceived of today) and it is unconscious, for it is only consciousness without content that makes us capable of being conscious of everything else, in the same way that the sun illuminates all things which would otherwise remain in darkness and unknown without its presence. The mind belongs to the field of the ‘observable’, and is therefore distinct from consciousness.

“The feeling of pain is nearer (to me) than the existence of the stone. At the same time the pain as well as the stone are recognized as other than me. [...] The stone (object which has physical properties) or the

¹³ Ibid., p.301.

¹⁴ John Grimes. *Ramana Maharshi: The Crown Jewel of Advaita*. Varanasi: Indica Books, 2010, pp. 59-60.

pain (object which has mental properties) is experienced as other than me, changing and having meaning when related to an experiencer.”¹⁵

How then does consciousness come to be identified with the mind, and the observer with the observed? According to the Samkhya-Yoga School:

“The perceiver is the seer, the witness, the immutable testimonial consciousness that observes the constant changes in visible nature. Nature is unconscious, but able to reflect the light of consciousness that emanates from the testimonial consciousness of the seer. This light, upon being trapped in matter becomes identified with its limited modes and creates an autonomous centre of consciousness subject to pleasure and pain, to likes and dislikes, to fear of death and to ignorance.”¹⁶

“The finite mind, in its congruence with the ego-complex, poses as the subject in the subject-object relationship, by ‘being’ that which it is not, by falsely identifying itself sometimes with the sense-organs, sometimes with the sensations, and sometimes with the thought. The very fact that we can think about the phenomenon of thought is sufficient indication that something else, ‘other’ than thought is present, because ‘thought’ as a tool could not think about itself.”¹⁷

The yogi, one who seeks knowledge of consciousness, endeavours through patient inner work to separate consciousness from its contents and move from identification with the body and the mind to identification with his or her deepest reality: the witness, pure consciousness.

The Mind

In Indian philosophy the mind is called the internal organ (*antaḥkaraṇa*). This organ is made up of four parts: *manas*, *citta*, *ahaṁkāra* and *buddhi*. *Manas* can be thought of as the ‘thinking or deliberating mind’; *citta* corresponds to memory, the great ‘storehouse’ of information which also includes the residues left by completed actions (*karma*) and mental habits (*saṁskāras*);

¹⁵ Sangeetha Menon. ‘Persistent Puzzles of Consciousness: What is it? Where is it?’, in *Understanding Consciousness*, op.cit., p. 187.

¹⁶ Òscar Pujol. ‘Patañjali’, in Òscar Pujol & Atilano Domínguez, *Patañjali – Spinoza*. Valencia: Pre-textos, 2009, p. 26.

¹⁷ Banamali Lahiry. *Quest for Truth*. Varanasi: Indica Books, 2001, p.35.

ahamkāra is the ego, the sense of individuality, of being a centre that is independent and separate from the rest; *buddhi*, the intellect, encompasses the faculty of comprehension and knowledge, of ‘penetration’ and discernment, as well as the faculty of decision. It must be noted that *buddhi* is not of an individual nature; it is the first manifestation of *prakṛti*, ‘nature’, the first ‘reflection’ of pure consciousness in the manifested world.

According to Sankaracharya: “The intellect, being transparent and next to the Self (*Ātman*), easily catches the reflection of the intelligence of the Self.”¹⁸ Thus, *buddhi* is the highest intellectual faculty, the one that acts as a bridge to pure consciousness.

Manas differentiates and integrates mental activities like a central switchboard. Yet it is largely mechanical. Mental movements (*vṛttis*), thoughts and emotions, appear and disappear in conformity with established habits, or *saṃskāras*, our ‘mental tendencies’, that we have formed in this and in past individual existences. But *manas*, while it is a ‘material’ product of *prakṛti*, is at the same time close to consciousness, which permits it to serve as a bridge between sense organs and consciousness.

“The mind is like a diamond; it does not shine in the darkness, but when a ray of light falls upon it, it is capable of breaking up this ray of white light into thousands of sparkling fragments. [...] The mind is like a diamond because it is transparent, and has the capacity to fill itself with the neutral or pure consciousness of the puruṣa...”¹⁹

Perception is produced when the mind makes contact with objects through the senses. Because both are material (though with varying degrees of subtlety), contact is made without difficulty. The mind becomes similar to objects, takes their form (it ‘con-forms’) and constructs a subtle model of the latter. Yet all of this would be a blind process without the light of the *Ātman* or *Puruṣa*, pure Consciousness. According to Srinivasa Acharya: “The *ātman* associates with the mind; the mind with the sense organ; the sense organ with the object; thus is perception generated.”²⁰

¹⁸ Śaṅkarācārya, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad Bhāṣya*.

¹⁹ Óscar Pujol, ‘Patañjali’, op.cit., p.68.

²⁰ Śrīnivāsa Ācārya, *Yatīndramatadīpikā*.

“[Srinivasa Acharya] says that this consciousness is just like the water in a reservoir and manas is the gateway through which the consciousness can flow. If water is to flow out, the gate of the reservoir needs to be opened. Then it can flow through the different channels in the form of sense organs. [...] Through the channels of the sense organs, consciousness can go to different objects and be cast in different forms.”²²

“As Patanjali [the author of the *Yoga Sutras*] notes, consciousness (*cit*) has the awareness of its own psyche (*buddhi*) by taking its form (IV.22). *Buddhi* takes the form of the perceptual objects in its range like the crystal reflects the adjacent flower. The focused mind, in an undisturbed equipoised state, takes the form of the object of knowing, the process of knowing, or of the knower, like an unblemished gem which assumes the colour of the adjacent object (i.41).”²³

Pure consciousness, the witness, is not individual, it is universal. ▲

²² M. A. Lakshmithathachar. ‘Study of Consciousness from the Point of View of Visistadvaita Philosophy’, in *Understanding Consciousness*, op.cit., pp.172-73.

²³ K. Ramakrishna Rao & Anand C. Paranjpe. ‘Yoga Psychology: Theory and Application’, in *Handbook of Indian Psychology*, op.cit., p.189.

MOUNTAIN PATH

Statement about ownership and other particulars about Mountain Path (according to Form IV, Rule 8, Circular of the Registrar of Newspapers for India).

1. Place of Publication – Tiruvannamalai; 2. Periodicity of its Publication – Quarterly; 3. Printer’s Name – Sri. N. Subramaniam; Nationality - Indian; Address – Sudarsan Graphics Private Ltd., 27, Neelakanta Mehta Street, T. Nagar, Chennai 600 017; 4. Publisher’s Name – Sri. V.S. Ramanan; Nationality - Indian; Address – Sri Ramanasramam, Sri Ramanasramam PO., Tiruvannamalai 606 603; 5. Editor’s Name – Sri. V.S.Ramanan; Nationality – Indian; Address – Sri Ramanasramam, Tiruvannamalai; 6. Names and addresses of individuals who own the newspaper and partners or shareholders holding more than 1% of the total capital – SRI RAMANASRAMAM, Tiruvannamalai.

I, V.S. Ramanan, hereby declare that the particulars given above are true to the best of my knowledge and belief. 31/03/2019



The Long Road to Bhagavan

Tracing the Pilgrim Life of Ella Maillart

Part One

MICHAEL HIGHBURGER

Introduction

Even today explorer, travel writer and photographer Ella Maillart (1903-1997), is revered as a national hero in her native Switzerland. But outside of a small circle, it is not widely known that she had been a disciple of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi and had spent many of the war years at Sri Ramanasramam.

Ella competed at the 1924 Summer Olympics in solo sailing and as a member of the Swiss national skiing team, she defended the colours of her country at the World Championships at Mürren (1931), Cortina d'Ampezzo (1932), Innsbruck (1933) and St. Moritz (1934). During the late 1920s, she participated in an archaeological dig in Crete, modeled for sculptors in Paris, acted at the Dramatic Arts Studio in Geneva and worked as a film stunt-woman in Berlin. She travelled extensively in Russia in 1930, Turkestan in 1932, and was commissioned by a major Parisian daily, in 1934, to report on the Japanese occupation of Manchuria. From there she teamed up with Peter Fleming to cross Central Asia from Peking to Srinagar (3,500 miles) by foot and horseback. Ella chronicled these and other gripping adventures in a

series of travel books and memoirs which brought her international fame and celebrity.

In 1939, with the winds of war stirring in Europe, Ella and the Swiss writer Annemarie Schwarzenbach set off by car from Geneva to Kabul. Proceeding to India, Ella eventually journeyed to Madras Province where, upon encountering Sri Ramana Maharshi, she felt compelled to settle down near the Ashram in order to remain in his company.

(The following multi-part series is based on articles published from January to October 2018 in Sri Ramanasramam's monthly e-magazine Saranagati and recounts Ella's years at Tiruvannamalai.)

When Ella Maillart arrived at Sri Ramanasramam at the end of 1940, the South Indian devotees who greeted her might not have been able to appreciate the nature of her pilgrimage, nor that of the many other Europeans who had come to the Ashram, many inspired by Paul Brunton's *A Search in Secret India*.¹

Ashram inmates might not have realised the full significance of what the recent outbreak of war in Europe meant for Ella. They might not have known that her very impressionable teenage years had coincided with the technologically-sophisticated trench warfare of World War One where artillery shells left five-metre craters. They may not have known how the conflict had left forty million dead or injured as well as a gaping wound in the European psyche.

Ella's South Indian hosts may not have understood how she had been ejected from her childhood home by the cheap materialism that sought to paper over the existential plight of a culture in crisis, a bankrupt moral order whose religious truths had proven ill-equipped to keep pace with the 'progress' of history and the 'advances' of science and the tools it unleashed on the world. They would not have been able to fathom that her many years of travel had been an exercise in blind trust, a going forth with no particular goal in mind:

¹ In a letter to her mother dated 28th October 1940, Ella wrote: "I went to have a look at Pondicherry for two days, and I do not think that I shall settle down there for the present. I prefer to go first to Tiruvannamalai, which is not far from Madras and where there is this great man described in Paul Brunton's book."



In Iran, enroute to India, 1939

“I know I must turn away from the outside world which is not the ultimate reality, and listen to the strength which is hidden [within] me. I know that we have in us a spark of energy which cannot die. If we knew how to kindle it instead of unwittingly smashing it, we could create bonds linking all of us so strongly together that we could not hate or kill each other anymore.”²

As Nazism spread its violence across Europe, Ella was still recovering from the tragedy of war during her childhood:

“The last war sent me down to the clean life of the seas, forever rid of illusions about our civilisation. This war compels me to search for ‘the meaning of all this’, for the common denominator in all of us, the basis on which to live anew.”³

Ella fled a realm not only racked by armed conflict but one that seemed to have lost its way with no lasting peace in sight, a people leaning desperately on blind gestures:

“The ‘war to end war’ [brought] in its train compromise, artificial ideals, and palavers that failed to establish a real peace.⁴ I am concerned that the majority of my fellowmen are busy with things that are not essential. They seek happiness where they cannot find it. Happiness is inside us but we seek for it in external things.”⁵

² *Gypsy Afloat*, London, William Heinemann, 1942, p.240.

³ *The Cruel Way: Switzerland to Afghanistan in a Ford, 1939*. University of Chicago Press, 1947, p.204.

⁴ *Cruises and Caravans*, London, J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1942, p.28-29.

⁵ *La métaphysique d’Ella Maillart*, RTS Religion, Babel, 17 September 2017, trans. Savitri Poornima.

Raw intuition steered her, and with the passing of years on the road, her wandering led to deeper questioning till it found its voice:

“The world is a book, and those who do not travel read only a page.... You do not travel if you are afraid of the unknown; you travel for the unknown that reveals you [to] yourself.”⁶

But in 1939-40 during her year-long overland trip to India, Ella began to identify a compulsive pattern in her itinerant life. As long as she was on the road and moving, she was happy. But as soon as she returned home, the former dissatisfaction set in, a gnawing discontent that could only be placated by fresh adventures. She began to see the unsustainability of her strategy, subject as it invariably was, to the law of diminishing returns. It was not enough to run away — there should be some purpose, some reason for living, some service to humanity beyond writing entertaining books. She began to take her wandering more seriously and began to recognise that while she had conquered the world, she had not conquered herself.

Arrival at Sri Ramanasramam

Dressed in trousers and possessed of an independent demeanour atypical for women in mid-twentieth century South India, upon her arrival at Sri Ramanasramam in November 1940, Ella would have felt a little out of place. There was nothing in her background that could have prepared her for the orthodox customs of a religious community. Her awkwardness would have been in full view. Having rejected religion at an early age, she had never lived among people of faith and did not know their language:

“At seventeen I had followed a course of religious instruction. The pastor had brought the problems of God, life, and death under the light of the Gospel. But because I listened with the mind only, as if it were a school lesson — whereas such teaching ought to reach deeper and subtler regions — the result was negative. We became a debating society where many moral questions were raised, but we never understood the real meaning of what [this] fine man was saying. I decided that religions were not helpful, and that I had to find by myself why we were on [this] earth.”⁷

⁶ Ella Maillart, <www.inspiringquotes.us>.

⁷ *The Spiritual Daughters of Herman Hesse*, Fanny Guex, University of Lausanne, August 2015.

Ella's initial clumsiness in adjusting to life among Ramana devotees would have obscured the mastery she otherwise demonstrated in less populated surroundings such as the barren reaches of the Gobi Desert, the high altitude wastelands of the Tibetan plateau, the mountain landscapes of the Chinese Pamirs, the twisting valleys of the Hindu Kush or, for that matter, under sail beneath the night-time sky in the vast expanse of the Atlantic Ocean. But she soon adapted:

"I wake up at 6:30, drink some buttermilk from my thermos, wash my face, brush my teeth, hunt fleas or do small repairs. Then a walk of twenty minutes (it rains every day now that the monsoon blows from the east), accompanied by the children who make the quest, pretty, bronzed, naked. Then I arrive in our small colony where we even have a post office, and Raja the postman is the friend who takes care of me. He is shaved with the exception of a bun on the back of his head, and his eyes are full of sweetness and kindness. His torso is naked except for a string that the Brahmins always wear; he is dressed in a sort of sheet wrapped around his hips, and he is barefoot. Raja also works in the kitchen, helping prepare meals for more than fifty people. On approaching our colony, I see the stonecutters engaged in pounding blocks for the construction of a sanctuary above the tomb of the Sage's mother."⁸

Ella's awkwardness implied no disrespect; rather she invited instruction and guidance in proper comportment in the presence of the guru. Yet all such concerns faded into insignificance once the encounter took place, and she found herself face to face with the one figure whom, until then, she did not know she had been looking for:

"His extraordinarily bright eyes expressed such kindness and peace. The silence between us was so rich that it gave me something like a cracked valve in my heart. It created emptiness, a total blank. My call to Reality, represented by this man, was so intense that I knew the answer I was looking for was to be found in his surroundings. The purpose of my expeditions was to bring me to the brink of knowledge that gives meaning to life. Only the inner journey is real."⁹

⁸ *This Reality That I've Been Chasing*, Paris, Payot, 2013, pp. 188-190.

⁹ *Two Swiss Travellers in India*, Fanny Guex, Workshop May 2014, Ella Maillart fonds — Ms. Fr. 7127/C, "A chacun sa raison de vivre..." , article sans date en français (ma traduction).

Following this first meeting with Bhagavan, the tone of her diary reflections changed markedly and her entries are henceforth couched in an ecstatic language of the divine:

“Where [did] I belong? Everywhere I found myself. I do not belong ... at home where no one shared my thoughts [...] Thus I belong where my heart is alive. Shall I one day belong to India? My heart wants to go home ... It is no self-pity, I see it at once. Yes, a home for my heart ... Where? With God, a spiritual home. And God is nowhere but in me. How simple, [how] ridiculously simple. I never lived it so clearly.”¹⁰

Setting Up House

As in those days, women were not allowed to stay overnight in the Ashram, Ella rented a flat for five rupees per month in Anaikatti Theru — what she calls ‘Dancing-Girls Street’ — just south of Arunachaleswarar Temple. She writes to her mother of settling into her new home:

“On my wooden bed, my tote is unrolled. I sleep in the flea bag you made me, wrapped in the vicuna blanket when the wind blows. I bought three soapboxes for my table, chair, and dressing table, and a paraffin lamp to light when I write on my [typewriter]. From my tiny terrace I have a wide view of the sacred Hill nearby.”¹¹

Early on she befriended Viswanatha Swami, son of the first cousin of Bhagavan who, in his youth, had been a sympathiser of Gandhi’s freedom movement when he came to stay permanently with Bhagavan.

The expat community who, like Ella, had journeyed to Tiruvannamalai to live and be near the Maharshi, came to her aid as well. Alan Chadwick, the British Army major who had come in 1935, took a liking to Ella from the start. She wrote of him:

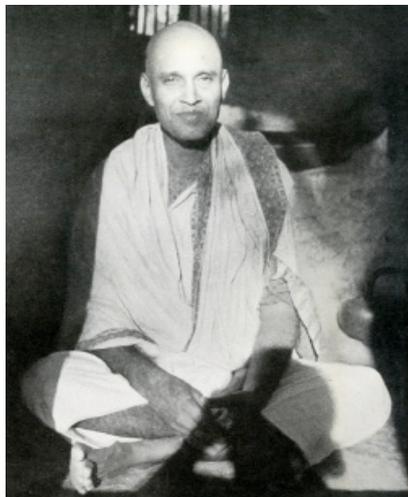
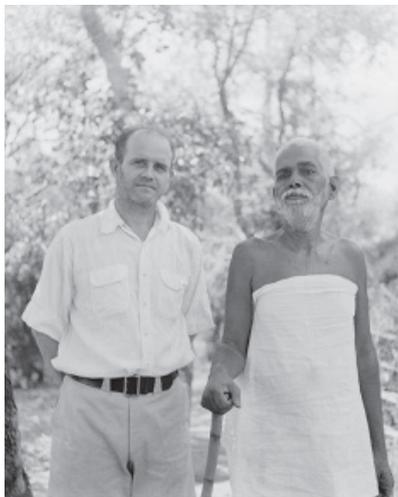
“I go to him often because he has a rocking chair on which I can stretch my legs, because he sometimes gives me a biscuit, because we tease each other about our meditation hours and discuss the war.”¹²

She also got to know Guy Hague, the Californian geologist who

¹⁰ Ibid, Ella Maillart fonds – Ms. Fr. 7111, B/4 feuillet 66.

¹¹ *This Reality That I’ve Been Chasing*, Paris, Payot, 2013, pp. 187-188.

¹² Letter to her mother, 12th December, 1940.



Courtesy of Ella Maillart

Bhagavan, Guy Hague, Viswanatha Swami and others sometimes found themselves in the viewfinder of Ella's Leica camera

spent two years in the Ashram in the 1940s and Lewis Thompson, the British sannyasin-poet who became one of her best friends and with whom she maintained constant correspondence until his untimely death at Benares in 1949.

Ethel Merston, the kind-hearted Englishwoman who lived in town and who made it her habit to assist newly-arrived devotees, made herself available to Ella.

S.S. Cohen, the Iraqi Jew who had delved into Theosophy prior to his arrival from Bombay in 1936, accompanied Ella to Uma Devi, the Polish author and translator. Cohen confided in Ella his unrealistic expectations upon arriving at the Ashram four years earlier, how he had hoped to be transformed in his first encounter with Bhagavan but had been so disappointed that it didn't happen as he expected that he 'went behind the Ashram to cry', only later realising that liberation was a prolonged endeavour.

Ella met many like-minded souls, all of whom came with the hope of learning what was needed from the Sage and thus gaining their freedom. However, many had come and gone rather quickly, operating under the misconception that the spiritual process was immediate. Ella's case was different. She harboured no illusions and knew from the start that hers was no brief or casual visit. She says, "The Sage used

to say about the Europeans who came here, ‘I explain something to them and they reply ‘Oh yes, we understand, and then they go away.’”

Ella adds: “We must become what we understand, so that it moves from the domain of intellect to the domain of being or of the fundamental essence of Being. I stayed three months instead of eight days like other people, because I doubted myself horribly. At the end of three months I really knew that this Sage was what he taught and it was then that I decided to remain. And the more I advanced the more I wanted to stay and try to transform myself and find out this truth which was within us.”¹³

Ella’s life changed. She was no longer planning new adventures but took stock of her life and began to reflect on her years of travelling. She had as her employment the discipline of writing books in English, mainly to support herself and ensure the possibility of being able to stay on. She established a rhythm:

“My days were spent at the Sage’s Ashram (about a mile out of town), eating the midday meal near him in a great dining-hall. There also I had my daily bath, returning in the evening.”¹⁴

Elsewhere, she wrote:

“I wanted to prolong my stay near the sage Ramana Maharshi. His life was public. Anyone could approach him, ask him questions and enjoy the benefits of his presence that radiated goodness, distinction and immutable peace. And there each one of us was free to do whatever they wanted, because, with the exception of meals, there was no set of rules for community life. I got into the routine of staying for two hours each morning and each evening in the hall where around twenty people of both sexes were seated on the ground, legs crossed in silent meditation. I read the little brochures where the main responses of the sage had been collected over the course of some thirty years. His function was to inform seekers about the nature of the ultimate reality. And I tried to see if his replies corresponded with something I felt in myself.”¹⁵

¹³ *La Metaphysique d’Ella Maillart*, RTS Religion, Babel, 17 September 2017, trans. Savitri Poornima.

¹⁴ *Ti-Puss*, William Heinemann, London, 1951, p.14.

¹⁵ *Croisieres et Caravanes*, Chap. XIV, ‘South India’, (French ed., 1951), trans. Marye Tonnaire, p.225.



Bhagavan on his sofa in the hall, early 1940s

Life in the Hall

All this was marvelously new for Ella but she took to it like a duck to water, careful to observe all that transpired before her:

“I was continuously distracted by the spectacle around me that was so new and so different. Apart from the servants (who were taking care of the garden, the refectory, the kitchen and the stable) and the ashram inmates (around twenty or so Hindu disciples and four or five Europeans), there was also an incessant (flow) of poor, Tamilian peasants, both men and women, accompanied by their children, coming to bow before the Maharshi who was reclining on his sofa – the men, almost naked, lying flat on the floor in full prostration, the women kneeling, draped in their saris, their heads touching the ground; they offered the master either a few fruits or some sweets.

“An attendant would then return part of the consecrated offering to them. While reading his mail or the newspapers, correcting proofs, fanning himself or meditating, the Maharshi would sometimes look at us or would smile at the astonished children who stood there frozen in front of him. He would often give nuts to the agile squirrels perched on the top of his sofa, or else his favourite cow would drop in to ask for a banana.

“Morning and evening a group of Brahmins chanted the holy scriptures. At a fixed time, the sage would take a short walk in the surrounding area, and it was on these occasions that we could speak to him in private. At eleven o’clock we would all eat in his presence, curry-rice served on banana leaves spread out on the red-tiled floor. The right hand alone was used to carry the food up to the mouth. According to the rules of caste, the Brahmins ate apart, separated by a screen. The Maharshi was seated so as to see everyone; he had been born a Brahmin but, because he was a sage—‘liberated while alive,’ as they say in India—he was beyond caste observances.”¹⁶

Cruises and Caravans

In 1942 her autobiography *Cruises and Caravans* was published and Ella presented it to Bhagavan with the following inscription:

“Dear Bhagavan, here is the book you helped me to write during the summer before last. Once more I form the deep wish that after so

¹⁶Ibid., pp.225-226.

many years spent in dealing with the external world—as you may see by gleaning through my autobiography—I shall make swift progress in discovering the inner life leading to You. — Yours, Ella.”¹⁷

The memoir was an effort at making sense of all that had happened to her, a form of self-understanding, as clarity began to emerge within her while living in Bhagavan’s presence. Her narrative began:

“Now that I can already look back upon half my life, I could easily link up its main episodes into a logical story. [...] Such clear-cut biographies I have read; but they don’t ring true: they give the feeling that the hero knew too soon the meaning of his life. In reality, things don’t seem to happen logically. You grope blindly towards the unknown, and your energy is sapped by the torture of suspense. A few men seem to have known since childhood what they wanted to be — poet, soldier, sculptor, doctor, musician, explorer. Though they probably fought and suffered to reach their goal, I have always envied them: they did not know the anguish of hesitation.”¹⁸

In one way of seeing, Ella’s arrival at Ramanasramam was anti-climactic — no more high-altitude mountain passes to traverse or raging river rope-bridges to negotiate. The outward impulse had given way to an inner exploration of the heart as Ella began to discover parts of herself she had not known. Elsewhere she recorded beginning to let go of everything that once formed her identity:

“I have some difficulty — a heart pinch — when I say that never, never again will skis be fastened, clasped under my feet. But, after all, I have had everything, so my giving it up is easy, especially when I know how bitter-sweet all that fun has been.”¹⁹

But now the savour of sports and the outdoors had been surpassed by something unexpected and Ella found that her heart could be content on its own without needing any external incentive or distant motivation. Peace had been modelled for her in a most remarkable way by a simple glance:

¹⁷ Sri Ramanasramam library, pasted in the 1942 English edition of *Cruises and Caravans* that Ella presented to Bhagavan.

¹⁸ *Croisieres et Caravanes*, 1942, Chapter 1, p.1.

¹⁹ Ella Maillart fonds – Ms. Fr. 7111, Extraits de notes ‘Five Years in India’, B/4 feuillet 48.

“What counted above and beyond everything else were the eyes of the Maharshi when he looked at me, a look so noble and so magnificent that one had to ask oneself what he was seeing!²⁰ [I saw now that] I had come to Tiruvannamalai in order to live near a Sage who embodied the essence of Hindu wisdom; and whereas a course for beginners would have suited me best, I found myself... listening all at once to the highest metaphysical teaching.”²¹

Finally, replying in 1942 to friends and family who had asked: “Well, why did you do all that?” she replied:

“Three riddles confront us: the world, ourselves, and God. By its loveable beauty and its wonders, the world attracts us long before we come to feel it has a hidden meaning: we start out to study and conquer it, demanding what response it can give to our deepest desires. But the world with its countless aspects cannot give us the fundamental answer: only God can. And God can be met nowhere but in ourselves. This truth everyone must discover for himself. Our deepest demands are alive because of a silent soul within us and they will be answered if we can only release that soul. In so many it has become paralysed through lack of use. The power to cure that paralysis lies in the heart and not in the mind. I don’t say this because I have been told so, but because I have found it to be true. Out of all that I have seen and known, this seems to me the most important fact, the sum of my discoveries.

“Today I feel at home anywhere, and, though I live by myself, I can nevermore suffer from loneliness. Here in India I have started on a new journey which, I know, will take me further than before towards the perfect life I was instinctively seeking. I began this journey by exploring the unmapped territory of my own mind and now, in the light of what living sages teach today, it takes me forward to a Reality so wonderful that to love and obey it is the greatest adventure and the greatest happiness there is.”²² ▲

(to be continued)

²⁰ *Croisieres et Caravanes*, Chap. XIV, (French Ed., 1951), trans. Marye Tonnaire.

²¹ *Ti-Puss*, William Heinemann, London, 1951, p.10.

²² *Cruises and Caravans*, London, J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd, 1942, p.154.

My Experiences with Bhagavan

JANAKI MURALI

I grew up with Bhagavan, although I had never seen him. My parents were devotees of Janaki Matha, an ardent devotee of Ramana. All my summer vacations were spent at the Janaki Matha Ashram in Thanjavur and I grew up reciting the *Upadeśa Sāram* and the *Śrī Aruṇācala Akṣaramaṇamālai*. My first visit to Ramana Ashram was as a teenager, when my parents took my brothers and me to Tiruvannamalai. It must have been 1975 or so.

My next visit was nearly 10 years later, when I visited with my husband and two young children. We had driven all the way from Hyderabad. We didn't know anyone and hadn't booked any accommodation either. But the ashram officials were very gracious and gave us accommodation in the cool environs of the former Morvi guesthouse, with its delightful library on the first and second floor.

After that, we kept going back. We often stayed at the Korangu Thottam, with the monkeys begging for biscuits and bananas from the children. We also stayed at the newer and greener Mourvi guesthouse or sometimes at the multistoried guesthouse behind the German bakery; or at the ashram guesthouse near the post office.

The shrill call of the peacocks in the morning was the best alarm ever for our city bred family. The peacocks were a major fascination for our children and they would run after them, watching them or clicking pictures with them.

I have spent many peaceful hours reading in the ashram library. Sometimes I would just vegetate and watch life go by as I sipped steaming filter coffee at the coffee stall opposite the ashram. During each visit to the Ashram, I would learn something more about Bhagavan's grace through the sharing of spiritual experiences with other Ramana devotees from around the world.

The Arunachala Hill always held me in thrall. My husband and children trekked right up to the top of the Hill once, and returned exhausted and dehydrated, as they had not carried enough water. The treks to Skanda Ashram and Virupaksha Cave were many, each adding to the varied moods of the Arunachala Hill. I watched as the Hill transformed from barren black to dry brown to the plush, undulating green of today, following the afforestation efforts of volunteers. What always took my breath away was the magnificent view from Skanda Ashram of the four gopurams of *Periya Kovil* (the great temple) and the cluster of houses in the town below. Every time I visited the ashram, I would look out for the splendourous, blue Arunachala Hill, knowing that if I saw it, we were not far away from the ashram.

The *girivalam*¹ has always fascinated me. The peace and calm of walking around the Arunachala Hill at night; in the quiet of a town gone to sleep; watching the sunrise over the hill; as morning sounds invade the silence and sleeping sadhus wake up groggily to their day. I have always been awed by the tens of thousands of pilgrims doing girivalam during full moon days, walking barefoot, as they sing odes to Siva and stop and rest at wayside shrines on the long 14.5 kilometre walk.

So much has Bhagavan become part of our lives, that when our son and daughter went to the UK to do their post-graduation, we went to Ramana Ashram to get their passports and travel papers blessed at the shrine. When my daughter got married, we sent the first invitation to

¹ *Girivalam* is the Tamil word for circumambulation of the Annamalai hill. The Sanskrit term is *Giri Pradakshina*.

Ramana Ashram. When I wrote my first novel, I took the manuscript to get it blessed by Bhagavan, *The Colour of Dawn* later got published by HarperCollins. My husband and I marked our 60th birthdays at the Ramana Ashram. Then there was the joy of participating in the Navaratri pujas and various other pujas at the ashram.

The meditation room has always been one of my favourite places. To the sounds of the mellifluous chanting of the Vedas floating in from the Hall, I would sit quietly, asking questions of Bhagavan, which he always answered.

During one such meditation sitting, I had a strange experience. I had no sense of my body or of the others sitting around me. Bhagavan took me on a journey through a deep tunnel and through a well-lit pathway high up in the sky, which was lined with sadhus squatting on both sides, with their eyes closed. Around them floated wispy clouds. After that experience, every time I sat in meditation, I tried to reach that bright light at the end of the tunnel but it never happened again. Of late, I find myself again travelling through the tunnel, but the light is elusive, sometimes it's just a tiny spot of moving light.

That Bhagavan's grace followed me wherever I went, was evident when I was on a US visit in 2000 and had a stomach flu and was hospitalized in a New York hospital. I had forgotten to tell the doctors that I was extremely sensitive to anesthetics, which the doctors had added in the drips. I found myself becoming deeply drowsy. As I had gone as a guest of the US government on an International Visitor Leadership Programme, I told the American official from the State Department who was with me, about my allergies and he didn't object as I wrenched the drips from my arm. He took me back to my hotel room, telling me to take care.

Alone in my hotel room, I was extremely frightened that I might drift into deep sleep, from which I might never awaken, and so rang up an old friend of the family. As I fought my waves of drowsiness, the friend drove me to their home in New Jersey. Lo and behold, what should I see first in their home, but a large picture of Ramana. I knew then that Bhagavan had stood by my side, as I battled my fears of dying alone in a strange place.

As I moved closer and closer to Bhagavan, my mother was concerned that I was moving away from Janaky Matha, our family

guru. Once, when I was sitting in meditation, Janaky Matha came to me and I felt her telling me, “You’ve gone directly to the source. Bhagavan is my guru, so don’t worry.” I related this experience to my mother, who was at peace after that. When she passed away in March 2017, it was to Bhagavan, I turned again to find closure, and I found it once again in the meditation room in Ramana Ashram.

I often wonder what he has designed for me for the rest of my life, but I know that wherever I am, my heart will always be in Arunachala and resting at the Lotus feet of Bhagavan. ▲

Meditation

Neelam

A man asked me over tea in the old dining hall,
“How much do you meditate?”
I hesitated, and finally said, “Not much.”
What I wanted to tell him was that
My meditation is
the slowly drifting cloud across Arunachala,
In the golden evening light glowing Arunachala,
In the swirling mist caressing the crest of Arunachala,
In the subtle gaze rewarded by a glimpse of the aura of Arunachala.
My meditation is
in the conscious tread on the sacred hill in the rustling breeze,
passing the butterflies flitting around,
standing still
to cock an ear to the bird song and the chorus of the crickets,
to behold the lofty crags and boulders as sacred sentinels.
My meditation is
in deep gratitude and constant awareness of being in His abode,
to tread the hallowed ground He trod,
surrounded by sacred sounds and sights in the company
of aspiring, inspiring worthy souls.
All of it is worship to Thee, My Lord.

Maha Bhakta Vijayam

Chapter Twelve

Kabir Takes His Wife to the Merchant

NABAJI SIDDHA

Kabir's hospitality to sadhus gradually eroded the wealth Tamal had earned for his son. The household was running only on the meagre earnings of Kabir as a weaver. One day, he could not sell his cloth and there was nothing left in the house to feed the family. To test Kabir's love for sadhus and uphold his glory, the Lord took the form of a sadhu and reached Kabir's house accompanied by a hundred sadhus. Addressing Kabir, he said, "O virtuous one! We have had no alms since sunrise. We are all very hungry. As we know that you are generous and known for your hospitality to sadhus, we have come to you. Will you arrange for our food as speedily as possible and appease the fire in our stomach?"

For Kabir, it was imperative to make every necessary arrangement and secure the required provisions. Turning to his wife, Kabir said, "O my beloved companion, we are forlorn that we are not able to feed our aged parents. But that is no reason to remain helpless now when devotees have come to our door. It is the bounden duty of a householder to show hospitality to whoever comes to his door, by any means, be it

begging, borrowing or stealing. If there are any articles in the house, please sell them and buy groceries.”

She replied, “O my master, do I ever hide any article from your sight in the house? We cannot put our house for sale to raise the wherewithal to serve these sadhus, as it is already under mortgage. Even the few grains of gold in my matrimonial thread have been similarly disposed of for the same.

“Now, something strikes me, O, the Lord of my life! There is a merchant in the next street, who throws small stones at me to draw my attention, whenever I pass by and says, ‘O gorgeous woman! If you consent to spend one night with me, I will supply you with all provisions.’

“If we avail of the opportunity now, you will be freed of your worry and we can also feed the sadhus sumptuously. Please don’t look at it as a disgraceful act, for we know from the scriptures that King Harishchandra sold his wife and son, and himself became a bonded slave to an outcaste, for the sake of dharma.”

Listening to the noble woman, Kabir embraced her and kissing her with great affection, said, “O crown jewel among women! O blemishless one, O unparalleled in virtues, abode of excellent merits, O lamp of my lineage, O radiant one, O inexhaustible fragrance, you are the nectar of my life! You are an exalted woman, your words of purity have gladdened my heart and saved me from embarrassment. You have found a way to adhere to dharma. The house in which resides a harmonious and supportive wife, is verily a garden filled with wish-fulfilling trees and celestial cows. O holiest of the holy, wisest among the wise, can anything be lacking in my life when I have you as my life partner? Let us make haste and alleviate the pangs of hunger of our guests, parents and children.”

Sundara took her husband to the shop and pointed out the grocer who had made passes at her. Approaching him, Kabir said, “You seem to hanker after my wife and desire to spend a night with her. In return, will you give me enough provisions to feed one hundred sadhus, who have come to my house?”

The man, blinded by carnal desire, eagerly agreed to the proposal. He felt like he had come upon a precious ruby on the street. Shamelessly, he told Kabir, “For spending a night with her, I will supply you with groceries sufficient to feed even two hundred sadhus!”

However, Kabir collected enough groceries only for a hundred sadhus and promised to send Sundara to him after she finished preparing and serving the sadhus. And he could keep her for the whole night and send her back the next morning.

Hurrying Sundara to complete the cooking as fast as possible, he served food to all. Then he looked at his parents and said, “You continue to look after the sadhus. I have to finish a little business with the grocer. I will be back soon and participate in devotional singing.”

He asked Sundara to dress up in her finery and then walked her to the merchant’s house. Meantime, the merchant had his bedroom decorated and waited, wearing fine clothes, for Sundara. When the couple arrived, he offered a garland to Kabir.

Kabir said, “O man of great merit! My mind would have been wearied, unable to find a way to repay your kindness, but for this chance you have afforded me to bring some joy to you. Accept this woman whom you desire so much. O noble woman, please conduct yourself in a way that will give him no cause for complaint.”

Leaving Sundara with the grocer, Kabir left for his home to discharge his service to the sadhus and engage in bhajan.

The merchant’s state was like that of a lame man wishing to taste honey on a tree or a miser longing to attain heaven. Indeed, he was like Keechaka lusting after Draupadi.

Overcome by lust, the lowly man addressed Sundara, “O beloved, O adorable woman! Why do you keep standing, hurting your tender feet? Let me close the door.”

As soon as he closed the door to the bedroom, there was a pounding on the door. The Lord, in the form of a night watchman kicking the door, cried in fury, “O crook, evil-doer, depraved to take another man’s wife, I will teach you a lesson!”

The merchant jumped back in shock. Asking Sundara to hide under the bed, he opened the door cautiously. Finding no one outside, he closed it with relief. Instantly, another heavy pounding was heard accompanied by abuses! Stricken with fear, he came out and looked around. Finding no one again, he returned to the room and approached Sundara with wicked intention.

The Lord, disguised as the watchman, crashed open the door, and jumping on the merchant, pushed him down on the ground, kicked

him and showered blows on him. The Lord said, “O monstrous sinner! The life partner of sadhus or Sadguru is to be looked upon as one’s mother. I am going to pluck out your eyes, which looked upon this noble woman with lust. I will sever your arms which longed to touch her with evil desire. I will behead you now!” By then, the grocer had fainted with fright and from the forceful blows dealt on him.

Dragging Sundara by the hand, the Lord took her home and pushed her into the house. After creating a storm of rain and wind, He disappeared. Sundara was inconsolable, “Alas, great harm and humiliation has befallen the grocer who helped us out with feeding sadhus. Now, how shall I repair the unnecessary blame that has arisen? How will I apprise my husband of the happenings? He will be put out with my return.”

While she waited with dread pounding her heart, Kabir, who was serving the sadhus, was taken aback to see her standing inside the house. Mistaking that she had run away from the situation, he hurled abuses at her wrathfully, “O destroyer of family honour, don’t you know that breach of promise is a terrible sin? How dare you come here, cheating the merchant of his due? You have broken my promise and have thus brought infamy to my long cherished austerity. A faithful wife considers her husband’s words as divine commandment. For the sake of truth, Lord Siva was on the run to escape Bhasmasura: a great hero, like Harishchandra was ready to sell his wife, Dasaratha, and Karna, put their lives at stake for dharma. O betrayer, by breaking my promise to the merchant you have reserved a place in hell for me.”

Trembling in fear and bowing at his feet, Sundara said, “O Swami, parents are the Lord for a good son; Guru is the supreme Lord for a good disciple; justice is the deity to be worshipped by a righteous ruler; a good son reveres the words of his parents as Vedas; a good disciple obeys the words of his Guru as supreme dharma. Similarly, being well aware that for a chaste wife, her husband is the supreme deity, will I disobey your words even if death stares at me? As soon as you left me there, the kotwal (the watchman of the town) came, banged the door, attacked the merchant, and then dragged me home forcibly. I was helpless. Please do not be annoyed with me!”

Hearing her loud wail, the sadhus and Kabir’s parents gathered around and asked the reason. In great anger, Kabir seized a stick and

set out with Sundara to deal with the watchman, saying, “When I have sent my wife, of my own accord, to the merchant, who is this kotwal to interfere? I cannot rest until I thrash him for his impudence.”

Reaching the door of the kotwal at midnight, he banged open his door and said, “O villain! It was my wish to leave my wife with the grocer for the night. Who are you to interfere and beat him up mercilessly on this account? I challenge you to come out this moment, if not I will thrash you, your wife and all your children with this stick. Do you all want a taste of death?”

The poor watchman, arising from his sleep and shaking with fear at the thunderous voice of Kabir, came out instantly. Falling at Kabir’s feet, he said, “O Swami, protect me. Why do you attack an innocent like me? I am ignorant of your accusations. I don’t even know what took place with your wife or the merchant. I am not to be blamed for any of these things.”

Dragging the kotwal along, they all reached the grocer who was lying in unconscious state. They helped him to recover. Alas, on seeing the kotwal, he started shaking in fear and crying in alarm, “Oh, you have come back again to kill me.” He dropped down in a faint again.

Livid with rage, Kabir turned to the kotwal, “You liar, these two are witnesses to your atrocious act. Now I will not spare your life.” As he raised the stick at the watchman, lo and behold! the Lord was standing beside the kotwal with a smile on his lips.

“O irate Kabir! That kotwal is not to be blamed, this kotwal (pointing to Himself) is responsible for the thrashing. Therefore, the stick which you raised against him should land on me to quench your ire.” Then, bending forward, He showed His back to Kabir, ready to receive blows.

Flustered at the development, Kabir threw away the stick and fell at the feet of the Lord and said ruefully, “O Lord, Refuge of the helpless! For my sake, You assumed the guise of a watchman and punished the grocer. How blessed is the merchant to be the recipient of blows and kicks from Your gracious hands. O, what supreme merits he must have accrued from past lives! Won’t You deign to deal a blow on me also and sanctify my birth? How can one understand Your strange sport? You, before whom the mightiest gods and universes kneel, stand bending Your head before me! Moved by compassion for Sundara,

You ran to her rescue and waited on her in the middle of the night! How fortunate she is!”

The Lord replied, “O Kabir, your behaviour is outrageous! In this world, a husband will not hesitate to kill if someone even touches his wife. Have you no sense of self-respect? What kind of husband are you? Even for a good cause, how can you trade your wife’s chastity and send her to another forcibly?”

“Now, you may come out with the cases of Lord Siva and king Raghu who acted similarly. You should know that those culprits didn’t stop at merely harbouring evil desire, they brazenly asked for their consorts as boons. Anyway, you are all possessed by strange madness! In your case, the merchant didn’t approach you for any such favours. You traded your wife, as noble as Arundhati, just for a few measures of grains! O wise sadhus, have you ever heard of a husband sending his wife to a debauchee to feed the sadhus?”

”Beloved Lord,” Kabir said, “can an ignorant man like me defeat You in debate? The dualities of ‘I, you, my honour, your honour’ etc. belong to the play of Your maya. What have I got to do with worldly norms? Are Your servants, the recipients of Your grace, also afflicted by pairs of opposites like the worldly people enmeshed in delusion?”

“Should I go on recounting Your deceitful exploits? But, You have the privilege to say, ‘He who has dissolved the mystery of life is not assailed by dualities of honour and dishonour; he whose desires are set to naught is not assailed by shame and self-respect.’ I can also apply the same logic!

“My question, however, is why did You harm the merchant who helped me with sadhu-feeding? Why have You made me a liar? I took my wife willingly to him and what is his fault in this?”

“O Kabir, if this grocer had touched your wife, the fire of her purity would have instantly turned him to ashes. Was I at fault in preventing such a calamity on him who supported your hospitality? You made this bargain with him, because he nourished such a sinful desire for your wife!

“If you touch fire, it is sure to burn you. Just because you gifted your own lamp to someone, is it going to spare him if he kisses the flame? Coveting the neighbour’s wife is held as a terrible sin, so he would have come to great grief; never is such a person uplifted. Nahusha

met his downfall and was reborn as a python for coveting Indra's wife. The scriptures narrate innumerable tortures and sufferings for an adulterer. If I had not stepped in, while he helped you to attain great merit, you would have earned him purgatory!"

"O Lord! He was fortunate to have Your darshan and chastisement at Your holy hands. He cannot go to hell. However, tell me how am I to redeem my promise to the merchant?"

"O Kabir," said the Lord, "you have, besides Sundara, another beautiful damsel called *mukti* i.e. liberation. Why don't you reward the merchant with the delights of her company? With mere intention, you can redeem an evil doer and grant him a higher world." With these consoling words, the Lord disappeared.

The merchant washed the feet of Kabir and Sundara with tears of remorse. He begged, "O Sadguru, please don't look upon me as a sinner. Give me refuge and redeem me. O mother, I wonder how my eyes, which feasted on your beauty with evil intentions, have not yet turned blind. It is the fire of your chastity that keeps the sea within limits and makes the sun rise daily without fail. O crown jewel of humanity, your patience is vaster than the sky. Your greatness summoned the Lord himself in a trice. O mother, please forgive my offence and protect me from harm."

Sundara casting her gracious look on him, blessed him with exalted devotion. Turning her beautiful eyes towards Kabir, she prayed to him with folded palms, "O Lord of my life, it is like the bridegroom turning into a son, he has become our child seeking refuge in you. Be compassionate and take him under your wings of protection."

Kabir wrote the redeeming mantra on his tongue and blessed him, "May you become desireless!" Destroying his negative tendencies, Kabir pointed out the path to damsel *mukti* and bade him revel in her company.

When Kabir returned home with his wife he marveled at the scene that met his eyes. The Lord, assuming his divine form, awaited Kabir in the company of Narada and other celestial sages. He adored the Lord with praises and danced in ecstasy. The Lord said, "O Kabir, I sought you out in the company of these sages to exemplify your steadfastness in a householder's dharma. I created the impulse in you to take your wife to the merchant. Just as the celestials yielded Heaven to demon

kings at one point of time, I had to bestow My exalted vision even on the adulterer.”

Turning to Kabir’s parents, the Lord said, “O Tamal and Jijabibi, holy ones! Please retire from the householder’s life, seek the solitude of the forest and engage in meditation on Me.”

After the entourage disappeared along with the Lord, Tamal said, “The words of Guru are to be more readily obeyed than those of parents and saints; but the Lord’s command is supreme. Let us comply with His wish.”

Embracing his son with much love, he imparted a few words of advice, “Don’t ever become proud of the Lord’s frequent darshan. Without grace of the Lord and Guru, one cannot be free from bondage. All other paths of yoga and meditation, mantra and tantra cannot take one to the ultimate on their own. Only by Guru’s grace, the mind turns to the spiritual path.

“Some look at this perishable body as a corpse in the deep sleep state, but not in the waking state, because they wrongly identify with the body, the storehouse of all impurities, as their real Self. Enamoured by the body, they seek pleasures to gratify it; then overcome by disease, they become prey to death.

“After death, they hang their heads in shame before the Judge, again take birth, are lost in play during childhood, blinded by passion in youth, entrapped by worldly enjoyments, and turn away from the knowledge of the Eternal. On reaching old age, once again they become the possession of death. Thus, jivas are tossed by the storms of life like dry leaves blown hither and thither by the wind, not tiring of riding on this endless giant wheel of transmigration.

“For them it is always too early to take to the spiritual path, either of knowledge or devotion. Enmeshed in attachment and desire, they believe only in what they see or hear; the experience of their senses is the reality for them. They deny anything that lies beyond the body-mind-sense complex. Maya is revolving on its wheel eternally and samsara is endless. While this is the state of affairs with worldly people, what avail is it, even if the Lord appears to them dozens of time in a day?

“O incomparable son! The displeasure of the Lord can be dispelled by the grace of the Sadhguru, but if one displeases the Guru, there is no redemption. The nature of Sadhguru can be comprehended only by worthy disciples. He remains always absorbed in the Self, oblivious of

the external world; he is verily the Brahman. We hear of the magnitude of sin one incurs by betraying the Guru, but not so much of the severity of offences committed against the Lord or one's parents. This goes to highlight the supremacy of the Guru in one's life. Why so?

“Because the Guru is the one who points out the way to cross this endless sea of samsara and unravels the mystery of life and death. He initiates the soul, inspires him or her to develop dispassion, engages them in spiritual practices and teaches the way to surrender. By his grace, we learn to revere him, cut asunder the bondage of life and taste the nectar of immortality. It is a pity that one is immersed in the pursuit of insipid sense pleasures, but not in serving the feet of the Guru.

“How short sighted is man, to be lost in transient joys which last only till one's last breath! Can you conceive of enjoying these petty pleasures when in a faint or in a mad state? At the time of death, the welfare of the soul is more crucial than that of the body. Why doesn't man seek it now itself when he has the strength of body and mind?

“When you are possessed by desire it leads to rebirth; when you are obsessed with otherness or duality, it is akin to death. He who knows this truth will seek solitude in the forest and abide one-pointedly in contemplation of the Self. Nothing will be lacking for him who pursues such a life.

“The superconscious state can be attained only by stilling the mind into silence. It is the power of the Guru that makes the mind motionless, bereft of waves of desire. The all-merciful Guru reveals the non-dual state as clearly as a fruit in the palm of the hand.

“What fitting gratitude can ever be adequate to the supreme Guru? How can one recompense this favour of all favours? The simple answer is that there is no way to recompense the Guru for taking the disciple to immortality. Losing oneself in his service is preferable to abidance in the superconscious state in solitude. Even then, you are forever in his debt. The supreme Guru is equal to the supreme Lord. Behold, the Lord has appeared again, Kabir!”

Holding the hands of both parents, Kabir said, “O beloved parents who sustained me with your toil and sweat! How will I bear your absence? Who else but the Lord can make the supreme state accessible to us? Because He is present everywhere, why should you go to the forest?”

Consoling his son, Tamal replied, “Though He is everywhere, this world is not the same as the next. Similarly, living in solitude in the forest to attain the goal is not the same as being in the city.”

Blessing his son with all well-being, Tamal got ready to leave with Jijabibi for a life of seclusion and contemplation.

Their parting was very touching. Jijabibi embraced Sundara lovingly and shed tears of affection. The Divine Couple Sri Ram and Sita also joined them, feeling the pangs of separation as if they were part of the same family. By now, the people of Varanasi, friends and relatives and even birds and beasts gathered there. The scene of farewell was highly charged with emotion.

Soon Lord Viswanatha of Varanasi along with his consort Mother Vishalakshi joined them and said, “O Hari, O Mother Sita, what a captivating play of maya is this? You have not only cast the spell of illusion on them, you act as if you are also enslaved by its spell, shedding copious tears at this parting! Is this intriguing play of yours, meant for the joy of the celestials, or for me or for Tamal? O Kabir, being a sadhu, why are you grief stricken?” Lord Hari kept silent with an enigmatic smile on His face.

Kabir’s eyes flew open on hearing Lord Siva and he looked around for his parents. Assuming that they had already left, Kabir was again assailed by deep emotion.

Then the Lord Hari came forward and said, “O Kabir, they have not gone to the forest, they have merged in Me. They were Our aspects. I was your father and Lakshmi was your mother. Without knowing this, you took them for ordinary mortals. Now behold Us in the form of your parents.”

The Lord and His consort appeared as Tamal and Jijabibi and all were astonished at the sight. Lord Siva was also spellbound by the charming sport of Lord Hari. Kabir realized that it was ignorant to grieve for the loss of parents when the Divine Couple themselves had come as his parents. Kabir prostrated to Lord Siva and Mother Vishalakshi and sang their praises. They blessed him to be immersed in the bliss of the Self always. All the Divine forms vanished.

Kabir spent a sleepless night thinking of the day’s events and restless at the separation from his parents. The next day, he went to the ashram of Swami Ramananda and felt consoled in his benign presence.

(to be continued) ▲

Sonasaila Malai

Song Garland to the Red Mountain

SIVAPRAKASA SWAMIGAL
TRANSLATED BY ROBERT BUTLER

The biography of Sivaprakasa Swamigal continued.

In return for the instruction given to him by Velliyambala Tambiran, the head of Dharmapuram Athinam Math in Tirunelveli, Sivaprakasa offered to Tambiran as *guru dakshina* the 300 gold coins which Reddiyar had given them to finance their trip. Tambiran refused, requesting Sivaprakasa to go instead to Tirucendur and defeat in a contest of prosody a Tamil scholar with whom he was having a bitter feud and thus deflate that scholar's arrogance. Sivaprakasa accordingly proceeded to Tirucendur and met up with the scholar in question whilst circumambulating the temple there. Both agreed to undertake a contest in which each would compose verses which contained no consonants (p,m,v) or vowels (u, o), in which the lips are closed or rounded. Sivaprakasa accordingly composed the *nīrōṭṭaka yamaka antāti*, consisting of a *kāppu – dedication* and 31 verses in the *kaṭṭalai-k-kali-turai* metre. This verse form presents additional difficulties in that in each verse the first foot of every line must be

Robert Butler devotes his time to the translation of Tamil classical and spiritual texts. He has published a grammatical commentary on *Uḷḷadu Nāṛpadu*. This and other translations are available for online preview, purchase or download at the following link: <http://stores.lulu.com/store.php?fAcctID=1212666>.

identical in form but different in meaning and also, being an *antāti*, there must be a repetition of all or part of the final foot of each verse in the initial foot of the following one. The following is one of the verses from that composition.

kaṇakkāka nāykaṭiṇ kāya nilaiyeṇak kaṇṇiyēṇṇa
 kaṇakkāka nāṇalain teyttē neḷiṇcentiṇ kantanerriṇ
 kaṇakkāka nārtanta niṇṇaṇai yēyiṇik kātaliṇār
 kaṇakkā kaṇānikart tēyaḷi yaṅkattiṇ kātalarṛē.

Thinking that the body, which is nought but food for hordes of crows and dogs, was real and enduring, to what end did I suffer and grow weary? Skanda, Lord of Tirucendur, may you, whom He fathered, whose body is clad in bones and who bears an eye in his forehead, vouchsafe me your protection, so that henceforth I may in devotion dwell upon you alone, freed from this love for the impermanent body, which is like a dream.¹

His opponent, however, was unable to complete a single verse, admitted defeat and swore allegiance to Sivaprakasa, who in turn took him to pay homage to Tambiran. Subsequently Sivaprakasa, on the advice of Tambiran, went to Chidambaram and spent some time there.

(The biography will be continued in Part Four)

In this world that the vast ocean girds,
 where waves, white crested, surge,
 I shall never forget you
 serenely dwelling there, as true devotees
 your noble form adorn
 with choice fresh blooms a mountain high,
 and thus to that old proverb give the lie.¹

¹ kāyam nilai eṇa kaṇṇi – *Thinking [to be] enduring the body*, kaṇa kāka nāykaṭiṇ – *[which] hordes of crows [and] dogs [are destined] to eat*, eṇṇa kaṇakkāka nāṇ alaintu eyttēṇ – *to what purpose, suffering, did I grow weary?* eḷiṇ centil kanta – *Fair Skanda of Tiru-c-centūr*, neṇṇi kaṇ akku ākaṇār tanta – *whom He with an eye [in his] forehead [and] a body [clad in] bones fathered*, kā – *protect [me]*, niṇ taṇaiyē iṇi kātaliṇāl kaṇa – *so that henceforth I may in love dwell upon you alone*, aṅkattiṇ kātāl arṛē – *free of love for the body*, kaṇā nikarttē aḷi – *[which is destined to] perish, resembling a dream*.

¹ According to both Tamil commentators the proverb being referred to here is *malai*

As your fair form,
 with verdant creepers
 encompassed all about,
 casts forth its comely shadow
 so that men proclaim,
 ‘Upon the pure, white moon,
 there lies a stain!’²
 you gloriously stand and shine,
Lord Sonasailan! Kailash’s Lord!

(30)

Mounted on a prancing steed
 of finest golden hue,
 though you came
 hurling well-honed missiles
 with your delicate lotus hand,³
 how is it then
 that still the fearsome tiger
 of this sensate world
 for me you have not slain?

aḷavu cuvāmikku malai aḷavu mālaiyā – Does a god a mountain high need a garland a mountain high also? The remark is probably aimed at those who overindulge in shows of piety. Another proverb in the same vein is *malai aḷavu cuvāmikku kaḍugu aḷavu kaṟpūram* – For a god a mile high a piece of camphor the size of a mustard seed will suffice. The idea expressed in the verse is that, in the case of *Sōṇasailan*, his devotees are so numerous and so devoted that they actually do fashion a garland as high as the mountain itself.

² The conceit is that *Sōṇasailan* is so high that the shadow of his peak will fall upon the moon. There are of course visible marks on the moon, which are traditionally recognised as being in the form of a hare, but these are hardly visible when the full moon is shining with its full brilliance. Thus for the purposes of this verse the moon’s face is taken to be clear and bright until notionally touched by the shadow of the mountain’s peak.

³ Lord Śiva is here being described as a hunter, a role which he famously takes in the *Mahābhārata*, when he takes on the appearance of the hunter, Kirāta, and fights with Arjuna. There is also an instance in the Tamil *Aruṇācala Purāṇam* where Śiva appears to Brahmā in the company of Parvatī with the Four Vedas as his hounds. On that occasion his mission is to cure the infatuation of Brahmā with the beautiful *apsara* Tilottamā, whom he, Brahmā, has created to ensnare the other gods at the request of Indra, but with whom he himself accidentally becomes infatuated.

The shade cast by your trunk and feet
reaches all the oceans seven,
whilst the shadow of your mighty head,
towering up into the heavens,
runs, the outer ocean,
wide and vast, to meet,⁴
Lord Sonasailan! Kailash's Lord!

(31)⁵

Even if you do not inspire me to sing,
feeding me with the milk
of Unnamulai Uma's breast,
She who is all that is,⁶
or even if you torture me
with gout and colic and all the rest,

⁴ According to Puranic cosmography the entire cosmos is divided into seven concentric island continents (*sapta dvīpa vasumati*) separated by the seven encircling oceans, each double the size of the preceding one (going out from within). The seven continents of the Purāṇas are stated as *Jambūdvīpa*, *Plakṣadvīpa*, *Salmalīdvīpa*, *Kuśadvīpa*, *Krauñcadvīpa*, *Śākadvīpa*, and *Puṣkaradvīpa*. The seven intermediate oceans consist of salt water, sugarcane juice, wine, ghee, curd, milk and water respectively.

⁵ This verse echoes the sentiment of verse 2 of the author's composition *Nālvar nāṇ maṇi mālai – Jewel Garland upon the Four*; 'the Four' being the three *Tēvāram* authors and Māṇikkavācakar, who are traditionally referred to in this way as being the four greatest of the Tamil bhakti poet-saints.

King of poets, you who adorn [the Lord] with garlands of words that are the cause of liberation! What does it matter whether the mighty One who dances in Tillai's golden hall bestows upon one of you the ambrosia of true knowledge, but afflicts the other, as he once did you, with an intestinal colic never before seen in the land? In your hymns you and he both praise him in exactly the same way.

The reference of course is to Appar and Jñānasambandhar, who were willing to receive the Lord's grace in whatever way he chose to bestow it. See notes 6 and 7.

⁶ The reference is to the famous incident in the life of Jñānasambandhar when Śiva and Parvatī appeared to him as a child when he was hungry and Śiva requested Parvatī to feed him with milk from her breast in a golden dish. When his father asked him who had given the milk, he pointed to the sky and sang the *patikam* which begins *tōḍu uḍaiya ceviyaṅ* – *He wears an ear-jewel in one ear*. This incident marks the conferring of the Lord's grace and divine wisdom upon the child, who

that I may, by your grace,
sing your praise, is my one request.⁷

Herds of deer too numerous to count
surround you, leaping all about,
reflecting thus,
'If he adopts his ancient form again
he'll not want the deer he abandoned then,
but will choose another amongst us,'⁸
Lord Sonasailan! Kailash's Lord! (32)

Grant me the great felicity
of bowing at their holy feet,
and offering my service
to devotees of yours who're steeped
in the highest form of bliss in which
desire and aversion both have ceased.

The torrents of compassion,
unceasing and impossible to stem,
that down your mountain flow,
are no different to them
who do not truly know,
than silvery streams that bubbling,

thereafter became known as Jñānasambandhar. It is this verse that begins the whole *Tirumuṟai* collection, being the first verse of the three books composed by Jñānasambandhar, which themselves come first in the collection.

⁷ In stark contrast, Śiva's granting of grace to Appar took a very different form. Appar had abandoned the Saivite faith and joined the Jain religion. Śiva's response was to afflict him with severe intestinal colic, *cūlai* in Tamil, until he realised his error and returned to his former faith. This event is commemorated in the first *patikam* of the first of his three *Tēvāram* volumes, *Tirumuṟai* 4-6, which begins *kūrru āyiṇavāru vilakkakilīr – Will you not banish those things (stomach pains) that afflict me like death?*

⁸ Lord Śiva is often portrayed in iconography holding a deer in his hand, indicating the controlling of the restive mind. The deer of Arunachala are fancifully imagined to be leaping about, eagerly vying for his attention, in the hope that, when he resumes his anthropomorphic form once more, he will choose to hold one of them, rather than the one he had held before assuming the form of a mountain.

down other mountains rushing go,
Lord Sonasailan! Kailash's Lord! (33)

Since in this life you generously afford
 wealth, and maidens chaste,
 in whom virtue brightly shines
 and beauty overflows,
 whilst in the next, you to them accord
 liberation's heavenly estate,
 what praise of you will learned bards
 be loath to make?

In your hilly fields
 the doughty mountain folk⁹
 build lookouts:¹⁰
 chopping logs of sandalwood,
 and planting them for legs,
 whilst on the top
 they make a floor
 of elephant tusks¹¹ outspread,
Lord Sonasailan! Kailash's Lord! (34)

Grant to me your grace that I,
 your devotee, may make my way
 into your holy presence where
 gods embrace their lady wives
 with eyes like baby mangoes sliced.¹²

⁹ *Hillsmen*, Tamil *kuṛavar*, are *hill dwelling tribes*, who live by hunting and hill farming. See v. 29, note 21.

¹⁰ *Lookouts*, Tamil *paraṅ*, *itaṅam* are platforms, built in the branches of trees, on high rocks or, as here, raised up on legs from ground level by hill folk and used as lookouts from which they can watch out for incursions into their fields by elephants, parrots and so forth. They feature in a number of Sangam *Akam* poems of the *kuriñci tiṅai* – *the hilly tracts*.

¹¹ Sandalwood and ivory are of course very valuable commodities and would never be used for such a purpose. The idea here is that on *Sōṅasailaṅ* these things are so plentiful that there is no problem in so employing them.

¹² *poḷntiḍum vaḍu kaṅ* – *eyes [like] sliced green mangoes*. It is a poetic convention to refer to women's eyes in this way. A *vaḍu* is an *unripe, green mango* in the early

In reverence they shrink away,
at a stroke from august Nandi's stave,¹³
then all around you press again.

Like a mother, when her heart melts
as her eyes upon her bonny infant rest
and she pours forth milk
in plenty from her breast,
as devotees [around you] prostrating go,
your streams [of grace] upon them flow,
Lord Sonasailan! Kailash's Lord!

(35)

Rama with his arrow true¹⁴
went the evil rule to oppose
that on Lanka's isle arose,
then came with deep devotion
those feet with sounding anklets
to worship and adore.
[Is it any wonder then that]
such feet as these, I fear to implore?

That no parallel might e'er be drawn
with any smaller mountain's form,
you chose in your shape to suggest
your consort Parvati's¹⁵ ample breast.

stage of growth, shortly after the flower has fallen. This stage of growth is called the *piñcu*, in which the mango has a somewhat elongated, sinuous form, which resembles the eye, particularly when sliced lengthwise to expose the white flesh. Tamil distinguishes this from the *kāy*, which is used to describe the fruit when it is almost fully grown and the *paḷam*, the fully ripe, sweet fruit.

¹³ Nandi, imagined in semi-human form, is Lord Śiva's gatekeeper on mount Kailash, here pictured wielding his staff to control the crowds of lesser deities who seek audience with the divine couple, Śiva and Parvatī.

¹⁴ The person referred to here is of course Rāma of the Rāmāyaṇa who is said to have worshipped Śiva at Rameswaram on his return from Lanka after defeating the demon Rāvaṇa, although some claim that this incident is not recorded in the Valmiki Rāmāyaṇa itself but only in later traditions.

¹⁵ Parvatī is referred to here as *malai māṇ* – the deer-like maiden of the mountain, as being the daughter of Himavat, the personification of the Himalaya mountain range.

Thus waxing great, on high you soar,
Lord Sonasailan! Kailash's Lord! (36)

Thinking that the [other] gods,
were really gods,
unable as they were,
to save themselves
from whirling births,
they did not the shelter seek
of you who are ambrosia sweet.
For those of true knowledge all devoid,
can the ills of birth e'er be destroyed?

From your mountain caves,
as a dark cloud passes by outside,
lions, to pounce, rush swiftly out,
thinking that an elephant is about,
then hurry back, their shame to hide,
Lord Sonasailan! Kailash's Lord! (37)

Whether my body stays
whilst aeons of time pass away,
or in the twinkling of any eye
doth fail and die,
'tis well with me,
as long as I may stay, a devotee,
at the lotus flowers of your feet.

As it climbs on high, the rising Sun
recalls the infant Murugan,
clambering up [his father's breast]
babbling child's talk, sweet and dear
as jewels glint
on pointed spear,¹⁶
Lord Sonasailan! Kailash's Lord! (38)

¹⁶ *pūṇ tayaṅgu ayil vēl* – with a sharp spear [on which] jewels shine. The sun rising up over the slopes of the mountain is compared to Siva's younger son, Murugan, as a young child, climbing up his father's chest, grasping his spear, holding which he is almost invariably portrayed. His *vēl* – spear, javelin is often golden in colour with a blade set with jewels.

Men beg of you to come,
 mounted on your speedy bull,
 to bring birth to an end.
 So let them beg, but as for me,
 poor wretch, what I request
 is birth itself in which I may adorn
 you with flowery garlands
 replete with honeyed Tamil words.¹⁷

As Sun and Moon hang in the sky
 above the Mountains East and West¹⁸
 it's as if you laid an offering pole¹⁹
 down upon the ground, adorned
 with jewelled pots at either end,
 and stood up tall between the two,
Lord Sonasailan! Kailash's Lord!

(39)

All the space within my heart
 I gave to girls with tender breasts
 adorned with jewellery of gold,
 set with shining gems and pearls.
 Yet for you, who are to devotees
 the apple of their eye, offering
 them in grace a never-ending feast,
 no place at all for you to live
 however small, could I give.

¹⁷A similar sentiment is expressed by Appar in the following *Tēvāram* verse: The curving eyebrows;/ the gentle smile upon lips red as the scarlet gourd;/ the sleek, matted locks;/ the body, coral red, smeared with milk-white ash;/ the raised foot delicately poised –/ he who has the good fortune to see these/ will welcome even human birth upon this wide earth. Appar, *Tēvāram*, 4:81:4

¹⁸*The Mountains East and West* are the mythical mountains in the East and West behind which the sun is said to rise and set. The scene is set in the evening on the full moon day, the only time at which the sun sets at roughly the same time as the moon rises.

¹⁹*kā*, also *kāvaḍi* means an offering pole. Winslow's dictionary gives the following definition: 'A pole carried on the shoulder with offerings for a temple, commonly with some parade; also the religious mendicant's pole which he takes from house to house to gather offerings, etc. for the service of an idol.'

As the *venkai* and *kondrai*,
with its blackened pods, shower down
upon the bamboo's pure white pearls
the medallions of their golden flowers,²⁰
the serpents, [not to be outdone], upon you
scatter cool gems from their hoods,²¹
Lord Sonasailan! Kailash's Lord! (40)

To you, who to that great bard,
two matchless maids,
adorned with choicest gems
in holy marriage did grant
with gifts of horse and elephant,²²
I gave no praise and wandered all bereft.²³

As ripples shimmer on your wide tanks,
where lotus flowers stand in ranks,
like devotees waving *arti* lamps,²⁴
you shine forth,
Lord Sonasailan! Kailash's Lord! (41)

²⁰ The *konrai* tree is the Indian Laburnum. Its long cascading bunches of yellow flowers are sacred to Lord Śiva, who is often described as wearing them. It produces thick clusters of long seed pods, which when ripe are dark in colour with black seeds. Here the blossoms are compared to gold coins, as if the trees were making their equivalent of a monetary offering. Here the golden flowers are referred to directly as *pon* – *gold coins*, an instance of *ākupeyar* – *metonymy*. See *Kuṟuntokai*, 233, which similarly compares their blossom to gold coins.

The little pits with gaping mouths, from which the yams have been rooted up, covered over with bright *konrai* blossoms, so that they look like the treasure chests of the rich, lids thrown open and filled with gold coins...

²¹ Hooded snakes were believed to carry a precious jewel in their hoods. See previously v. 29 and note.

²² The 'great bard' is Sundarar and the 'the two matchless maids' are Paravaiyār and Caṅkiliyār, the two celestial handmaidens, whom, in their human incarnations, Lord Śiva granted to him as wives. See v. 22, note 62.

²³ The poet avows his own folly in not praising a Lord who has a record of generously giving whatever is requested to deserving devotees.

²⁴ *ālatti* also *arati* is *the waving of lights*, usually ghee lamps or burning camphor

If you will only grasp the black
 defilement of your devotee,
 and place it at your sapphire throat²⁵
 with that the mighty gods
 churned from the sea,
 behold, your beauty by that blackness
 magnified will grow, and even brighter be!

The bright effulgence that spreads
 from the jewel upon Adishesha's²⁶ head
 up through the shaft
 that great and noble Boar carved out
 recalls to us how young Murugan
 sprang, a tiny spark, from our Lord's brow,²⁷
Lord Sonasailan! Kailash's Lord!

(42)

placed on a platter, before an idol or person who is being honoured. The tanks of Aruṇācala are compared to *ālatti* platters, with lotuses as the flames from ghee lamps or burning camphor, being waved in veneration of the mountain. One might imagine that the rippling waters of the tanks and pools, gilded in the setting sun, might easily resemble shiny salvers of beaten brass or gold.

²⁵ *maṇi miḍiṛru* – [in your] sapphire throat. *maṇi* means *jewel, gem*, here standing for *nīla maṇi* – *sapphire*, to which the black poison in Śiva's throat is likened. Hence the name *nīlakaṇṭaṇ* – *the One with the sapphire throat*.

²⁶ *aṇantaṇ maṇi oḷi piḷampu* – *the mass of light [from] the jewels [on the head] of Aṇantaṇ*. *Aṇantaṇ* – *the Infinite One* is the serpent *Adiśeṣa*, who is said to support the world on his thousand heads. He is the king of the *nāgas* – *serpents*, who dwell in *Pātāla* – *the infernal regions* beneath the earth. Viṣṇu, when he burrowed down in the form of a boar, would have needed to travel that far and further if he were to reach the Lord's foot, thus allowing the spark from the jewels on the serpent's heads to travel up through the shaft thus created. *Adiśeṣa* is said to have 1000 jewels upon his 1000 heads, which illuminate all the regions.

²⁷ According to the account in the Tamil *Kanta Purāṇam*, the gods complained to Śiva of being harassed by the *asuras* and begged him to produce a child who could vanquish them. Accordingly Lord Śiva assumed his ancient six-faced form and produced six sparks from the third eye on each of those six heads. The gods Vāyu and Agni carried those sparks and deposited them in the river Ganges, which conveyed them to the Śaravaṇa lake in the Himalayas, where the six fiery sparks were transformed into six children. Later when Parvatī grasped them to take them home, they became a single child with six heads and twelve arms. The child was Lord Murugan, also known as Skanda, Kārttikeya, Aṛumukaṇ, Subrahmaṇya and other names.

MOUNTAIN PATH

Will that day come that in delight
my eyes shall come to see
the beauty of your holy face,
your shoulders four like stony mounts,
the coiled locks that lightning plays about,
your eyes where grace abounds,
and your two holy feet?

The streams that tumble down your sides,
like music sweet of heavenly choirs²⁸
upon your slopes resound,
as if, in love, your very form
melted to that delightful sound,
Fair Sonasailan! Kailash's Lord!

(43)

Their bodies covered thick with white
of holy ash, your devotees I saw,
and yet, like a cow that stands and dotes
upon her baby calf,
my mind refused to melt and flow
and to worship you I did not go.

Lord Sonasailan! Kailash's Lord,
where streams rush down,
as if in anger to drive away
tigers fierce, lion and bear,
deeming it unseemly that they
upon your holy form
with such disdain should stray.

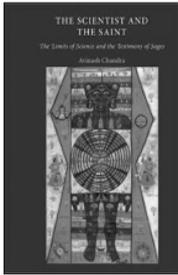
(44)



(to be continued)

²⁸ The words *heavenly choirs* translate the Tamil word *kimpuruṭar*, Sanskrit *kimpuruṣa*. 'A class of demigods, celestial lyrists, supposed to have the form of a horse and the head of a man.' (Tamil Lexicon)

BOOK REVIEWS



THE SCIENTIST AND THE SAINT *The Limits of Science and the Testimony of Sages* by Avinash Chandra. (HB) Pub. Archetype, Cambridge, UK, 2018. pp.660, approx. ₹4,000/-, £12.81, \$46. ISBN-13: 978-1901383546. www.archetype.uk.com

Once in a while one comes across a book for which the word ‘staggering’ is an apt description. The book staggers because of its size, 660 pages, and it weighs in at about a kilo. This is a book meant for a long, slow read. The range of discussion is wide and deep. The books cited and quoted are extensive and the author’s grasp of his subject matter is impressive. There is an extended table of contents at the very end of the book which may help readers orientate themselves to the sheer scale of the material. The opening chapter ‘A World At The Crossroads’, will give the reader an overview that will ease them into the detailed but fluent arguments the author skilfully makes. There is a modesty about the book which is inviting and I thoroughly enjoyed the adventure, though this is not a fast read.

The author quotes, early in the book, a statement by Richard Tarnas, a historian of culture, which succinctly presents the challenge, “In the combined wake of eighteenth-century philosophy and twentieth-century science, the modern mind was left free of absolutes, but also disconcertingly free of any solid ground. [...] A stupendous quantity of information had become available about all aspects of life—the contemporary world, the historical past, other cultures, other forms of life, the subatomic world, the macrocosm, the human mind and psyche—yet there was also less ordering vision, less coherence and comprehension, less certainty. [...] The great revolutionary political projects of the modern era, heralding personal and social liberation, had gradually led to conditions in which the modern individual’s fate was ever more dominated by bureaucratic, commercial and political structures. Just as man had become a meaningless speck in the modern universe, so had individual persons become insignificant ciphers in modern states, to be manipulated or coerced by the millions.”

Avinash Chandra presents us with two contrary arguments, the ‘traditionalist’ view and the modern worldview encapsulated by the philosophy of science that postulates that, to put it bluntly, if something is not quantifiable then it does not exist. The traditionalist worldview states that the physical world we inhabit is not the only world, in fact it is quite dense and limited. It states that there are higher more subtle worlds beyond the limited dimensions of time and space we presently experience. It embraces a transcendental attitude with the implicit assumption that our purpose in life is to transcend this world through a series of disciplines, which deepens and strengthens our consciousness, so that we may transcend our ignorance.

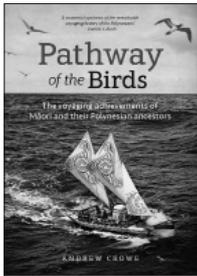
It is interesting to note that Rene Guenon, the French traditionalist (1886-1951), who was at the forefront of the intellectual challenge to make us aware of the dangers we face from the deadly impact of modern materialism, had a profound impact on our founding editor, Arthur Osborne, as also on the author of this book under review.

The book is divided into four main parts: i. The Scientific View of the World; ii. Consciousness; iii. The Spiritual Vision; and iv. The Labyrinth, that includes topics such as Death, Evil and Finding the way out of the labyrinth. Those who have read the book excerpt earlier in this issue of the magazine, will have some idea of the tenor and scope of the author’s intentions.

A distinguished modern proponent of traditionalism, who combats the presumptions of materialist science, is Alan B. Wallace, who is quoted here in connection with a scientific conference in London under the auspices of The Royal Society, about consciousness: “This meeting revealed a remarkable consensus among the speakers that science understands none of the central aspects of consciousness — what it is, how it evolved, how it is generated by the brain, or even what it is for. The paradox confronting the participants was that from the first-person perspective, consciousness is a prime irreducible datum, but from the third-person scientific perspective there is no way of investigating it directly. That is, brain research tells us nothing about why neural processes should give rise to mental experiences of any kind. However, when one participant suggested that research into consciousness must include the first-person perspective, a number of his colleagues expressed consternation. In their eyes avoiding

the taboo of subjectivity and remaining ignorant of consciousness was apparently preferable to breaking that taboo and opening the possibility of fresh avenues of understanding.”

What we are attempting to do, as adherents of a transcendental view of reality and as devotees of Sri Ramana Maharshi, is to be absorbed in that Pure Consciousness, or, shall we say, unalloyed subjectivity, so that we profoundly see that thoughts are a result of consciousness. They are the shadows on the cave wall made possible by the fire of consciousness in the parable related by Plato. Thoughts may describe but they are not the thing in itself. What Avinash Chandra has done is lay down before us in a magnificent manner the intellectual foundation of why we do what we do. I, for one, will be reading my copy for some considerable time to come. — Christopher Quilkey



PATHWAY OF THE BIRDS The voyaging achievements of Maori and their Polynesian ancestors by Andrew Crowe. Published by Bateman, New Zealand and University of Hawai'i Press. pp.288, ₹3,826; US\$39, (RRP). NZ ISBN: 978-1-86953-961-0. USA ISBN: 978-0824878658. <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/41112497-pathway-of-the-birds>. See also www.batemanpublishing.co.nz

We rarely venture out of the so-called spiritual borders of the magazine but in this case it is justified. Andrew Crowe has been coming to Arunachala for many years. He is an award-winning author of over 40 books on nature and the interconnectedness of life, including a charming biography of the Dalai Lama for teenagers that can be read by everyone.

The present highly readable book has been some 15 years in the making and the meticulous care and attention to detail regarding the presentation, on art paper, of the photos, maps, inserts and diagrams, shows this has been a labour of love. The book presents a lucid picture of the historic Polynesians who sailed and settled nearly every archipelago scattered across some 28 million square kilometres of the Pacific Ocean.

Through an engaging narrative and over 400 maps, diagrams, photographs and illustrations, Crowe conveys some of the skills,

innovation, resourcefulness, and courage of the people who drove this extraordinary feat of maritime expansion. He integrates a diversity of research and viewpoints that are accessible to the general reader and the scholar. He has patiently assembled an extraordinary range of readable information from astronomy, archaeology, genetics, linguistics, meteorology, zoology and Polynesian traditions that reveal how they navigated the vast stretches of water by observing the dynamics of the waves, the seasonal wind patterns that govern the Pacific Ocean over a calendar year, the behaviour of migratory birds, shoals of fish, drifting branches and, of course, the stars. He shows how they honed their skills to locate islands and were able to adapt to the varying environmental conditions of the numerous islands of the archipelagos.

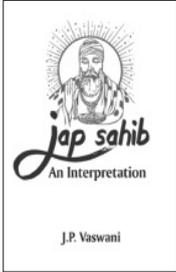
Here is just one example of the enormous distances they were capable of sailing: in 2012, two traditional-style vessels navigated, without the use of instruments, some 7000 km from New Zealand to Easter Island via the Austral Islands and then returned to NZ the next year via Tahiti and the Cook Islands using the trade winds.

Based on their research, archaeologists have come to the tentative schemata that the ancestors of the Polynesians came from the islands that today constitute Indonesia, Taiwan and New Guinea, around 3000 BC. 'Remote Oceania' including Fiji was settled ca.1000 BC and ca.1250 AD New Zealand began to be settled. By the fifteenth century, when Europeans entered the Pacific, general exploration was over.

Crowe disputes the thesis of Thor Heyerdahl that Polynesians were one-way voyagers sailing downwind from South America, presenting evidence of their two-way voyaging capability. He shows how Europeans frequently underestimated the non-instrument, nature-based navigational skills of the Polynesians, showing how these skills allowed them to take the far safer approach of making exploratory return voyages from the west during periods of anomalous winds.

The more I delve into this book the more fascinating it becomes. For those who are interested in the Pacific Ocean and its islands, one can think of no better book to immerse oneself in. "Everything you need to navigate is in nature," explains Hawaiian master navigator Nainoa Thompson, "The question is, can you see it?"

— Christopher Quilkey



JAP SAHIB AN INTERPRETATION by J.P.Vaswani. Gita Publishing House, Pune. 2017. pp.535, ₹450. ISBN: 978-93-86004-03-1 www.dadavaswaisbooks.org

org

Japji is a prayer at the beginning of the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, and is considered to be the essence of the holy scripture of Sikhs. It is said to be the very first composition of Guru Nanak, the first Guru in the line of ten Sikh Gurus. In addition to the *mool mantra*, the basic sacred formula, and two *slokas* as prologue and epilogue, the *Jaji Sahib* consists of 38 *pauris* in metres of various length. *Japji* is chanted in the Sikh tradition at initiation ceremonies and during a cremation ceremony.

The fact that JP Vaswani delivered lectures and produced a book from them that is so extensive on the *Japji Sahib* shows that the prayer was close to his heart. I do not know any other book in his name with such detailed commentary on each verse and word of a sacred scripture. He says that the hymn is a concise and clear summary, indeed the very epitome of the Sikh philosophy. Through detailed analysis of the hymn and stories particularly about his own guru, Sadhu Vaswani, we are galvanised by the devotion which caused JP Vaswani to touch the hearts of so many people.

There is one story about his guru that deserves mention:

“We would do well to remember the Guru’s words: ‘I am unworthy to be your sacrifice. Our unworthiness and His grace and the Guru’s grace are recurring themes of the *Gurbani*. We have not earned God’s mercy. We have done nothing, nothing whatever to deserve His bounty!’

“Once, on seeing Gurudev, Sadhu Vaswani gave money to a poor man, someone said to him, ‘When you give to the poor, you do not discriminate, you do not make sure if the person to whom you give is deserving or otherwise.’

“Sadhu Vaswani said, ‘The Lord gives without hesitation to an undeserving person like me. Who am I to enquire into the deserts of others?’”

For those who wish to be inspired by a true saint in full flow this is a book to savour.

— T.V. Ramamurthy ▲

ASHRAM BULLETIN

Swami Ramanananda

Swami Ramanananda (Venkatoo) was a key figure in transitioning the Ashram from the difficult times following Bhagavan's *Mahanirvana* in 1950 and the subsequent demise of the Ashram Sarvadhikari, Chinnaswami, in 1953. Venkatoo's tenacity was instrumental in making the Ashram what it is today. His Samadhi Day was observed on the morning of 25th December.

Lectures on Aksharamanamalai

Following Bhagavan's 139th Jayanti celebrations, seven days of discourses on Aksharamanamalai were offered by Nochur Sri Venkataraman in English at the Granthalaya Auditorium before about 700 eager devotees. This year's series led up to v. 45 and is scheduled to continue next year.

Acharya Mahashraman

Acharya Mahashraman, a renowned Jain monk, the 11th Acharya of Terapanth sect in the tradition of Acharya Tulsī, the highly revered founder of the Anuvrat Movement, and of Acharya Mahapragya, visited Sri Ramanasramam along with a large number of his followers on 20th December 2018 when he was received with due honour. Addressing ashramites and his followers at the Ashram Auditorium in chaste Sanskrit, the learned Acharya said he was very happy to visit the Ashram which his revered Guru Acharya Tulsiji had also



visited many decades ago. Sri Nochur Venkataraman and Sri Kamal Nath Tripathi spoke at the end of the function thanking the Acharya in Sanskrit and Hindi. The Acharya and his followers are walking through India spreading the message of love, service and non-violence.

Swami Niranjanananda

The Samadhi Day of Swami Niranjanananda, the *Sarvadhikari* of Sri Ramanasramam, was observed on 20th January 2019 at his Samadhi in front of Matrubhuteswar Temple.

V.S. Mani's Sathabhishekam

On Friday 22nd February, *Sathabhishekam* for Sri and Smt. V. Subramanian took place at Sri Ramanasramam Vedapatasala under the guidance and supervision of the senior patasala teacher, Sri Senthilnatha Ghanapatigal. The traditional 80th birthday celebration is normally performed on the star of the Tamil birth month when the 80th year has been completed. While *satha* commonly means 'hundred', in this instance, it has the signification of 'stable', 'uninterrupted' or 'complete'. Also called *Ayush Shanti Homam*, the ceremony is said to increase the couple's health and longevity. Having completed eighty years, eight months and eight days, they will have seen one thousand full moons. The event marks a new stage in the spiritual search where lingering karmas affecting them, or their children, are purified. On the day of the ceremony, relatives and friends gathered to witness nine *homam*s including Ganapati, Lakshmi, Amurtha Mrityunjayar, Ayush and Dhanvantri *Homas*, among others; and finally, *Kalasabhisheka*, where the couple was anointed with the sacred *tirtham*. The ceremony concluded with the exchange of garlands, tying of *mangalasutra*, well-wishing and photographs.



Sundaram Iyer

Sundaram Iyer, the father of Bhagavan Ramana, was a reputed lawyer of Tiruchuzhi in Tamil Nadu known for his uprightness and open house. Bhagavan once referred to him as 'a majestic personality'. His Samadhi Day was observed inside Mother's Temple at 10 a.m. on 23rd February 2019.

Mahasivaratri

Mahasivaratri is an important day in the ashram calendar. It is the great night of Lord Siva and takes place on *krishna paksha chaturdasi*, the fourteenth night of the dark half of the lunar cycle during the Tamil month

that falls between mid-February and mid-March. The festival this year took place on the evening of 4th March.

It is on this day that the ashram prepares the *vibhuti* that is given to devotees throughout the next twelve months. Each year after the first *kāla pūjā* around sundown, a ceremony by ashram priests is performed at the *gosala*, where a heap of dried cow dung cakes and dried rice husks are ceremoniously lit. After a week the burnt remains are transformed into sacred ash, which is distributed during *pūjās*.

The ashram has an all-night vigil (*jāgaran*) of *pūjā*, recitation, meditation and *pradakṣiṇa*. Many devotees attended the all night ceremonies while the Vedapatasala students chanted the *Sri Rudram* through much of the night, rousing and invigorating devotees.

Obituary

Sri Sitapati Ganesh passed away on 17th February 2019, from a heart condition. He was born in 1948 Tanjore at the ashram of his grandmother, Janaki Matha, who was herself a disciple of Sri Ramana. In 1972, he married Kamala Ramanathan at Ramanasramam. Theirs was one of the last marriage to be conducted inside the ashram premises. Ganesh was not conventionally religious, but he was influenced by Sri Ramana's teaching of self-inquiry. His treatment of fellow human beings with equality and empathy was the way he put advaita into practice. Through his long professional career – first as an engineer, then finance expert, then management consultant, entrepreneur and recently as a farmer in rural Maharashtra growing and processing *haldi* powder – Ganesh was motivated not by material rewards, but a belief in hard-work and integrity as ends in themselves. He touched the lives of many people providing moral and material support, though he rarely talked about it and never expected anything in return. And he refused to bend his principles, even where he had to pay a price. He will be missed by his family and a large circle of friends and admirers.

