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Divine Names of Arunachala

17. ॐ भक्तप्रेक्षणकृते नमः

om bhaktaprekṣaṇakṛte namaḥ

Prostration to Him who extols dispassion to His devotees.

Except for ‘*namaḥ*’, this divine name is expressed in a compound of which the elements are ‘*kṛte*’ from the verbal root ‘*kṛt*’ meaning to praise, glorify, commemorate; ‘*prekṣaṇa*’ from the verbal root ‘*pra-√ikṣ*’ meaning to look on (without interfering), suffer, say nothing; and ‘*bhakta*’ meaning devotee (or devotees, in this case.) So, prostration is to Him who teaches his devotees to view the world with dispassion or detachment as an unreal spectacle before them. It is not a heartless indifference but one grounded in the firm knowledge that only the Self exists. When practised with complete devotion this detachment from *māyā* leads to a state unreachable by the mind.

Indifference is the subject of the very last dialogue of *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi* in which the Master explains its true meaning in an especially cogent and revealing exchange.

Devotee: We are told to practise indifference (*udāsīna*) which is possible only if the world is unreal.

Maharshi: Yes. *Oudasiṇyam abhipsitam*. Indifference is advised. But what is it? It is the absence of love and hatred. When you realise the Self on which these phenomena pass, will you love or hate them? That is the meaning of indifference.

D: That will lead to want of interest in our work. Should we do our duty or not?

M: Yes—certainly. Even if you try not to do your duty you will be perforce obliged to do it. Let the body complete the task for which it came into being....

D: How is it to be done?

M: Like an actor playing his part in a drama – free from love or hatred.¹

— BKC

¹ Venkataramiah, M, (compl.), *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk§653.

The Popularity of the Ashram

It is becoming increasingly clear to long time devotees of Bhagavan that the ashram has swelled in popularity as more and more people are drawn to receive Bhagavan's Grace and breathe in the atmosphere around sacred Arunachala. It is now rare to be in the Samadhi Hall, the Mothers' Temple and the Old Hall when there are few people around. The silence and the space we once took for granted are no longer available. It is a fact we have no choice but to accept and learn to live with it.

If we are, as has been said, akin to filings that are attracted to a magnet, does it make any difference if we are but one or are in the midst of a cluster of other similar filings? It makes no difference to the power of the magnet that attracts us all. We may assume the power of Bhagavan is a quality that has a maximum level and a minimum level of potency. This is not correct. Spiritual power of the kind that Bhagavan exerts has nothing to do with quantity. It is unaffected by physical measurements. It is not dependent on distance or time. Whether we are close or far, whether it is day or night when we are

asleep or awake, that power is unaffected. It radiates, regardless of the conditions in this physical world, just as the sun throws out its radiance whether we are there to receive it or not.

It is a question of purpose. If Bhagavan has the intent, there is nothing in the physical world that can impede it. We may not be aware of it except when we are completely still and our minds are calm and receptive, but that does not mean it is not working at other times. Does that mean we rely on blind trust? No. Once the marriage of our being with that higher power has been set in motion, when our hearts open to that divine Grace, it never stops. We may think it is dormant, or that Bhagavan has ‘forgotten’ us, because nothing is happening and we are bored or in the midst of a crisis that seemingly has no solution. Again, no. A crisis may be the result of Grace that brings the toxin to the surface for the purpose of being eradicated.

The invisible, subtle tendrils that have been lovingly forged can never break however lazy we may be, through obstinacy or weakness of mind. We could say that Bhagavan patiently waits for us, but that is not true. Bhagavan does not wait for anyone. Like the sun Bhagavan ever shines, that is his nature. We cannot even call Bhagavan a ‘he’ or a ‘she’. It would be impolite to say ‘it’, so let us just say ‘that’ which is unnameable.

Each of us has a unique relationship with Bhagavan. Lord Krishna said that he assumes whatever form the devotee desires.¹ Bhagavan too assumes the form we feel most comfortable with. Each of us has a different idea of who Bhagavan is and it is effortlessly fulfilled.

Whatever name they give it, and in whatever form they worship it, that constitutes a way of knowing the perfect Reality which is without name or form. Nevertheless, you should know that the only true knowing is to discern one’s own truth in the truth of that Supreme Reality, to subside into it, and to merge as one with it.²

Our focus on the form (*rūpa*) of Bhagavan leads us to the name (*nāma*). In philosophical terms as we read the literature and hear about Bhagavan, the substance (*prakṛiti*) of what we learn, inevitably, as we

¹ *Śrī Bhagavad Gītā*, 4.11. “As men approach me so do I accept them.”

² *Uḷḷadu Nārpadu*, v.8.

accumulate knowledge, leads us to the essence (*purusha*) of Bhagavan. For, the more we learn, the more of a mystery it becomes till our mind is filled with questions that cannot be answered with our normal consciousness. We stand in awe before a Presence that overwhelms our understanding. It is a light that remains undiminished by the veil we try to throw over it with our ignorance. It is not impressed with our cleverness. It even, it seems, repels our inquisitiveness like a magnetic field that fends off alien elements. We turn away after a time, perplexed, but somehow hollowed of our previous petty, repetitive thoughts. We know something has happened but we do not know what it is. This is the sign that divine grace has literally operated on us and purified us.

That being so, when we are in silent attunement, how are we to manage when there is the noise and physical pressure of crowds bumping into us, some of whom are devout and many of whom are just curious or bored and want to get on to the next temple on their list? One ploy is to be there when the crowds are less, in the very early morning or after the main events at the ashram are over at night and many have gone home. This is a temporary measure of making the best of circumstances. It is not entirely satisfactory but what else can one do? The same dilemma, in a more general way, faces those who would love to be permanently in the vicinity of the ashram but cannot because of family commitments or finances.

It happened quite often during Bhagavan's lifetime that people asked him if they should renounce the world and come and live near the ashram and Arunachala. Bhagavan invariably declined to encourage the request. When asked why Bhagavan came to Arunachala, he more often than not said it was his *prārabdha* (destiny). Bhagavan implied in conversations that if someone was meant to be at Arunachala, they would simply do it and not ask permission. They would do it because they were so strongly impelled that no impediment would deter them. This is the key to our dilemma. If we are discouraged by the crowds and complain, then we are not meant to be in the ashram. We are wasting our time because we are more focused on the negativities than on what is really important.

Instead we should see the obstacles as an opportunity to gather our mind together in one determined channel of concentration and

not be distracted by the annoying activities. If we do that the noise will bounce off, the teeming physical bodies will actually aid our attention and force us to pull our attention further inside us, as we deliberately and methodically learn how not to be influenced by the distractions. Like a wheel with spokes that turn in rapid motion, the more we regain our centre, the quieter and stiller we become. If we identify with the outer whirl of movement, the more we will be flung out into the worldly manifestation that confuses and distracts us. We will depart from the ashram in a bad temper. There is no point and we only harm ourselves.

Turning towards the Heart and away from external phenomena through detachment (*vairāgya*), ceaselessly and one-pointedly examine and know the Self through the self, with the inward-turned vision which is the form of the enquiry ‘Who am I?’. Then shall you (yourself) clearly know (as your very own nature, the truth of the words, “You yourself, You alone, are the essence of the Real.”). Thus, did you instruct me [Arunachala!] What a wonder is this!³

The challenge we face is a perfect example of how to transform ourselves and not be tempted and inevitably frustrated by trying to alter the external circumstances which are beyond our control. Instead of being irritated we should welcome the opportunity to test our maturity of mind and learn by our lapses in attention to be unaffected by the external manifestation, conscious as we are of their distractive power.

It is all there for us, it only depends on how we approach it. ▲

³ *Śrī Aruṇācala Akṣaramaṇamālai*, v.44. *Aruṇācala Akṣaramaṇamālai A Detailed Commentary* by Muhavai Kanna Muruganar. Translation by Robert Butler. pp.81-82.

Listening: An Effortless Sadhana

V.S. KRISHNAN

The perennial truth which ancient saints experienced after introspection and passed on to successive generations by word of mouth is known as *Śruti*. *Śruti* is the divine truth which is spoken and heard. *Śruti* is the source of all knowledge; the source from which the Vedas and Upanishads have originated. *Śruti* is regarded as the supreme authority (*pramāṇam*) and the base on which the entire edifice of spirituality is built. *Śruti* is compared to a mother who teaches her children stories, parables and principles to lead them to the path of truth.

Ever since ancient times, listening constituted an effective way of gaining knowledge. After his return from pilgrimage, Sri Rama ruminated about the various aspects of life, the nature of the world and the underlying reality. When he met sage Vasishta, he raised the questions that bothered him. “Listen O Rama”, the sage said,

Sri V.S. Krishnan, 80, served in the Public Sector. He is among the many who came to Bhagavan through the *satsaṅga* of Nochur Sri Venkataraman. At a young age, Krishnan and his family members were initiated in the *Thiruppugazh* form of worship and the Nochur experience guided him to know more about *Thiruppugazh* and Bhagavan’s teachings.

“when the desires end, when the illusion of the world goes, when the bondage ceases and when the ‘I’ becomes free from all its adjuncts, the realisation of the Self dawns and you get liberated. This realisation should be the goal of your life.” Sri Rama heard the advice of sage Vasishtha and followed it in letter and spirit. Bhagavan Sri Ramana referred to *Yoga Vāsishtham* frequently and has even incorporated six couplets from it in His *Supplement to Forty Verses* (verses 21 to 27) because the advice of the sage was not meant for Sri Rama alone but for all those who are eager for knowledge of the Self.

“Is there an easy path for realisation?” asked Sanaka and his three brothers. “Yes,” said sage Sutar, son of Brahma. The sage said that the *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* shows the way for Self-realisation through devotion (*bhakti*), knowledge (*jñāna*) and dispassion (*vairāgya*) and ultimately liberates the devotee from the cycle of repeated life and death. He said that just by hearing the *Bhāgavatam*, liberation would be as perceptible as if it was in your palm.¹ He said that just by hearing it, Lord Hari would take a permanent seat in the heart of the listener.² He further said merely by listening to it, all one’s accumulated sins would get washed away.³ Revealed by Sri Veda Vyasa and expounded by sage Suka, son of Sri Veda Vyasa, *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam*, is considered the quintessence of all Vedic scriptures. Its uniqueness lies in the emphasis it gives to the practice of listening. It is said that just by listening to the *Bhagavatam*, one reaches beyond the state of the sun and the moon, the transcendental state of Siddhars.⁴ According to the *Bhāgavatam* when King Parikshit who was cursed to die by a snake bite, was overtaken by the fear of death. Sage Suka called him near and said: “Never fear about death. The fear comes because you identify yourself with the body. You are the Atman. The

¹ *yasya śravaṇa mātrena muktiḥ karatale sthitā. Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa.* Gita Press, Gorakhpur. Chapter III-24.

² *yasya śravaṇa mātrena Hari cittam samasrayet.* Ibid Tritiyodhyaya – 25 (Cessation of bhakti’s suffering). p.17.

³ *yasya śravaṇa mātrena pāpa hāni prājāyate.* Ibid Chaturthodhyaya – 15 (Redemption of Atmadeva). p.24

⁴ *yatra sūryasya somasya siddhānām na gatiḥ kadā || tam loke hi gatāste tu Śrīmad Bhāgavata śravāt.* Ibid. Panchamodhyaya – 86 (Gokarna attaining beatitude). p.36.

Atman is eternal, it is never born and never dies.” King Parikshit heard this advice and was transformed into an enlightened *jñāni*. He said, “I have become free from the fear of death,” and, conveying his reverent thanks to his guru (*siddhosmi, anugrhitosmi*), he said, “I have realised my Self. I am blessed.”

The guru is the dispeller of darkness. He creates an inner awakening by means of his mere gaze or his touch or by a word. The guru is already shining within. For an aspiring devotee, who has searched for knowledge, the guru appears from outside, gives just one or two indicative words of advice and departs, as happened in the case of the young Venkataraman. While in school at Madurai, Venkataraman met an elderly relation and asked: “Where are you coming from?” “Arunachalam,” he replied. As soon as the word ‘Arunachalam’ fell on his ears, Venkataraman experienced the radiance of an inner light. He remained still, deeply absorbed. The word created an inner awakening in him. On further enquiry he came to know that Arunachalam is the same as Tiruvannamalai. He then set out on his journey to Arunachalam. On the fourth day, when he set foot at the temple *sanctum sanctorum*, it seemed as if the Lord Arunachala was waiting to welcome his much beloved son. Later, the ‘son’ asked himself, “Who has seen Arunachala?” When he sought to find the answer to this question, he could not say “I saw” because there was no ‘I’ to see. There was no seer. The distinction between the seer and the seen had gone. When he searched for the one who has seen, the seer had ceased to exist.⁵ The duality had gone.

Hiranyakashipu, the demon king, had his son Prahlada taught about his father’s greatness to impress his son about his father’s name and fame. When Prahlada returned and was asked what he had learned from his teachers, his father, who was expecting praise for himself, was in for a rude shock. His son was full of praise for Hari. He said: “To hear the names, praises and stories of Lord Vishnu, and chant them, to remember Him and his names, this is the highest form of devotion.”⁶ Among the various forms of devotion, *śravaṇam*

⁵ *kaṇḍavaṅ evaṅ eṅak karuttiṇuḷ nāḍa, kaṇḍavaṅ inḍriḍa niṇḍradu kaṇḍēṅ. Arunachala Ashtakam, v.2.*

⁶ *śravaṇam kīrtanam viṣṇoh, smaraṇam pādasevanam. Śrīmad Bhāgavatam, Book 7, Discourse 5.*

occupies an important position. *Śravaṇam* means listening to a discourse on Vedic scriptures and Puranas, which open up the inner eyes of the audience, listening to the songs (*keertans*) which kindle the light of devotion in the heart, and listening to hymns like *Śrī Aruṇācala Akṣaramaṇamālai*, which elevate devotees to a new world of awakening. Bhagavan said the moment sincere *śravaṇam* starts, the flame of knowledge dawns.⁷ Just as a flame is shaken by wind, knowledge is disturbed by thoughts. Therefore, the flame of knowledge should be protected by means of *mananam*. *Mananam* means the recollection or the remembrance of God and reciting God's name so that no other thoughts come in between. The knowledge gained should shine brilliantly and brightly. This is ensured by means of *nididhyāsana*. As Bhagavan said, *nididhyāsana* is like trimming the wick of a flame. It is turning all outgoing thoughts inward. Thus listening is the first gateway towards knowledge, leading to Self-realisation.

The Self (Atman) is always shining within, ever present (*nityasiddha*) and ever experienced. There is never a moment when the Self is not, but still why is the individual not able to realise it? The hindrance is the mind which takes his attention away. Even while active in *satsaṅga*, thoughts come and take him away to far flung areas, making it difficult for him to continue his spiritual pursuits.

Bhagavan said that the most effective tool to silence the mind is by listening to the advice of the guru. When the attention is centred on listening, merely by the grace of the guru, all thoughts come to a standstill. Bhagavan said that one whose mind is pure, free from thoughts and free from wrong identity, experiences the truth soon after hearing it.⁸ As already said, hearing is the first step towards knowledge and there are other steps to be followed. According to Bhagavan, hearing (*śravaṇam*) helps our intellectual understanding of the truth. Meditation (*mananam*) makes this understanding clear and finally contemplation (*nididhyāsana*) brings about realisation of the truth.⁹

Tirumular, the great Siddha saint, said that the devotee gets real understanding on seeing the guru, on reciting the name of the guru, on

⁷ Venkataramiah, M, (compl.), *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk§647.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Talk§249.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Talk§21.

listening to the words of the guru and on remaining ever in thoughts of the guru.¹⁰ Listening to great spiritual masters is the first step towards spiritual fulfillment. According to Swami Chinmayananda, *śravaṇam* (listening) means experiencing the presence of God through the ears.

“Assuming that God and Guru both come and stand before you, whom would you greet first?” Kabir said, “I will bow to the guru first because it is the guru who shows me God.” The Tiruvannamalai-born saint Arunagirinathar, the author of *Thiruppugazh*, viewed Lord Muruga not as a supreme power but as a guru. He said in *Kandhar Anubhuti*, “Come as my Guru and grace me.”¹¹

According to the legend, Muruga took the role of a guru and gave the advice on *praṇava mantra* to Lord Siva. In one of his songs, Arunagirinathar says: “Oh Muruga, come and share with me the same advice that you conveyed into the two ears of Lord Siva.”¹² Here, the two ears are emphasized because listening becomes complete only when received attentively through the ears. In another verse of *Kandar Anubhuti*, Arunagirinathar says: “Oh Muruga, tell me how to reach a state free from all that over-shadows me (*upādhi-s*), so I become my true Self.”¹³

From the emphasis he has given to the words ‘tell me’, it is clear that Arunagirinathar signalled his eagerness to listen. There seems to be an inexplicable link between the ears and the heart because what is heard through the ears goes directly to the heart, the centre. When we listen with one-pointed intent we feel as if we are in the centre between the ears, as if we were hovering at the heart of what is important.

For a *sattva guṇa srota*¹⁴ whose ears are receptive and whose mind is at peace, it becomes an effortless *sādhana*. He catches the knowledge that emanates from the teacher as instantly as a piece of

¹⁰ *teḷivu guruvuṇ tirumēṇi kāṇḍal/ teḷivu guruvuṇ tirunāmam ceppal/teḷivu guruvuṇ tiruvārttai kēṭṭal/teḷivu guruvuru cindittal tāṇē*. Tirumandiram 137.

¹¹ *guruvāy varuvāy aruḷvāy Guhaṇē*.

¹² *Tiruppugazh* song rendered by Sri Arunagirinathar at Palani. *Sivaṇār maṇam kuḷira upadēsa mantram iru cevi mīdīlum pahar cey, Gurunāta*.

¹³ *ellām ara, eṇṇai izhanda nalam collāy, Murugā surabhū patiyē*. *Kandhar Anubhuti* 2.

¹⁴ *sattva guṇa srota*: One who has the germ or beginnings of a pure idea.

cotton, taken near a flame, catches fire or as a nail kept close to a magnet acquires magnetic power. Even in the case of a *tamo guṇa srota*, listening is effective, though it takes a longer time. He may not have understood what he heard with his external ears. However, just as we refer to the inner eye, there is an inner ear and what is heard is stored there and the listener is enlightened at the appropriate time.

In one of his discourses, an ardent devotee of Bhagavan said, “You may be on different levels of understanding. Some of you may not be able to comprehend the full import of my discourse but still I would urge you to listen. For some of you, the words I utter may not carry any particular meaning. They may not make an immediate impact on you but they have the potential to make an impact later. The mere act of listening is enough and it will mean something to you later. My words will reach somewhere in a corner of your heart and stay there alive. They will then merge with the seed already living in the fertile field of your heart and then germinate at the right time. The words that lie dormant within will acquire meaning when you engage in similar *satsaṅga*-s later and lead you to the right knowledge.”

Having said this, he remained silent for a while. Apparently, the message that he conveyed got registered in the heart of the audience, because they kept coming back to attend his *satsaṅga*. Soon, they built bridges of understanding with him and the flower of *jñāna* started blooming in their hearts.

When the mind is in agitation, it does not take the transmitted message in the right perspective. This happens to a *rajo guṇa srota*.

There was a lady whose mind was restless and who resisted anything noble and reasonable. Having heard Swami Vivekananda emphasising the need for Self-realisation, she went up to him after his speech and said: “Swamiji, I think that by repeatedly stressing an abstract theory you are trying to mesmerize us.” Swamiji smiled and replied: “Oh child, there is no need for me to mesmerize you or hypnotize you. In fact, you are already hypnotized by the illusory world. I am only trying to de-hypnotize you. I am only trying to wake you up from your slumber.” These words were enough for the lady to introspect later.

Willingness to listen is a quality that develops even from a very early stage of life. Prahlada started listening to the songs of his mother even while in her womb. Listening to the stories of Narada he became

an ardent devotee of Lord Vishnu. The story of Prahlada reminds me of an incident that happened at Palakkad, Kerala. A mother used to come to the discourse of a saint regularly, while carrying her baby. She listened to the discourse while the baby was fast asleep on her lap. Though the baby remained asleep throughout, it transpired that what was spoken registered on its brain. It was amazing when they discovered this later in his life. Over the years, the baby boy grew up and received the first basic lessons on the Vedas and the Upanishads. One day, when his mother got annoyed over a trivial issue, the boy said to her: “Find out, for whom this anger occurs.” She was taken aback. She recollected that the child used the same words that the saint had used in his discourse.

Every word that comes from a guru is worth listening to and worth contemplating on especially when the saint happens to be a realised being like Bhagavan Sri Ramana. He used very few words. Every word conveyed deep meaning and made a profound impact. Whatever the nature of the questions, he answered them using the minimum of words and sometime even without using any words. The seemingly complex questions that were posed looked trivial the moment he answered them. A devotee asked: “What is that one thing, knowing which all doubts are cleared?” “Know the doubter,” Bhagavan replied.¹⁵

There were devotees who found happiness merely by being near Bhagavan. There were others who aspired for just a word of advice. They treated the one or two words that came from Bhagavan as an advice (*upadeśa*). Sri Damodaran Nair, an advocate from Palakkad was one of them. Though he read books and visited temples, he could not get the peace he looked for. On the advice of Ramdas, the saint from Anandasramam, Kanhangad, he came to Sri Ramana Maharshi. The moment he saw Bhagavan, he was convinced that he had found the guru he was looking for. He felt that his spiritual thirst was quenched. “It was indescribable,” he said about his experience of meeting Bhagavan. After prostrating before Bhagavan in the Old Hall, he sat in a corner. He was absorbed in *samādhi* for two hours. As he opened his eyes, Bhagavan Ramana was answering another devotee’s query.

¹⁵ Op.cit., *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk§41.

The words, ‘*teevira vairāgya*’ (intense dispassion) that emanated from Bhagavan’s lips struck his mind. He took it as Bhagavan’s advice to him. He dedicated his life to the service of Bhagavan and came to be known as Swami Suresananda and the ashram he established at Palakkad came to be known as Vijnana Ramaneeya Kendram.¹⁶

There was another case of a young North Indian who came to see Bhagavan on the advice of Sri Paramahansa Yogananda. The youth came, prostrated before Bhagavan and sat with great earnestness to grasp every word that came from Bhagavan. As the loving glance of Bhagavan was directed at the boy, Bhagavan’s attendant, who was standing behind, kept on muttering something. Bhagavan then told the attendant in Tamil, “*Summa irum, oiy!*” (‘Keep quiet’). The youth then asked the person standing nearby what Bhagavan had just said. The person nearby translated it to mean ‘Remain quiet and keep still’. The boy instantly accepted these words as *upadeśa* and quietly left. Needless to say, he followed the advice in letter and spirit.

Listening is not necessarily done through the medium of language. Truth cannot be explained but only indicated. No word or language can reveal truth as eloquently as silence. He who goes beyond words and language and listens to the sound of silence realises the truth. Sri Dakshinamurti has explained the underlying reality (Brahman) by means of silence.

Sri T.K.Sundaresa Iyer has described how Bhagavan embodied this teaching of Sri Guru Dakshinamurti.

“It was a Sivaratri Day. The evening worship at the Mother’s shrine was over. The devotees had their dinner with Sri Bhagavan, who was now on His seat, the devotees at His feet sitting around Him.

“At 8 pm., one of the sadhus stood up, did *praṇām* (offered obeisance), and with folded hands prayed: ‘Today is Sivaratri Day; we should be highly blessed by Sri Bhagavan expounding to us the meaning of the *Hymn to Dakshinamurti*.’

“Says Bhagavan: ‘Yes, sit down.’

“The sadhu sat, and all eagerly looked at Sri Bhagavan and Sri Bhagavan looked at them. Sri Bhagavan sat and sat in His usual

¹⁶ *Mountain Path* July-Sept, 2008. ‘Swami Suresananda’ by Sri A. Swaminathan. Vijnana Ramaneeya Kendram, which is managed by Sri Ramanasramam, continues to serve ever-increasing numbers of devotees.

pose, no, poise. No words, no movement, and all was stillness! He sat still, and all sat still, waiting. The clock went on striking, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, one, two and three. Sri Bhagavan sat and they sat. Stillness, calmness, motionlessness — not conscious of the body, of space or time.

“Thus eight hours passed in Peace, in Silence, in Being, as It is. Thus was the Divine Reality taught through the speech of Silence by Bhagavan Sri Ramana Dakshinamurti.

“At the stroke of 4 am. Sri Bhagavan quietly said: ‘And now have you known the essence of the Dakshinamurti Hymn?’ All the devotees stood and made *praṇām* to the holy Form of the Guru in the ecstasy of their Being.”¹⁷

There is another story that illustrates the power of listening. Giri, a humble devotee, joined the group of disciples of Adi Sankara at the Sringeri Peetham. Though Giri was not well versed in scriptural knowledge, he was a good listener when Adi Sankara spoke. He regularly attended the *satsaṅga*. One day, someone commented that they need not wait for Giri, who was late, as he seemed dull. But later, the grace of the *jagadguru* and the constant listening by Giri transformed him into an enlightened sage, called ‘Totakacharya’. Thus, quite often, the link between the ear and the heart is established without even an mechanical mental understanding.

Once, when Bhagavan was explaining *Upadeśa Sāram* to a four-year child, the poet Muruganar wondered whether the child could understand what even scholars found difficult to comprehend. Bhagavan then said, “Do you think that the comprehension of a truth is possible only by means of intellectual understanding?” Muruganar then realised that the intellect does not necessarily play any role in the comprehension of the truth. It is the Heart, the seat of the Self, that holds, like a magnet what is heard through the ears. ▲

¹⁷ Sundaresa Iyer, T.K. ‘The Teaching in Silence’, Chap. 9, *At the Feet of Bhagavan*, pp.28-9.



The Path of Satya for Mahatma Gandhi

V.R. DEVIKA

Mahatma Gandhi was the face of the Indian struggle for independence from over two hundred years of British rule. He was also one of civilization's foremost proponents of active and applied spirituality. At the heart of Gandhi's philosophy was the notion of *Satyagraha*, a term he coined bringing two Sanskrit words together — *satya* (truth) and *āgraha* (insistence or holding firmly to). *Satyagraha* therefore means insistence on truth. Behind the legendary freedom movement, he was a man who experimented with himself as a way of practical spirituality. His feeling was that India must find an alternative way of development more in tune with her culture, geography and her vast number of poor citizens – an ideology based on truth and non-violence. He published these ideas in the Gujarati language as *Sarvodaya*. His deep commitment to the empowerment of the weak and the downtrodden made him come up with an economic

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philosophy based on self-reliance that celebrates human effort and skill as its capital. He made *sevādharma*¹ an essential part of *sarvodaya*.²

Gandhi believed in the mutable. Truth, he said, is not static, it is dynamic. What one believes as truth can change with more information. All his life, he experimented with truth. Bowing to the order of his mentor Gopalkrishna Gokhale, Gandhi, in his first year in India after becoming an accomplished social and political activist in South Africa, he travelled, observed and tested his beliefs in several social contexts. He toured the country by train and by foot and addressed meetings, outlining his faith in truth and non-violence as the preferred tool over violence. It was important for him to convince himself and his fellow Indians to fight a colonial rule not just without blaming the British for their plight but also to undergo self-regulation and self-introspection. His aim was to create *satyagrahi*-s who would regulate themselves through the practice of non-violence, equality, calmness, peace and non-envy.

He focused his entire life work in demonstrating that forward progress requires both preparedness for failure and strength for recovery. It is the fuel that drives every worthwhile endeavor. “The Goal ever recedes from us. . . . Satisfaction lies in the effort, not in the attainment. Full effort is full victory. . . .” he said, and “Man will ever remain imperfect and it will always be his part to try to be perfect.”

Swadeshi or self-sufficiency was advocated as an alternative to India’s economic dependence on goods imported from Britain. Political independence, he argued, could not be achieved in the absence of economic independence. *Swadeshi* was an important strategy for achieving Indian nationhood.

In the midst of his, at times, overwhelming mission he said, “If there was no music and no laughter in me, I would have died of this crushing burden of my work.”³ In 1946 when Mahatma Gandhi visited the Hindi Prachar Sabha in Madras, a young girl Leela Sekar, who was a volunteer, sang “*Mamava Pattabhirama* . . .”⁴ the

¹ *sevādharma*. *sevā*: serve; *dharma*: law; goal of life; duty.

² *sarvodaya*. *sarva*: all; *udaya*: rise, progress. Or, ‘universal upliftment’.

³ Letter to Rabindranath Tagore, written on December 22, 1945.

⁴ *mamava pattabhi rama* . . . Oh Pattabhirama, whose name Rama, is glorified by victorious Maruti, please protect me.

Dikshithar *krithi* in *Manirangu raga*. Mahatma Gandhi was very pleased. He made her sing it again when she went to Sevagram in Wardha. He said he loved the slow pace of the song and the *rāga* that dripped sweetness.

In 1947, just a few months post-independence, M.S.Subbulakshmi was given a message by someone that Mahatma Gandhi had asked for her to record his favourite *bhajan* ‘*Hari tum haro*’⁵ and send it to Delhi. Her husband Sadasivam replied that they were unfamiliar with the *bhajan* and would not be able to do it justice, and could perhaps get another singer to sing it. They promptly got a call back from Gandhiji, who said he would rather have Subbulakshmi speak the *bhajan* than have anyone else sing it. So overnight they recorded ‘*Hari tum haro*’ and sent it to him. A few months after that, in the new year, while listening to All India Radio for the news, as she did all her life, M.S.Subbulakshmi heard the announcement of Gandhiji’s assassination, after which she heard her own voice singing ‘*Hari tum haro*’. Distraught, she fainted. It is said that she would always choke up and cry when narrating the story, even years later.

At a speech at the Second Gujarat Educational Conference at Broach, on Oct. 20, 1917, Gandhiji said, “At times, we find restlessness in a large gathering. This can be arrested and calmed if all sing a national song. We have an example of the power of music in the fact that boatmen and other labourers raise, in unison, the cry of Harahar and Allebeli and this helps them in their work. Music must get a place in our efforts at popular awakening.”

He continued, “Music means rhythm, order. Its effect is electrical and soothing. But unfortunately, we have neglected music. It has never become nationalized in the modern sense. If I had any influence with volunteer boy scouts and Seva Samiti organizations, I would make compulsory a proper singing in company of national songs. And to that end I should have great musicians attending every Congress or Conference and teaching mass music.”

When Gandhi was in South Africa he had started evening prayers in the Ashram. That collection of *bhajans* was published under the name *Nitivam Kavyo*.

⁵ *Hari tum haro...* Hari, remove the fear of people. It is a song composed by Mirabai, the 16th-century Hindu mystic poet and devotee of Krishna.

His idea of music was also connected to spirituality. In this context he wrote a letter to Pandit Narayan Moreshwar Khare who was the music teacher in the Satyagraha Ashram, Sabarmati, on October 7, 1924. "I have gradually come to look upon music as a means of spiritual development. Please try your best to see that all of us sing our 'Bhajans' with a correct understanding of the sense. I cannot describe the joy I feel: music is a constructive activity, which uplifts the soul."

At Ahmedabad, in his address to *Young India*, on April 15, 1926, he said, "If we use a broad interpretation on music, i.e., if we mean by it union, concord, mutual help, it may be said that in no department of life we can dispense with it. So if many more people send their children to the music class it will be part of their contribution to national uplift."

According to the Mahatma, "In true music there is no place for communal differences and hostility." Music was a great example of national integration because only there we saw Hindu and Muslim musicians sitting together and partaking in musical concerts." He often said, "We shall consider music in a narrow sense to mean the ability to sing and play an instrument well, but, in its wider sense, true music is created only when life is attuned to a single tune and a single time beat. Music is born only where the strings of the heart are not out of tune." He stated that true music was implicit in *khadi* and the spinning wheel.

The first visit to Madras by Gandhiji is interesting. He was already famous when he arrived on 14th of October 1896 as the secretary of Natal Indian Congress. The Bala Sundaram incident in South Africa had reached Madras to add to it. *The Hindu*, the *Madras Mail* and *Times of India* newspapers announced he was in Madras and he spoke at a meeting in Pachaiappa Hall. There was a run for his *Green Pamphlet*, describing the injustices to Indians in South Africa. He stayed in Madras for two weeks. He also kept a meticulous account of his expenses. He perhaps had some kind of skin infection because his account shows he bought sandal paste ointment. The account also talks about a few *annas* given to some street magicians.

His later 1915 visit was really dramatic. "He is coming, he is coming," a shout went out as the train approached Madras Central station. He was travelling from Haridwar on Delhi express. There

was a huge crowd at the Central station including Annie Besant, C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer, G.N. Chetty, and many students who searched in the first and second class cabins and felt disappointed that he had perhaps not come. Then the rail guard announced that Mr. and Mrs. Gandhi had alighted from the third class compartment. They were escorted with great enthusiasm by the gathering. The waiting horse carriage (*sarot*) was relieved of its horses and the students themselves pulled the carriage. Gandhiji and Kasturba stood in the carriage with folded hands as it was pulled all the way to G.A. Natesan's home in Sunkurama Chetty Street, George Town.

Gandhi and Kasturba had been given two rooms in the house. Cots with soft mattresses, chairs and tables had all been arranged. Gandhiji got them all removed saying he and Ba needed no luxury. Early morning he got up, washed his clothes and wanted to go for a walk to the beach. Natesan wondered if they could do it after a cup of coffee. Gandhiji said he did not drink coffee and began his walk. Natesan had a quick coffee and ran to catch up with him.

Gandhiji's Harijan tour in 1936-37 was really an important path-breaking one. It was then that he led a group of Harijans into the Meenakshi temple at Madurai, in the company of Ganesh Iyer and Shankar Iyer. When Gandhi was travelling by train from Chennai to Madurai, the railways gave him a special third class compartment.

He had expressed a desire that the train should make a brief halt at Taramani, just south of Madras. Taramani had no railway station and therefore the train just halted. The reason was that at Taramani there was a well-known Leprosy Hospital and some social workers had asked Gandhi to give *darśan* to the leprosy patients. Gandhi readily agreed. The train halted.

The carriage door opened, and Gandhi came out on a special plank which allowed him to be clearly visible without getting down. The halt was for about a minute. Gandhi folded his hands in *namaste* and looked over the entire crowd of leprosy patients numbering it is said, over 10,000. In response, a totally silent crowd raised their hands. Suddenly, the chorus of "Mahatma Gandhi Vazhga!" waved through the entire assembly of these humiliated and abandoned people. Gandhi put his finger on his nose indicating that he wanted silence. Everyone went quiet. One leprosy activist who was in the crowd narrated much

later that “when Gandhi looked over the entire crowd, everyone there felt that Gandhi was looking particularly at him.” This was his magic.

Gandhiji said, “If my faith burns bright, as I hope it will even if I stand alone, I shall be alive in the grave and what is more, speaking from it.”⁶

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi still speaks to us seventy one years after his ashes were immersed in the waters. In his life time, Gandhi communicated his ideas for personal transformation, political revolution and social justice. He conveyed his thoughts through many public acts like fasting.

Violin maestro Lalgudi Jayaraman told me that whenever Mahatma Gandhi went on a fast, several people in Lalgudi also observed a fast. Narayan Desai, son of Mahadev Desai who was secretary to Gandhi, once narrated that people in North Western Province also observed a fast when Gandhi went on a fast. That was true in central, western and eastern India too.

How did people in such diverse cultures share the same devotion for Mahatma Gandhi? How did his message reach millions of people and communicate his ideas in such a strong manner? Think of a time of no telephone, internet and social media access in a country of mostly unlettered people speaking diverse languages and dialects?

Gandhi used complex ways to transform those he was addressing. The transformations that took place in the lives of those around him resembled how an actor would transform his audience through the experience of *rasa*. A kind of *rasāsvāda*⁷ or even *bhakti* happened when hearts and minds were transformed by Gandhi into *satyagrahi*-s of various levels.

Gandhi lived his life in the public space and in the public gaze. In an extraordinary way, he used many symbols to create the communication links that touched his people in direct and indirect ways. He transformed his life into commentaries about many of the issues he wanted to urgently convey. He offered telling narratives with his symbolic and practical embrace of the spinning wheel, his habit of spinning several hours every day, his austere life at the ashrams he established, his readiness to terminate civil disobedience campaigns

⁶ M.K.Gandhi in *Harijan* August 7, 1947.

⁷ *rasāsvāda*: appreciation, savouring the essence.

when some people engaged in violence and his many expressions of altruistic love and self-discipline. His commitments and actions complemented and authenticated his written texts and his speeches in ways that language could not.

In a letter Gandhi wrote to Jawaharlal Nehru, “My ideal village still exists only in my imagination. After all every human being lives in the world of his own imagination. In this village of my dreams the villager will not be dull — he will be all awareness. He will not live like an animal in filth and darkness. Men and women will live in freedom, prepared to face the whole world. Nobody will be allowed to be idle or to wallow in luxury. Everyone will have to do body labour.”⁸

Swadeshi, *swaraj*,⁹ *satyagraha* and *sarvodaya* were all constructs that he created for the building India’s new economies based on the dignity of labour.

He taught us that an individual can train him or herself to become transparent and open, and how to create synergy and co-operation between education, training, employment and community sectors. He strove always for continuous improvement in whatever area held his attention.

Gandhi measured all decisions against truth. Truth can be translated as transparency and the courage to see both the limitations and possibilities against the raw material of aptitude and skill available in a person.

Gandhi spoke about means and ends. The means of arriving at an end is to be as honourable as the end. He believed that a policy for refusal to compromise cannot be a refusal to communicate. Being open to different possibilities is not a compromise.

Gandhi also focused on the worldwide conflict between capital and labour and the poor envying the rich. According to Gandhi, if all worked for their bread, distinctions of rank would be obliterated. The rich would still exist, but they would deem themselves only trustees of their property, and would use it solely in the public interest.

His view was that the idea that we work for others is only an illusion. We always work for ourselves he said. He asserted that we

⁸ 5th of October 1945.

⁹ *swaraj*: literally, self-rule.

can attain deliverance only if we work exclusively for our higher self. In Gandhi's formulation, work could be a means of self-realisation.

"If everybody thinks about the work he is doing, and so works intelligently, he would get the best education, would find his work interesting, develop his intellect, enlarge and purify his heart, acquire efficiency in his work and make inventions and improvements which would benefit the world. As the work becomes more interesting, it gives him joy; he feels no fatigue in doing it and the work becomes artistic — whether it is cleaning lavatories or roads, writing accounts or something else."

Gandhi needed young people who believed in his utopia. He wanted fellow Indians to be the *satyagrahi*-s in this utopia. They had to understand sacrifice. He needed *sahrdaya*¹⁰ people, that is, those with similar hearts and feelings.

Natyashastra, the ancient treatise on dramaturgy in India, describes a *sahrdaya* as someone who is ready to receive the message given by the actor and feels the mood entirely.

Sahrdaya involves sacrificing something of one's own. People have to forget their own state of mind and body and be transported into the world created by the actor. The characters in the performance may be the same, the unfolding story may be the same but the experience of the participation is fresh and revelatory. That is what an aesthetic experience is. Gandhi attempted to create *satyagrahi*-s who were prepared to share in a collective experience and sacrifice themselves for the ecstasy of participation in total communion with others.

As he contemplated and experimented with the means in the path of freedom both political and social, especially in regard to untouchability, Gandhi's tried to captivate the minds of his followers and opponents through creating the awareness of Ardour, Order and Truth (*tapas*, *rta* and *satya*).

Most artistic traditional performances are enjoyed on the basis of the collective feeling of an audience and a collective consciousness of the culture of the earth that they belonged to. A *sahrdaya* thus requires a keen recollection and an intense concentration as a preparation for the melting process which takes place when there is a powerful

¹⁰ *sahrdaya*: One who is kind behaves in a gentle, caring manner.

aesthetic experience. The qualities of a *satyagrahi* and *sahrdaya* invite a comparison.

Natyaśāstra talks about four modes of *abhinaya* to create such an experience in a *sahrdaya*. *Abhinaya* is described as ‘taking forward’ or ‘transporting’. The four modes of *abhinaya* are *angika* (body language), *vachika* (sounds of ideas), *āharya* (costume, décor, presentation), and *satvika* (inner involvement expressed subtly through complete immersion in the role). Gandhi’s body language, his prolific writing style with its simple but very effective language that was never obscure, his meetings which had music and prayer as the main activity, his costume as a man of the people, his spinning wheel and his ritualistic burning of passes in South Africa and foreign clothes in India, and his austere living are fascinating study of his *angika*, *vachika*, *āhārya* and *satvika* modes of reaching out to multitudes of people.

For Gandhi, tradition was not a blind collection of precedents but a form of inquiry, a scientific adventure and an unplanned but rigorous communal science constantly tested and revised. Gandhi’s ritualistic practices of fasting, observing silence, and walks as tools for all moral applications in social and political activism were *satyagraha* in action for *sahrdaya*-s to participate and seek *rasanubhava*.¹¹ ▲

¹¹ *rasanubhava* : aesthetic experience.

Ramani Māmi: A Remembrance

A recent video from the Bay Area Ramana Kendra called Ramani Māmi: A Remembrance commemorates the life of Smt. Ramani Subramanian.

Please see the following link: <https://youtube/EVzDAFa9JAM>



Rishabhava

The Paramount Importance of Self Attention

Part Thirty Two

SADHU OM
AS RECORDED BY MICHAEL JAMES

5th December 1978

Sadhu Om: If we worry about other people or what is happening in this world, even if our concern is motivated by the *sāttvika* qualities of love and compassion, that shows that we still have a *satya-buddhi* [sense of reality] regarding the world. So long as we take this world to be real, we will be concerned about it and the people we see in it, and our concern will prompt us to face outwards, away from ourself. This is why Bhagavan taught us that whatever world we see is no more real than any world we see in a dream. It is just a mental fabrication, so it seems to exist only when we are aware of it.

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

Only if we are willing to accept this will we have sufficient *vairāgya* [freedom from desire, attachment and so on] to be able to dive within deep enough to obtain the *ātma-muttu* [the pearl of self-knowledge]. Therefore ultimately we must be willing to give up even the *sāttvika* feelings of love and compassion for others.

When Bhagavan said [in the nineteenth paragraph of *Nān Ār?* (Who am I?)], ‘Likes and dislikes are both fit [for one] to dislike [spurn or renounce]’, he implied that we need to give up all concern about anything other than ourself. Only when we do so will we be willing to turn within and surrender ourself entirely.

Sadhu Om [while discussing intense yearning for Bhagavan’s grace and the prayers that come welling up out of one’s heart as a result of such yearning]: Ignore the one who complains, lamenting the state of separation from him. There is a great power that is working within us rectifying our defects. The more we come to know of its working, the more ego will yield itself to that, thereby withdrawing from activity and subsiding. Finally peace alone will remain. It was in such a state of yearning and complaining that *Ramaṇa Sahasram* [a thousand verses that Sadhu Om wrote praying for *jñāna*] came out. The mind will complain and complain about its state of separation until finally it no longer remains to complain about anything.

Sadhu Om: When I first came to Bhagavan and thought deeply about his teachings, I came to three important conclusions.

The first of these conclusions is that of the three characteristics that he said define reality, namely eternal, unchanging and self-shining; self-shining (*svayamprakāśa*) is the one essential characteristic.

Neither eternal nor unchanging on their own, nor both of them together, can be sufficient to define what is real, because if we try to decide what is real without considering whether or not it is self-shining, we could conclude that something insentient is real. For example, we could argue that physical space is eternal and unchanging, so it is real. But how do we know that it is eternal or unchanging? How do we know that it even exists? It seems to exist only because we are aware of it, so its seeming existence is dependent upon our awareness of it. How can anything that depends for its seeming existence upon some other thing be real? Therefore

nothing that is insentient and hence not aware of its own existence can be real.

In order to be real, a thing must be aware of its own existence, and this is what Bhagavan means by being self-shining. Whatever is not self-shining cannot be real, even if it seems to be eternal and unchanging.

If we carefully consider the meaning of self-shining, it will be clear that whatever is self-shining must also be eternal and unchanging, so the characteristic of being self-shining includes within itself these other two characteristics of reality. We can understand this by considering some examples.

Some people may consider the sun to be self-shining, for instance, but we can repudiate such an idea by pointing out that the sun is not aware of its own existence, so to make its existence known it must depend upon another light, namely the light of the mind that perceives it. Therefore whatever is insentient (*jaḍa*) is not truly self-shining in the sense that Bhagavan uses this term.

Since the seeming existence of all insentient things is illumined by the mind, is the mind self-shining? No, it cannot be, because if it were self-shining it would shine even in sleep. Since it does not shine in sleep, it does not exist then, because existence and shining are one and the same thing. Existence is *uḷḷadu* or *sat*, and shining is *uṅarvu* or *cit*, and as Bhagavan explained in verse 23 of *Upadēśa Undiyār*, *uḷḷadu* [what exists] is *uṅarvu* [awareness]:

Because of the non-existence of [any] awareness other [than what exists] to be aware of what exists, what exists (*uḷḷadu*) is awareness (*uṅarvu*). Awareness alone exists as we.

Whatever seems to exist at one time but not at another time does not actually exist even when it seems to exist. Therefore, since the mind seems to exist only in waking and dream but not in sleep, it does not actually exist at all. Its existence is just a seeming existence, so its awareness (shining) is just a seeming awareness and not real awareness.

Since the mind does not shine in sleep, the property of shining (awareness) is not natural to it. In other words, shining is not the *svabhāva* [own nature] of the mind. The light by which it shines is one that it borrows from some other source, namely *ātma-svarūpa* [the real nature of ourself], which is the light of pure awareness.

What actually shines by its own light, therefore, is only our real nature, because we alone exist and shine in sleep, and we do so without the aid of any other light, because nothing other than ourself exists then. Everything else appears and disappears, but we exist and shine by our own light of pure awareness at all times and in all states without ever undergoing any change, so we alone are eternal, unchanging and self-shining. Therefore what is real is only ourself, as Bhagavan says in the first sentence of the seventh paragraph of *Nāṇ Ār?*, ‘*yathārthamāy uḷḷadu ātma-sorūpam onḍrē*’, ‘What actually exists is only *ātma-svarūpa* [the real nature of oneself]’, and in verse 13 of *Uḷḷadu Nārpadu*, ‘*ñāṇam ām tāṇē mey*’, ‘Oneself, who is *jñāna* [awareness], alone is real’.

By considering thus, we can see that unless a thing is eternal, it cannot be self-shining, because though it sometimes seems to exist and shine, it does not always exist and shine, so even when it does shine it must do so by whatever light illumines both its appearance and its disappearance. Likewise, unless it is unchanging, it cannot be eternal, because it is one thing before each change and another thing afterwards, and since it is not eternal, it cannot be self-shining. Whatever is truly self-shining, therefore, must necessarily be eternal and unchanging.

The light of pure awareness, which is our real nature, is what illumines both the mind in waking and dream and its absence in sleep. However, what the word ‘illumines’ means in this context is not ‘knows’ but ‘makes known’, and it is important to understand this distinction, because what knows the seeming existence of the mind in waking and dream is not pure awareness but only the mind itself. Without the background light of pure awareness, the mind could not know anything, either itself or anything else, but in the clear view of pure awareness there is no mind at all. The mind as such is a shadow, and light can never know a shadow.

However, though the mind is a shadow, it is not only a shadow, but a mixture of light and shadow, because it is *cit-jaḍa-granthi*, a knot (*granthi*) formed by the seeming entanglement of awareness (*cit*) with a body, which is insentient (*jaḍa*). The *cit* element of the mind is pure awareness, which is never aware of anything other than itself, but it is what illumines the mind, enabling it to know both itself [the subject

or perceiver] and everything else [the objects or phenomena]. All the phenomena known by the mind are just shadows, because they are *jaḍa*, so they are not known by the clear light of pure awareness, but they are known by the mind, because the mind is not a pure light but a mixture of light and shadow, *cit* and *jaḍa*.

Therefore, though the light of pure awareness makes the mind known, it does not make it known to itself [pure awareness] but only to the mind. The mind exists only in its own view and not in the view of our real nature. Hence, our real nature is not aware of the presence of mind in waking and dream, so it is not aware of its absence in sleep. In its view it alone exists, so it is not aware of any changes, nor is it aware of any state other than its own eternal and unchanging state of pure awareness.

Who then is aware of the absence of the mind in sleep? In sleep no one is aware of its absence, because the fact that it is absent in sleep is just an idea that exists in its view in waking and dream. Therefore when it is said that the light of pure awareness illumines the presence of the mind in waking and dream and its absence in sleep, what that means is that it lends its light to the mind, thereby enabling the mind to know both that it [the mind] is present in waking and dream and that it was absent in sleep.

The mind borrows its light of awareness from our real nature, but it misuses this light to know things other than itself. This is like directing the beam of sunlight reflected from a mirror into a dark cave and thereby using it to know whatever objects are in that cave. If instead that reflected beam of light were directed back to its source, the sun, it would merge and be lost in the bright light of the sun. Likewise, instead of using the light of the mind to know anything other than ourself, if we were to direct it back to its source, ourself, it would merge and be lost in the bright light of pure awareness, as Bhagavan implies in verse 22 of *Uḷḷadu Nāṛpadu*:

Consider, except by, turning the mind back within, completely immersing it in God, who shines within that mind giving light to the mind, how to fathom God by the mind?

What he refers to here as *pati*, the Lord or God, is our real nature (*ātma-svarūpa*), which is the light of pure awareness. If in this way we turn our entire mind or attention away from all phenomena back

to face the light of pure awareness, which is its essential *cit* element, what will remain shining is only real awareness, which is what we actually are, as Bhagavan implies in verse 16 of *Upadēśa Undiyār*:

Leaving aside external *viśayas* [phenomena], the mind knowing its own form of light is alone real awareness [true knowledge or knowledge of reality].

The second and most important of the three conclusions I reached after reflecting carefully on Bhagavan's teachings is that ego will be destroyed only when it attends to itself alone, because as he says in verse 25 of *Uḷḷadu Nārpadu*, ego is a formless phantom that comes into existence, stands and nourishes itself by grasping form, which means by attending to anything other than itself, so if it tries to grasp itself alone, it will dissolve back into the source from which it arose, which is what he means by saying, '*tēḍiṇāl oṭṭam piḍikkum*', 'If sought, it will take flight'. This is why he implies in so many other places, such as in verses 22 and 27 of *Uḷḷadu Nārpadu*, that we cannot know our real nature and thereby eradicate ego by any means other than turning our attention back within to investigate the source from which we have risen.

The third conclusion I reached, which logically follows on from the second one, is that the more we attend to ego the more it will subside. In other words, in order to keep ego in check we must watch it vigilantly, and in order to surrender ourselves entirely we must persevere in our attempts to attend to ourselves as keenly and as constantly as possible. ▲

(To be continued)

KEYWORD

Neti-Neti

B.K. CROISSANT

Beginning with the Vedas, there are many instances of ‘*neti-neti*’ in sacred Indian texts that have come down to us from pure and enlightened souls. The phrase especially abounds in spiritual literature that explains the teachings of *advaita vedānta*. To begin with, the meaning is simple enough. ‘*Neti*’ comes from ‘*na*’ and ‘*iti*’. ‘*Iti*’ can mean ‘thus’ or ‘so’, but it may also be used to call attention to something or can signal quotation marks, giving special significance to a word or indicating words that are to be spoken. Often translated as ‘Not this, not this,’ *neti-neti* is a powerful negator.

In the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* Maitreyī asks Yājñavalkya, “By what means can one perceive him by means of whom one perceives this whole world?” He replies, “About this self (*ātman*), one can only say ‘not –, not –.’ He is ungraspable, for he cannot be grasped. He is undecaying, for he is not subject to decay. He has nothing sticking to him, for he does not stick to anything. He is not bound; yet he neither trembles in fear nor suffers injury.”¹

¹ Olivelle, Patrick, *The Early Upaniṣads: Annotated Text and Translation*, verse 4.5.15, p. 131.

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.

The *Avadhūta Gītā* of Dattātreyā, declares, “By such sentences as ‘That thou art’, your own Self is affirmed. Of that which is untrue and composed of the five elements the *Śruti* says, ‘Not this, not this.’”² Further on, the same idea is expressed thus, “Always ‘not this, not this’ to both the formless and the formed. Only the Absolute exists, transcending difference and non-difference.”³

Śrī Ādi Śaṅkarācārya, the great enlightened soul and most revered teacher of *advaita vedānta*, refers to ‘*neti-neti*’ in the *Ātma Bodha*. “By a process of negation of the conditionings (*upādhis*) through the help of the scriptural statement ‘It is not this, it is not this’, the oneness of the individual soul and the Supreme Soul, as indicated by the great *Mahāvākyas*, has to be realised.”⁴ It appears in the *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* as well. “The *Śruti* says, ‘Not this, not this,’ because they are attributes and, therefore, not real. As you see the snake in a rope, and as you see things in a dream – both unreal – therefore, practice ‘not this, not this’.”⁵

For those without the time or opportunity to read and reflect on the *Ātma Bodha* or the *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, fortunately for us Śaṅkara also wrote a jewel-like poem, a masterpiece referred to as the *Nirvāṇa Ṣaṭkam*, that illustrates *neti-neti* in six lilting verses. The first five can be understood as the Master’s words and the last one the ecstatic response of his disciple who, having heard and reflected upon those words, attains *nirvāṇa*. Clearly the Master is a *sadguru* speaking from the other shore. His student, on the other hand, must have certain qualifications which Śaṅkara describes in the first verse of the *Ātma Bodha*: “I am composing the *Ātma-Bodha*, this treatise of the knowledge of the Self, for those who have purified themselves by austerities and are peaceful in heart and calm, who are free from cravings and are desirous of liberation.”⁶

² *Avadhūta Gītā* of Dattātreyā, translated and annotated by Swami Ashokananda, verse I.25, p.13.

³ *Ibid*, verse I.62, p.33.

⁴ *Ātma-Bodha of Śrī Ādi Śaṅkarācārya*, translated with commentary by Swami Chinmayananda, verse 30, p.60.

⁵ *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi of Śrī Śaṅkarācārya*, translated by Swami Turiyananda, verse 246, pp.111-112.

⁶ *Ātma-Bodha of Śrī Ādi Śaṅkarācārya*, translated with commentary by Swami Chinmayananda, verse 1, p.1.

A more elaborate version of the qualifications expounded in the *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* would be possessing 1) discrimination between the real and the unreal, 2) detachment from the fruits of action, 3) the treasure of six virtues (tranquility, self-control, mental poise, forbearance, faith, and concentration), and 4) a longing for Self-Realisation.

मनोबुद्ध्यहङ्कारचित्तानि नाहं
न च श्रोत्रजिह्वे न च घ्राणनेत्रे ।
न च व्योमभूमिर् न तेजो न वायुः
चिदानन्दरूपः शिवोऽहं शिवोऽहम् ॥१॥

mano-buddhyahankāra-cittāni nāhaṁ
na ca śrotra-jihve na ca ghrāṇa-netre
na ca vyoma-bhūmir na tejo na vāyuh
cidānanda-rūpaḥ śivo'haṁ śivo'ham

Not the mind or the intellect, not the ego or *citta*,
Not ears or tongue, not eyes or the sense of smell,
Neither space nor air, fire nor earth am I,
Pure Consciousness and Bliss by nature, I am Śiva, I am Śiva. (1)

न च प्राणसंज्ञो न वै पञ्चवायुर्
न वा सप्तधातुर् न वा पञ्चकोशाः ।
न वाक्पाणिपादं न चोपस्थपायुः
चिदानन्दरूपः शिवोऽहं शिवोऽहम् ॥२॥

na ca prāṇa-sañjño na vai pañca-vāyur
na vā sapta-dhātur na vā pañca-kośāḥ
na vāk-pāṇi-pādaṁ na copastha-pāyuh
cidānanda-rūpaḥ śivo'haṁ śivo'ham

Neither *prāṇa* nor the five vital airs am I,
Not the seven constituents nor the five sheaths,
Not voice nor hand nor foot, not the genitals or anus,
Pure Consciousness and Bliss by nature, I am Śiva, I am Śiva. (2)

न मे द्वेषरागौ न मे लोभमोहौ
न मे वै मदो नैव मात्सर्यभावः ।
न धर्मो न चार्थो न कामो न मोक्षः
चिदानन्दरूपः शिवोऽहं शिवोऽहम् ॥३॥

na me dveṣa-rāgau na me lobha-mohau
na me vai mado naiva mātsarya-bhāvaḥ
na dharmo na cārtho na kāmo na mokṣaḥ
cidānanda-rūpaḥ śivo'haṁ śivo'ham

No likes or dislikes are mine; no greed or delusion have I,
Neither pride nor feelings of jealousy are in me,
For me no duty, no wealth, no pleasure, no liberation,
Pure Consciousness and Bliss by nature, I am Śiva, I am Śiva. (3)

न पुण्यं न पापं न सौख्यं न दुःखं
न मन्त्रो न तीर्थं न वेदा न यज्ञः ।
अहं भोजनं नैव भोज्यं न भोक्ता
चिदानन्दरूपः शिवोऽहं शिवोऽहम् ॥४॥

na puṇyam na pāpam na saukhyam na duḥkham
na mantra na tīrtham na vedo na yajñāḥ
aham bhojanam naiva bhojyam na bhoktā
cidānanda-rūpaḥ śivo'haṁ śivo'ham

Not merit, not vice, not happiness nor sorrow are mine,
No mantra, no sacred places, no scriptures, no ritual,
Neither the enjoyer nor the enjoyed or the enjoying,
Pure Consciousness and Bliss by nature, I am Śiva, I am Śiva. (4)

न मे मृत्युशङ्का न मे जातिभेदः
पिता नैव मे नैव माता न जन्म ।
न बन्धुर् न मित्रं गुरुनैव शिष्यः
चिदानन्दरूपः शिवोऽहं शिवोऽहम् ॥५॥

na me mṛtyu-śaṅkā na me jāti-bhedāḥ
pitā naiva me naiva mātā na janma
na bandhur na mitram gurur naiva śiṣyaḥ
cidānanda-rūpaḥ śivo'haṁ śivo'ham

No fear of death, no class distinctions for me,
No father, no mother, no birth have I,
Not a relation, not a friend, neither guru or disciple,
Pure Consciousness and Bliss by nature, I am Śiva, I am Śiva. (5)

अहं निर्विकल्पो निराकाररूपो
विभुत्वाच्च सर्वत्र सर्वेद्रियाणाम् ।

न चासङ्गतं नैव मुक्तिर् न मेयः
चिदानन्दरूपः शिवोऽहं शिवोऽहम् ॥६॥

ahaṁ nirvikalpo nirākāra-rūpo
vibhutvācca sarvatra sarvendriyāṇām
na cāsaṅgataṁ naiva muktir na meyaḥ
cidānanda-rūpaḥ śivo'haṁ śivo'ham

I am devoid of thought and in essence formless,
All-pervasive, existing everywhere, through all the senses,
Free of attachments, no need for liberation, and immeasurable,
Pure consciousness and Bliss by nature, I am Śiva, I am Śiva. (6)

Imagine a stupendous fire into which are cast great and small sacrifices. They include the inner organs (mind, intellect, ego, and *citta*); the five organs of knowledge (ears, tongue, eyes, nose and skin); the five elements (space, air, fire, earth, and water); the five vital airs (five types of *prāṇa*); the seven elements of the body (water, blood, flesh, fat, bone, marrow, and semen); the five sheaths (physical, vital airs, mental, intellect, and bliss); the five organs of action (voice, hand, foot, genitals, and anus); vices (greed, delusion, pride, and jealousy); the four goals of human life (duty, wealth, pleasure, and liberation); all dualities, such as merit and vice or happiness and sorrow; religious practices (mantra, pilgrimages, scriptures, and ritual); all triads, such as the enjoyer, enjoyed and enjoying; fear of death; birth; relations (father, mother, relatives, friends, teachers and disciples), and class distinctions.

Śaṅkara manages to compress volumes composed by all the great exponents of *advaita vedānta* on the negation process prescribed by the Vedas in only five short verses. No small feat indeed!

Negation or *neti-neti*, however, is only part of the scheme. It must be accompanied by constant practice of detachment or renunciation (*vairāgya*) and discrimination (*viveka*). Śaṅkara says, “By the increase of *viveka* [discrimination] and *vairāgya* [renunciation], the mind becomes purified and is ready for liberation. Therefore, one who is intelligent and desirous of liberation should have these two qualities (discrimination and renunciation) well-established in him”.⁷

⁷ *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi of Śrī Śaṅkarācārya*, translated by Swami Turiyananda, verse 175, p. 78.

“Renunciation and discrimination are the two wings of a bird. Know this, O expert, that rising to the top of the house of liberation cannot be accomplished without these two.”⁸

Direct experience or *aparokṣānubhūti* is the subject of the last verse of *Nirvāṇa Ṣaṭkam* and of its refrain, “I am Śiva, I am Śiva”. It is no mere repetition of words. Bhagavan addresses this point in detail and explains *ātma vicāra*, the sword of discrimination, in this dialogue with Dr. Syed, a Muslim professor and devotee.

Devotee: Shall I meditate on “I am Brahman” (Aham Brahmāsmi)?

Maharshi: The text is not meant for thinking “I am Brahman”. Aham (‘I’) is known to everyone. Brahman abides as Aham in everyone. Find out the ‘I’. The ‘I’ is already Brahman. You need not think so. Simply find out the ‘I’.

D: Is not discarding of the sheaths mentioned in the śāstras?

M: After the rise of the ‘I-thought’ there is the false identification of the ‘I’ with the body, the senses, the mind, etc. ‘I’ is wrongly associated with them and the true ‘I’ is lost sight of. In order to shift the pure ‘I’ from the contaminated ‘I’ this discarding is mentioned. But it does not mean exactly discarding of the non-self, but it means the finding of the real Self. The real Self is the Infinite ‘I-I’, i.e., ‘I’ is perfection. It is eternal. It has no origin and no end. The other ‘I’ is born and also dies. It is impermanent. See to whom are the changing thoughts. They will be found to arise after the ‘I-thought’. Hold the ‘I-thought’. They subside. Trace back the source of the ‘I-thought’. The Self alone will remain.”⁹

When ‘That thou art’ is directly realised, then all thoughts and all words disappear, like the powder of the *kataka* nut, which settles down after it has cleansed the muddy water. “Such thoughts as ‘this indeed am I’ and ‘this I am not’ are annihilated for the *yogin* who has become silent by knowing for certain all as the Self”.¹⁰ “Having reduced the

⁸ Ibid, verse 374, p. 171.

⁹ Venkataramiah, M, (compl.), *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk§266.

¹⁰ *Aṣṭāvakra Samhitā*, translated with commentary by Swami Nityaswarupananda, XVIII, 9, p.131.

visible to the invisible, the wise should think of the universe as one with Brahman. Thus alone will he abide in eternal felicity with the mind full of consciousness and bliss".¹¹

Śaṅkara's poem is a great blessing to us all. Memorize it, sing it, hold it in your Heart! It will set you free. ▲

NOTES ON THE TRANSLATION

There are many wonderful translations and recordings of *Nirvāṇa Śaṭkam*, and I consulted several of them as I worked on my own version of the text with the kind assistance of my friend and colleague Marcia Solomon. The poem assumes a great deal with regard to philosophical concepts, which is perhaps why some of the categories contain missing elements (i.e. 'water' and 'skin' in the first verse). The realities of metrics might account for these omissions as well. John Grimes' *A Concise Dictionary of Indian Philosophy* is a helpful resource for readers who are interested in learning more about all these many things we must discard in order to live our lives more fully.

¹¹ *Aparokshanubhuti or Self-Realisation of Sri Sankaracharya*, translated with commentary by Swami Vimuktananda, verse 142, p.77.

Like A River

Suresh Kailash

Why does a river slow down
when it nears the sea?

Is it to savour the first taste
of salt in its deep?

Why do I linger when I come
close to your feet?

If not to breathe, Ramana,
your heady fragrance of peace?



Sri Mahaswami

The Sage with Eyes of Light

Part Five

SERGE DEMETRIAN

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

Kārvetinagar, June 1971

Nocturnal walk behind the Mahāsvāmī

The *chāturmasya* has not yet started and Śrī Mahāswami could still leave at any moment. The friends of the hermitage, the assistants, the visitors and me, we all tried guessing from his movements what would happen next. It is impossible to anticipate when he will grasp his water vessel, and with his *daṇḍa* slightly bent forward, he would start walking towards the nearest road. We would not know in which direction he would head until the first road crossing.

On a beautiful afternoon what we all feared happened. The owner of the hut entered my room where I was resting:

He shouts, “Śrī Mahāswami has left!”

“When? Where?” I utter.

“One hour ago, at 4 pm, towards Pallipattu”, says the man breathing heavily, as he had run to inform me.

“One hour,” I gauged, “He is too far ahead to join him by foot”. I made some enquiries and discovered that in another half hour a bus would drive in the direction taken by Śrī Mahāswami, which was towards south. Luckily the vehicle would pass near Gandhi Ashram, the place where I was living. I quickly packed and just managed to catch the bus as it was moving, by jumping onto it.

I found Śrī Mahāswami some six kilometres further along at the first important crossroad. His group were resting in a coconut plantation at the side of the road. I prostrated and looked on from a distance, as he was quite busy. Several citizens from Kārvetinagar had come on the same bus as myself, and were pleading and praying for him to come back to their village. They were opposed by a group of inhabitants from Pallipattu who were trying to shout over the others inviting him in their own locality which was only about two kilometres away. Śrī Mahāswami was used to this sort of display that repeated itself every time he left a locality. He simply replied by showing his noble gestures of appeasement. As he was maintaining silence for several days, he just smiled from time to time or closed his eyes for a few moments.

The sun was descending towards the horizon. The assistants who had followed Śrī Mahāswami and me were preoccupied, eyeing each other. There were no houses in the vicinity and none were prepared to pass the night in the fields. All of a sudden, Swāmiji stood up. We all jumped up at the same time. He went to the crossroad and inquired about the distances: to Chittur, 40 kilometres; to Pallipattu, 2 kilometres; to Kārvetinagar, 6 kilometres. He was thinking deeply while turning towards every direction as if he was mentally trying it, then slowly but with firm resolve, he started towards Kārvetinagar. The inhabitants from Kārvetinagar cannot conceal their joy that he will return to their village! Those from Pallipattu are crestfallen, but being good losers, they do not show it. Everybody drew his own conclusions: some boarded the last bus for Kārvetinagar, some started on foot towards their near-by homes.

Around Śrī Mahāswami there remained five persons, myself included. Swāmiji started walking bare foot, at a brisk regular pace, on

the left side of the tar road. He would neither change his rhythm nor would he stop during the entire march. For me there is no illusion: six kilometres without shoes on a hard road, meant I would have swollen feet covered with blisters the next day. I do not hesitate: to follow him in such a small group is an occasion one should not miss. I tighten my dress, check my water reserve and shove my sandals into the bottom of my bag, so as not to be tempted to wear them.

I fall in behind him. Soon it becomes evident that this will be no ordinary march. The four assistants, who generally guard him with jealousy, are scattered on the road. They prefer the right side of the road. They hardly look towards Śrī Mahāswami. Seeing him continue on the road at a calm and regular pace, they became bolder and, when the night was darker, they would wander off into the gardens that lined the road in search of fruits. I took advantage of these favourable conditions and placed myself exactly behind Swāmiji. I did not leave him until the end of the journey.

Almost two hours, alone, at night, behind Śrī Mahāswami!

I adjust my stride, which is longer than his, and try to put my feet exactly on his footprints. I do not see them on the tar but I feel those foot marks: these areas are hotter due to a tangible light; they are slightly noticeable when with due care one's foot hits the spot. I am so near to him that I could touch him with my outstretched arm. However this is not necessary. There emanates from him a sort of trail made of a fine and luminous matter which envelops me like a cocoon. From time to time, I would notice that I walked like an automaton. Then something more happened: the feeling of 'I' perished. Śrī Mahāswami was moving in both places, then in a single place. But does he really walk? Nothing seemed sure to me about it, although the usual movements were there. But this is not any of my concern as Śrī Mahāswami seems to have taken charge of my body which follows him much as an automaton would, which was tied to him.

I understand now that he is leading me and I forget the body and withdraw into the heart. It started with short periods. Every time I returned to consciousness of the body, I found Swāmiji in front of me. I took courage from the fact that I felt led and in total bodily unity with him. The mind, entirely freed of the care for the body, concentrated even more in the heart. There, instead of thoughts, it was

replaced by the purifying image of a short flame that became more and more stable. Then the flame was surrounded by a fine radiation, an impalpable light that diffused and spread through the interior of the old body which now simply felt like a box of transparent wax paper. An inexpressible feeling of undiluted happiness prevailed. The self was what it should be, just itself, without limits. In a definite moment everything perished, even the impalpable light, even the inexpressible joy: what was still lingering, a 'screen-I', indifferent and deprived of individuality, dissolved without trace.

I woke up near Kārvetinagar. I came back rather quickly to the ordinary awareness of the world. How did I sink into the heart? It was, no doubt, due to the stream of purified air in the wake of Śrī Mahāswami, which having reached me, then infused me. Or perhaps it was as if two tendrils from the current embraced me by passing behind my back and now held me in tandem with him. I continued to walk at the same distance behind him like a robot. Nobody had come between us.

At some fifty metres from the crossing where he had to turn right, towards the Lotus Pond and I needed to turn left, towards Gandhi Ashram, I felt that I had to leave him. My heart became heavy, my stride slower, I lost the rhythm. At the cross road, Swāmiji stopped for a moment: it was for me. I walked round in front of him, as he was standing still, and prostrated. He gently shook his head. Then, followed by his four assistants, he headed towards the Lotus Pond. It must have been about 9 pm.

I went to the Gandhi Ashram where I woke up the owner and informed him of the return of Śrī Mahāswami. I then prepared myself for the night. I knew that the next day I would be unable to go and see Swāmiji, because usually, after a few kilometres of march on the tar road, my feet are swollen and covered with blisters. This night I had walked six kilometres. I went to sleep accepting my destiny.

Next morning, after the first usual thought of Śrī Mahāswami and the first gaze at his photo, I turned to my feet. For an instant I did not recognise them, as they did not seem to be mine. They were clean and healthy as though they did not belong to me! I took them in my hand one by one, and touched and examined them. There was no trace of swelling or of a blister. I sat up straight: there was no change, everything appeared perfectly normal. I had rarely completed my



daily morning program of meditation, yoga and bath in such a hurry, so keen was I to reach the hermitage.

Once I arrived, I found that the door was closed. Someone informed me that Swāmiji had not been seen outside. I went round the hut, as I normally did. Soon afterwards an assistant appeared. He was one of the four who accompanied Śrī Mahāswami last night.

He approached me and said:

“Śrī Mahāswami is ill; he will not come out today”.

Almost unbelievable! Śrī Mahāswami is ill simply because of the walk yesterday. I had never heard this before.

“How is it possible?” I wondered, “Last night he was in perfect health!”

“It is true,” the attendant replied, “But this morning he has swollen feet and they are covered with blisters. He is now taking rest.”

After almost one hour, the door of his room was opened and I saw him, lying on his bed, with his head toward west, and his feet wrapped up by thick bandages of orange cloth. I knew that one should not prostrate in front of him when he is lying down, so I stayed at a distance trying to meditate in my heart but with not much success. I left and started to walk round the Pond of the Lotus and after the first and the second complete round, I saw each time at the open door of the hermitage the feet of Śrī Mahāswami wrapped with ochre.

At the third round I stood frozen. My eyes turned towards my unscathed feet, and then to his dressings, and finally I understood: out of compassion on the preceding night he had taken over my pain. My throat dried up and tears filled my eyes. I greeted him from afar. Then I came slowly nearer and saw he was not sleeping. I stood there for some time thanking him in my heart; then I meditated for a long time.

When I felt that I should leave I opened my eyes only to observe how Śrī Mahāswami was gazing straight at me. I greeted him once again, the hands up in *añjali*, up above my head. He slightly brought up his right hand in *abhaya* and gently moved his head. Though he was comparatively quite far, I do believe there was a fine knowing smile concealed in his short white beard.

The heart of Shrī Mahāsvāmī

During Śrī Mahāswami’s stay in Kārvetinagar I was in his immediate company for between six and eighteen hours a day. These months

were not only the most serene but also the single most continuous period I have ever passed in his vicinity. I had identified myself with being the disciple of a great Sage who exemplified the very best of Hindu tradition.

The local residents were astonished when they saw that I lived in a hut with an earthen floor similar to the one in which he resided, and that often I slept out in the open on the stairs of the Lotus Pond. Concerning dress, food and household habits, I adopted those of the local people and most of which I could use without any risk to my health.

Śrī Mahāswami appreciated, I think, this attitude as the *darśan*, meditations, talks, prayers followed each other at a brisk and harmonious pace. My encounters with him led to waves of experiences, ‘visitations’, and profound moments of introspection. These in fact, had become so extreme that inner reason advised me to cease trying to express in written words the Inexpressible.

With the exception of a few events I had ceased keeping a regular diary after March 1971. But on the 27 August 1971, during a *darśan*, the Younger Shankarāchārya had suggested that I should write down my observations. I asked him if through writing we do not give too much importance to the activity of the lower mind (*manas*), the enemy to be destroyed. He insisted that I write what I considered important, even if in my opinion the Truth has no mental form. I therefore accepted his injunction: he knew better than I. In addition, I am almost sure that it was Śrī Mahāswami who inspired him to advise me.

So, I started again writing more regularly and this with an event that took place round the middle of June 1971.

What, since the beginning of this year was simply a feeling, became later, for me, a conviction. There were indisputable signs that Śrī Mahāswami is not limited by the physical body that is seen by us. For example, he loses his physical density and contours when he blesses. Then he becomes insubstantial as a bluish cloud surrounded by a half-transparent light haze.

During the morning hours, when, sitting on the ground, he repeats the names of *Īshvara*, the Lord, his body becomes translucent in the

day light. His features become simplified, finer and render his face even nobler. It becomes increasingly obvious that he does not belong to this transitory world, that he is fundamentally that Other: that he has become the One to whom he directs his prayer.

If this almost immaterial appearance of Śrī Mahāswami, which is not a regular occurrence, persists, and he gets up or strides along, he moves as if in a dream: he lightly touches the earth and drifts over imperceptible elements where it is enough to think of them and the movements will spontaneously occur. In this space he exists: that is all. The movement of his body, which is almost a foreign structure, continues to follow the laws of matter to which he has long since not been bound. He sometimes shows the soles of his feet to his devotees, which confirms for those who have the eyes to see, that he is a weightless being who glides on pillows of air. For an aged person who has travelled barefooted thousands and thousands of kilometres, as he rarely wears the wooden sandals, which are hard too, the bare skin that supposedly touches permanently the ground is whiter, neater and finer than that on the hand of a young child.

In this situation of immateriality, where his movements are reduced to the strictly necessary, he does not express himself, not even through signs. He barely replies with slow and delicate gestures, full of love, to the appeals of the common visitors, who press on him their requests for assistance in their daily lives.

Śrī Mahāswami seems to me to have two bodies, one easily visible, formed of tissues similar to those of other humans, and another finer, like a luminous cloud. Which is the primordial, which the secondary? What is the connection between the two? If the normal physical body can be replaced by the cloud-like one, can we suppose that the latter is the original? Thus his normal subtle body seems to be secreted by a mysterious device at the periphery of the ineffable reality that remains concealed behind the screen of the visible body. A process of absorption, opposed to the secretion, could also explain the disappearance of the physical corporeal reality. We are faced with a physical body that changes and is subject to the hazards of time. There is another body, still changing to some extent, but fine, ethereal, and that seems to be the original body. The question is: would this be the last one?

And what if behind the cloud-like reality laid another substance, even more profound? What if in the heart of this marvellous being, stood another that is further concealed, and is the source of what he appears to be?

It is already difficult to probe the heart of a mortal being, how painstaking would it be to look into the heart of a Sage, unless he would consent. And how to find a way within, where to find this opening, a tiny slit, leading to the interior. After mature reflection, there arose a solution that seems plausible. What if one was to interrogate the eye ...his eyes ...his superb eyes? Are they not the windows of the soul? The more so as during the last three years Śrī Mahāswami had given me many opportunities to be convinced that the ‘blessing through the look’ (*drishti-anugraha* or *drishti-dīkṣā*) is a powerful catalyst that opens up the true reality.

I had now to obtain his permission to investigate further. To come before him with such a request would not have been shocking for Śrī Mahāswami. But the assistants cum interpreters and the general public of devotees would have been frightened at the strange, resolute curiosity of someone who wishes to investigate behind the screen of this world and yet, is apparently so normal and unassuming in his manners. To talk about my doubts to a friend, skilled in the Indian spiritual tradition, seemed to me risky, even behind the cloak of discretion. I decided therefore to act alone, taking Swāmiji as the unique witness. At the very beginning of this new experiment I mentally put my intentions before him:

“If he thinks otherwise, he will find the means to let me know.”

Since nothing seemed to oppose my research, I started systematically to study his eyes with the utmost attention. During the last six weeks the opportunities did not fail me. The situations I was put in were perfect. I was able to come up close to a few centimetres, under different angles and in different light conditions. I observed him in the multiple attitudes he took during a ‘working’ day as he accomplished numerous ritual gestures and replied to innumerable questions and appeals by visitors. To say he discreetly collaborated with my research might be an exaggeration, but it is also true, he did not oppose it either. The clear improvement of my eyes and my comprehension convinced me that my approach had been accepted. Indeed, from the first regular *darśan* at Kāñcipuram, when I had so

much difficulty looking into his eyes, I had become progressively better: I could now gaze at him without effort.

Because he offered his eyes more and more frequently to my inquisitive look and for durations that seemed calculated and progressive, I discovered this certitude: it is through the eyes that the ether out of which he seems to be made was spreading out, over and into those who surrounded him. Depending on the necessities, on our receptive capacity or on unknown parameters, the blue or the azure, beneficial power out of which he is entirely constituted, spreads and is mixed with the ether that is in us. To me it is beyond doubt that every living being, perhaps even the non-living ones, contain a little of his nature. How could we be able otherwise to recognise him?

This encouraged me to continue to forge ahead in search for the original substance of this ether. I came to the vague premonition that a certain significant event was soon to happen. I had already developed the habit of offering and opening myself to him through my eyes, or even more so...to try to 'drink' him in through my eyes. How is it possible to know someone, if one does not allow oneself unreservedly to be known by the other? Once, with the intention to test my fitness, Śrī Mahāswami unexpectedly took hold of me: during a *darśan* he absorbed my eyes. Without my mind being able to intervene, he 'drank' them. This time it was he, and he did it entirely, he drank my eyes and their light. That day, for some hours, I remained the witness of 'my' look. Although I lived what seemed a normal existence, I did not make any choice as what to think, see or do. Everything stayed totally normal and was working independently by its own laws without any interference on my behalf. These phenomena did not trouble me. I was rather content to be free of responsibility.

Next day a reaction quickly set in. For three days, the senses asserted themselves and showed their displeasure at being usurped. I had to suffer negativity in the form of a general indisposition without any signs of a specific malady. It was only on the fourth day that for a few blessed hours in his immediate presence Śrī Mahāswami held me safe. I felt happy and purified.

I was not deceived about the feeling I had had that an anticipated major event would happen. At the hermitage, towards the end of a day, when the sun had just crossed the line of the horizon, Śrī Mahāswami permitted me to stay a very long time in front of him and



to contemplate his eyes. I could observe, beyond any doubt, how his eyes changed into two stable globes of a blue vapour, and they were emitting fine rays. I saw his brown irises lose their habitual colour and become bluish and luminous. In place of the pupils, which are always black in every living person, there came forth two stable points of light.

I have never seen something like it before nor have I heard or read of any such description. I had observed how when he was blessing people, there sprung out of his eyes a short burst of lightning. However, this phenomenon usually disappeared immediately after and then reappeared a few seconds later, if necessary.

On this special occasion, I saw clearly and for several consecutive minutes how his pupil was replaced, not by a simple point of light, but by a round space that was well defined. There was a white azure light, a concentrate of diamond powder, impossible to describe; it was incomparable.... It was the lightning of the blessing that had been rendered stable and was offered for my contemplation. I had in addition the clear feeling that the window of the pupil was a boundary. Beyond its circle, going back up in the opposite direction along the current that was gushing out, lay the source, the place of the lightning's origin. It was a mass of azure light of indescribable purity: the heart of Śrī Mahāswami.

This expanse of azure light is, indubitably, the core substance of his visible being. It is the light that he discreetly let filter under the aspect of his cloud-like body or through his eyes by only short lightnings of blessing, because otherwise it would reduce us to inert dust in a fraction of a second...

The night falls quickly in this subtropical area. Śrī Mahāswami retired with his loving gestures of separation and of excuse, by using his head and his right hand. He seemed to express by sign language, clearer than by words. "I do not really quit; do not worry; I leave you in peace." I stood paralysed by awe. The small round windows of his eyes lingered for a long time, piercing my pupils. Two fine golden lines, stable shafts of lightning, penetrated my pupils. Their fragrant radiation dispelled for some hours the darkness of my doubts.

I returned to my hut and stretched on my couch, happy. I started dreaming even before I had fully fallen asleep. ▲

(to be continued)

How to End Our Life Cycle in this World?

M.R. KODHANDRAM

Right from the time we are born, our senses only take the mind outside into the world. The five senses have been designed only to project into the outside world and make contact with objects. And what we perceive in the outside world is not the *ātmā* but only the *anātmā* or non-Self. Since we see only the world of objects and appearances which includes our body, we identify ourselves only with the body. And we consider this world of objects to be real and get attracted to it by the power of *māyā*.

This becomes a strong conditioning for the mind. Thus, we develop numerous desires in the world leading to actions which bind us further to this world. This bondage to the world gives rise to repeated births

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in this world due to our desires and attachments. Every birth in this world is only a misery and there is no glory in this repetitive existence. It is like coming back to the same class in a school every year instead of passing the exam and progressing to higher levels. Therefore, we have to pass this exam of life and reach the supreme state of no return to *samsāra*. This is the goal of life for all.

How can we cut off this bondage to the world? How can we overcome the attractions of the world? We are attracted to the world only because we think that the objects are real. And the senses derive pleasure and pain due to contact with these objects. Whatever gives us pleasure, we try to hold onto to it and seek it again and again. The pleasures we derive from these objects are only temporary. Nothing in this world is everlasting. What gives us pleasure also gives us pain. When something gives us pain, we tend to detach from it. Thus we develop numerous likes and dislikes in the world according to our experiences. If we evaluate our experiences in life, we will find that the net result is only misery. How can we attain a state where we end all our misery? How can we reach a state of constant happiness?

As long as the mind considers the world to be real and indulges in it, it will always be subject to the dualities of pain and pleasure, heat and cold, likes and dislikes, happiness and sorrow etc. How can we rise above all these and reach a state of supreme peace wherein we are not affected by the dualities of the world? It means to lead a life that which how Bhagavan lived in this world.

For this, we have to first understand the true nature of the world process and also the true nature of our own Self. The scriptures say that the real happiness we are seeking in the world is only within us as our own Self. It means our true nature is only happiness. That's why we experience happiness in deep sleep when the mind detaches from the world and retires to its source inside. When we wake up from our sleep, our happiness is lost as we start engaging with the world.

When we analyse this experience, we will realise that true and lasting happiness cannot be found in the objects of the world. It is obtained only when the mind withdraws from the world and goes inwards towards its own Source. It means we have to change the focus of our attention from the objects to the Subject which is our own Self. Only by abiding in our Self we will be able to gain permanent

happiness which is not related to anything in the world. This is the effort we have to make to end all our misery once and for all.

Thus, we face misery only when we go away from our original or natural state and project ourselves into the outside world. Therefore, only withdrawing from the outside world and seeking our true Self within will help us to attain supreme and steady happiness and thus fulfil our goal of life, which is to attain Liberation from the cycle of birth and death in which we have been caught for countless *janma*-s (births). But we cannot easily withdraw from the world as it is always there and we have to face it whether we like it or not. It is not easy for the mind to detach from the world and remain in its natural state of oneness with the Self in the waking state. This is because of the *vāsanā*-s that make the mind project itself outside and engage in worldly activities. So how do we come out of this problem?

The scriptures say that the visible world of creation has its basis in the Supreme Self or Brahman. Therefore, we have to go beyond the visible world and reach the Brahman which is the source for the entire world of creation. In the opening verse of the 15th chapter of the *Śrī Bhagavad Gītā*, Lord Krishna uses the metaphor of an ashvattha (*aśvattha*) or peepal tree to explain the world of creation.

The peepal tree symbolises the tree of life. It is known for its longevity. In fact, in the sloka 10:26, Lord Krishna says that among all the trees, he is the ashvattha, which shows its sacred nature. A peepal tree can live from 1500 to 3000 years. Though the tree has longevity, yet its visible parts such as leaves, fruits, etc. are temporary. They are born, live for some time and fall away only to be reborn as new leaves, flowers, branches, etc.

So too is our life. From the tree analogy, we can see that the roots, though not visible, are more important and enduring. As long as the root remains, the tree will also exist, even though the leaves, branches, flowers, etc. will keep renewing themselves. It is like the continuous cycle of birth and death that occurs to all living beings in this world. If we have to come out of this vicious cycle of birth and death and attain the state of no return to this world, we have to shift the focus of our attention from the surface to the roots. If we want to destroy this tree of life, we have to cut it at the roots and then only it will die.

Lord Krishna says that the primary root of this tree of *samsāra* arises from the Supreme Brahman. The roots of a tree arise from the

seed. From a tiny seed, this huge peepal tree arises. If we break this seed and see what's in it, we will find that there's nothing in it. Just from this nothing, the whole tree arises. What we call as nothing is in fact everything. It's the Supreme Brahman. It's the source of everything in this world including ourselves. This Source is not visible to our eyes as it's too subtle. So to reach the source of this tree of *samsāra*, we have to trace it to its roots. When we reach the root and cut it off, the whole tree of *samsāra* collapses and our rebirth cycle comes to an end.

In this *śloka* of the *Śrī Bhagavad Gītā* (chap 15:1), the relationship between the Creator and the Creation which is the world is explained. The creator is the Cause and the creation is the Effect. The Cause is superior to the Effect. The cause of creation lies in the Pure Consciousness. From Pure Consciousness arises the *prakṛti* which is the root cause of all creation.

It is from *prakṛti* that the whole world of names and forms has arisen. We are able to see the world but not the Source from which the creation itself has arisen as it is too subtle for our senses to perceive. One who knows the Source knows the essence of the Vedas which is the Self or Consciousness which is unmanifest. This is the sole Reality which is eternal and imperishable. Everything arises only from this including our body, mind and senses.

The word '*aśvattha*' can be understood by dividing it into two parts: '*sva*' means 'tomorrow' and '*stha*' means 'that which remains'. And when we put the prefix 'a' to this word, it gives the opposite meaning. Thus, *aśvattha* means that which will NOT remain the same tomorrow. Thus, the tree indicates the transient nature of the world process which is constantly changing. This world of constant change is also mentioned here as *avyaya* which means eternal. It is like a perennial river that is constantly flowing. The river is always there, but its water is constantly changing. It's not the same water that is flowing in the river, but the river is constant.

So too is the world of creation. Though it appears to be permanent, it is constantly subject to change. In *pralaya*, it goes to the seed state and again there is Creation or *sr̥ṣṭi*. It shows the phenomenon of life and death which is constantly happening. This tree of *samsāra* or world process is continuing from beginningless time. So we think

it is real and get bound to it. That which is born lives for some time and then dies. Again it is reborn in some other form. Thus change is constantly happening and the continuous cycle of birth and death describes the nature of *samsāra*. How to escape from this cycle?

In the *Śrī Bhagavad Gītā* (chap 15:3), Lord Krishna says that we have to cut this tree of life with the strong axe of *asaṅga* (non-attachment). This is the first step. It means that only through the development of *vairāgya* (detachment), will we be freed from this seemingly unending cycle of birth and death. Non-attachment to the world means that we should not become worldly though we have to live in this world.

We should live like the lotus plant. The lotus plant despite being born in the water and living in it, not wetted by the water and the flower always keeps its head above the water. So too, we have to live in the world and yet outside of it, through detachment. That's why the lotus is considered as a divine flower and is used as a symbol of non-attachment. The Self is always unattached to everything in the world despite being the substratum of all. *Vairāgya* is its nature. Therefore, those who are on the spiritual path should develop *vairāgya* so as to become one with the Self. The second step is to surrender to the Lord and strive on the spiritual path towards Liberation from this *samsāra* (chap 15:4). ▲

(to be continued)

The Names of Lalitha

Ramesh Menon

You are the subtle flame,
Ajnanadhvantadipikaa,
which pervades the night,
the invisible splendour
that illumines the heart.

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.

Cheenu Srinivasan



Opposite Lake Manasarovar is the famous Chiu Gumpa Monastery inside which is the meditation cave of Guru Rinpoche

Australian Kailash Yatra 2018

Part Two

CHEENU SRINIVASAN

*Om Nama Shivaya
Om Namo Bhagavate Shri Ramanaya*

Gyirong (elevation 2700m) inside Tibet

On Thursday 6th September, all nineteen of us in our Yatra group were at our orderly best rising early and walking up in some slush to the border crossing for its opening at 9.30am China time. This was 2 hours 30 minutes ahead of the local Nepali time where we all stood in wait. Little would one have thought that a mere walk across a fence would make so big a shift in our clocks and more importantly for our daily routines over the next 11 days in China occupied Tibet.

Remember we were all leaving the freedom and associated chaos of a rural democracy and entering a regimented totalitarian space where we knew there would be data gathering devices tucked away in decorative flowerpots and festooned flags at every post. Or so we imagined you may well say, but our experience suggests otherwise.

Cheenu Srinivasan lives in Sydney, Australia, was drawn into Bhagavan's orbit some fifteen years ago and visits Sri Ramansramam regularly. He feels blessed that he and his wife Soumya could bring waters from Lake Manasarovar and Gowri Kund for *abhiṣekam* at Bhagavan's shrine last February.

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Breakfast done and now our mandatory Diamox timed not to let our waterworks intrude seriously into our waiting game at the border, we surrendered our passports to the agent and waited somewhat nervously to cross the so-called 'friendship bridge' (note it is China's way of saying that the bridge is essentially in their interest alone!).

Treading gingerly over the bridge and peering through slits of sleepers, we could see and hear the gushing river below. Within five minutes, we made it across to an expansive concrete building that boasted modern technology, including fingerprinting devices and scanning of our passports.

Everything in China it seems is made easier for their immigration staff. For instance, by affixing a label with our number (19 in my case) on our passport, it spares the officer any fumbling with our name and going straight to the page with our photo and passport number. Chinese genius at work, sort of!

At the immigration counter, we witnessed a minor breakdown of one of the scanning devices and within minutes we moved to a parallel line (100% redundancy planned in systems!) and the processing continued. Unlike the security personnel at the Kathmandu helipad, these folks were meticulously looking for what we don't know. My camera was turned on and given a complete look over, all 82 pictures taken since landing in Kathmandu!

I had a few books of our Hindu scriptures and a little notebook featuring a picture of Sri Bhagavan Ramana Maharishi. I was tempted to say about HIM but silence, the teaching of Sri Bhagavan took its hold on me and I was asked to move on. I was the last in our group of 19 to collect my bag and join my group who had moved out of the building.

Outside, it was getting warmer and the regimented Chinese establishment was at near its orderly best in contrast to what we had just seen in Nepal the past few days. We waited for our Tibetan bus and travel guide (no one can travel within Tibet without a guide) and with our bags now safely across with the team of Sherpas, we were now ready for our long road journey deep within Tibet.

With a few introductions and a warm welcome by our Tibetan guide, we were now on the move with 19 of us, one Sherpa, the Tibetan guide and Chinese driver and a spare seat while the remaining

Sherpa team of 10 and two Tibetans drove in two four wheel drive vehicles with our duffel bags, food supplies, gas cylinder/stove, pots, pans and plates.

The drive to Gyirong (spelt Kirong or Kirung by some) took a little over an hour up steep winding concrete roads with hillsides slammed with reinforced retaining columns to forestall landslides that are not uncommon in these places. We could feel the climb and associated decline in oxygen levels. As in the brief drive within the Nepali countryside, the drive to Gyirong was picturesque lush green and tall trees, the occasional snow lapped mountain and waterfalls.

The Chinese do like testing our propensity to stand in line from 1 to 19 every now and then. It does appear they do not have much faith in their own tight security system so that they now feel compelled to check our passport yet again before reaching our accommodation in Gyirong. And one more thing: No photography allowed at any of these checkpoints of anything let alone their officers doing the routine checks.

I suspect that local party officials can demonstrate their loyalty to the powers that rule by engaging in what appears to us as a meaningless ritual. But then, it provides employment and gives us some stretch time to walk a few hundred metres and soak in the free air and low oxygen!

We reached our hotel (call it Rest House) around 2.30pm local China time. Our Tibetan guide formally welcomed us with their traditional white silk scarf placed around our necks and looked forward to working with us over the yatra. A tall man with a reasonably sound grasp of English (far more articulate and superior in spades than my knowledge of our dominant tribe's Telugu!), he gave us confidence that we had the right man to work alongside our Nepali Sherpa leader.

Our rooms in two levels of floors meant that we had our first real taste of what it is to live in high altitude, be it only at 2700m. Our leader was very clear that none of us carry our backpacks and that the Sherpas will have them delivered to our rooms. Needless to say, many puffed their way to their rooms with a few showing signs of exhaustion. One among us needed an oxygen boost but was otherwise fine as were the rest of us.

In quick time the Sherpas had our lunch ready and we enjoyed our meal and obviously relieved that we had crossed into Tibet with no

serious drama with our permits and possessions. After a short rest, we devoured some hot lemon drink that was tonic to our system.

Our leader and his medical team checked our blood pressure and oxygen levels. Yours truly registered a somewhat higher reading of blood pressure and hence a second check was made later in the evening. Needless to say, I was touched by his care and his medical team's oversight of the health of all members. No doubt we all felt truly blessed to be part of this group of 19 where 17 of us were first time Kailash yatrikas.

With the medical checks done, we were issued our Down jackets to brave the cold that helped us venture on a short 30 minute or so walk of the town to gauge first-hand what a little town like Gyirong has to offer and how our legs and lungs coped with a lower level of oxygen relative to the previous day at 1600m or so at Rasuwagadi.

A light dinner of the mandatory soup with garlic (even my wife who dislikes garlic took a liking for it when told that it is a MUST at high altitudes!), chappatis, rice, dhal and vegetables was the menu with a gulab jamun or rasagolla included for completeness!

Night was upon us as did a volley of Diamox reminders from across our rooms. The first night of sleep and snoring had arrived at high altitude and it was time for a well earned rest to welcome a new dawn.

The high-altitude test at Gyirong

Friday 7 September was planned as our first real test at high altitude. Over the next few days we would learn from each other that it was our attitude that predetermines our ability to cope with any altitude.

With our morning Diamox swallowed, the routines of the morning including breakfast, we set out in the cool crisp air for a longer walk. A banner 'Kailash Yatra 2018' with Australian Flag at two corners was to have been on prominent display on our bus. But better sense prevailed that such displays may provoke questioning by Chinese authorities and hence we posed for group photographs with the banner as backdrop and had it tucked away never to be seen again.

Wangchhu Sherpa and his Tibetan colleague led us on a long walk past what would be 'downtown' Gyirong over well laid broad roads punctuated with traffic lights and pedestrian crossings clearly marked at each intersection. We walked past many a closed shop,

street hawkers of fresh fruit and vegetables and the occasional stray dog. Birds if any were few and traffic was mainly of three-wheel all-purpose vehicle the locals used by choice.

Our walk leaders took us across a paddock up a gentle incline to observe our pace and satisfied that we were all doing well, they stepped throttle and took us to a construction site and a deep gorge and suspension bridge that became a major attraction. Some of us ventured across the bouncing bridge with enough legs for a longer walk to a nearby monastery. But that was ruled out as being too far and demanding as it would be a three hours round trip.

We lingered around for some time and took our time walking back to our rest house in Gyirong. A family of locals had their fruit stall open where we bought a selection of apples, plums, bananas, grapes and other fruits not uncommon in India and Nepal.

Two things that readers, potential yatrikas may want to note:

- The rooms are pretty basic and the washroom/toilet is cramped with leaking faucets and wet floors. The shower hose sits over the commode and flushing of toilet papers causes blockages too!
- The local Tibetans would just walk in selling their wares or offer money exchange. Intrusion into what we regard as private space is not an issue for these folks.

Lunch, afternoon tea, evening prayers and dinner followed with clockwork precision and as with the other days since our first intake at Rasuwagadi, each of us took our Diamox, packed our duffel bags and left them outside our rooms. That we had all passed both individually and collectively with our first real test of walking at high altitudes, albeit 'only' 2700m was indeed a great relief.

On to Saga (4700m)

Each morning before we set out on our walk or long journey by road, our leader would have us assemble for prayers and the refrain Shambho Mahadeva would rent the air. These prayers gave us both individual strength and team resolve that together we were on a higher purpose and that HE alone is our goal. Words are woefully inadequate to describe how each one of us felt in these collective *satsang*-s.

Saturday 8 September was going to be a testing day on the road to Saga, some 140km from Gyirong. There were reports that the highway was cut off with landslides between Gyirong and Saga. Not

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to be deterred, our leader was steadfast in his faith and resolve that we pray and push ahead and that is what we did. Faith they say moves mountains, and we now saw how they do.

The road to Saga unfurled undulating rolling hills and waterways with green pastures rapidly fading into a distant memory. The landscape was brown, dusty and winds often kicked up a mild dust storm. Villages were far apart while a monastery and their stupas here and there stood out in the bare landscape. There was a surreal calmness and arid beauty with mother earth's blue roof ever present as witness to happenings below.

Our journey took us onto a very steep climb and peaked at 5236m, a compelling spot for a few photos and stretching of limbs. Heights above 4500m would become our new normal in the days ahead and hence any time spent, however short, was all part of our altitude acclimatization.

The time-tested mountaineering rule is climb high and sleep low. And that is precisely how our yatra was planned. Over many a steep hairpin bend we made a rapid descent and soon arrived at a fork and a road closure of the stretch that takes us to Saga via a shorter route. After some phone calls by our Tibetan guide, he instructed the driver to follow a motorable dirt track that tested our ability to accept pitching and yawing of a bus on land like a craft on water!

Butterflies in our stomach made their presence known for many of us. A lunch halt was called and our excellent Sherpas had lunch set up, paper plates, hand sanitisers and serviettes readied and served us the usual mix of food. With close to an hour taking in the open spaces, we boarded our vehicles Saga bound.

We passed many a crew engaged in road works and soon we were to discover that our bus driver, despite his excellent skills, had ploughed our bus into ground with the wheels half buried in unrelenting clay and mud! Disembarking to lighten the load and try as we did, the bus was in one of its stubborn unrelenting moods. But help was close by with a bulldozer now commissioned with pleas for help. Extricated and free, what better way than to cheer our bus driver and give him another round of applause!

Approaching Saga, we had our first glimpse of the mighty river Brahmaputra and a few of its tributaries. Passing a few roadblocks and

back alleys, we finally arrived at Saga which appeared very clearly as a military base with red flags fluttering. The Saga Hotel was to become our overnight home. Again, steep steps to the second floor tested our ability for climbs and thankfully, all 19 passed this one too. Our new normal at high altitude it appeared had set in. Or had it?

Given a few hours before sunset, some of us walked around Saga town centre and its many shops while open carts had vendors selling Yak meat. A local, drunk to his bones was totally unaware of his whereabouts while young soldiers went about in their off duty attire shopping provisions. A pharmacist did some brisk business with our folks buying up some face masks while the more adventurous of appetite ventured into spiced bamboo shoots for their gastronomical delight!

Back at the hotel, it was time for dinner and the usual nightly routine of packing our duffel bags and backpacks and the by now regular intake of Diamox.

On the shores of Lake Manasarovar (4590m)

Another beautiful morning it was, Sunday 9 September, the day that would soon mark of our first sighting of both Lake Manasarovar and Mount Kailash. Hence it was inevitable that a quiet expectation was building up within us. Even a mere long distance sighting, let alone being in their close proximity would be counted as a blessing for us Hindus in this lifetime.

The well laid road from Saga to Lake Manasarovar of about 450km, unlike the track that brought us the day earlier to Saga, was a sheer delight to travel. Barring a few unexpected pot holes and the occasional swerve to avoid an obstacle or stray goat, it was what we might call a routine drive past many scenic vistas.

Our eyes were now used to the many hues of blue skies and snow clad mountains along the route that was now the new normal. The mandatory diesel refuelling and bio breaks aside and 20 minute stoppage to comply with road speed regulations, there was nothing that disturbed our inner peace.

The sudden appearance of many sand dunes to our left hugging the shores of a tributary of the Brahamaputra was intriguing as was elaborate civil engineering effort to keep the dunes confined within

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square concrete enclosures alongside pieces of rock to prevent soil erosion.

We took a break for lunch during one of our enforced 20 minute stoppage. At a distance, large Tibetan dogs huddled by the roadside, perhaps in quiet anticipation of some food being tossed their way.

Road trips such as this over dusty undulating terrain can upset stomachs and lead to varied incarnations of what we simply call 'Delhi Belly'. While the environment is often the cause, one of our fellow yatrikas discovered to his discomfort that indulgence of spicy chillies sauce on his pasta lunch were giving him the runs. And to him goes the honour of inaugurating our mobile toilet seats and biodegradable collection bags. Surely he is well within his rights to be remembered for other things!

But some good came out of this man's unfortunate experience. Sauces of this kind, hot pickles (our dominant tribe love them!), watermelon and vegetable salads (mainly cucumber and carrots) were summarily banned from the menu by our leader at least till such time our main mission of the Kailash parikrama was completed.

This turned out as good a time as any for my wife and I to plead for milder spices and 'satvic' food given our constitution being different to those accustomed daily to Andhra spices and hotness. The absence of yogurt now that we were in Tibet was another of our problem. A daily intake of probiotic tablets seemed to have helped us both on these days.

Bus rides in a group are enjoyable where the inside is charged with divine music and prayers that make it a mobile *satsaṅga* on wheels. One puts up with some inconvenience and adjusts to cramped conditions inside with backpacks, cameras, water bottles and other essentials. At times there was a scramble for good seats to avoid those over the wheel arches. But by and large we traded seats so that everyone had the experience of a 'rough' ride as well as got some time on the left and right side of the bus to take in the views and display camera skills showing off our photo composition skills on the move.

Every group settles down into a routine and ours was no exception. The bus journey would start and finish with prayers with many more in between depending on roadside conditions that called for divine intervention to get us across creeks and sudden road diversions. Chants



Cheenu Srinivasan

Lake Manasarovar

MOUNTAIN PATH

of Shambo Mahadeva would come out in unison whenever we needed HIS help. Some amongst us in front of the bus would see a pothole several metres ahead and shout ‘Shambo’ which our Chinese driver learnt was our code for him to slow down!

At close to 4pm that afternoon, our leader had spotted Mount Kailash on the right side of our bus and soon thereafter Lake Manasarovar to our left. At the earliest opportunity, we disembarked, and looked towards the snowclad South Face of Mount Kailash with hands folded in prayer. It was verily a sight to behold, picture perfect like the many seen on Youtube videos and photos adorning living rooms that yatrikas proudly display.

The customary group photos taken with a variety of phones and assorted cameras, we left soon thereafter to our guest house at Lake Manasarovar. By all accounts this was minimalist, with six ladies in one room and four gents in the other rooms. The holy lake was right before us with its deep blue waters a calming influence while Mount Kailash appeared to play hide and seek from a distance as clouds caressed her in bursts before the setting sun.

With dinner and the night rapidly advancing, medical needs were a priority for our caring team of doctors. Injections and other medications and oxygen were administered to those who needed with such care that one can only dream of.

In private huddles, folks teamed up past midnight for a walk to the lake’s shores and witness shooting stars pop into the waters and/or other mesmerizing light shows that nature can only offer at such heights.

The following morning, Monday 10 September, our leader had us all have the holy waters of Lake Manasarovar rationed for a 3 mug sprinkle, the water duly warmed by our ever efficient team of Sherpas. Within a tent on the shores where we could see the calm waters close by, we sat down for our Shiva Puja that was masterfully conducted by our leader.

Prayers completed, lunch followed and then a short ride to the nearby Chiu Gompa Monastery. This place contains the meditation cave of Guru Rinpoche, embedded footprints in rock of the Guru and that of his disciple, a wishing rock and ancient Buddhist scriptures that have been spared the loot and destruction by the Chinese during

their annexation of Tibet. We then drove on to see the smaller Rakshas Tal lake where no one risked dipping their feet in waters deemed evil and unholy by both Hindus and Tibetans.

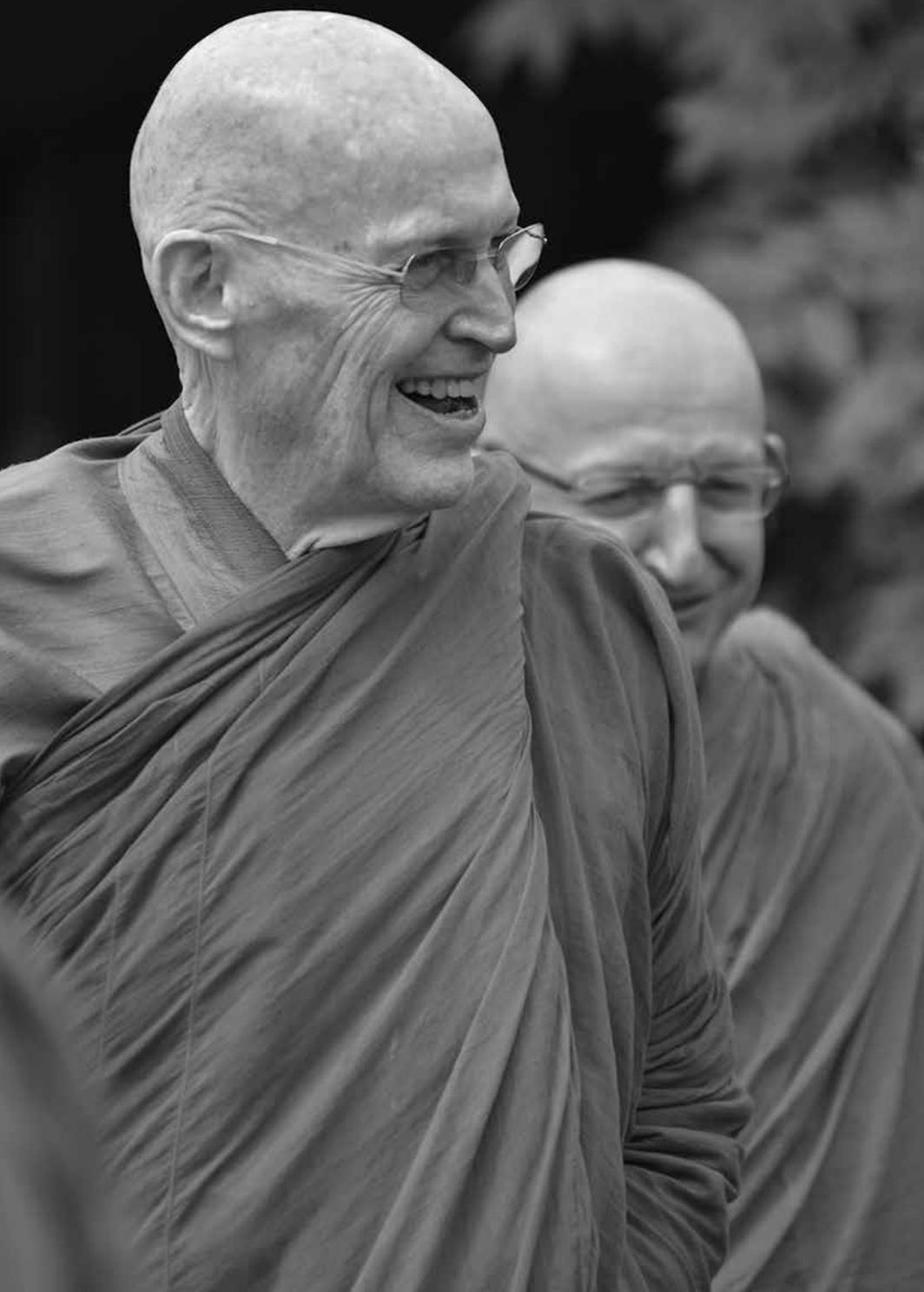
The night was to be our second one in cramped quarters and a final opportunity for some star gazing and sighting of phenomena unique to Lake Manasarovar. This night did test the resolve of a few as they were medically challenged and hence kept our team of doctors busy providing care.

Tuesday 11 September was special too. Yet again our leader patiently outlined the rituals and helped us perform the *Tarpanam* (propitiation) for those who had lost a parent (or both). That we could do this at Lake Manasarovar made us all feel truly blessed in remembering our forebears.

The rituals done and a quick lunch, off we went to nearby Darchen, a mere 10km from our camp at Lake Manasarovar. After sorting out our room allocation and figuring out the complexities of a Wifi connection to shoot off messages to near and dear ones if needed, another night and yet another place to sleep had become by now standard practice for we yatrikas.

On Wednesday 12 September we would know how well placed we are in both mental and bodily strength to take on the four-day *parikrama* around Mount Kailash. And of course, Diamox by now was a routine intake both morning and evening. ▲

(to be continued)



A Talk with Luang Por Sumedho

Part Three

You Have to Let God Go to Know God

CITTAVIMALA

Luang Por: You know, I never understood Christianity till I became a Buddhist! Now I understand it! (He laughs.) But when I was a Christian, I didn't understand it! As a child you just accept what the priest tells you, what your mother and father tell you. They're the gods, who tell you what's right and what's wrong and what to believe in. But when you're adolescent you start developing your critical abilities, you start questioning, and I never got very good answers from my mother or from the priest. They were always saying, 'Doubting is a sin' and 'You've got to believe' and so on. But, as I discovered, all religions are really pointing to the same place – liberation!

Q: Luang Por, how did Buddhism help you to understand Christianity?

Luang Por: Well, Buddhism, in the Theravada style, is always talking about Dhamma. And this word, Dhamma, is a Sanskrit-Pali word, which means ultimate reality or ultimate truth. Well, that's 'God', isn't it? But it's not personified. Christianity has anthropomorphized God into a patriarchal male who is very judgemental. He gets upset

when you break the Commandments or he sends a plague down on the Jews, when they've misbehaved! (Luang Por chuckles.) In the Old Testament he's a really nasty creature! Jesus is very different – with Jesus there is much more of a loving-kindness approach. But still, in most Christian approaches, God is referred to as a male. This God-is-a-male idea is apotheosized in the famous Michaelangelo mural in the Sistine Chapel.

So the feminists have the objection, 'Why does God have to be male? Why can't God be female?' But gender refers to the *sankhara*-s [conditions] – being male, being female, are *samsaric* conditions, they aren't ultimate reality. In contrast, when you think of Dhamma, when you think of consciousness, when you meditate, you are going inward and observing what is here and now.

Christianity says that God loves you, but the Christian god is personified, so God becomes a person who's hovering around, making judgements about you. This makes you feel guilty a lot, because you aren't always behaving according to the way they say God wants you to behave. Whereas Dhamma isn't judgemental!

This was really quite an important revelation to me, because, being brought up as a Christian, you're brought up to be judgemental and God is the ultimate judge. I became aware of this sitting in front of the big Buddha statue in the temple at Amaravati. One day I was sitting in front of that image and I realised that I felt intimidated by it. It was like seeing the Buddha saying to me, 'You foolish monk! You're always doing this, doing that!' – He was kind-of scolding me, because in the *sutta*-s he oftentimes does that.

But then I reflected, 'Why do I always think the Buddha is admonishing me? Why do I always think this way? On the contrary, he isn't scolding me, he's blessing me!' Shifting from feeling judged and accused to feeling blessed – this was an important change. It was just that my Christian conditioning had made me very judgemental. The [Amaravati] Buddha *rupa* just was what it was, sitting in the *mudra* of teaching the Four Noble Truths, but I interpreted it as judging me. This was due to the *vipaka kamma* of my being brought up in this very morally judgemental Christian tradition, where God is very personal!

But Dhamma isn't personal! Dhamma isn't about persons, individual persons: Dhamma is Reality itself. I used to go to these

interfaith meetings in London – they have a very good, very well-organized interfaith council in London, because Britain now is multi-faith. So, I'd go to these meetings and the theistic religions were all talking about God's love – while I was talking about the Four Noble Truths.

So, I'd get embarrassed about that and would try to talk about *metta* instead, because that sounds more on the theme of God loving everybody. But this propelled me into thinking, 'Why did the Buddha establish a religious teaching based on suffering – the first sermon, the First Noble Truth. And then I realised that this is because God isn't judgemental! And because we have no language that can describe ultimate reality. And that's what the Buddha realised when he first was enlightened. He thought, 'How can I teach this truth to others?' because this truth cannot be spoken: it is intuitive, it is based on awareness. Language is very limited. So then, I began to think, what they really mean, what Christians really mean by 'God' is Dhamma! It isn't about male or female, or old patriarchal men.

Today that patriarchal version of Christianity is justifiably criticized and old patriarchal men are quite rightly subject to great criticism! (Luang Por laughs). But whether we call it 'Ultimate Truth' or 'Dhamma' or 'God', this is what the Christian mystics were pointing at! They would often say, 'You have to let go of God to know God' – meaning that you have to give up all your concepts of what God is, because they are all illusions. That's why the Zen Buddhists say, 'If you see Buddha on the path, kill him!' – though this statement really upsets the Theravadans! (Luang Por laughs.) But they're making a very important point – they are saying that whatever your impression or notion is of the Buddha, that concept is not Buddha. Your belief in a thing or a human being called 'Buddha' is a *sankhara* [a condition, a mental construct].

The Muslim Sufi teachings too are pointing at the same ultimate reality – this is what Rumi is talking about. The historical Buddha never pointed at himself – he's not a god. Instead he always pointed at pure awareness, at awareness of conditions [*sankhara*]. So Buddhism is not deifying a historical sage. Instead, Buddhism teaches that awareness and the investigation of your own mind lead you to a profound understanding of other religions. Instead of being critical of

them you learn to understand them. They're like different perspectives which are all pointing at the same truth. You've got a circle, and at its centre is ultimate reality – Dhamma is the centre. And the different religions are looking at Dhamma from different angles, different positions, on the circumference of this circle. This is one way, one metaphor, for understanding this.

Q: Luang Por, the present times seem very dark politically – do you have a sense of hope so that you don't share the dark view that many of us have, who have political affiliations or sympathies?

Luang Por: Well, you know, in terms of Dhamma, it's the way it is. And, you know, things are always changing. So, even if it's dark now, it will change. And that's the best way to look at this. As for us, you know, what we can do is be enlightened, rather than worrying about the darkness! Just like being conscious in a dark room! (He laughs.)

Q: Luang Por, young men would say to Bhagavan, 'We're rushing up there to join Gandhiji in his fast!' But his response was, 'First reform yourselves, then you can reform the world!' That's exactly what you are saying, isn't it, Luang Por? But one sees the urgency and one feels that one should be doing something!

Luang Por: Right, well just observe that! On a personal level, just see the intimidation involved – the feeling that you have got to be doing something! Because that's a very strong desire – the desire to do things! But I don't mean that you should not do them. Instead, just be aware of this mental process – how you intimidate yourself by thinking that you are wasting your time in the ashram, when you should be out there, on a peace march! (Luang Por laughs.) Be aware of that! Trust your awareness.

This doesn't mean you can't go on a peace march, but that's not really the issue. You know, when I was in the peace movements in Berkeley I wasn't peaceful! I was carrying a sign saying, 'Peace!' but I didn't even know what I was talking about! We were demanding peace from the society and from the government. But within the very peace movements that I was involved with, there was so much conflict and jealousy and lack of peace! Peace is our ideal. We like the idea of peace. It's like your experience coming here, to this very peaceful place, where you had no duties, no responsibilities, and yet you created suffering in your mind! (Luang Por laughs.) So, you know, my insight

A TALK WITH LUANG POR SUMEDHO

when I was at university was that I had better first find out what peace really is, before I start demanding peace from others! Because they can't give you peace – the government can't make your life peaceful!

Q: Luang Por, did you realise this while you were at university? You saw this already then?

Luang Por: Yes... yes!

Q: That's wonderful!

(And at this point the cuckoo in Luang Por's Swiss cuckoo clock stuck its head out and started calling, signalling that an hour was up since I'd started my conversation with Luang Por.)

Q: Luang Por, I think that's telling me something! (Luang Por laughs.) We should probably stop.

Luang Por: Has it been recorded?

(I checked the recorder, and this conversation with Luang Por Sumedho had been recorded.) ▲

Goddess

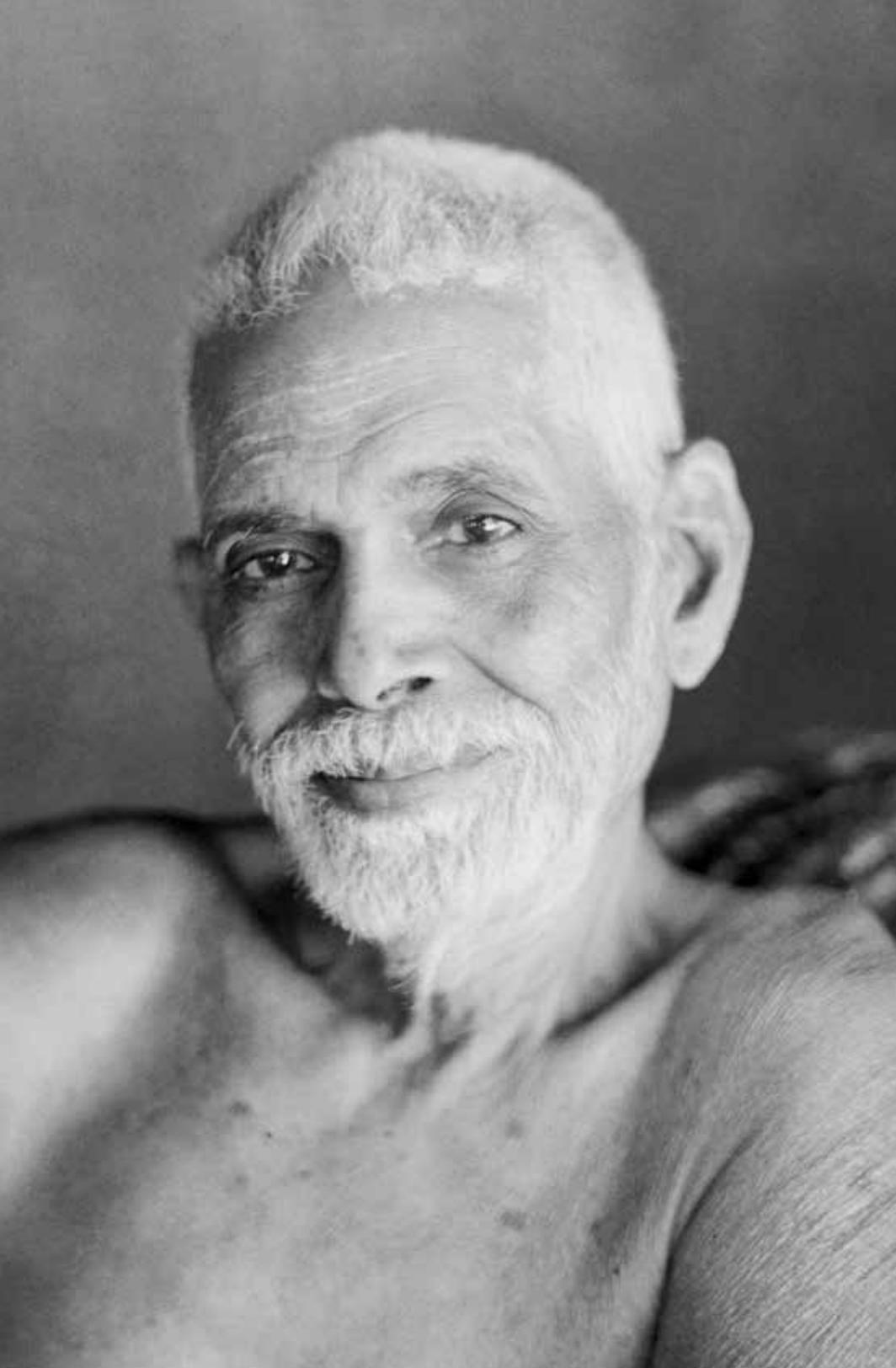
(In Memoriam J.R.)

Upahar

Mother of many names,
whose vehicle is every love and sorrow,
whose hunting-ground this blessed, broken world;
who calls on Her must dare the single vision,
who cries to Her stands in the sacred fire.

Mother transcending thought;
the deep, illumined scriptures of the spirit,
gathered in days of grace, Her sacrifice;
the spell of birth and death Her mystic binding;
all time Her smile, all hearts Her wild shrine.

Mother of all fierce mercies,
whose laughter rings across the fields of being;
who sings Her secret truth is lost forever.
Sparks from Her flame, we rise and leave no trace.
Who turns to Her is never found again.



HOW I CAME TO BHAGAVAN

Sri Ramana – The Divine Being

GURUPRASAD

Salutations to the omnipotent Lord who appeared as Sri Ramana in response to the prayers of many struggling souls. Salutations to the divine Ramana, the fountainhead of love, knowledge and yogic power.

Salutations to the eternal guru who incarnates in every age to shower his grace to remove ignorance and the pain of every heart. O! Lord, be gracious and compassionate to those who seek Thee in their hearts!

It was in the summer of 1957 that I read Paul Brunton's *A Search In Secret India*. I borrowed the book from the library of National Defence Academy, Khadakwasla (near Pune), a premier training institution of the Indian Armed Forces, where I was a cadet. I found the book very interesting (in fact, as a consequence, I read his other book, *A Search In Secret Egypt* also), but can't recollect if Brunton's meeting with Sri Ramana Maharshi left any lasting impression on my mind. The next time I heard about the Maharshi was in late 1960 from an officer of our Regiment, Hanut Singh, who was to later retire as a Lieutenant General, a renowned soldier of the Indian Army, decorated with the MVC in the 1971 war. He had strong spiritual leanings and had a good collection of books about various saints and

their teachings. It was through Hanut that I was really introduced to the Maharshi. I read a few books borrowed from him about the lives of Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Ramana Maharshi. We often discussed the latter's path of self-enquiry, which centres around finding an answer to the query 'Who am I?'. Looking back now and with some experience, I realise that our understanding of the subject was very elementary even from an intellectual view point.

It was in April 1962 that Hanut gave me Arthur Osborne's book, *Ramana Maharshi and the Path of Self Knowledge*, to read. It is a well researched book and as I read along I was captivated by the fascinating life story of the Maharshi who attained Self Realisation at the young age of sixteen: so simple and yet so profound. I was still reading the book when I began to see holy people and saints in dreams. I did not know, at that time, who they were except Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda whose photographs I had seen in books. This phenomenon was to continue for nearly fifteen years.

At about the same time (in mid-May), suddenly and unexpectedly I received my posting order to move to Ahmednagar, a military station near Pune. It was a huge disappointment because Regimental life was so much fun and leaving my friends was not easy. Anyway, there is little that anyone can do in such matters in the Army and I had to go. On a sudden impulse, one day (in June) I picked up Maharshi's book and prayed to him that I would visit his Ashram at Tiruvannamalai if I was posted out of Ahmednagar in six months' time; clearly a near impossibility because all Army postings are for at least two years unless there are some exceptional circumstances that could cut short one's tenure.

I did move to Ahmednagar; whilst there, I wrote to Major Chadwick (I had read about him in books), who was an old devotee of the Maharshi and was a resident of the Ashram for a long time, asking him to clarify some points. Unfortunately, I received a reply from the Ashram that he had passed away. The war with China started sometime in October 1962 and there was a major shake-up and reorganisation of the Army on its conclusion. It was evening time, sometime in December, and I was in my room in the Officers' Mess when a Lieutenant Colonel dealing with administration entered my room, after knocking, and announced, "Pack up your bags immediately

because you have been posted out to Ladakh and you have forty eight hours to leave.” The unexpected turn of events left me flabbergasted, especially when I recalled my prayer to Bhagavan that I had made six months earlier and how it had been granted in a sudden manner, in circumstances that could neither be forecast nor anticipated at that time.

It took me nearly thirty years to redeem my pledge to visit Ramanasramam; not that I had forgotten about it, but somehow, for various reasons, circumstances were never propitious enough to do so. I would often justify this to myself on the ground that in my vow to visit the Ashram no time limit had been mentioned! But, over the years my devotion to the Maharshi steadily took stronger roots. I read more about him and would often gaze at his photo, specially his captivating eyes and face. Many a time, I would find that the photo had disappeared and there was a momentary blankness.

In May 1992, I accompanied the Deputy Chief of Army Staff on an official visit to Chennai, Puducherry and Andaman and Nicobar Islands. A trip to Tiruvannamalai was neither a part of our program nor had I even thought about it. We were in Puducherry for a couple of days and the morning we were to return to Chennai it suddenly occurred to me to enquire if Tiruvannamalai was anywhere close to the road that we were taking to go back. I asked our driver about it and he mentioned that we would have to make a detour from Tindivanam to reach Tiruvannamalai and it would take less than an hour and thirty minutes to reach there. It was a God-sent opportunity that was totally unplanned and I immediately decided to avail of it.

I, accompanied by my wife and the Deputy Chief’s wife, left Puducherry after breakfast. A little after we took the road from Tindivanam to Tiruvannamalai, and I saw a hill and instinctively recognised it to be the Arunachala Hill. We reached our destination a little before one o’clock and as we entered the Ashram gate, the place appeared to be deserted and there was no one in sight. Maybe, the inmates were resting indoors because it was a very hot and sultry day with bright sun. I went around the office area and found a young boy (I can’t recollect his name though) in the library. I introduced myself and expressed our desire to go around the Ashram and see all the places connected with the Maharshi. The youngster was very forthcoming,

courteous and helpful. He insisted that we have lunch before going around and despite our protests, as we had to reach Chennai in time, he persuaded us to agree. He took us to the dining hall and made us sit on chairs. He pointed out the spot where Bhagavan used to have his meals. Then, he served us a meal of rice (with dollops of ghee), and *sambhar* and topped off with a small cup of butter milk. Though simple, that lunch is memorable, not only because it was so delicious but also due to the love with which it was served.

Next, we went to the Old Hall and immediately felt its powerful spiritual vibrations. I sat for meditation, facing Bhagavan's couch, for a short while. Bhagavan was extremely gracious and told me, "You should be able to separate water (*māyā*) from milk (Reality), if you want to attain the Self." Then, I saw, in a vision, two glasses; one containing water and the other milk, indicating how sharp and total the separation must be to attain complete Realisation. The implication was to develop the mind's power of discrimination (*vivek shakti*) to such a high level that one can reject and eject ignorance or *māyā* from individual consciousness. In its profundity, what better instruction could I have had?

Very happy and satisfied, I asked our guide if we could meet someone who had been a devotee during the Maharshi's lifetime. He told us about Kunju Swami and before taking us to meet him, we went around the cowshed area, which is associated with cow Lakshmi. It was a delight meeting Kunju Swami who was staying in Major Chadwick's cottage. I asked him many questions about how he came to Bhagavan, life in the Ashram during Bhagavan's time and how he had served him. Finally, I asked him what he had gained spiritually and he replied simply, "I live in Bhagavan." Soon thereafter, we thanked our very helpful guide and left the Ashram for the drive back to Chennai, after a visit that gave me cherished memories.

I met my guru, Sri Sivabala Yogi, in April 1977. He initiated me into the discipline of *atman dhyana* (meditation on the Self). But, my devotion to the Maharshi was in no way affected by it. In fact, to cement it further, I resolved to adopt him as my *Ishta Deva* (the form of God that one desires to have vision of) with the approval of my guru. As I made some spiritual progress, the latter revealed to me the true nature of the Maharshi's greatness. Sri Sivabala Yogi's teaching

is that God assumes human form in two primary aspects; as an *avatār* or as a *yogi*. *Avatār-s* (divine incarnations) take birth to re-establish the primacy of virtue over vice in the constant struggle that goes on between them in the natural order of things (i.e. the world perceived by senses); examples of such divine beings are Sri Rama, Lord Krishna and Guru Gobind Singh.

Yogi is a much used term that people employ in an elastic manner for adepts in various disciplines; for example, *haṭha yogi*, *tantric yogi* etc. (not to speak of many self-styled yogis!). In its pristine form, however, the term, *yogi*, is applied to someone who has successfully practised *tapas yoga*. A few points of this type of yoga need to be noted.

Firstly, it is a very severe discipline that is beset by many dangerous obstacles and it requires an iron will to succeed. Secondly, it involves facing various cardinal directions to empower someone who practises it to reverse the creative process at an individual level, i.e., have the power to make an outward looking mind introvert to its point of origin and then destroy it. In simpler words, anyone who practises it attains divine power to grant Self Realisation to others. Thirdly, *tapas yoga* can be pursued successfully only by incarnations of God and by a certain class of ever-free souls who have some divine mission to perform. It is so hazardous and hard that even gods and goddesses (*devtas* and *devis*) are incapable of going through it for the purpose of giving Realisation to the people who worship them.

That is why, it is said, that apart from God, no one has the power to grant total salvation or freedom from ignorance to anyone.

Fourthly, *tapas yoga* can be practised either in the subtle world, in the subtle body or *sūkṣma śarīra* (i.e. prior to human birth), or in physical body (as was done by Sri Sivabala Yogi). The power (to grant Realisation) that a *yogi* attains on its conclusion is called *tapas shakti* (power) and it is specific for the divine mission (i.e. the number of people that can be imparted this power) that a *yogi* has to perform on earth.

Fifthly, a *yogi* when he takes human birth is known as a *satguru* or a *sadguru* (a true or eternal guru); in common parlance, simply a guru. It needs to be stressed that a *satguru* is a special being and in the hierarchical order created by God ranks supreme as number one.

However, it should be borne in mind that for one true guru, there are thousands of fakes (usually self-proclaimed ones!).

Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi's life should be viewed in the context of what has been stated in the foregoing paragraph.

He was God in human form and amongst the supreme teachers of mankind. He had taken birth after practising tapas yoga in the subtle world. He was an accomplished *yogi* of the highest class and had the power to grant instant Realisation to anyone in time less than it takes to blink eyes. Not only could he initiate people on any of the well-known spiritual paths but had the power to create new ones. The Maharshi taught in absolute Silence, an extraordinary form of tapas power, in which there is no requirement for imparting instruction in spoken words, just like the ancient sage Sri Dakshinamurti. That he answered the questions of devotees was an act of grace, though their doubts would have been clarified in Silence (some other teachers of the same class are Lord Jesus Christ, Sri Shankaracharya, Sant Kabir and Guru Nanak). There are innumerable recorded instances in which persons who sat in the Old Hall in Bhagavan's presence had their doubts clarified by his mere glance. It happened by the power of Silence that he had.

While on this subject, it needs to be emphasised that the Maharshi acted very much as a guru, notwithstanding the fallacious notion entertained by some that he did not accept that he was a guru. He might not have said so very often but he confirmed that to Major Chadwick when the latter asked:

D.: 'Bhagavan says that he has no disciples.'

B.: (Looking at me suspiciously): 'Yes.'

D.: 'But Bhagavan also says that for the majority of aspirants a Guru is necessary?'

B.: 'Yes.'

D.: 'Then what am I to do? I have come all this distance and sat at Bhagavan's feet all these years, has it all been a waste of time? Must I now go off and wander about India in search of a Guru?'....

.... Bhagavan replied, 'For the seeker, God in his Grace takes a form in order to lead him to the formless state. Has he any doubt about it? Ask him, does he want me to give him a written document? Go and call Narayanier, the Sub-Registrar, and tell him to make one out for

him.’ Then later he added humorously, ‘Go and get the office stamp and put it on him. Will that convince him?’”¹

Another point to remember in this context is that the Maharshi’s teaching on self-enquiry does not accept the notion of duality (i.e. a teacher and a student) even for beginners. Many devotees who had met Bhagavan during his lifetime were taken in by his powerful luminous eyes; he would look into their eyes and they would have feelings of peace and bliss. This is a well-known method in which a guru initiates a devotee by transferring his *tapas* power to the latter.

Just prior to shedding his body, Bhagavan often assured many of his devotees that he is going nowhere and that he would be available to them always. His omnipotent grace, once given, is for all times to come because he dwells in the heart of every devotee. Those who did not meet him in his physical form should know that his subtle body or *sūkṣma śarīra* is still extant and will remain so till the end of this time cycle when a new creation would come into being. His grace and guidance are still available to anyone who seeks them through sincere prayer to him. A prayer to be effective must become a constant refrain in the mind and not uttered just a couple of times in a day. Best prayer of all is to repeat his divine name as much as one can with great earnestness.

Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi is beyond all praise and no one can meet a guru of his stature without the greatest fortune that accrues through merit of good karma earned over many, many lives. Blessed are those who serve him in any capacity but who can count the blessings of those who actively seek him and desire a union with the Source of divine love, knowledge and yogic power. ▲

¹ Chadwick, A., *A Sadhu’s Reminiscences of Ramana Maharshi*, pp.65-66.



To Compete or Not to Compete?

SANJEEV KUMAR NATH

Once heard something about the child of one of my teachers. This boy has always been very brilliant in his studies, usually coming first in his class. Once, when he did not come first and someone happened to tease him about that, he replied, not as a clever or angry retort but in all seriousness, “But why should I come first all the time? Why should someone else sometimes not have the pleasure of coming first?” This wise boy’s attitude indicates his calm, peaceful acceptance of his position, his generosity, and above all, an inner peace that cannot be disturbed by callow demands for performance or perfection.

As I go about doing the hundred little things that my present situation entails, however, I observe that such an attitude of acceptance, peace and happiness is getting rarer and rarer. What I notice everywhere is competition, a vulgar desire to attain or to possess more and more. In my workplace, for example, one sees people competing with one another all the time. The higher authorities demand specific standards of performance, and the employees all

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scamper to achieve higher scores. One sees that in meetings and seminars venerable senior scholars and professors are described in terms of their many achievements, and they sit there, nodding with pleasure. Sometimes one even hears one or two of these wise old people correcting the speaker, saying that such and such an award or honour has not been mentioned!

And then one remembers that story of a person who went to see Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi when He was staying in one of the caves in Arunachala. When he saw a person in a loincloth drying fuel, he took him to be some lowly worker and asked, "Hey! Have you seen Ramana Maharshi?" The loincloth-clad, simple-looking person said, "He will come. You can wait here." Then, after a few moments, one of Bhagavan's devotees came there, and observing his appearance, the visitor took him to be Bhagavan, and prostrated before him. Surprised, the devotee asked, "Why are you prostrating before me?" When he said that he had come to see Bhagavan, the misunderstanding was cleared up by the devotee. He told the visitor that the humble person in loincloth was the Maharshi Himself. The point here is Bhagavan's total disregard for esteem and for the high regard shown to him through the title 'Maharshi'. People identified Him as 'Maharshi', but He had nothing to do with this identification. On the other hand, make the slightest mistake in describing the details of a professor's achievements, and he corrects you instantly. That is the difference between a consciousness enmeshed in ego and egotistic achievements and a consciousness that is purity itself.

Even more startling is the story about the biographer a person who describes Ramana Maharshi as a married man with spouse and kids. He also wrote that Bhagavan suddenly appearing at Arunachala when he received the call to do so. The most extraordinary thing about this story is that this biographer actually took a proof copy of his book to be corrected by Bhagavan, who corrected only the spelling of a single word and returned the book for publication. However, when the printer had serious doubts about the fanciful claims in the book, he contacted Kunju Swami who had been with Bhagavan for so many years, and practically knew all about Him. Kunju Swami was aghast to see the nonsense that the author had written, and told Bhagavan that the book contained all kinds of untruths. Bhagavan then said, "If

these are all untruths, are all the other things that you observe true?” For such a one as Bhagavan, the Vedantic dictum that the entire world is unreal and Brahman being real was not merely a statement but an experience of the truth.

Therefore, there can be no comparison between Bhagavan and anyone else, whatever heights of scholarship he may have scaled. After all, scholarship is at the level of the intellect, and the more the intellectual attainments, the more egoistic and proud the person usually becomes. How can one compare a person with a fat, over-sized ego with someone who does not have any ego or mind, any meddling intellect, at all? So no comparison is possible, but in discussing things, one has to use language, and what is said here is said with the awareness that language can never be adequate to describe the true ‘state’ of a *jñāni*. Here we should understand that a ‘state’ implies change, while the *jñāni*’s ‘state’ is eternal.

But as far as the world is concerned, competition is seen everywhere, both on an individual, micro level, and at the level of society or country, at the macro level. There are undeclared competitions for everything: for bigger houses with the latest amenities, for expensive cars, mobile phones and other gadgets. People jostle in the market to buy the best gadgets possible for themselves. They desire to consume more, consume what they perceive as the best; they want to travel more, enjoy more, and so on. Careerism and consumerism prevail everywhere. It is endless. On a macro level, countries compete with one another for military supremacy, diplomatic one-upmanship, and dominance in trade and commerce.

Maybe all this can be seen as a consequence of the dominance of western modernity. Darwinian evolutionary theory gave rise to the idea of the survival of the fittest, which was extended and misused to justify racism and speciesism, and to not just justify, but valorise and encourage competition. Colonization brought western modernity to the east, and today we have become so westernized, so modern, that many of us do not even know that there is an alternative system of values, that life need not be a competition with others all the time.

Sometimes one sees competition in the least likely places. Through Bhagavan’s grace, my wife and I were able to attend the last talks on *Śrī Aruṇācala Akṣaramaṇamālai* given by Sri Nochur Venkataraman

at Sri Ramanasramam in 2018. After breakfast with Bhagavan (I always like to think of all meals in the Ashram in this way, for Bhagavan is present with us all the time), we would rush to our room to take our medicines, and would return quickly to attend the talks. But although we walked as fast as possible and though we reached well ahead of the time for the talk, we would invariably find many of the seats ‘reserved’ with handkerchiefs or books placed on the chairs. All the front rows would be ‘booked’ in this way, and so we would sit somewhere at the back. Though we came back quickly to secure ‘good’ seats, we were pipped by other devotees who were faster, and more resourceful than us. There was no doubt that a competition was going on. One day we found only one chair unreserved. I persuaded my wife to sit there, and I stood at the back.

But did it really matter whether I sat in the last row or the first? Whether I sat or stood? Was any competition necessary at all? Was it not our unimaginably good fortune that we were in that lovely hall at the foot of Arunachala in Sri Ramanasramam, Bhagavan’s special abode, that from where we sat or stood we could see Bhagavan’s large portrait, and Sri Dakshinamurti, that we were in the presence of senior devotees who had had the great good fortune of being with .Bhagavan when He had not yet shed His mortal coil, that we could listen to a discourse on *Śrī Aruṇācala Akṣaramaṇamālai*, possibly the most famous of Bhagavan’s compositions, the spontaneous outpouring of his deep devotion to Arunachala?

After all, many of the devotees must have been excited, like us, to be able to attend Sri Nochur Venkataraman’s lectures after having been greatly impressed by his talks available with voiceofrishis.org Besides, the very fact that I keenly felt that my fellow devotees were in a race to grab the ‘best’ seats does not speak well of my own inner poise. Surely, a devotee should not have a judgemental mind. What Jesus said on our desire to be judgemental is revealing: “And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?” (Matthew 7:3)

Competition can be meaningful for me — if the competition is not with others, but with myself, if competition merely means the inner struggle to attain the goal of total surrender; if it is a journey towards peace, to the kingdom of heaven which is inside. All competition

TO COMPETE OR NOT TO COMPETE

then ends, and even the act of noticing competition in others, of being judgemental, ends, once that kingdom is attained. Until then, Bhagavan's grace alone can save us. Effort is necessary, of course, but with our realisation that even our effort is made possible only through His grace. ▲

Him

Alan Jacob

He is out today.
Every bird is singing his name,
Every tendril towards him yearns,
Each drop of dew
Reflects the ocean of his grandeur.

The curtain of blue has lifted
To reveal the glory of our Sun resplendent.
Sometimes behind a gloomy cloud
He hides, in mischief sulking,
But having glimpsed through undergrowth
The hem of his robe, I know
that he is somewhere about
And enjoying the day.

Look who just flew into the room
In food-moth form!
Searching for a flame
In which to be consumed!

Sometimes you wrap
Yourself in a cloak of pain
To inscribe upon my basalt soul
The image of thy name;
Though on other days you send
A cup of nectar
For my soul to humbly sup.



BOOK EXCERPT

Quiet Courage of the Inner Light

Finding Faith and Fortitude in an Age
of Anxiety

PHILLIP PEGLER

QUIET COURAGE OF THE INNER LIGHT. Finding faith and fortitude in an age of anxiety by Philip Pegler. Published by John Hunt Publishing, Winchester, UK. 2020. pp.168. £10.99 or US\$16.95. ISBN: 978 1 78904345 7; 978 1 78904 346 4 (ebook) www.johnhuntpublishing.com

What is authentic spirituality and what noble qualities are needed so that we may stand up for what is truly sacred in today's anxious, divided and sceptical world? These are the fundamental questions posed by the thoughtful book from which the following excerpt is drawn.

The author, Philip Pegler, is a bookseller, former journalist and long-term English devotee of Sri Bhagavan. He first visited Sri Ramanasramam as a young man in the summer of 1969, before becoming resident there for an extended period in the early 1970s. Here he reflects on some stern challenges often faced by disciples upon their return home, as they attempt to put into practice the Maharshi's direct teachings of surrender and Self-inquiry amidst the conflicting demands of contemporary living.

Now is the time when steadiness of character is most urgently required. A sound foundation of virtue, coming from a deepening understanding of the universal principles sustaining true health and harmony, should be established at this point. But such a transformation of outlook is gradual, requiring not only diligence, but unstinting patience too.

There is a price to be paid for authentic faith. Considerable turmoil was to be Philip's own experience and his latest book graphically describes mental health problems, made manifest by sādhana, as he struggled to adjust to daily life in the West. Perhaps the sound advice he now offers in its pages could help other seekers avoid some of the more obvious pitfalls he had encountered. Such an outcome would fully justify the arduous task of composition.

He was prompted to consider these vital issues afresh upon a recent return pilgrimage to Arunachala after nearly 25 years away. Before setting out on the long journey back to India, he had felt concerned he had lost touch with Indian culture after such a long absence, but upon arrival he was reassured. He found the vicinity of the ashram altogether more hectic than previously, but never had the beautiful hill overlooking its precincts seemed more majestic in appearance or magnetic in atmosphere.

Self-inquiry is the ultimate cure for deep sorrow. The author can testify wholeheartedly to this profound truth.

The Steadiness of Being

Make no mistake about it – there is no such thing as a mistake in the ultimate sense. This is because even apparent mistakes are allowed in the wholeness of life that includes everything. The darkness and the light, the rough and the smooth, what is easy and what is unbearably difficult – all these facets of experience further spiritual growth when regarded in a positive light.

It is undeniably true that the steadiness of an authentic spirituality expresses itself primarily in the grounded optimism of moderation. Consistency, reliability, a quiet trust in the universal principles of harmony; all these wholesome qualities provide a firm foundation for an orderly life.

Nevertheless, a mature spiritual outlook cannot afford to be unrealistic about human nature and must remember to make allowances for the shocking extremes of human conduct. Never a day passes without further examples surfacing in the news of appalling behaviour that nevertheless should not always be rejected out of hand – but embraced instead with compassionate understanding.

Figures in public life are expected nowadays to be of exemplary character as a matter of course, but we all have feet of clay under certain circumstances. Notwithstanding lapses of judgement, the willingness to admit mistakes or show remorse following wrongdoing, is always a good indication of a person's essential decency. Nobody is altogether beyond forgiveness, but redemption requires the abandonment of pride and malevolent intentions.

From the spiritual point of view, a background sense of order in someone's life may well be suggestive of genuine virtue, which arises spontaneously from recognition of the sacred nature of life.

Unfortunately, however, signs of simple goodness are all too frequently misconstrued in these secular times as rather a dull indication of mere respectability, which in turn may be regarded as old-fashioned or mediocre. In truth it is nothing of the sort.

A typical person of a modern mind-set – in preference to the steadiness afforded by a meditative lifestyle – usually craves the stimulation provided by the continual challenges of contemporary living. Exciting new developments frequently hold out the beguiling prospect of endless progress, but all too often utterly fail to deliver enduring fulfilment.

Cynicism and a general lack of trust in traditional values, spring from oft-repeated disappointment and the unceasing demands of commercialisation, which leave little time for sober reflection upon the true significance of human life.

Turning aside decisively from superficial distractions, it is good to ascribe the highest importance to spiritual practice – yet there is a careful balance to be struck. When we become too intense concerning our spiritual pursuits, or alternatively push too hard against the natural tide of events, we run the risk of focussing upon our spiritual progress at the expense of our ordinary affairs.

After all – in the final analysis – it is obvious that being is far more important than interminable doing. In other words, people are far more

important than things, while even having a great deal of possessions, or achieving more and more success, pales after a while.

Our ‘things’ include all those pet notions of ours, which tempt us at times to brush all else aside in pursuit of our goals – but in disregard of common sense. This may tend to happen whenever we are overtaken by self-centred enthusiasm for whatever spiritual path we have been drawn to follow, and which we may by then be inclined to foist upon others. How wearisome all that becomes, once one has seen through such an inclination – understandable as it is.

The secret hope to convert others to our point of view is bound to cause conflict in our personal relationships sooner or later. It may also encourage a subtle form of egoism, which is hard for us to detect, because it is so difficult to remain objective concerning one’s own failings. It is only natural to seek for genuine freedom of spirit – to reach out in all sincerity to make meaningful contact with the true inner light – but it is imperative we do not seek to transcend our natural humanity in the process.

Our immediate task is to remain where we find ourselves in the present moment – for this is where our duty lies and where fresh opportunities to make progress will become naturally available to us. If we fulfil the demands of this present moment with goodwill, we can be sure that the future will take care of itself, but if we neglect our immediate obligations, we will only succeed in storing up yet more problems for the future – all of them needing to be resolved with even greater difficulty later.

In its own good time, the gentle but penetrating practice of mindfulness will shed valuable light on all the neglected corners of our existence, cleansing and renewing us as it does so.

From the beginning, what is of the most crucial importance is our integrity, since we will stand or fall according to the quality of our intention. It cannot be said too often that we do not live in isolation. One’s personal consciousness is not merely one’s own private domain – it is simultaneously the True Consciousness, which informs all living beings and so is universal in nature.

Since Life abides in unity – there can be no secondary or lesser consciousness. In the turmoil of daily life, we can forget this basic fact all too easily, but to recall it is the Real Remembrance. Each time we bring this basic truth to mind, we feel somehow held by It. We

become aware of a deep sense of belonging to the totality of existence – without even caring to know what that supreme reality really is.

The ability to articulate the insights one has received is not necessary either. More significant is the fact that when you realise that you are somehow part of everything – and not really separate from anyone else except in strictly personal terms – you will know finally what solidarity means.

Wherever you happen to be – whether in the thick of things or on the sidelines – you will experience an uplifting sense of unity and can no longer feel isolated or lonely. At last you can emphatically declare that you belong to humanity – and take delight in that. In Buddhist terms, such empathy is what is known as ‘sympathetic joy’.

From now on, you will be participating in the positive experiences of other people – but by the same token, you cannot avoid shouldering their burden of sorrow either. That too, is a privilege – yet you do not mind at all. By then, you have come to feel that showing compassion is the very least you can do as a responsible human being – at last dedicated to bringing harmony and reconciliation to a disordered world.

Kindness Counts Most

They do not have to be grand gestures – small acts of kindness will suffice just as well. A supportive word here, a thoughtful action there, a pleasant smile, a friendly wave in greeting – these are the sort of ordinary but positive contributions that help the world turn around smoothly and can even make the crucial difference between life and death, war and peace.

In the end – after all the fine words and froth of interminable concepts – the most genuine kind of spirituality comes down to those quiet moments when you take the time to really listen to what someone else is saying. It is kindness that counts most on the level of basic human relationships, because genuine kindness is the outcome of an unobtrusive love that is not self-serving.

It is the natural warmth of common decency that paves the way for unselfish love. And more especially, it is the loving concern and decisive action born out of the selfless courage of rescue workers and volunteers that often proves to be the salvation of the world in its hour of greatest need when disaster strikes out of the blue.

There may be no prior knowing of who they might be, or where they have come from, but all those brave helpers, who would never hesitate to offer immediate aid in emergencies, include people of every age and from any walk of life. That list may number those of religious persuasion or none; famous names perhaps, or ordinary folk – totally unaccustomed to the limelight and normally content to live quietly behind the scenes unrecognised.

And all such workers for peace would immediately put any differences aside to join in service to a common cause, sharing a sense of outrage at injustice – together with a determination to uphold at all costs the inviolability of human life. Have not things always been so, during critical times of transition amidst the swirling tides of human affairs?

This noble and thankless task of building an enduring peace amidst the warring factions of the world, begins, not necessarily at the sharp end of conflict, but much nearer home in the ordinary routine of everyday life.

This important work must always be conducted in a spirit of goodwill and consideration for others and what counts most is our basic attitude. Something radically changes within us, with the clear recognition of the small but significant part we have been allocated in the huge drama of the world. It is in the very instant we take responsibility for the state of our own mind and heart, that effective peace-making begins.

Time and again, one sees the truth of the matter. Before we can effectively engage in the urgent task of outward reconciliation, we first need to begin to make peace with our own inward demons. This happens immediately whenever we manage to touch the central point of purity at the heart of our own being.

It is that sparkling purity of love that changes us for the better – and not we ourselves by dint of effort and struggle. That fundamental purity is innate to all people, but its transformative power cannot fully act, unless the impediments that check its expression are removed. We can accomplish much in this respect through sensible spiritual practice – but not everything. We cannot take the final leap without being aided, no matter how hard we try.

Kindness is one example of a small key that unlocks the door of goodness – and when that door to the eternal beauty springs open, it

QUIET COURAGE OF THE INNER LIGHT

reveals the hidden river of love that is always flowing for the delight and refreshment of mankind. The river knows the way and does not need to be directed.

Our inherent purity – the very essence of our individual consciousness – belongs to the supreme love that sustains all created life. As human beings, at birth we emerge from the womb of creation, while at death we return to the source of our being. But as long as physical life endures, there is an indwelling healing element within each one of us that is constantly working to bring forth renewed harmony into our experience and to restore the balance of health on every level, whenever it has been disturbed by stress or trauma.

The self-same healing balm is constantly available and works in the world to resolve conflict and deliver peace. It is down to the interwoven nature of all created matter and the operation of natural law that this should be so. Even as the healing process is permitted to continue unobstructed within us while we knowingly cooperate with its beneficent action – just so, the results of increased individual harmony benefit the outer world and aid its uplift.

To work realistically for peace and order on the chaotic periphery of life, is to realise these profound things that underpin any meaningful contribution to the vital task of reconciliation. ▲

Archival Souvenirs Available for Free Downloading

Over the decades, numerous souvenirs have been released to commemorate special occasions e.g. Jayanti, Advent and Maha Kumbhabhishekams. Including articles, photographs and testimonies of interest to devotees, such collections have disappeared from public notice owing to limited editions. The Ashram would like to make such material available for devotees and is thus uploading pdfs and audio recordings onto the Ashram website (in the sources and audio sections). The 1965 Jayanti Souvenir, 1967 Ramana Pictorial Souvenir, 1969 Ramana Jyoti Souvenir, 1974 Venkato 60 Souvenir and 1996 Advent Centenary Souvenir are now available for free downloading at: <www.sriramanamaharshi.org>

ASHRAM CALENDAR 2020

Sri Bhagavan's 140th Jayanti	Saturday	11th January
Pongal	Wednesday	15th January
Chinna Swamigal Aradhana	Saturday	8th February
Sundaram Iyer Day	Thursday	13th February
Maha Sivaratri	Friday	21st February
Sri Vidya Haven	Friday	20th March
Telugu New Year Day	Wednesday	25th March
Sri Rama Navami	Thursday	2nd April
Tamil New Year Day	Tuesday	14th April
Sri Bhagavan's 70th Aradhana	Monday	20th April
Maha Puja	Saturday	16th May
Cow Lakshmi Day	Thursday	2nd July
Guru Poornima (Vyasa Puja)	Sunday	5th July
Sri Bhagavan's Advent Day	Tuesday	1st September
Navaratri Festival Commences	Saturday	17th October
Saraswati Puja	Sunday	25th October
Vijayadasami	Monday	26th October
Deepavali	Saturday	14th November
Karthigai Festival Commences	Friday	20th November
Karthigai Deepam	Sunday	29th November
Sri Bhagavan's 141st Jayanti	Thursday	31st December

Maha Bhakta Vijayam

Chapter Thirteen

Kamal, Son of Kabir, Sets Out on a Pilgrimage

Part Three

NABAJI SIDDHA

While Kamal spread the glory of his father and his sublime teachings, creating a large band of eager followers, his own fame spread wherever he went. He earned the respect and love of people who listened to him with wonder and talked of him as a worthy son of the great Kabir.

A wealthy merchant accosting the supporters, asked, “Why are you making a great fuss about a young boy? Can he cure diseases or bestow prosperity or give salvation? Just as an army of ants blindly follow a single ant, you follow in chorus when a person sings the praise of someone. Did anyone of you get your problem solved by him?”

One of them said, “O wealthy man, even a crow sitting on the branch of Karpaga, the wish fulfilling tree, tastes the fruit of elixir of life. Is there any doubt that those who seek refuge in Kamal will have their cares and anxieties removed?”

The merchant’s heart rejoiced at these words, for he was suffering from a serious malady. He resolved that he would gift Kamal with a priceless emerald stone if he cured him of his illness.

The very moment this thought took shape in his mind, he became free of the disease. Dumbstruck with amazement, he hurried to Kamal with the gem. Listening to Kamal's outpouring of wisdom, he was completely overwhelmed.

He repeatedly fell at Kamal's feet and muttered, "Aha..! If one wishes for a son, he should be like this boy! Any other offspring should be treated like a mere fledgling or hatchling or the young ones of a mongoose or a squirrel! What is the use of having a dozen cows if they are barren? Even if one begets ten children, if they are demented, what use are they to their parents? One may have only one son, but if he is worthy, his parents are redeemed. Without a child of such excellence, my life is lived in vain."

Reading his thoughts, Kamal looked at the merchant with love and said, "Are you free of the disease? Your heart yearns for a son like me! Why don't you look upon me as your son?"

The merchant was speechless on hearing these endearing words. An irresistible love for Kamal sprang in his heart. He invited him to his house. When Kamal reached there, pointing to a corner, he counselled the merchant to dig in that place as the merchant's father had buried precious stones there. On removing the earth, they found beautiful ornaments of emerald fit for a small child.

The merchant said in a disappointed voice, "What use are these ornaments to me, a childless wretch?" Lo and behold! He saw a charming child in the place of Kamal, crying in a nectarine voice.

He called out to his wife and said, "O dear, Kamal has blessed us with a child and slaked the fire of my desire for a child. The baby is crying of hunger. Give him milk."

His wife fed the child with milk which oozed from her breast out of her love for the child. Deep attachment sprouted in their hearts. Distributing sugar to everybody to celebrate the occasion, he narrated the miraculous appearance of the child to the gathering. All those who were issueless hurried to Kamal and begged him with mellowed heart to bestow a similar blessing on them. The compassionate Kamal blessed them all by appearing in the form of many infants wearing beautiful jewels of dazzling gems.

When the merchant heard about Kamal's impending departure for Varanasi, he reflected, "What a marvelous child he is! Even great

sages seldom bestowed the gift of a child whereas this little boy has performed a miracle on hundreds of people here so easily. One should not hesitate to offer one's everything at the feet of such a remarkable and merciful being. Ah... I forgot to offer him the green emerald, which I vowed to place at his feet. How can I live away from so kind a person? When Kamal casts his gracious look on a person, it becomes easily possible for him to ascend to heaven in his physical body. One may amass wealth, earn honour and live an outstanding life in this world with relatives and friends. But when his life departs, are these of any avail to him? One may go through endless struggles in life to shield and shelter one's kith and kin, but can they partake of his destiny of sin and merit? If one has wealth, everyone surrounds him like a friend. If he becomes a pauper, the same people repulse him like a corpse. Near and dear ignore a person when he falls on hard times. That is the way of the world.

“Very few give away their wealth for a righteous cause. People are more fond of squandering their riches on pleasures. Only noble minded deploy their wealth for the service of sadhus. Worldly minded people wallow in the joys of the body and wander through lives in utter ignorance. Afflicted by diseases and tormented by fear of death, unable to bring the fickle mind to the feet of the Lord at the last moment, they revolve in the cycle of birth and death endlessly. Let me not become such a chattel to the illusory charms of this transient world.”

Overcome by dispassion, he sent his wife with the child to her parents and exhausting his wealth in virtuous acts, reached Kamal with the emerald. A glimpse of Kamal assuaged his pain of separation.

Kamal said tenderly, “O merchant, I am with you in the form of the child. Now, who will look after me there? Why do you harbour the illusion of separation? Like you, my father Kabir is also yearning for the return of his child. Without further delay, you must return home. Don't overlook my words.”

He offered the precious gem to Kamal who said, “You have exhausted all your wealth for dharma. You need to earn the wherewithal for your family. Please take this back and start a business. I will visit you again soon.”

However, while leaving, the merchant tied the gem to the corner of Kamal's upper cloth without his knowledge. By Kamal's grace,

when he started a new business, it prospered. He awaited Kamal's visit with an ache in his heart.

In the meantime, Kamal hurried home with eager anticipation of the joy of reunion with his parents. When Kabir embraced him lovingly, he was dismayed to see the gem in his cloth. He took it in his hand and stepped back in distaste. Agitated, he sat at the shrine and lamented uncontrollably. When Jijabibi and Kamal tried to find out the reason, he would not divulge it. Then, they also started weeping. The deceitful Lord also hastened to the spot and joined the chorus of lamentation. Soon the news broke out and Swami Ramananda also hastened to Kabir. On hearing his knock at the door, Kabir rushed to invite him into the house.

Swami Ramananda said to the Lord, "O Lord, today is an auspicious day for me to have Your *darśan* here. May I know the reason for this lamentation in which You too have joined?"

The Master of intrigues replied, "I have been wishing, since a long time, a matching gem for the pendant of my necklace. When Kamal left on *yatrā*, I asked him to bring me a present. Without forgetting my request, he brought me an exquisite gem. On seeing the gem, Kabir has become unhappy. My present is with him. If you will secure it for me, I will always remember you for this kind act."

Kabir broke in, "O Swami, you don't believe His tale. Does the Lord of perennial wealth need a present from us? He is mocking at Kamal for his greed for treasures. Have you heard of such a strange barter - a handful of dust for the fragrant *kasturi*, a bottle of liquor for the holy water of Ganga, a piece of common timber for sandalwood, a donkey for a thoroughbred stallion, a bowl of poison for a drop of nectar and a dirt of a gem for the precious Name of the Divine? Kamal has traded his devotion in the market place for this kind of dirt!"

He roared again, "Can we equate the vulture and the divine eagle however high the former flies, millions of bright lamps against sun, countless luminous stars against moon, a herd of auspicious cows against Kamadhenu or a forest of trees against Karpagam? Similarly, whatever rigorous austerities he performed on *yatrā* and whatever holy places he frequented are mere dust against the virtue of desirelessness, which he has forgone. Greed for wealth has overtaken him. We should not look even a moment longer at the face of such a contemptible

wretch. He is not fit to live here any longer with us. O Sundara, drive him out of the house, this instant.”

Listening to this tirade, Kamal said, “O father, your words are strange. Do you think that I was assailed by desire for the trifle of this stone? Even if the tiger is famished, it will not eat grass. When the fire of hunger consumes the lion, will it turn to the flesh of a dead jackal. A wise man will not approach a miser even in dire need. The abject poverty of a virtuous man will not deter him from good deeds. A hero will not flee the battlefield even in the face of a vast army. Similarly, dispassionate that I am, will I be attracted by earthly treasures? Out of extreme love, the merchant has secured it in my cloth without my knowledge. Oh, it is a grave offence to covet someone’s possession! Let me leave forthwith for his place and return it to him. This piece of stone has brought enough grief to everybody here.”

Reaching the merchant’s place posthaste, Kamal said, “O affluent one! Tying the gem on the sly to my cloth, you have caused me great humiliation. Please take back your gem.”

Kamal returned to his parents before they could blink their eyes and said to his father, “O master of my life, now that I have returned the gem, has your anguish left you? Is your mind at peace?”

Kabir was astounded at the speed with which Kamal accomplished his journey to the merchant and back. He asked Kamal, “Did you really go to the merchant and return the gem?”

The Lord answered him, “I vouch for it. However, O Kabir, it seems, you have more love for your dispassion than for me. Fulfilling my wish and pleasing me seem to be of lesser concern to you!”

Kamal remonstrated, “Making over somebody’s possession to You as a gift sounds like stealing a coconut from the shop and breaking it before Lord Ganesha to fulfil one’s vow! Such worship is fruitless. Are You really so fascinated by this green-coloured gem?”

Kabir was highly pleased with Kamal’s reply. His heart leaping in joy, he held Kamal close to his chest and caressed him. His eager fondling seemed like the joy of a father seeing signs of life in his son, given up for dead or the elation of a merchant to see his ship, reported to be sunk, coming ashore laden with riches.

Freed from all revulsion, Kabir spoke with emotion, “O endearing child, what penance I must have performed to have you as my son.”

MOUNTAIN PATH

Turning to the Lord and bowing to Him humbly, Kabir said, “O Lord of my life! If you really have such a fondness for the nugget, I will go at once, become a servant of the merchant and earn it with my sweat.”

His eyes shining with love, the Lord said, “I pretended a penchant for the stone just to test your devotion. Any gift, however precious, is nothing before your priceless love for Me.”

Swami Ramananda was engulfed by waves of wonder at the strange happenings that took place in Kabir’s house. Amazed at the astonishing lives of the noble souls, he returned to his ashram.

Nabhaji, the supreme siddha concluded thus, “O great sages, such was the extraordinary life of Kabir! Kabir, Sundara and Kamal led exemplary lives as householders. Their noble conduct and unabated love for sadhus shone as a beacon in the city of Varanasi.” ▲

(This concludes the chapter of Kabir)

Infinity

Suresh Kailash

I saw infinity walk.
Its feet left flowers
on the mountain path.

I heard infinity talk.
Its voice was silence,
clear and soft.

I saw infinity’s face.
Its eyes contained
all of space.

Ramana,
amazing is the way,
you’ve cloaked infinity
in a human cape!

Sonasaila Malai

Song Garland to the Red Mountain

SIVAPRAKASA SWAMIGAL
TRANSLATED BY ROBERT BUTLER

As if a golden temple,
with gems fittingly inlaid,
as a [murky] roost for bats I gave,
within my barren heart
no union with thee I craved,
but there a home
for base desire I made.
One even such as I
will you come to save?

Lord Sonasailan! Kailash's Lord,
where streams rush down
scattering gold,

Robert Butler devotes his time to the translation of Tamil classical and spiritual texts. He has published a grammatical commentary on *Uḷḷadu Nārpadu*. A translation of the biography of Māṇikkavācakar is now available at the ashram bookshop. These are available for online preview, purchase or download at the following link: <http://stores.lulu.com/store.php?fAcctID=1212666>.

MOUNTAIN PATH

flooding holes
that hillsmen made
to harvest tubers
that they crave,
and filling pits into which
elephants [unwary] slip.¹ (66)

I wandered rejoicing in the sight
of maids with fine dark skin
in perfumed gowns with jewels bright
but their inner truth I did not know,
just as a [silken] pouch
its sackcloth lining does not show.²
For me, a slave to worldly deeds,
what day will there salvation be?

Though your ruddy lotus feet
reach down below the [seven] hells
and your holy crown
beyond the heavens towering goes,³
yet still you can encompassed be
by sweet songs intoned by the Three,⁴
Lord Sonasailan! Kailash's Lord! (67)

¹ *vēlam vī kuḷikaḷum* – the pits [into which] elephants fall. The hunters dig pits and disguise them to trap unwary wild elephants.

² The idea is that the gross, repulsive nature of the fleshly body is hidden by the outer skin and fine clothing and ornaments, just as a beautiful silk bag reveals its rough hessian lining only if turned inside out. Compare *Nālaḍiyār* 42, which says of the body, *maṟṟu adaṇai pai maṟiyā pārkkā paḍum* – it should be looked upon as a bag turned inside out, and *Maṇimēgalai*, 4:121, *idaṇai puṟam maṟippu āṟāy* – look upon it as if the innards were on the outside.

³ Compare *Tiruvācakam*, *Tiruvempāvai*, v. 10, l. 1-2:

Beneath the seven realms of hell his lotus feet
[reach down,] transcending speech and on his head
his crown with flowers intertwined, of all reality
Is the crown!

⁴ *mūvar* – the Three are Appar, Jñānasambandhar and Sundarar. See the note to v. 1 in Part One.

Each time I dwell
 on birth's torment,
 or at death the mind's confusion
 as the bonds that bind
 the body's sinews loosen,
 my heart's with terror filled
 as I suffer
 like sesame ground in a mill.

You echo to the rival cries
 of worthy devotees
 who *Harahara*⁵ chant
 and to the roar of lions
 who, seeing dark clouds
 massed on high surmise,
 'This way comes an elephant!'
Lord Sonasailan! Kailash's Lord! (68)

Seeking refuge at your side,
 'Merciful Lord,' I cried,
 'you who [even] to a spider,
 from his body spinning gauze,
 did your holy grace afford,⁶
 so that the pain of birth and death
 tormented it no more.'
 And yet your holy will remains
 a secret to me still.

Lord Sonasailan! Kailash's Lord,
 when a powerful elephant
 raises aloft his sturdy trunk,

⁵ There is a play on words in this verse. *arakara*, Skt. *hara hara*, is an invocation to Lord Śiva, one of whose names is *Hara*, the *Destroyer*. Earlier in the same line the words *ari* – *lion* and *kari* – *elephant* are juxtaposed. These words, taken together, *arikari*, can also be interpreted as Skt. *hari hari*. an invocation to Viṣṇu, uttered by those of the Vaishnavaitic persuasion.

⁶ There are stories telling how Śiva granted liberation to a spider who protected him with its web related to Śri Kalahasti in Andhra Pradesh and to Tiruvāṇaikā in Tamil Nadu.

to the Sun in his fine chariot
 it seems a black serpent⁷
 from your caves has sprung,
 and fearful in his heart
 he [from your holy peak] departs. (69)

Will it one day come to pass,
 that with the fire and whetted axe⁸
 in your fair hands clasped,
 you clear away the thickets
 of my intractable deeds,
 then, of undying love for you
 planting the seeds,
 of this devotee's mind
 you nurture⁹ the fields?

⁷ *pāmbu* means serpent and also is a name of Rāhu, a planet in Hindu astrology. The serpent Rāhu is a demon with a dragon's tail. When the gods churned the ocean for *amṛita*, he disguised himself as one of them and stole a portion, thus becoming immortal. The Sun and Moon revealed the fraud to Viṣṇu who cut off his head, but, being immortal, he has ever since wreaked vengeance by occasionally swallowing them, causing them to disappear temporarily. His tail is known as Ketu, and both are regarded as planets in Vedic astrology. In scientific terms they represent the ascending and descending nodes, the points where the moon's path in the sky crosses the ecliptic, the sun's path in the sky; these are the only points near which eclipses can occur, since at those points all three celestial bodies, the earth, the moon and the sun, are in the same plane. The conceit here is that when the Sun sees the elephant's trunk on the mountain, he thinks it is Rāhu exiting from a termite hill to come and swallow him and hurries away in fright.

⁸ *kūrṇi kaṇal maḥuvāl* – with the intense fire and the sharp battle-axe. The word *kūr* can mean both *intense*, *excessive* and also *sharp*, and can therefore apply to both nouns, i.e. with *intense* fire and *sharp* battle-axe. Fire and the battle-axe are two of the numerous items Śiva is seen to be holding in his hands in his various iconographic representations.

⁹ *maṇattiṇai tiruttum nāḷ uḷadō* – will there be a day when you will cultivate [the field off] my mind. The verb *tiruttu* has the general sense of *to correct*, *level*, *amend*, *adjust* and is used here in the twin senses of *to discipline the mind* and *to improve land*, levelling it, clearing it of trees and stones and so on, in preparation for cultivation. The word *fields* is added in the translation to convey this double sense.

As the ruddy glow of eventide
 o'ertakes the dark blue sky,
 it appears from your noble stance,
 that you look upon the God of Love
 and engulf him in your fiery glance,¹⁰
Lord Sonasailan! Kailash's Lord!

(70)

When will you in grace
 allow me at your feet a place
 in the goodly band of those
 who all five senses have restrained
 and true wisdom fully gained,
 and grant that those
 of nature harsh and base
 shall leave and far from me remain?

Lord Sonasailan! Kailash's Lord,
 when [in your caverns] deadly serpents
 spit out gems of lustre bright
 tigers strong and proud in terror take flight
 thinking in delusion that the cave's alight.

(71)

*Antari,¹¹ Kumari, Anjali, Gauri
 Ambika, Manonmani, Matangi*

¹⁰ *vēl purattu eri kaduviḍa* literally, *in order to grasp [with] the flame [of your third eye] the body of the God of Love*. The Puranic tale of how Kāma, one of whose names in Tamil is *Vēl*, was burned up by Śiva when he attempted to disturb his *tapas* was referenced previously in v. 7. Kāma is usually represented as having a dark green or greenish-blue body colour. It can often be observed that the lower area of the sky between the red hue of sunset and the deep blue of the upper heavens has a greenish-blue tinge.

¹¹ *antari* is a name of Parvatī derived from Skt. *antara* – *that which is inner, soul, heart, supreme soul*; *kumari*, Skt. *kumārī*, *means maid, virgin*; *añcali* can mean either *She who should be worshipped*, from Skt. *añjali* – *a gesture of reverence with the open hands placed side by side* or, deriving it from *añcal* – *do not fear!* it can mean *Granter of protection, freedom from fear*; *ambikai*, Skt. *ambikā* means *mother*; *maṅḍamaṅi* means *she who transcends the mind*; *madaṅgi*, Skt. *mātaṅgi* denotes a ferocious aspect of the goddess, a name of Durga; both Tamil commentators take it in the sense of *songstress, musician*, which is one of its Tamil meanings.

Uma,¹² *Unnamulai*,¹³ *Sundari* –
Pray grant your grace,
And tell me by what names
I may your holy consort praise.

Lord Sonasailan! Kailash's Lord,
where illustrious Tumpuru
and Narada¹⁴ too your praises sing,
plucking the lute's sweet strings,
as Vishnu coming to stand nigh
intones the Vedas' holy hymns.

(72)

May you grant your grace
and enrol me in the company
of those faithful devotees
who of the world's delusion are free,
who in the highest wisdom ever abide,
and whose love for your holy lotus feet
ever foster in their minds.

Lord Sonasailan! Kailash's Lord,
where *kantal* blossoms' petals

¹² *umai*, Skt. *umā*, like *parvatī* references the goddess as daughter to Himavat, the Himalaya mountains.

¹³ *uṅṅāmulai* – [*she off*] *the unsuckled breasts* is the name of Śiva's consort in the *sthala* of Tiruvuṅṅāmalai. The *Aruṅācala Māhātmyam* gives an interesting explanation of how this name came about. It comes at the moment when Lord Śiva has just granted Parvatī the right of sharing his own form. Referring to the time when Parvatī left to perform *tapas* to atone for covering Śiva's eyes and causing universal chaos, leaving her infant Skanda unattended, he says to her:

stanyārthinaṃ guhaṃ hitvā yātāsi tapase yataḥ,
tad apīstanaṃ nāmnā nivasa atra mama antike.

Since you abandoned Guha (Skanda) who yearned for your milk, and went away for the performance of *tapas*, dwell with me here with the name Apīstanaṃ (She of the unsuckled breasts). *Aruṅācala Māhātmyam*, Utt. Ch. 21, slokas 25b-26a.

¹⁴ *nāradaḥ*, Skt. *Nārada* is a celebrated sage and son of Brahmā. He is portrayed as a musician and storyteller and as a messenger of the gods. *tumburu*, Skt. *tumpuru* is one of the Gandharvas, celestial musicians and is sometimes described as the best of singers. He leads the Gandharvas in their singing.

softly strike the honey-filled beehives
 as a [hammer strikes an hour] gong¹⁵
 each time the gentle summer breeze
 caressing, comes along. (73)

The wonder of devotion¹⁶
 in which we fearless remain,
 as ‘Birth for us is ended!’
 we in ecstasy proclaim –
 of that, we have no notion.
 To what purpose then
 do we your devotees
 our lifetimes idly spend?

The hosts of heaven praise you,
 saying,
 ‘When our unblinking sight
 upon you falls
 no sin in us remains at all.
 But the penance, [alas],
 in which we walk around
 with both feet planted on the ground
 for us can never come to pass,’¹⁷
Lord Sonasailan! Kailash’s Lord! (74)

¹⁵ The word *gong* translates the Tamil word *kannaḷ*. Tam. Lex. describes *kannaḷ* as ‘Perforated hour-glass that fills and sinks at the expiration of a nāḷikai.’ (A nāḷikai is an Indian hour of 24 minutes). Here it is used to indicate some other instrument for marking the hour, as a gong and hammer. *tuḍuppu* means *spatula*, *small ladle*. It is also the name given to the petals of the *kāntal*, *Gloriosa superba* as resembling a ladle. Here they are imagined to resemble the hammer of a gong. The open blossoms are often compared also to human hands with flexed fingers.

¹⁶ *batti navam* – *the wonder of devotion*. *navam* (< Skt. *navam* – *new*) = Tamil *pudumai*, which, in addition to the meanings *newness*, *novelty* also has the sense of *wonder*, *miracle*. *batti* (< Skt. *bhakti*) – *devotion*, *love*, *piety* is described as a wonder because it has the power of bestowing liberation from birth and death.

¹⁷ The point here is that the gods, although living in the blissful state of the heavenly worlds, are not immortal but are condemned eventually to die and be born again. The sight of Sōnasailan absolves them of all sins, but, as gods they cannot walk upon the earth and cannot therefore perform the penance of *pradakṣiṇa* that will help them

MOUNTAIN PATH

My eyes with love
shall see you with delight;
my hands in adulation
shall be raised up above;
my ears shall hear the hymns
that your great glory fete,
and around you my two feet
pradakshina shall make.¹⁸

When [on your slopes]
bears burrow into termite hills
cool rays in streams flash out
from gems that are unearthed,
as if they had been lying in wait,
the dark itself to rout,
Lord Sonasailan! Kailash's Lord!

(75)

Those who like young Murugan¹⁸
with sharp and bloody spear,
delight the jewelled maiden's eye,
will wither like the tender bud
that flowers, soon to fade and die.¹⁹
This I've seen, and yet do I
still glory in this sinful life.

(cont.) to gain the Lord's grace and with it absolute freedom from birth. It is for this reason that the gods themselves aspire to be born there in human, or any other, form. See the *Aruṅācala Purāṇam*, v. 73:

Those who dwell in matchless Svarga, feasting on ambrosia, and those who severally stand guard over that Garden of Pleasure and the other worlds, desire to be born there, believing birth in that city, even as a mere worm, to be the greater good. Except for those who have performed one hundred sacrifices, birth in that noble place is not attainable. Whilst it is easy for those who are recipients of the Lord's grace, it is difficult indeed for the other gods, and the most eminent even amongst men.

¹⁸ The word *kālai*, used here means *a young man in his prime*. Here the reference is clearly to Murugan, because of the mention of a spear dripping with the blood and flesh of slain foes. See *Kuṇṭogai* 1: *koṅṛu avuṅar tēyṭta ceṅ kōl ambiṅ – having arrows red [with blood], with which he slew and annihilated demons*.

¹⁹ *tiri taḷiriṅ*, literally *like a shoot [which] change[s]*. A leaf begins as a shoot, matures into a green leaf, changes colour, withers and dies, a metaphor here for the transitory nature of human existence.

Their anklets snared, a bridegroom
 and his powdered bride²⁰ around you go,
 and only at the time of parting,
 will that shy pair their situation know,²¹
Lord Sonasailan! Kailash's Lord! (76)

Will it ever leave and go,
 my futile praise of maids
 with wide bright eyes
 like sliced mango,
 whose graceful hands
 like *kantal* blossoms glow
 and the beauty of whose feet
 in jewelled anklets clad
 the tender mango leaf defeats?

With no brightly spotted Vasuki,
 employed by those who churned²²
 the majestic rollers of the [milky] sea,
 you bestow the ambrosial medicine
 that great *tapasvins*
 from the fear of death doth free,
Lord Sonasailan! Kailash's Lord! (77)
 As my life ebbs away,

²⁰ *maṇam timir maḡaḡir* – a maiden smeared with fragrant substances. *maṇam* also means *marriage*, so the sense is of a newly married girl anointed with sandalwood paste and other fragrant substances.

²¹ In earlier times, it was customary for a bride and groom, a few days after their marriage, to perform *pradakṣiṇa* of Aruṇācala, closely accompanied by both sets of relatives, who, in the press of bodies, would contrive to tie together their anklets without them realising it. At the end of the *pradakṣiṇa*, when the two sets of relatives departed for their various homes, the young couple would find to their embarrassment that they were unable to go their separate ways, symbolically affirming their marriage to each other.

²² When the *devas* and *asuras* churned the Milk Ocean to extract the elixir of immortality they required Mount Mandara as a churning stick and the *nāga* king, Vāsuki, to use as a rope. In sharp contrast *Sōṇasailan* requires no such aids to produce the same result for his devotees.

MOUNTAIN PATH

and thoughts in turmoil stray;
as darkness fills my eyes,
my ears hear no sound
and phlegm wells up inside,²³
may this boon in grace be granted
that in my heart
your holy form be firmly planted.

You who in your throat hold
the black venom
that Mount Mandara bestowed
and at your left side place
the ambrosial Maid
the snowy Himalaya gave,
Lord Sonasailan! Kailash's Lord!

(78)

Daily offering worship meet
with fresh blooms at thy holy feet
remaining to thee ever near,
so that Death himself,
the soul's consumer,
shakes with fear,
will there ever be a day
that I shall walk
in liberation's supernal way?

For those whose fast intent
is to best those mighty foes,
the triumphant objects of sense,²⁴
and to rule the heavenly realm

²³ *ai mēl undu ida* – as phlegm wells up. *ai* is phlegm, mucus, a reference to the death rattle, sounds often produced by someone who is near death as a result of fluids such as saliva and mucus accumulating in the throat and upper chest.

²⁴ *vayam koḷum viḍaya perum pagai*, literally *the great enemy [consisting of] the objects of sense, which are victorious*. *vayam* can mean either *power, might or victory, conquest*. Here both meanings apply. Very few are those who can resist the attraction of the objects of the mind and senses and hence they are almost always victorious.

[of liberation] surely go,
 thou art the fort²⁵ [secure]
 that doth their victory ensure,
Lord Sonasailan! Kailash's Lord! (79)

Will there ever come a day
 when I a wicked, evil one,
 shall to your royal presence come,
 where gods unsleeping cower back
 as the baton held in Nandi's hand
 upon their head falls with a thwack,
 only to surge forward, just as [when]
 algae [scattered] by a stone
 dropped [in a tank reforms again]?²⁶

You who abide and shine
 as [against your chest] the elephants
 of the Mountain Maiden[’s
 ample breasts] firmly press,
 she whose warring eyes defeat
 the long spear's shining blade,
 wide, finely honed, shaped like a leaf,
Lord Sonasailan! Kailash's Lord! (80)
 Whether you guide me

²⁵ *araṇam* or *araṇ* means *fortress, castle* or *defence, fortification*, of which the dictionaries list four kinds, *walls, seas and rivers, mountains* and *forests*. The word *araṇam* brings to mind the second *mangalam* verse of Ramana Maharshi's *Uḷḷadu Nārpadu*, previously quoted in relation to v. 46, which contains the lines:

Those people who have a deep fear of death will, for their protection, take as their refuge (*araṇ*) the feet of Lord Śiva, he who is without both birth and death.

²⁶ Nandi is again pictured in his semi-human form, controlling the crowds of lesser deities with his staff in Lord Śiva's court on Mount Kailash. See v. 35 and note. As in that verse, those deities are imagined to be ultimately undeterred by Nandi's blows, but, having at first shrunk back, crowd forward again, prepared to risk his wrath. In this they are compared to algae or pond scum on a pond or tank, which is dissipated when a stone is thrown in but soon regathers again on the surface.

onto salvation's true way
upon which those sages embark
who the god Desire have slain,
or saying, 'What a fool!'
consign me to the [hellish] dark,
what recourse remains to me
other than the lotuses of your feet?

Unlike other mountains in the world
where deer prance²⁷ 'midst summits high,
within you dwells the deer-like One
with unsuckled breasts like lotus buds
[who bears the name Unnamulai],²⁸
Lord Sonasailan! Kailash's Lord!

(81)



(to be continued)

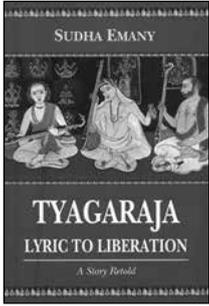
(cont.) The image recalls v. 399 of the Sangam anthology, *Kuruntogai*, in which the heroine is telling her friend how she suffers in the absence of her lover:

Like the green scum/gathered/on the surface of a well/where the village/
draws its water,/this sickly pallor/recedes at his every touch,/only to return/
whenever he leaves.

²⁷ *vām marai* – deer that leaps, go by leaps. *marai* is more properly the sambur, Indian elk, one of the largest species in the deer family.

²⁸ *uṇāmulai ām tāmarai porundum māṇ*, literally *the maid who possesses the lotuses that are [her] unsuckled breasts*. *uṇāmulai*, which means *unsuckled breasts* is the name of Śiva's consort in the *sthala* of Tiruvaṇṇāmalai. See v. 72 and note. The word *māṇ* – deer also means woman and is often used of Śiva's consort. *tāmarai* – lotus is here used to designate *the closed bud of the lotus*, which resembles the female breast in its shape.

BOOK REVIEWS



TYAGARAJA Lyric to Liberation A story retold by Sudha Emany. Pub: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt Ltd., Jawahar Nagar, Delhi-110007. 2019. pp.207, ₹650. ISBN 978-81-208-4259-5. www.mlb.com

Tyagaraja, saint and Carnatic music composer, lived between 1767 and 1847 AD. His name has become synonymous with Carnatic music at its best along with his undivided devotion to Lord Rama. Great pioneering composers like Purandara Dasa, the Father of Carnatic Music, Bhadrachala Rama Dasa, Annamacharya, and others preceded him and there have been great contemporaries like Syama Sastry, the supreme craftsman of the art of music composition, and the versatile and erudite, Muthuswamy Dikshitar, and there have been in our own times composers like Papanasam Sivan, hailed as Tamil Tyagaiah and others. However, it is Tyagaraja's name which stands out and no other name is dearer and more evocative of awe than that of Tyagaraja's.

Author Sudha Emany tells us why. She is well qualified to write on Tyagraja – she has a very good knowledge of Carnatic music and has a diploma in violin – as well as a proficiency in Telugu, her own mother tongue, and Sanskrit in which she holds a diploma, the two languages in which Tyagaraja composed songs. Besides, she has a very impressive command of English in which she has a Master's degree and she writes in simple English with clarity, precision and elegance.

Sudha Emany looks at the great composer from various perspectives: as a totally surrendered devotee of Lord Rama, as a born musician, a master composer with immense lyrical prowess, as an ascetic householder who scorned possessions, as one who declined gifts and begged his alms singing his songs on the streets of his town for him, his family, students and guests, as a polyglot who conversed with his numerous visitors in their own tongues, as a man of excellent moral rectitude, as a very accessible man and a most welcoming host who kept an open house, as one who loved his students dearly and provided

free boarding and lodging and was loved and revered by them, as one who never put down others but admired merit wherever he saw it, as a man who was in the world but not of the world, as one who sought nothing but liberation through his music and completely selfless love for Lord Rama. Above all, the author looks at the great Ramabhakta as an advaitin who believed in the oneness of life and of Reality and to whom Rama, was identical with the Advaitin's Brahman.

Sudha says: "Tyagaraja's chosen path to attain to the Divine was destined to be through his music and his devotion to Rama both of which depended on his lyrical prowess." And what a prowess it was! Tyagaraja was not only a musical colossus, he was a superb word-artist too. Such music which flows like Ganga and shines like gems and such honeyed words of ethereal beauty can come only from a highly evolved soul. Of the 700 songs extant out of several thousand believed to have been composed by him, the author shares with her readers 170 songs, reproducing the songs in roman script and giving elegant English translations, quoting them in proper contexts.

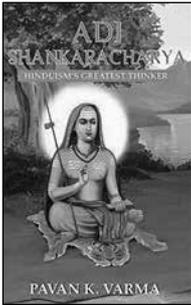
Rama is Tyagaraja's own Self, everybody's Self. Tyagaraja aimed at Self-realisation through complete surrender to Rama. His music pervaded his entire life in which, as Sudha shows, there was not a single false note of pettiness, greed, pride, jealousy or hypocrisy. No wonder that the music of such a great pure soul has not merely entertained but ennobled generations of listeners.

As God is a Beloved, Father, Mother, Child, Friend and everything to the devotee, he takes the fullest liberty with Him and reaches out to Him in numerous moods and modes. So does Tyagaraja, who not only traversed the entire gamut of devotional moods but gave tongue to them eloquently as the author shows in three delightful chapters. In Tyagaraja's own words, he wails, waits, meditates, adores, beckons, praises, clings, scolds, prostrates, sports, sings, begs, celebrates, seeks refuge, comprehends, concurs, greets, is grabbed, tires and submits. In the bewitching song 'Manasuloni' in *Raga Hindolam*, the saint reminds Rama that He had helped him before, will He not hold his hand now? In the exquisitely worded song in *Raga Todi* 'Kaddanavaariki', Tyagaraja asks Rama, "Are the assurances of the elders who say you exist for those who believe in you, false?" It seems that Tyagaraja employed every mood and mode there is and more, each one springing from the fountain of love that his heart was.

It is said that the Vedas are *Śabdabrahman* and music is *Nādabrahman*. It is certainly true of Carnatic music and absolutely so of Tyagaraja's music. In the chapter *Nāda as Brahman*, Sudha Emany brings it out powerfully. The final chapter 'The Liberation' is a fitting thrilling climax to a riveting book. If Tyagaraja's life and music were a wonder, equally was the way his Lord Rama took him back, of which there were eyewitnesses alive during the first two decades of the 19th century.

This is a book which every lover of Carnatic music should read.

— V.S. Ganamurti



ADI SHANKARACHARYA Hinduism's Greatest Thinker. Pawan K. Varma. Pub: Tranquebar Press, Chennai-600095. 2018. pp.364, ₹699. ISBN 9788193655610.

Pawan Kumar Varma, former ambassador, and now a newspaper columnist and in politics has written a highly readable book on a subject of very great and perennial importance. The subject is Adi Sankaracharya whom the author incontrovertibly hails as Hinduism's greatest thinker in the book's title itself and goes to prove it in a riveting, succinct, brilliant and well-researched presentation of the life and teaching of the master dialectician. No doubt, books must have been and will continue to be written by many other scholars and academicians, even more knowledgeable in the subject with greater proficiency in the majestic, hoary language used by Adi Sankara on the subject but this book has a unique flavour. Varma has a clear, incisive, versatile intellect and is an excellent writer with an original, simple, strikingly charming style perhaps both innate and honed to perfection during his stints as a diplomat and sojourns abroad.

Varma's account, brief but adequate, of Sankara's life is the book's opening chapter aptly named 'Life – A Personal Journey'. He has visited every place hallowed by the stay of the great Acharya right from the blessed Kaladi where the manifestation began in 788 A.D. till Kanchi in the South and Kedarnath in the North in one of which it ended in 820 A.D. Having held very important positions in the Indian Government, Varma has been able to easily meet important and

knowledgeable people from whom he could obtain valuable details about the life and message of the Master.

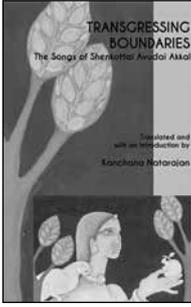
Sankara, the Advaitic titan, did not invent Advaita, the philosophy of non-duality or, as some scholars prefer to call it, non-difference though the two names seem non-different. He skimmed the Advaitic cream out of the vast sea of philosophical literature that was made available to him mainly by his teachers at Kaladi and then much more by his spiritual Vidyaguru Sri Govindapada at Omkareswara. Besides, he was doubtless a born mystic who could tap into himself for insights.

In the chapter 'The Canvas Before' Varma offers a panoramic view of the most impressive philosophical wealth that is Sankara's heirloom. There were the Vedas, the main ten Upanishads and the marvellous notes on *Mandukyopanishad* by Gaudapada, Govindapada's Guru, Vyasa's profound *Brahma Sutras* and the greatest anthology of wisdom, the *Bhagavadgita*. There were the great epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* and the five schools of *Darsana* or philosophy that preceded him, and the wise, gentle, revolutionary, agnostic religions Buddhism and Jainism. Sankara tested everything on the touchstone of the Vedas and Vedanta that the Upanishads are. Incredibly original, yet young Sankara did not create a new philosophy. In Varma's words Sankara's amazing originality lay "in the creation of a structure of thought that is rigorously consistent, internally cohesive and ground breaking in protecting the non-dual reality of the cosmic play."

In the brilliant chapter 'The Audacity of Thought', Varma offers us more than a peep into the doughtiest brainstorming ever of Sankara in which he showed the inadequacy, incompleteness or untenability of every school of thought other than Advaita which holds that Brahman alone is real, the jiva and his ego are illusory and so is the world conjured by the ego and when the vision is illumined by Self-knowledge, the jiva is Brahman itself and none else and All This is Brahman. Déjà vu? Yes, these are Vedic, Vedantic declarations and it was left to young Sankara, to prove them and drum them up along the length and breadth of Bharatavarsha. There is Varma's eloquent summing up: "On the basis of the enigmatic utterances of the Upanishads on Brahman and Atman, the cryptic aphorisms of the Vedanta Sutras and a deep study of the other schools of philosophy that preceded him, he built a vision that sought to explicate both the bewildering plurality in our lives and the eternal substratum of unity underlying it."

In a long impressive chapter Varma tries to show that by and large modern science bears out the Vedantic thesis. Finally, there is A Selective Anthology in which a good number of Sankara's hymns of matchless poetic beauty drenched in total devotion are reproduced in Roman script with good English translations.

This is one of the best general introductions I have read on the greatest thinker of Hinduism. — Jijñasu



TRANSGRESSING BOUNDARIES The Songs of Shenkottai Avudai Akkal by Kanchana Natarajan. Publ. Zubaan Books, New Delhi. 2012. pp.362, ₹601. ISBN 978-0521448697 www.zubaanbooks.com

Kanchana Natarajan's article in MP Vol.56, No. 3 of July-September 2019 featuring the lives of St. Teresa of Avila and Sri Avudai Akkal triggered a search to learn more about Akkal, leading me to eventually contact the author and find a copy from Amazon

India given that the publisher had no copies left.

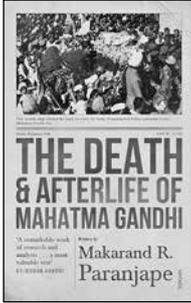
This book by Dr. Natarajan is one I could not put down for its pages come alive with the story of Akkal's life and her Vedantic outpourings which were in lucid spoken Brahminical Tamil of those times. We learn that Akkal's works in a male dominated world were not written down till the early 1900s and had survived largely by oral transmission from generation to generation within and across families, mostly Brahmin widows in Tirunelveli and Madurai districts.

The author's contribution is profound in many ways. It has given us not only an English translation of the Tamil verses of Akkal, but also very rich contextual information and commentary with cross references to our Upanishads, classical Carnatic music, local history, village norms and practices, Ayurveda and spiritual masters.

In over 362 absorbing pages, the author takes us through the Vedantic lyrics, each a gem on its own steeped in meaning and rich with imagery and metaphors that make poetry what it is. That Bhagavan had said that Mother used to sing some of Akkal's songs increases our spiritual thirst and hence one sets out to the Tamil source spring to drink from.

We must count it as our collective blessing that Akkal's songs – the handed down version over some 300 years – is now available from Sri Gnanananda Niketan (gnanananda_niketan.org).

MP readers may want to see online the Jan-March issue of 2010 where a short article by Dr. Kanchana Natarajan on Shenkottai Avudai Akkal first appeared. — Cheenu Srinivasan



THE DEATH AND AFTERLIFE OF MAHATMA GANDHI. Makarand R. Paranjape. Pub. Penguin Books. 2015. ₹399. xviii+331pp. ISBN 9780143427599 www.penguinbooksindia.com

What is striking about this highly original book is the total empathy of the relatively young author with Gandhiji whose earthly sojourn ended about fifteen years before he was born. The whole book is a meditation on the death of the phenomenon called Gandhi who in his life was a man of very deep meditation in which he was in tune with what he called the Unseen Power. In a life dotted with numerous fasts of various durations, silence, prayer and surrender, he transcended the flawed human mind which, however brilliant, cannot sense Reality. Though Gandhiji was the simplest of men in attire, life and thought, yet as one delves into his life, a highly complex scenario unfolds. It is perhaps natural because Truth is both simple and complex and Gandhiji was an unswerving votary of Truth. Gandhi has become an enduring metaphor for quest of Truth.

The book begins with Gandhiji's assassination. Who killed this Dove of Peace and Apostle of Love making him a Lamb of God? The answer is easy: Nathuram Godse of the Hindu Mahasabha and his friends. It is also difficult because the victim was a man of God and he could not be killed by one individual or even a whole group of conspirators. Paranjape casts a much vaster net than Stephen Wolport did in his fascinating *Nine Hours to Rama* which naturally was banned in India. In it, the finger of accusation of negligence was pointed to two or three very important people in power and the needle of suspicion of masterminding what Paranjape would call patricide turned towards someone whom it would not be politically correct to criticize today.

Paranjape's needle of suspicion points to everybody including Gandhiji himself. Gandhiji had been talking often about death in the last weeks of his life. Death was his friend he said. And he was meeting his friend more than half way in the last fast of his life. For one who wished to go on for 125 years, it now seemed he could not wait any more. It was not exactly death wish, the call had come. However, the author forgot the Entity perhaps the most responsible for the end of the earthly sojourn of this man of God, namely God Himself. In the evening of the day before he was shot, Gandhiji was talking to M.A. Srinivasan, who was Dewan of the Scindias when he told him that he felt he should go and he asked God who said he should. Only God can take back the life of anybody and certainly that of a man of God like Gandhiji. At that very moment, Godse and Apte were in transit to Delhi with the automatic Beretta in their bag. Ironically enough, they were the ones who carried out what Gandhiji always wished, namely dying with Rama's Name on his lips as he was struck down. They were armed with a pistol and this Lamb of God armed to the teeth with unconditional love.

The book begins with the death or to be more exact with the martyrdom of Gandhiji and proceeds to show very graphically how Gandhi worked greater miracles in death and after than even in his miraculous life. He joined the ranks of John the Baptist, Jesus and many of his Apostles, Mansur al-Hallaj, Guru Arjun Singh, Guru Tegh Bahadur and other messengers of God who laid down their lives for Truth and live for ever.

Paranjape calls the murder on that January 30th as Patricide because the victim is the Father of the Nation. It is a guilt which has to be atoned by all of us, past, present and future. The author instils a guilt complex and also the salvatory sense of penitence in us all. By involving all of us, to the exclusion of no Indian, in that event, the author helps us to try and redeem our lives from the collective wrongdoing and the act of soul-searching can become the practice of Self-enquiry culminating in our Self-Knowledge. In fact Gandhiji's primary goal was to make his countrymen free from fear, hate and divisiveness and be seekers of Truth and he said that India's freedom was of secondary concern to him.

If God wanted to call his messenger back, he could have adopted a better medium. The act of a strong young man using an automatic

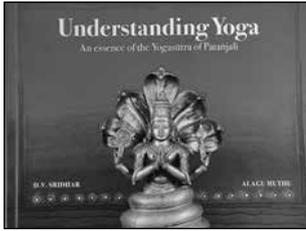
to annihilate a frail old man, on his way to his Prayer Meeting, whose weapon was love and *Ramnām* was out and out cowardly and adharmic. Or does it make the martyrdom of the man of God even more haunting? The assassin claimed that he was a patriot and chose to silence Gandhi because he did not prevent the Partition of India. Paranjape shows how Gandhiji did all that was humanly possible to stop Partition. It is an irony that Gandhi who was the quintessence of all that is good in Hinduism was feared, hated and finished by those who spoke in the name of that religion. Pseudo-Hinduism can be worse than pseudo-secularism. Hinduism is constant synthesis and progress with roots in timeless values absorbing all that is good in everything and being tolerant of what is different in others. It was Gandhiji's Hinduism.

Paranjape quotes Vinod Lal who wrote that the killers of Gandhi had a miserably poor understanding of Hinduism. The chapter on Gandhi and RSS is very objective. RSS was no more involved in Gandhiji's assassination than the rest of us Indians. Gandhiji admired the total castelessness of RSS and he accepted, though with a touch of scepticism, the Sarsanghchalak's assurance to him in September 1947 that their aim was to protect Hindus and never to harm the Muslims. The Sangh's Chief knew and said that none ever had a greater impact on the minds of Indians than Gandhiji. In 1969 Guru Golwalkar wrote that Gandhiji was one of those who should be remembered every morning (*Pratassmaraneeya*). However, today they have to decide to move more surely towards the all-inclusive Hinduism, which is Sanatana Dharma, of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda and Gandhiji.

The chapter 'The Art of Dying' is a masterpiece, the tribute jointly meant for Gandhiji and the author who has selected Gandhi's remarks on death in the last few weeks of his life and commented on them. He says that Gandhiji went just as he had predicted, exiting according to his own script, right down to the last words. When Bhagavan Ramana was told of Gandhiji's premonition, he remarked, "Won't a *jñāni* know?"

In his brief, brilliant Epilogue Paranjape repeats his censure of all who failed to protect Gandhiji when every detail of the imminent crime was known. Well it is all over. He concludes that Gandhiji has

given us all the whole blueprint for peace and the roadmap for a sane world order if only we would listen to him. The final sentences of this inspiring book neatly sum up its message: “Just as he did not live in vain, the Mahatma did not die in vain either. This is attested to not only by his life, but much more so by his death and afterlife.” — Atreya



UNDERSTANDING YOGA An essence of the Yogasutra of Patanjali by DV Sridhar and Alagu Muthu. Self-published. Yogaraksanam, Besant Nagar, Chennai. 2019. ₹699. 161pp. ISBN: 978-93-5382-548-5. damalsridhar@gmail.com & alagumuthu.yogasutra@gmail.com

The book was first published in 2008 and this revised edition is given a new expansive format. It is a sincere effort to explain the reality of Yoga given that it has become nothing more than a form of exercise for many people. It is written with knowledge, research and love.

While it does not delve into depths the teachings of Patanjali it nevertheless explains his aims in an accessible language so that one is left with a much more complete picture of yoga than currently exist in the general domain. It is a book for the layperson to enjoy and understand. The exquisite art work of Sohan Qadri enhances the message and is an example of what can be done to make reading an enjoyable experience. It has the attributes of a coffee table production with its beautiful layout but with real substance. One not only appreciates it visually but learns a lot from it. It is a book to pick up and put down satisfied with an insight.

The book is divided into the traditional four chapters of *Samadhi Pada*, *Sadhana Pada*, *Vibhuti Pada* and *Kaivalya Pada*. Each *sloka* is presented with its devanagari script, English transliteration, Alagu Muthu’s apt verification and lastly, a short prose summary of the *sloka*.

We see here yet another inspiring example of individuals who are attempting to reawaken us to the wisdom and beauty of Hinduism, and wish to make a difference to our lives. Anyone who has the opportunity to pick up this book will come away impressed. — T.V. Ramamurthy



ASHRAM BULLETIN

Physiotherapy at Ashram

On Saturday 28th September, Sri Ramanasramam Dispensary inaugurated its newly installed physiotherapy department. Dr. Gandhi, physiotherapist, has been called on to head treatment for patients suffering paralysis, lower back pain, neck pain, shoulder and knee pain and cerebral palsy (in children). The lab is equipped with a cervical and lumbar traction machine, interferential therapy machine, a shortwave diathermy machine, ultrasound, tens and a muscle stimulator.



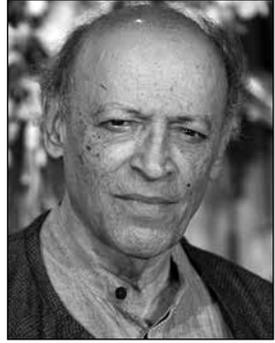
Dr. R. Ravichandran was born in Karaikudi on 9th March, 1957 and did his undergraduate work at Stanley Medical College, followed by postgraduate study in Aravind Eye Hospital where he worked for 10 years under Dr. G. Venkataswamy. He worked with Dr. Bill Stewart at Stanford University, USA in 1992. Under Dr. G. Venkataswamy's guidance and inspiration, he developed devotion towards Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi and founded

the Sri Ramana Maharshi Eye Hospital in 1996. He performed 4,76,496 free surgeries all over India and trained 126 ophthalmologists around the world. The Government of India honoured him with the 'Best Citizen of India 2001' award for conducting free eye camps and free eye surgeries. He was well-known for his kind heart and wide knowledge and experience in his profession. On 17th September 2019, at the age of 62, Dr. Ravichandran surrendered his soul at the Lotus Feet of Bhagavan Sri Ramana.

Sri Biddanda K. Subiah, the long-time Ramana devotee and Bharatiya Vidya Bhavana Kodagu Vidyalyaya Managing Board Chairman, passed away at the age of 82, on 25th August 2019 following cardiac arrest. The prime disciple of the great Nath Panth Master B.G. Vellal Maharaj, he was on the way to deliver a satsang discourse in Bengaluru when

he developed health complications and passed away in the car before help could be arranged. His followers write that he had already ‘died’ when he merged with the Divine years back, and only now ‘has his body left us’.

As a planter with an estate in Meduru, he and other planters who were being spiritually guided by him provided Ramanasramam’s annual requirement of coffee beans, pepper and cardamom each year for decades. He had numerous followers in India and from abroad.



Sri Biddanda K. Subiah is survived by his wife, son and two daughters.

Sri V.Srinivasan, son of the late Justice K.S. Venkataraman was absorbed in Bhagavan on 2nd September 2019. (Devotees would know his elder sister, the late Sulochana Natarajan and her husband, late Sri AR Natarajan, Founder President of Ramana Maharshi Centre for Learning, Bengaluru).



Sri V. Srinivasan was blessed to have the *darshan* of Bhagavan in 1948 and later became an ardent devotee of Kanchi Paramacharya, His Holiness Jagadguru Shankaracharya Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswati Swami. He was also deeply devoted to the cause of old freedom fighters of India in general, and to Sri C. Rajagopalachari, in particular. In accordance with the Gandhian spirit, he always wore khadi. A person of childlike innocence and natural purity, Srinivasan was ever ready to help one and all with no expectations. His favourite God was Ganesha, and he was absorbed on Ganesh Chaturthi day. He is survived by his wife Hema Srinivasan, his nieces, Sarada Natarajan and Ambika Kameshwar.

Smt Hilda Kapur was born Hilda Shroff in Sholapur on 7th April 1930. She was the eldest of three siblings. All three children and her parents were ardent devotees of Sri Ramana Maharshi. After a huge



cyclone in her youth when just a girl of nine years old, she was standing on the veranda of the family home and saw an elderly man walking towards the flat. She said to herself, “This man is coming to help us.” It was not long after this that her parents began coming to Ramanasramam. When Hilda first saw a photo of Bhagavan, she recognised that the man who had approached after the cyclone had been Bhagavan. Hilda, her parents and her sister, Rhoda and brother, Dadi came to stay near the Ashram in January 1945 when Hilda was 15 years old.

Inspired by Paul Brunton’s *A Search in Secret India*, Hilda’s father and mother Peston and Dhun traveled to Tiruvannamalai in 1939 and arrived during Bhagavan’s *Jayanti* celebrations; their first *darshan* of Bhagavan proved life-changing. Their affection for Bhagavan deepened in subsequent visits and by January 1945 they took the plunge and came to live at Ramanasramam.

With the war on, her father, a naval officer, was compelled to come and go. But Mrs. Dhun Shroff and the three children stayed permanently to enjoy the simplicity of Ashram life. Hilda, aged 15, Rhoda, 13, and Dadi, 12, having been used to an urban life, at first found the simple rural lifestyle challenging, yet the privations they faced served to teach them surrender. In time, all were enveloped in the calm loving presence of Sri Bhagavan which, they later said, “acted as a balm for every anguished soul.”

Hilda visited the Ashram regularly, even with a job and bringing up four young children as a single parent. She would relate many beautiful incidents in her life where Bhagavan featured. She left this world on 11th October 2019. ▲