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Divine Names of Arunachala

19. ॐ भक्तदोष निवर्तकाय नमः

om bhaktadoṣ anivartakāya namaḥ

Prostration to Him who removes the faults of his devotees.

‘Doṣa’ means a fault, error or sin. It comes from the verbal root ‘duṣ’, to be bad or corrupted, to sin, commit a mistake. ‘Bhakta’ means devotees and ‘nivartaka’ causing to cease, abolishing, removing.

It is especially noteworthy that the subject of the very first verse of Ramana Maharshi’s great poem to Lord Arunachala is removal of the ego, which is the source of all human errors. It is a supremely powerful verse that embodies in a few well-chosen words the entire content of His teaching. Surrender, know who you really are, and be free.

Arunachala! Thou dost uproot and annihilate the ego of those who meditate on Thee in their hearts.

This idea of the ego’s annihilation plays out in verse 24 of the *Bhagavad Gītā Sāram*, but here it is cast in terms of Knowledge and the destructive power of fire. Arunachala is the Hill of Fire, so the comparison is particularly apt.

*As burning fire of fuel ashes makes
So doth the fire of Knowledge, Arjuna,
Reduce all actions unto ashes too.¹*

Ego or mind and actions are intimately connected. This is firmly stated in verse 2062 of the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha*.

*Between the two, mind and activity, which are ever united like
fire and heat, on the absence (or annihilation) of either, both
just vanish.²*

And then there is the Agnus Dei, based upon John the Baptist’s reference to Jesus in *John* 1:29.

*Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world,
grant us Peace.*

On Sundays, this prayer is chanted in Christian churches all over the world. — BKC

¹ Translation by Major A.W. Chadwick and approved by Bhagavan.

² *The Vision and the Way of Vāsiṣṭha*, translated by Samvid, p.498.

Remembrance

The coronavirus pandemic has recently occupied the minds of most people around the world. The physical virus is not the only disease, there is also the invisible fear of the unknown that has spread and caused major insecurity. The contagion has created a marker in the lives of many. An enemy that has no country or boundary. There is a before Covid-19 and there will be an after Covid-19, which will surely happen because nothing lasts forever.

It is an opportunity for us to ask ourselves what is really important in our lives. The enforced lockdown many experienced has led to the disruption of normal life. Instead of counting our earnings for what we can plan on buying or doing next, we are now counting the cost of an invisible expense it has extracted from us not just in physical discomfort, but also emotional and mental disequilibrium. For those who have lost a family member or a friend, the loss is sobering. The shock great or small has or will alter us in ways we may not see for years to come, but change will indubitably happen for we realise there is something we cannot control.

What the pandemic has done is magnify what happens on a daily basis in our lives. The world is always changing, maybe not as dramatically as recently but nevertheless everything is always in flux. We are rarely on stable, secure ground and we are faced with the unpalatable fact that we don't know what will happen next. If we look closely we see that we really don't have any control. This is

both a curse and a blessing because life is constantly new and fresh. Our challenge is to learn from it. We have no choice but to become more aware of what is really important to us in terms of values. The long stretches of free time now forced on us can be spent engaged in family communication long overdue, binge watching TV or reading something worthwhile or simply looking at a wall bored out of one's mind. Quarrels that were incipient can erupt volcanically, or alternatively love and friendship can be cemented caringly. The choice is ours. From the point of view of a Ramana devotee the most notable result of the pandemic is the time it has given us to sit quietly and ponder. It is a golden opportunity.

Anyone who has experienced the lockdown will know the value of the unfettered freedom of movement they had before, and though for the most part after the epidemic is over, we will revert to previous habits it will not be total, because the sensitivity we learnt will leave a positive residue. The world has changed and we too have changed with it. Though we may feel at times that existence is pointless, nothing is ever wasted. We are living in abnormal times but when did we not live in the moment not knowing what would happen next?

Under the guidance of Sri Ramana Maharshi we are instructed to either enquire as to the root of our identity, that is, the complex of thoughts we identify with by asking Who Am I? or pursue the path of surrender. More often than not over time we engage in both activities as they complement each other.

If we principally follow surrender, a question arises: what is surrender? How do we surrender? Is it a passive attitude? Do we wait supine for something to happen to us? Or are we to engage actively in surrender?

Surrender supposes giving something up. If that is so, what do we give up? More to the point, what is ours to give up? Yes, we have possessions; yes, we have ideas about ourselves; yes, we have relationships. But are they truly ours? We do not own our mother and father nor our children or our friends. We do not even 'own' ourselves for we are constantly pulled and pushed hither and yon without our consent. True renunciation is when something drops away naturally without our volition. It is self-evident like children who give up a toy because they have outgrown it, not because they did not want it. Whether we are aware of it or not, we are constantly giving up

ideas and things because they are no longer of any use. If we do feel a twinge it is more for sentimental reasons than practical.

The whole purpose of surrender is to discard anything that distracts us and comes between us and the guru. By surrender we allow the grace of the guru to transform us. Because we are partially blind to our own self-made obstacles, we cannot see clearly and therefore the act of surrender is fraught with misunderstanding. We think by giving up something we automatically will be better off. Not necessarily. For example, we do not give up regular food because without it we would not survive. We do not give up friendship or affection because life is hard enough as it is. But we do give up that which makes us miserable.

Discrimination is required to know what is best for us. It is here we can go round in a circle: to exercise discrimination we need to be detached. To be detached we need discrimination.

When we are faced with this dilemma, it is akin to the age-old quandary, which came first: the chicken or the egg? In logical terms there is no reasonable, uncomplicated answer but we are not dealing with logic. Life in its entirety does not conform to the logic of the dimension we presently inhabit. Though we may not always be aware of it, other dimensions of reality interrupt our pedestrian lives with as Wordsworth would say, ‘intimations of immortality’.

The power of surrender is ignited when we recognize we cannot find our way out of an impasse. We recognize our helplessness in the face of forces far beyond our comprehension, let alone control. We open up our hearts and minds to the unknown and refuse to allow fear or insecurity to rule our lives. We may not be always aware of it but the power of Arunachala Ramana once it has entered our heart works systematically. How is a mystery but effective it is, if we trust and surrender to its influence.

And how do we open up? It is by prayer that helps break us out of the shell of ignorance we inhabit. It is here that surrender becomes evident when we give up our self-will and allow a higher power to operate in our lives. Prayer is like a shaft of one-pointed attention that unlocks the door of our unconscious, blind refusal to see and listen. It can happen spontaneously on rare occasions but more often we need to practise for it to be efficacious. It should be regular. The more we practise the more we gain insight.

If we simply remember our guru or chosen *iṣṭadevatā* then slowly but surely a bond or current is established. Bhagavan once said to a young devotee that if she remembered Bhagavan, Bhagavan would remember her. This applies to us all. To think of the guru is for the guru to think of us. This, of course, is not a casual thought but a whole-hearted thought, persistent and sincere. Like the disciple in the well-known story, who questioned his guru as to how much earnestness is required in the quest, and the guru in turn demonstrated it by holding the head of the disciple under water until the desperate disciple burst free and surfaced to breathe the air. So too, we should develop this same sense of determination.

It is all a question of remembrance, never to forget our resolve to seek the truth and know who we truly are. Remembrance is both a practice and a process, it is actually not passive, but active. As a practice it is a way to purify ourselves of tamasic and rajasic thoughts that cloud our consciousness. As a mystical state the consequence of remembrance depends on the spiritual level of the seeker. The spiritual path is well documented in literature for it is a step by step process all the saints and sages have travelled. It requires patience and perseverance. It is not that we are deliberately being kept in ignorance, it is we who keep ourselves in ignorance. That said, to burst directly into the highest level of light would be an act of lunacy. We are led gently. We should be aware of our limitations and act accordingly. Like confronting the coronavirus we become all too aware of our limitations. This is good. Until we accept how vulnerable we are, we can never grow in wisdom and find by constant remembrance our true centre free of all expectation and delusion.

It is said that when someone loves something, they remember it often. When we recollect our love towards Bhagavan, we remember this in our hearts. The only remembrance possible to sustain permanently is this loving remembrance with the heart for it is impossible to remember with the mind which by its very nature is always in a state of flux. It is a help of course to remember that only Bhagavan's body left us, he himself is always here and everywhere if we sincerely ask for his help, then he surely hears us.

We should remember to remember. ▲

Dṛk Dṛśya Viveka

NEERA KASHYAP

It was during the period that Bhagavan stayed at the Virupaksha cave (1900-1916) that he copied the Tamil verses of *Dṛk Dṛśya Viveka* (*Drik Drishya Viveka*) and translated these into Tamil prose. Though he copied the verses of Sivananda Murti in which the original work is attributed to Vidyananda Swami, Bhagavan's invocation verse and introduction to the text attributes the work to Adi Shankaracharya. Later forming a part of Bhagavan's *Collected Works*, *Dṛk Dṛśya Viveka*, along with Bhagavan's translation of *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, were first published in 1908 and reprinted in 1916 and 1921.

In his introduction to *Dṛk Dṛśya Viveka*, Bhagavan asserts: "This is the whole secret of the advaita doctrine as taught by the master to the advanced *sādhaka*." Once, when the chief of the Kovilur Vedanta Mutt, Veera-Subbaiah Swami and his disciples visited Bhagavan at Virupaksha, they requested him to explain the practices required for attaining *sahaja nirvikalpa-samādhi*. In affirmation, Bhagavan showed them his translation of *Dṛk Dṛśya Viveka* in which the six meditations are explained.

In attempting to understand this text, this writer wishes to acknowledge with deep gratitude the explanations and insights into this work offered by Swami Sarvapriyananda, minister and spiritual

leader of the Vedanta Society of New York (Ramakrishna Math and Mission) through a series of six Youtube talks recorded during the Sivananda Ashram Yoga Retreat in the Bahamas in early 2018. In this article he is referred to as Swamiji. This article will attempt to focus on aspects that have a practical bearing on our sadhana.

Through his introduction, which provides the essence of the text, Bhagavan states:

In one's own Self which is no other than Brahman, there is a mysterious power known as *avidyā* (ignorance) which is beginningless and not separate from the Self. Its characteristics are veiling and presentation of diversity. Just as the pictures in a cinema, though not visible either in sunlight or in darkness, become visible in a spot of light in the midst of darkness, so in the darkness of ignorance there appears the reflected light of the Self, illusory and scattered, taking the form of thought. This is the primal thought known as the ego, *jīva* or *kartā* (doer), having the mind as the medium of its perceptions.

So thought, born of darkness, becomes visible in a spot of light reflected from the Self. With the mind as medium being a storehouse of latent tendencies, thoughts are seen in this spot of light as a “shadow-show in the waking and dream states...mistaken for real by the *jīva*” (Bhagavan's introduction). Since our tendencies are mere reflections, like images reflected in a mirror, Bhagavan's advice reiterates the text:

Turn away from the delusion caused by latent tendencies and false notions of interior and exterior. By such constant practise of sahaja *samādhi*, the veiling power (which first hides the real nature of the Self and then presents the objective world) vanishes and the non-dual Self is left over to shine forth as Brahman itself.

The first verse itself – considered the most important – plunges us directly into the distinction between the Seer and the seen. Bhagavan translates:

The world we see, being seen by the eye, is *drśya* (object). But the eye, being perceived by the mind is *drśya* (object) and the mind that sees it is *drk* (subject). The mind, with its thoughts perceived by the Self, is *drśya* (object) and the Self

is *dr̥k* (subject). The Self cannot be *dr̥śya* (object), not being perceived by anything else.

Swami Sarvapriyananda points out three principles that derive from this verse:

(i) The seer and seen are different. If the eyes are the seer and the book is seen, then the eyes are different from the book. The seeing mind is different from the eyes seen. The seeing Witness is different from the movements of the mind seen.

(ii) The seer is one, the seen many. The forms seen are many but the eyes that see them are one entity. The mind that sees the various qualities of the eyes – blindness, keenness, dullness – perceives singly. The witnessing Self sees the various facets of the mind – desire, determination, doubt, faith, courage, fear – singly.

(iii) The seen changes, the seer is unchanged. The witnessing Self is unchanging, neither rising nor setting; neither increasing nor decaying; self-effulgent, illumining everything – unaided. This witness is ever the Seer, the world ever the seen – the mind and eyes serving as instruments of the seen.

A remarkable conclusion can be derived from these principles: if you feel misery in your mind you cannot be miserable as, being different from the mind, you are the seer of the misery in your mind. Swamiji urges us to practise watching our misery as a means of calming our minds. Yet, if the mind calms down, he cautions:

No, you are not calm. By embracing the calm of your mind, you are embracing the mind again. And the mind is changeable. You are witness to the calm mind just as you are witness to the restless mind. In witnessing both, you find real peace – not subject to the changes of the mind – for the witnessing Self is ever at peace.

A central question that has puzzled many professionals – scientists, philosophers, linguists, psychologists, neuroscientists is: how does a physical system like the body generate a first-person subjective experience? This ‘hard problem’ is resolved through the Advaitic perspective: it is the pure Consciousness shining on the mind that gives one this subjective experience – *cit chaaya* or a reflection of Consciousness.

Swamiji explains this in terms of physical reflection. At night we don’t see the sun but its reflection can be seen on the moon which, in

turn, reflects on the world. So the sun, though invisible, has its effects on the world. Much like the moon, our minds are lit up by the reflected light of Consciousness, possessing the capacity to reflect this in our thoughts and in all our sense experiences.

Bhagavan translates this as:

This contact of the *buddhi* with the reflected consciousness is like the identity of a red-hot iron ball with fire. Hence the gross body passes for a conscious entity.

Unlike in traditional Vedanta wherein the mind is categorized as mind, ego, *buddhi* and *citta* (memory), *Dr̥k Dr̥śya Viveka* categorizes it in just two: ego and *antaḥkaraṇa* (the rest of the mind comprising the inner organs of mind, *buddhi* and *citta*). The identity of the ego with the reflected consciousness is of three kinds:

(i) It is natural (*sahajam*) like the reflection of a face in a mirror is natural.

(ii) The ego's identity with the body is due to past *karma*, sundered only when *karma* is exhausted.

(iii) Its identity with the witness is due to ignorance. What is generated by ignorance is removed by the knowledge that ego and *antaḥkaraṇa* are instruments of the witnessing Consciousness and not Consciousness itself.

How do we acquire this knowledge? Again Swamiji advises:

The ego is not the Self because it is an object. Practice seeing the ego as an object. When we do, we distance ourselves from the emotions, desires, miseries and impulses of the ego-mind which then become easier to control. By realising that the ego-mind is not me – the Self – we give up our identification with it, finding peace.

He raises a common doubt that occurs in us: If I am the unchanging consciousness, why do I keep changing? This doubt is answered by a key aspect of Vedanta. A human being has three aspects:

(i) A gross body or *sthūla śarīra*;

(ii) Within pervading the gross body is the subtle body or the *sūkṣma śarīra*, which carries the thoughts, feelings, desires and memories of the mind;

(iii) The causal body or the *kāraṇa śarīra* which is the cause of the gross and subtle.

Beyond these is Consciousness/Self.

It is in the subtle body that we experience variations – the mind sometimes feeling kind, sometimes nasty. Depending on our state of mind, Consciousness appears to vary. In reality, it is the mind that varies, not Consciousness. In fact, the subtle body experiences all our states of existence.

Bhagavan translates this as:

The subtle body, which is the material cause of mind and ego, experiences the three states (of waking, dream and deep sleep) and also birth and death.

The ego is fully merged in deep sleep, half manifest in dream and fully manifest in the waking state.

It is *māyā* of the causal body that has the powers of projection (*vikṣepa*) and veiling (*āvṛiti*).

Bhagavan translates this as:

It is the projecting power that creates everything from the subtle body to the gross universe of names and forms. These are produced in the Sat-Chit-Ananda (Existence-Consciousness-Bliss) like foam in the ocean. The veiling power operates in such a way that internally the distinction between subject and object cannot be perceived, and externally that between Brahman and the phenomenal world. This indeed is the cause of *saṃsāra*.

The projecting power does no harm, projecting names and forms from Brahman; it is the veiling power that hides the underlying Reality. The enlightened see through the illusion but not ordinary souls. It is like seeing the waves, the foam, and the spray of the ocean but not noting the water underlying it all.

To break through the pervasive power of illusion, Swamiji narrates a story: there was once a debate between a dualist and non-dualist judged by the king; the dualist won; the king, with empathy for the non-dualist announces the trophy to the dualist: “all the silver in the seashells of my kingdom – you can keep!”

Another significant illusion occurs from the witness aspect of the mind: the witnessing Self is reflected in the buddhi aspect of the mind that exists in closest proximity to the Self. Bhagavan terms this ‘*vyāvahārika*’ or the empirical Self which appears as witness, again

through false superimposition. In Bhagavan's teaching, this is the primal thought or the 'I'-thought.

Bhagavan says:

You must distinguish between the 'I', pure in itself, and the 'I'-thought. The latter, being merely a thought, sees subject and object, sleeps, wakes up, eats and thinks, dies and is reborn. But the pure 'I' is the pure Being, eternal existence, free from ignorance and thought-illusion. If you stay as the 'I', your being alone, without thought, the I-thought will disappear and the delusion will vanish forever. In a cinema-show you can see pictures only in a very dim light or in darkness. But when all lights are switched on, all pictures disappear. So also in the flood-light of the Supreme Atman all objects disappear.¹

Bhagavan's own composition – the invocation verse to *Dṛk Drśya Viveka* – is a prayer for transcending all illusion:

Oh thou divine Śaṅkara,/Thou art the Subject/That has knowledge
Of subject and object./Let the subject in me be destroyed/As subject
and object./For thus in my mind arises/The light as the single Siva.

Existence, Consciousness and Bliss – pertaining to Brahman – exist equally in all the five elements, in devas, human beings, animals, plants etc. Names and forms do not pertain to Brahman but to the universe.

The text advises us to focus on Existence-Consciousness-Bliss, both within the Heart and outside, remaining indifferent to names and forms. Taking up each aspect of Brahman, Swamiji asks us to see Existence as an 'Isness' which continues alike in all – like constituent water – people, animals etc. appearing as waves in the waters of Existence. If we find Existence in all, where do we find Consciousness?

In our minds, just as we can experience Bliss in our minds – when purified and rendered *sattvic*. So while names and forms can borrow existence from Brahman, only the mind can experience both existence and consciousness and, if *sattvic*, *ānanda* (bliss) as well. The quality of our mind-mirror will determine the extent of our experience. For the realized one, the whole universe is joy, for the illusory network of our mind's *rāga-dveṣa* (likes and dislikes) is dispelled.

¹ Cohen, S.S., *Guru Ramana*.

Thus far has been the background to the actual description of the six meditations taught in the text which advises their practice for a long period for a breakthrough. At the outset, Swamiji makes the distinction between Vedantic and other meditations. In *yogic* meditation, for instance, every thought is brought back to focus on a particular *mantra* or deity, the purpose being to calm the mind so the Witness is appreciated in its real nature.

In Vedantic meditation, *vicāra* is used to penetrate to the Truth even as our thought-movie is in full projection. In Buddhist meditation, breath is the object while, in Vedantic, breath is used to become Consciousness itself.

Of the six meditations, three are internal with a focus on the Heart and three external with a focus on any external object such as a thought, word, image or sound. Of both the internal and external meditations, the first two are *savikalpa* which use first a thought and then words as support before flowing naturally into the third meditation which is *nirvikalpa* – unsupported by thought or words. In *savikalpa*, the distinction between knower, knowledge and known is not lost while in *nirvikalpa*, it is.

The text deals first with the internal *samādhi*-s. The first support is with any internal object – a thought, a desire, a memory, an idea. With the foreknowledge that the object shines as a reflection of Consciousness, the object is used to become aware of the Consciousness that reflects it.

In Bhagavan’s translation this is “meditation on one’s own consciousness as the witness of thought forms such as desire.” As we feel the current of the witnessing Consciousness, we move to the next meditation, gently bringing these words to mind: “I am Existence-Consciousness-Bliss – non-attached, self-luminous, non-dual.” These are not affirmations but observations, says Swamiji, wherein we are not trying to be detached but observing the detached witnessing Consciousness within. Then giving up the support of both objects and words, we move to the third meditation – *nirvikalpa* – which is a higher form of concentration, free from the subject-object relationship and from all ideas whatsoever.

Bhagavan translates this as:

In this state steady abidance is obtained, like the unflickering flame of a light kept in a place free from the wind.

MOUNTAIN PATH

As the practice goes, Swamiji advises: *nirvikalpa* meditation is sustained by an aspirant established in renunciation, so if thoughts come, go back to the first meditation, then the second and in returning to the third, plunge deeper into stillness. Using a physical screen to demonstrate the practice, Swamiji put his hand before a lit screen. He used the reflection of his hand to focus awareness on the lit screen; he pronounced the text against the lit screen; then dropping hand and words, only the lit screen remained.

The three meditations on the external follow the same process. Just as with an internal object, the first *samādhi* (external) is practised with the help of any external object such as the sun or a hill or river. The aim here is to concentrate on pure Existence as an aspect of Brahman and to dissociate from the changing aspects of names and forms.

Again, Swamiji brings up our capacity to feel the ‘Is’-ness of things.

Focus not on the wave, the foam or spray but on water. Soon you will see we are in the middle of an ocean of Being with people, animals and plants appearing as waves in the ocean. Instead of seeing waves having water, we see water appearing as waves. Notice the ‘Is’ness in everything – our hunger, our sorrow ‘Is’ in the form of Brahman.

The second *samādhi* (external) moves from a single object to an uninterrupted reflection on the essence of Brahman. From ‘Isness’ we are asked to reflect on the unbroken quality of this essence – the same undifferentiated water flowing through all, the difference being only in name and form. Swamiji quotes Kabir:

With open eyes, I joyously behold the beautiful form of God everywhere.

This uninterrupted reflection leads naturally into *nirvikalpa samādhi* (external) – “uninterrupted like the waveless ocean” (Bhagavan’s translation).

Says Swamiji,

When you observe this Beingness, you will notice that It is not outside – it is within. It is you that are the unchanging ocean of Being.

All our practice aims for us to get a glimpse that we are all water – and the task is done. ▲

Self-Realisation And Destiny

The Advaita of Avudai Akkal

ROBERT BUTLER

Sri Avudai Akkal lived in the 18th century. A Brahmin child-widow, she was initiated at an early age by her guru, Shridhara Venketesa Ayyawal. Attaining the state of realisation, she composed many songs extolling the blissful state of union with the Self, Brahman. These ecstatic outpourings were memorised and recorded by the Brahmin womenfolk and passed on by oral tradition and in unpublished notebooks for some two centuries. They have only recently begun to appear in print. Two articles on Akkal, both by Kanchana Natarajan, have appeared previously in The Mountain Path, the first in Vol. 47, No. 1, January-March 2010, entitled, Avudai Akka of Chengottai and the second, in Vol.56, No.3, July-September 2019, entitled, St. Teresa of Avila and Chenkottai Sri Avudai Akka. Readers are advised to consult these sources for further information.

This article deals with two aspects of Avudai Akkal's advaitic stance. Using two of her songs as examples we shall first examine her evocation of the pure Advaitic, Non-Dual state and in the second part of the article, her treatment of the theme of *prārabdha*, the *karma* to be worked out in the current lifetime.

In the book *Conscious Immortality*, a series of *satsang* notes with Sri Ramana Maharshi, compiled by Paul Brunton, the following exchange takes place in the chapter ‘The Illusion of Ego Experience’:

Ramana: Eliminating the ‘not I’ is not enough. The process is only intellectual. The Truth cannot be directly pointed out. Hence the process. Now begins the real inner quest. The I-thought is the root now to be sought at its source. Find out who it is and abide there.

Devotee: Is the analytic process merely intellectual or does it exhibit feeling predominantly?

Ramana: The latter.

So what is this ‘feeling’ that remains over once the analytic process, the work of the mind, has reached its limit and which now becomes the focus of our quest? Ramana informs us in no uncertain terms and on innumerable occasions that it is simply the sense of being, the sense simply that one is, one exists.

There are innumerable works on Advaita that are perfectly valid on the intellectual level but relatively few are the works that, in addition to providing a guide to what we call the state of ‘real’isation of the Self on the level of the intellect, also succeed in conveying some actual sense or foretaste of that state and which, through bringing us to focus uniquely on that sense of being, spur us on and make us dare to aspire to attain it for ourselves. Amongst such works in Tamil, selecting those that are most suited to the mind-set of an individual living in the 21st century, we might mention the *Uḷḷadu Nāṛpadu* of Sri Ramana Maharshi, the *Ozhivil Odukkam* of Kannudaiya Vallalar, the *Vairagya Catakam* of Santhalinga Swamikal¹ and the songs of Avudai Akkal.

In the aforementioned category of spiritual texts the songs of Akkal hold a special place, conveying a sense of immediateness, an almost breathless excitement, as if she is unable to contain the irresistible desire to communicate the realisation of her true nature as the Self to others and thereby put an end to their suffering also, just as her own torment has come to end. A typical, one might almost say archetypal,

¹ A serialisation of this work, acknowledged to be one of the key Advaita texts in the Tamil language, is planned to begin publication in the January-March 2021 issue of the *Mountain Path*.

example of such a song is song 64 of *ñāṇa rasa kīrtanaigaḷ*² beginning with the words *āḍaḍi māṇē*. In this Akkal sings at some moments as if she is speaking to a girlfriend engaged in an ecstatic dance and at others, as if she is herself the dancer.

We give the composition in full here, followed by an analysis of its salient points:

Pallavi

Dance, my dear, as the undivided One, dance my dear, dance on.³

Aṇupallavi

Dance my dear, for I am the unfettered One. All I see is Brahman, clearly manifest, apart from which naught can be.

[Dance, my dear...]

Saraṇam

The world as manifold did I see and danced my dance accordingly. But now, apart from all of this, I as the Self, pure consciousness, exist.

The Self, the Reality of 'Thou art That' is only consciousness [at last].

[Dance, my dear...]

World and body are consciousness only. What else exists, apart from me?

'I am eternal bliss' is now the state in which I dwell.

It takes me to merge with ecstasy, of all attributes entirely free.

[Dance, my dear...]

As supernal bliss ever greater grows, free of clinging [to the world], experiencing this, the delusion of pride and attachment goes.

This dance that knows no dancing is the dance of bliss.

[Dance, my dear...]

² *ñāṇa rasa kīrtanaigaḷ* is a series of short songs contained in the anthology *Ceṅḡōṭṭati Śrī Āvuḍai Akkāḷ Pāḍal Tiraṭṭu*, published by Sri Gnanananda Niketan.

³ In the Carnatic tradition the *Pallavi* is a refrain which is repeated after the following single *Anupallavi* and each of the following *Saranam* verses, which are of indeterminate number. At times there is a grammatical continuity between the *Pallavi* and the following *Anupallavi* and the series of *Saranam* verses and at other times not. Bhagavan's *Appaḷappāṭṭu* and *Āṇmaviddai* are songs composed in this style.

MOUNTAIN PATH

*Dwelling in the form of 'That', free of [thoughts of] 'I' and 'other',
abiding firmly, come what may, [in the Self] without dismay,
deeply sleeping but wide awake, this is the dance of joy and
bliss.* [Dance, my dear...]

The sense of breathless excitement in the song is underscored by the *Pallavi*, the refrain which is repeated after the *Anupallavi* and each verse of the *Saraṇam*, the main body of the song:

āḍaḍi māṇē akaṇḍam enru āḍaḍi māṇē.

Dance, my dear, as the undivided One, dance my dear, dance on.

In the first verse of the *Saraṇam* we learn what was the nature of the dance she had in her unenlightened state formerly danced, for she describes it as:

nāṇāvāy pārttu pirapañcattil nāṇ inṇad[u] enr[u] āḍiya kūttu.

*The dance which I danced in accordance with my perception
of the world as manifold.*

The 'dance' she is referring to is the chaotic whirl that ensues when we try to exercise control over the illusory world of the mind and senses, convinced that we ourselves are the doer. Manikkavacagar in Hymn 50, *Āṇanda mālai* compares such a state to that of a puppet, tossed about helplessly by its strings, which are the ego-mind and senses:

*Of love and wisdom,
virtue, penance, all bereft,
like leathern puppet in the dance,
I whirled and fell, yet as I lay,
you showed me my delusion,
and the righteous way;
revealed to me your holy form,
that I might journey to that world
from which [to birth] there's no return.
With Him who came to rule me thus,
when, O when
shall I, a wicked wretch, be merged?*

In the second and third line of this first verse we learn that such is not the state she now enjoys and the reason for Akkal's elation



is revealed. It is the realisation, brought to fruition by the teaching imparted by her guru, Sri Venkatesa Ayyawal, of the truth that this apparent frenetic whirl of *māyā* is something that takes place within her own consciousness only and that this sensate world, once it is seen for what it is, is powerless to harm her, just as the snake, formerly seen in the rope, can never reassume its form as a snake:

‘tat tvam’padārta svarūpamē cittu.

The Self, the Reality of ‘Thou art That’ is only consciousness.

This is a momentous realisation for the spiritual aspirant, who, after puzzling over the meaning of formulations such as ‘Thou art That’ and having gained a sound intellectual grasp of them, suddenly comes to fully ‘real’ise in the deepest seat of her being, that the ‘That’ which she has been making the focus of her attention is nothing other than her own consciousness, her own being.

Verses two and three of the *saraṇam* go on to explore the further ramifications of this realisation. She sees now that if the Real is only her own consciousness, then the world and all the *jīva*-s that inhabit it, including herself, are only an appearance within her own Self:

cittē jagattu dēham. eṇakk[u] eṇṇa pratakku?

World and body are consciousness only. What else exists, apart from me?

She finds herself inhabiting now a state which is entirely free of the ego-mind and senses, all the conditioning factors which were formerly the cause of her bondage. If she is all that is or ever could be, then her freedom is absolute and if there is no ‘other’ to threaten her, then fear is banished forever. The state of absolute freedom and fearlessness transports her into a state of blissful ecstasy:

nirgguṇāṇandattil koṇḍu oḍuppikkum

It takes me to merge with ecstasy, of all attributes entirely free.

The frenetic dance at the mercy of the ego-mind and senses is now transformed into a dance of bliss in which she remains perfectly still as the *līlā* of the world and its activities play out upon the screen of the Self. She typifies this state as:

āḍāmal āḍum inda āṇanda kūttu.

This dance of bliss in which I dance without dancing.

Finally in verse four she describes the final term in this process of transformation, which is beyond even bliss, in which there is no longer any trace of ‘I’ or other. It is described by Sri Ramana Maharshi in the following terms:

That is the state of the *jñāni*. It is neither sleep nor waking but intermediate between the two. There is the awareness of the waking state and the stillness of sleep. It is called *jagrata sushupti*...Go to the root of thoughts and you reach the stillness of sleep. But you reach it in the full vigour of search, that is, with perfect awareness.⁴

In this state the experience of bliss is totally transcended and she has become bliss itself, merging with the Self in the state of *jñāna*. Like Sri Ramana she too characterises this state as *tūṅgāmal tūṅgum kūttu* – the dance in which I sleep without sleeping:

tāṅ pīrar arṛu tatākaramē vaḍiv[u] urṛu
 ēṅgāmal edu vandālum nilaittu
 tūṅgāmal tūṅgum sukāṅanda kūttu.

Dwelling in the form of ‘That’, free of [thoughts of] ‘I’ and ‘other’, abiding firmly, come what may, [in the Self] without dismay, deeply sleeping, but wide awake. This is the dance of joy and bliss.

We will now examine briefly the theme of *karma* as presented in a number of Akkal’s songs. In songs 18-21 of *ñāṅa rasa kīrtanaigal* Akkal addresses the issue of *karma*, specifically *prārabdha karma*, the *karma* of the present birth, which is said to persist even in the *jīvanmukta*, the realised sage, even though the *karma* waiting to manifest (*sañchita*) and the future *karma* accruing from the current birth (*āgāmya*) have been now destroyed. How then are we to reconcile the apparent fundamental contradiction in which a *jñāni* who has merged with the supreme Self is nevertheless said to be subject to *prārabdha* that will continue to follow the trajectory decreed by that Self until the time of the body’s final dissolution? Sri Ramana states the fundamental position as follows:

⁴ Venkataramiah, M, (compl.), *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk§609.

Karma (action) cannot be for the body because it is insentient. It is only so long as *dehātma buddhi* ('I-am-the-body idea') lasts. After transcending *dehātma buddhi* one becomes a *jñāni*. In the absence of that idea (*buddhi*) there cannot be either *kartritva* or *kartā*. So a *jñāni* has no *karma*. That is his experience. Otherwise he is not a *jñāni*. However an *ajñāni* identifies the *jñāni* with his body, which the *jñāni* does not do. So the *ajñāni* finds the *jñāni* acting, because his body is active, and therefore he asks if the *jñāni* is not affected by *prārabdha*.⁵

In other words, the *jñāni* has become one with the Self, the supreme Reality, upon the destruction of the ego and 'his' body is now simply a part of the world appearance that appears on the screen of the Self. As such there is no *karma* for 'him' whatsoever, not even *prārabdha*. However, because the *ajñāni* is quite unable to conceive of such a state and perceives the *jñāni* to be operating, as he imagines himself to be, in an external world perceived by the mind and senses, the explanation is regularly given that *prārabdha* remains for the *jñāni* but does not affect him because he no longer identifies with his body that suffers. Bhagavan goes on to elucidate this rather subtle point as follows:

The scriptures say that *jñāna* is the fire which burns away all *karma* (*sarvakarmani*). *Sarva* (all) is interpreted in two ways: (1) to include *prārabdha* and (2) to exclude it. In the first way: if a man with three wives dies, it is asked. "can two of them be called widows and the third not?" All are widows. So it is with *prārabdha*, *āgāmya* and *sañchita*. When there is no *kartā* none of them can hold out any longer.

The second explanation is, however, given only to satisfy the enquirer. It is said that all *karma* is burnt away leaving *prārabdha* alone. The body is said to continue in the functions for which it has taken its birth. That is *prārabdha*. But from the *jñāni*'s point of view there is only the Self which manifests in such variety. There is no body or *karma* apart from the Self, so that the actions do not affect him.⁶

⁵ Ibid., Talk§383.

⁶ Ibid., Talk§383.

Turning to the songs of Akkal on the subject of *prārabdha*, these seem to reflect predominantly the former point of view, not because she fails to grasp the deeper meaning given above, a fact to which the song *āḍaḍi māṅē*, quoted earlier, and so many others, provide ample witness, but, one would suspect, because that modified viewpoint would have been more accessible to the bulk of her devotees than the pure Advaitic stance of the latter interpretation. The following is song 20 of *ñāṅa rasa kīrttaṅgaḷ*. It begins with the *Pallavi*, paramē agam enr[u] irundālum pirārabdam paṭṭāl oḷiya viḍumō:

Pallavi

Though they abide saying, ‘I am the Supreme,’
can there from their destiny any escape be?

Anupallavi

*Even though jivanmukti is gained, must they not consume
their karma
as long as the body remains?* [Though we abide...]

Saraṅam

*The Sun from his daily rising gains no surcease;
Great Vishnu of repeated births endures the grief,
and even supreme Lord Siva goes abegging
the pangs of hunger to relieve.
Thus the experience of karma, glorious, proceeds famously.* [Though we abide...]

*Even though their minds in pure awareness at all times reside
and they ever in the company of the wise surely abide;
even though their voices, ‘The world’s unreal,’ daily proclaim,
and the feet of the supreme Guru in their thoughts
with love remain.* [Though we abide...]

*Even though of the taint of fear and anger in them there is no stain,
and the grace of Srimad Guru Venkatesar they come to gain,
even though they rejoice in the fleetingness of all they see
and sunk in the Self’s undivided Realm contrive to be.* [Though we abide...]

As is the case with all *jñāni*-s, the teachings of Akkal reflect the varying levels of spiritual maturity of her devotees. Songs like *ādadi māṅē* present a very pure Advaitic view, which for many will be difficult to grasp but will provide a profound support and inspiration for the more advanced seekers, whilst songs like song 20, whilst presenting a modified view, nevertheless reinforce an important teaching, which is that it is not our *karma* which we need to change, for we cannot. It tells us that our *sādhana* lies in the practice of viewing that karma with equanimity, whether good or bad, and not becoming identified with it, a process which is perfectly natural for the *jñāni* but a matter of assiduous practice for the serious *sādhaka* and an essential stepping-stone on the path to liberation. ▲

The Waiting

Suresh Kailash

Day by day,
night after night,
I feel your waves
caress and erase
a little more of me.

And I fervently pray,
to be dissolved
without a trace
in the vast and deep
of your boundless sea.

Waiting for your final act of grace,
O Ramana,
I lie prostrate,
like a stick figure,
drawn on the wet sand
of a windswept beach.

The Paramount Importance of Self Attention

Part Thirty Four

SADHU OM
AS RECORDED BY MICHAEL JAMES

6th December 1978 (continued)

Sadhu Om: Why do we have desire? Once when someone asked me this question, I replied, ‘Because desire is our real nature’, and I explained this as follows:

Suppose there is a table whose surface is perfectly flat and horizontal, and onto a point at the centre of that table water is falling drop by drop. When the first drop falls it will spread out a little to form a small circular pool, and then with each subsequent drop the pool will spread out further. If we are able to see the whole pool, we will see that what is happening is that as each drop falls in the centre of the pool it settles down, and its settling is what causes the spreading.

However, if we cannot see the whole pool but can view it only through a narrow slit cut in a sheet of metal fixed horizontally a few

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.

inches above it, and if the slit enables us to watch a line of water from near the centre of the pool to its outer edge and beyond, what we will see is what seems to be a steady stream of water flowing in one direction. Whereas the water is actually just settling (being), our limited view of it makes it seem to us to be flowing (moving).

Likewise, when our view is limited by our rising as ego, the false awareness 'I am this body', love, which is our real nature, is experienced by us as desire for things that seem to be other than ourself, namely objects of the world or God. Love is the *priya* or *ānanda* aspect of *brahman*, so it is one and indivisible, but when it shines through the prism of the mind it is seemingly dispersed into multiple desires and all the progeny of desires, namely likes, dislikes, hopes, fears, attachment, aversion, love, hatred, greed, envy, anger and so on. That is, when we rise as ego, we see ourself, the one infinite and indivisible whole, as 'I' and others, and consequently we experience love flowing from 'I' towards others in the form of desire or aversion. When we remain as we actually are, love is experienced as our being, but when we rise as ego and thereby limit ourself within the confines of a body, love is experienced as flowing in the form of desire or aversion towards other things.

Thus the root cause of desire is our rising as ego and thereby limiting ourself as the extent of a body, as a result of which we see the appearance of others. Love takes the form of desire only when it is directed away from ourself towards something else. Since its nature is being, true love needs no expression and does not involve any action or movement, whereas desire is expressed through action or movement, because it is always for something that seems to be other than oneself. For example, a mother expresses her love for her baby by cuddling and rocking it, because her love for it is a form of desire, being for something other than herself, but she does not express her love for her hand in such a way, because she does not experience her hand as something other than herself. Therefore to overcome desire, aversion, fear and so on, all we need do is to eradicate ego, the false awareness 'I am this body', which we can do only by investigating and finding out who am I.

Such is the greatness of Bhagavan's teachings. Like a skilful mechanic, he has located precisely where the fault in the whole machine of life lies. All that is required is to tighten one small screw

and the machine will run perfectly. The loose screw is our false awareness 'I am this body', and we can tighten it simply by being aware of ourself as we actually are. Since all other problems in the machine are caused by this loose screw, once it is tightened all other problems will cease.

So long as we rise as ego, we cannot avoid having desire, because our real nature is both infinite happiness and love for such happiness, so we can never be satisfied by any means other than knowing our real nature. The driving force behind every desire is love for happiness, but happiness does not exist in any of the things that we desire but only in ourself, so desire always leads to dissatisfaction. Even when a desire is satisfied, that satisfaction is only temporary, because it is not complete and hence dissatisfaction quickly follows in its wake. Only complete satisfaction can be permanent, and complete satisfaction is only the satisfaction of self-knowledge.

Until we know ourself as we actually are, we will always be dissatisfied to a greater or lesser extent, and dissatisfaction gives rise to desire. Desire for happiness is not wrong, because it is our real nature, as Bhagavan implies in the first sentence of *Nāṇ Ār?*:

Since all living beings want to be always happy without what is called misery, since for everyone the greatest love is only for oneself, and since happiness alone is the cause for love, [in order] to obtain that happiness, which is one's own nature, which one experiences daily in [dreamless] sleep, which is devoid of mind, oneself knowing oneself is necessary.

What is wrong is not our love or desire for happiness but only our seeking it in anything other than ourself, because happiness is our real nature and can therefore be found only within ourself, not in anything else. What is required, therefore, is not that we give up all desire, which we cannot do, but only that we redirect our desire away from all other things back towards ourself. The more we desire to know and to be what we actually are, the more our desires for anything else will wither and fade away.

7th December 1978

Sadhu Om: Why is it that men are attracted to women and women are attracted to men? When a friend asked me this question, at first the

only answer I could think of was the one that Bhagavan would usually have given, namely: “Why do you think you are a man? Because you mistake yourself to be a body, you feel either ‘I am a man’ or ‘I am a woman’. But is this body what you actually are? Investigate yourself and find out”.

This is the most useful and practical answer that can be given to such questions. However, since the friend who had asked this question had asked it sincerely, I felt that some further explanation would be appropriate. For a few days I could not think of any suitable explanation, because it is hard for me to imagine the attraction that most people feel. After about four days, however, a suitable explanation came to me while I was having a bath:

In every magnet there are two opposite poles, north and south. Likewise, in every *jīva* there are two opposite genders, male and female. However, each body that we identify as ‘I’ is generally either male or female, so if we identify a male body as ‘I’ we feel ‘I am a man’ and consequently feel attracted to female bodies, and if we identify a female body as ‘I’ we feel ‘I am a woman’ and consequently feel attracted to male bodies. That is, just as each pole of a magnet is attracted to the opposite pole of another magnet, even though both magnets contain both poles, each gender that we identify as ourself causes us to be attracted to people of the opposite gender, even though all people contain the seeds of both genders.

As we learnt in physics class at school, if iron filings are spread evenly on a card under which a magnetic bar has been placed, the filings will form a pattern showing where the magnetic attraction is strongest, where it is weaker and where it is non-existent. It is strongest around each of the two poles, but in the exact centre between them it is non-existent. A little to either side of the centre there is a slight attraction to the nearest pole, and that attraction increases as the distance from the centre increases.

Likewise, in the centre of every *jīva* there is a point at which sexual attraction is non-existent. What is that centre? It is the point that is common to both men and women, namely ‘I am’. Whether we are aware of ourself as either ‘I am a man’ or ‘I am a woman’, we are all aware of ourself as ‘I am’, so ‘I am’ is devoid of gender. ‘I am’ is the centre of all that we experience, and everything else is just an adjunct and therefore peripheral. So long as we identify ourself with

adjuncts, we experience pairs of opposites such as male and female, attraction and repulsion, desire and aversion, pleasure and pain. If we cling firmly to 'I am', on the other hand, we thereby free ourselves from all such pairs.

Therefore if we want to be free of sexual attraction and craving, all we need do is remain in the centre by clinging to 'I am'. This is why Bhagavan teaches us: "Come to the centre. Come to the heart. Remain only as 'I am'. Then only can you be free from sexual attraction and all other desires".

When we remain in the centre, we are aware of nothing other than 'I am', but as soon as we move away from the centre even to the slightest extent, we become aware of ourselves as 'I am a man' or 'I am a woman' and thus we become a prey to sexual desire. Therefore we cannot overcome sexual attraction by any means other than remaining in the centre. If we try to forcibly overcome sexual desire by fighting against it whenever it arises, we will thereby only strengthen it, because by fighting it we are attending to it, and attention is what nourishes and sustains any desire. We can overcome it only by ignoring it, but however much we try to ignore it, it will continue rising intermittently, so the only way to ignore it permanently is by clinging firmly to 'I am'.

Fighting against sexual desire is like cutting a magnet in two. As soon as a magnet is cut in the centre, what was the centre becomes two opposite poles. This is why celibacy is suitable only for those who are sufficiently mature. Others may struggle to be celibate, but they will be overwhelmed by powerful sexual desires. If someone who is not yet sufficiently mature tries to be celibate, it would be like forcibly plucking an unripe fruit from a tree. Such a fruit will dry up and wither away without ever ripening.

The root cause of sexual desire is the mistaken identification 'I am a man' or 'I am a woman', so the correct way to treat the disease of sexual desire is to rectify its cause, which we can do only by investigating who am I. Sexual desire is just a symptom of the disease, and we cannot cure any disease by treating only its symptoms. Only by treating its root cause can we get rid of the disease along with its symptoms. This is why Bhagavan did not recommend celibacy but only self-investigation and self-surrender.

Question: What exactly do you mean when you say that in each individual there are the two opposite poles, male and female? Do you mean that we each have the capacity to project and identify ourself as either a man or a woman?

Sadhu Om: Yes.

[Then after some further discussion, Sadhu Om remarked:] This is an explanation I have given on several occasions to male friends who have asked me about this subject, but I would not normally discuss this subject in the company of ladies, because unless they are able to see me as one who is neither male nor female, they may misunderstand me and think ‘How does he know about such things?’ The truth is that whatever clarity has been given to me about any subject has been given only by Bhagavan. ▲

Fear

Bharati Mirchandani

Look at the fear
See whence it rises
I cannot crave liberation
Cannot talk of freedom
Till I face my fear
See how I cling to it
See how I savour every nuance of it
As though it were a love letter
From a secret lover
And when I see it
For what it really is
Fear
Only an emotion the mind feeds
MY mind
I can smile
I can watch as it arises
Watch as it grows
Weaker each time
Because of the watching

The Question of Integrity

KITTY OSBORNE

Sometimes I think about the New Testament in the Bible. It seems that the general opinion is that the first Gospel was written some forty years after the death of Jesus. The mind boggles! When one contemplates the extraordinarily imaginative sayings that have been attributed to Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi, and that is when people who knew him are still alive (me for instance!), then it seems unlikely that what Jesus Christ said is what has come down to us unmutilated by time. What Bhagavan actually said has, for the most part, been well documented. However there are those, who possibly to suit their own interest, just make up or misrepresent his words. I suppose that, provided nothing contrary to the spirit of Bhagavan's teaching is advocated, then too much harm isn't done...except to the perpetrators of these tricks. One should never forget the power of a true *jñāni*. He encompasses the whole universe and one plays games with him at one's own peril. I don't know whether the source of the information that people are seeking makes any difference to the recipient? The trouble is that many people who claim to be the channel

Kitty Osborne, daughter of Arthur Osborne, first came to Bhagavan in 1941. Though sent to boarding school in Kodaikanal she nonetheless spent much time at the ashram right up to Bhagavan's *mahasamadhi* in 1950.

through which Bhagavan's teachings are disseminated, really aim to be a sort of a guru by default! In point of fact Bhagavan's words are, virtually in their entirety, available to anyone who can read. They were written down almost as they were spoken, and have been published by the ashram. It is the age of the Kali Yuga. The words of all the great masters of the past are now available to all. Perhaps it doesn't matter whose mouth utters those words? For those who are seeking for a true guru, I suppose there are several criteria that more or less always hold good.

If the one you approach asks for any sort of donation...money, cars, sex, whatever...look again. Bhagavan never accepted any gifts of any description, except for fruit, which was shared out amongst those around, or flowers which were offered in the temple. A lady who made some special pickle for him brought it as a gift and Bhagavan asked "Is there enough for everyone?" When told there was not, he refused to accept it. That story has gone down in the annals of ashram lore, as have many more.

There was a definite protocol about the giving of gifts. Bhagavan sat on a couch, and beside it was a low table about 3ft. square. Devotees would place their gifts upon this table and an attendant would take them. If someone tried to sneak in anything valuable or personal these were returned by the attendant. Of the fruit or flowers a few were taken and given back to the donor as 'prasād' or a gift from the recipient, while the rest were used for puja if flowers, or sent to the dining hall to be shared out after lunch. Bhagavan never actually touched or handled any of these gifts...and he never ever gave an individual gift to anyone...ever. To do so might have caused the recipient to consider him or herself to be particularly favoured and special, and Bhagavan would never tolerate that. The closest I know that Bhagavan ever came to giving a gift was to my father! Some workmen were renewing the thatch somewhere in the ashram when, amongst the straw, they found a strange bit of metal. They took it to Bhagavan, as everyone did with everything in those days, and asked him what it was. Bhagavan studied it closely, turning it around and examining it and then came to the conclusion that it was a shoehorn...twisted and bent, but still recognizable. "Give it to Osborne," he said. "He must wear western shoes sometimes." That was as personal a gift as I ever heard Bhagavan gave. I have the shoehorn still.

Then there is the story about Bhagavan coming into Osborne House. Absolutely not. Bhagavan was an ascetic, he had an iron control and adhered in every way to the customs and religious observances of Hinduism. He is a *turīyāīta*, beyond all three states of consciousness, and in his daily physical existence, a *sādhu*, and that implied he did not enter the home of a householder (*grihasta*). To my knowledge, he never entered the house of a *grihasta* after the 1st September 1896. He held fast to all the restrictions of the state he assumed for daily life, and would never have broken even one of those rules.

In days gone by he used to go for walks on Arunachala and often his path took him through Palākotthu, an enclave of *sādhu*-s who lived in huts or caves just beyond the ashram at the foot of the hill. Such a one was Cohen and Bhagavan sometimes stopped and sat on the ledge of his verandah. At that time Cohen was himself a *brahmachari* and not a householder, but nevertheless Bhagavan did not go inside his hut, he merely rested outside...until one day Cohen put a chair out so that Bhagavan should be more comfortable. Bhagavan never came back! He invariably refused special treatment just for himself. That is probably the origin of the story about Bhagavan going to visit people in their homes.

However, back to the search for a guru...

If the person you fancy as a 'guru' wants to be treated specially... look again. I don't mean someone who is treated specially, but someone who wants it. That brings to mind another well-known Bhagavan story, but it bears repeating. The poor and the beggars etc. used to be fed in the ashram, then as now. They were fed first and then the inmates went to the dining hall for lunch. One day, Chinnaśwami, Bhagavan's brother and manager of the ashram's daily business, lost his temper and said in effect enough is enough. From now on we eat first and outsiders eat afterwards. When the lunch bell went, no sign of Bhagavan anywhere. After much searching he was eventually found sitting on the ground with the waiting beggars. Shock horror! from all concerned, but Bhagavan gently explained that he too was originally from outside so he would wait for his turn with the rest. Needless to say that rule was immediately rescinded and to this day the poor are fed first and the inmates later. Just by quietly obeying the new rule, and not putting himself forward in any way, Bhagavan made sure that all were fed correctly and in their due time.

Anyone who gives special treatment to a particular devotee, whether by favours or gifts, or in any other way, is not a true guru...look again.

A *jñāni* cannot lie. That is a purely human talent!...a *jñāni*, by definition is super-human.

Bhagavan always spoke kindly of people. Another well-known story...A man known to be a thug and a rowdy died, and Bhagavan's devotees came and told him, wondering somewhat mischievously I feel, what he could find to say about such a notorious hooligan, Bhagavan said that he had always kept himself and his clothes immaculately clean!

I have a lot of trouble with that last precept. Suppose a fantasist comes to Tiruvannamalai, someone who seems to have fooled many people...after all that is what a good storyteller does...I feel so strongly about it that I need to speak out. Such a one I feel, was someone called Robert Adams, who claimed to have come to Ramanasramam first in 1947 when he was just 17 years old. No one saw him. That was in the days when every foreigner was noted and written about and talked about. However nobody apparently saw or spoke to Robert Adams. If he had come for a short visit of a few days to the ashram while I was in school I might never have known, but if he had stayed for even a month or two, never mind several years as he claimed, he would have been entirely memorable!

He also claimed to have stayed in my family home without my father apparently knowing about it! This is according to one of his statements recorded on a website devoted to his teachings. He certainly could not have stayed in our house while we were there without us knowing, when we were not there the house was locked up and unused. What is even more extraordinary is that he claimed that Bhagavan used to come and visit him several times in our house and bring him fruit. They supposedly had long chats there. Who was their interpreter? That whole story is a fabrication. Bhagavan understood English pretty well, but he barely spoke it at all. As I have explained earlier, Bhagavan never went into any house, including ours. My goodness if he had, the whole street, town, country, would have known about it. It would have become a landmark day for our family and remembered for ever more. It would have been written about by the diligent scribes who religiously recorded every word Bhagavan uttered and everyone who came into his presence!

Bhagavan never left the ashram by the front gate or even crossed the road from the ashram (where our house is still) after 1928-29 when he stopped doing *giripradakṣiṇā*, except for two recorded occasions. Once when he went to look at a lake (*Samudram*) that had unexpectedly filled with water and secondly when he went to see a well in Ramana Nagar that never went dry. Every move he made was noted and recorded, and everyone who was associated with him, would have been noted.

Bhagavan would never have cosy buddy, buddy chats with anyone, thereby showing favouritism. Whoever invented these stories was definitely indulging in a fantasy and not only had no idea of how Bhagavan behaved, nor the strict norms and hierarchy in the ashram, but apparently had not even met Bhagavan.

Contrary to appearances, Bhagavan was not an easy-going pushover! Because he paid so little attention to his physical form people assumed he was a softie who could be easily manipulated. On the contrary, trying to envisage getting Bhagavan to do anything that he didn't want to do is unimaginable! For goodness sake...Bhagavan could stop a charging elephant at 50 paces with one look if he so wished. Of course that was never necessary, of course no one told us so, we just knew...everyone knew. No one who lived in his ambit ever had any doubt as to the sheer power of Bhagavan.

There was even a story put about, that my father had given Robert Adams our family car. Amazing! Our family never owned a car, neither of my parents drove and if we wanted to go anywhere we went by bus. Adams claimed he gave the ashram a jeep. The ashram, to this day, has never owned or was given a car or jeep. In 2018 it purchased for the first time, a mini-truck for ferrying cow dung and cattle feed. That is verifiable fact.

In Tiruvannamalai we get more than our fair share of dodgy gurus. Admittedly most of them come with their hands out, so that eliminates them! Being worshipped is probably the biggest ego trip in the world and only the genuine can resist the allure. Many find the temptation of that kind of power absolutely addictive and they become corrupted by it. But how about those who are genuinely searching for guidance? Those who want a living voice to point them in the right direction? I have no special axe to grind regarding Robert Adams, I never met him and only heard his name mentioned for the first time a couple of years ago. I wish his admirers well and hope they find what they are searching

for...but please...not through fraud. Everyone should evaluate for himself/herself the nature of divinity and the worth of the one placed on a pedestal.

I was incredibly lucky I now realise. I grew up from the age of five years at the feet of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi. Now when my time on this earth is coming to an end, I am sorry that not many voices will be left to correct flagrant faults in reporting the days when Bhagavan lived in Tiruvannamalai. The truth is so important to us all, now as then when we thought everything we knew would last forever. When not at school, my brother, sister and I saw him every single day. We told him our secrets, ran around and played in his presence and always recognized that he was Bhagavan...special and all knowing. The ashram was our playground. The rules that governed it we imbibed without conscious thought. Some things were done one way, some another. No one was ever shown favouritism, not even the poets that came and recited their verses to him. Not even his three devoted attendants, although I heard that they had been given special dispensation to enable them to touch him in the course of their care. He suffered from rheumatism, but nonetheless the touch of a *jñāni* is supposed to be devastating. Maybe that is why he normally never touched at all. Either that or perhaps he had imbibed the characteristics of a South Indian Brahmin; they usually never touch anyone nor do they encourage touching. His words alone were words of power.

Let us not forget some other words of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi. As he lay dying someone called out “Bhagavan don’t leave us. What shall we do without you?” And Bhagavan replied “You place too much attention on the body. I am not going anywhere, where should I go.”

I feel that a genuine cry for help to Bhagavan will definitely be heard. He never performed ‘miracles’, at least not in a spectacular way; but things tended to happen around him that seemed entirely accidental, but had the desired effect of answering a supplicant’s prayers. Bhagavan is very subtle, but he surely hears...the question is can we ‘hear’ his response?

As for Robert Adams, it seems to me that there are so many inconsistencies and downright impossibilities in his stories, such a total lack of verifiable fact or any credible witness, that I can only conclude that he never met Bhagavan at all. ▲

KEYWORD

Darpaṇa/ādarśa: Mirror

B.K. CROISSANT

Part Two

Having learned from his wife Hemalekhā that God was Pure Consciousness, Hemachūḍa worshiped Tripurā with single minded devotion, and Her Grace manifested in his heart. No longer tempted by sense objects, he was totally immersed in investigation, which is the principal means of Liberation. After some time, he met with his wife again and asked her the meaning of the parable that had previously frustrated him. Noting his elevated state due to dispassion (*vairāgya*) and investigation (*vicāra*), she concluded that it was time to awaken him and said, “Great fortune has been attained by you through the Grace of God.”

At this point, the focus of the story narrows and intensifies. Even more practical than before, it becomes a detailed guide for sincere practitioners, informing them of specific traps one can encounter in the final steps to Self-Realisation.

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.

First of all, Hemalekhā answered the immediate question and gave Hemachūḍa the keys to the meaning of the parable. In short, the *jīva* closely identifies with the Intellect and associates with Ignorance. The Intellect marries Delusion, the son of Ignorance, and their son, Mind, marries Imagination and Desire. Thereafter, the Mind is tortured by their sons, the Sense Organs, Anger and Greed. Under the influence of the *jīva*, however, the Intellect marries Discrimination and finally breaks free from Ignorance. That enables the Intellect to subdue the Mind, kill Anger and Greed, free herself from the senses, and rejoin the Mother, who is Supreme Consciousness. The parable represents her own journey as *jīva*, said Hemalekhā, and the journey of all souls. She told Hemachūḍa that it was his journey too, and by understanding the story well, he would obtain the highest good.

Hemachūḍa was stunned by the parable's profundity and saw clearly its relevance to his own life. He questioned his wife further, asking "Who is that Supreme Consciousness? Who are we and what is our natural state?" She told him to investigate the nature of his own Self with an extremely purified intellect. The Self is not a visible object nor can it be expressed in words. It shines everywhere for everyone without the need for proof. A guru can point out the means for Self-Realisation, but one must ultimately find it for oneself. She instructed him to retire to a lonely place, to discard everything that is deemed as 'mine', and to perceive the Self, which is not possible to be given up. Thus he would obtain the highest good.

Hemachūḍa then left the city determined to meditate in private. He discarded his family members, wealth, and possessions as non-Self and further reasoned that he is not the body, mind or intellect. With the aid of *hatha yoga*, he controlled his thoughts. Darkness overcame him, then light, visions, and finally a profound peace. Confused by these alternating and diverse states, he summoned his wife. Ascending his palace-retreat 'as moonlight the Meru mountain', she praised him for his effort in stopping the outward movements of the mind. However, that effort can never be the cause of attaining or perceiving the Self because the Self is attained always. Its attainment does not happen. It is not obtainable by the senses and the mind reaching out but by remaining still. It is not knowable by mental activity but shines in the absence of reflection. Then come the wonderful verses with the

mirror image, driving home the Truth expounded by Hemalekhā to her Beloved.

यथा हि निर्मलादर्शे प्रतिबिम्बसहस्रकम् ॥
 पश्यन् बालोऽपि नादर्श पश्यत्येवं जनः खलु ।
 पश्यन् स्वात्ममहादर्शे प्रतिबिम्बं हि जागतम् ॥
 स्वात्मानं न विजानाति तद्व्युत्पत्तिविवर्जनात् ॥
yathā hi nirmalādarśe pratibimba-sahasrakam
paśyan bālo 'pi nādarśam paśyatyevam janaḥ khalu
paśyan svātma-mahādarśe pratibimbam hi jāgatam
svātmānam na vijānāti tad-vyutpatti-vivarjanāt

Just as a child seeing a thousand reflections
 in a blemishless mirror
 Doesn't notice the mirror itself;
 so it is with people who,
 Seeing images of the world
 in the vast mirror of their own Self,
 Fail to recognize their very Self
 for want of acquaintance with That.¹

With a single image, these verses powerfully capture a critical moment on the path to Self-Realisation. Once the pilgrim has gained traction through association with the wise, listening to the Scriptures with sound reasoning, experiencing dispassion, cultivating devotion, attaining Grace, and practising investigation, it then becomes a matter of subtly and firmly changing one's perspective. At this point, the sincere seeker must move from constant focus on the reflections that are contained in and not separate from the mirror to constant focus on the mirror itself. This shift in perspective is described by Sri Bhagavan over and over again in countless ways. He sometimes uses the image of words on paper.

D: What is the one Real thing?

M: That is what is: the others are only appearances. Diversity is not its nature. We are reading the printed characters on paper but ignore the paper which is the background. Similarly you

¹ Chapter Nine, verses 83(b)-85(a). All translations of Sanskrit verses are by the author in consultation with Marcia Solomon, a dedicated and inspiring Sanskrit teacher and scholar who resides in Boulder, Colorado.

*are taken up by the manifestations of the mind and let go the background. Whose fault is it?*²

The mirror, the paper are always there, however much we may choose to ignore them. Recall this passage from *Talks*.

*B: The Self remains ever the same, here and now. There is nothing more to be gained. Because the limitations have wrongly been assumed there is the need to transcend them. It is like the ten ignorant fools who forded a stream and on reaching the other shore counted themselves to be nine only. They grew anxious and grieved over the loss of the unknown tenth man. A wayfarer, on ascertaining the cause of their grief, counted them all and found them to be ten, but each one of them had counted the others leaving himself out. The wayfarer gave each in succession a blow telling them to count the blows. They counted ten and were satisfied. The moral is that the tenth man was not got anew. He was all along there, but ignorance caused grief to all of them. Again, a woman wore a necklace round her neck but forgot it. She began to search for it and made enquiries. A friend of hers, finding out what she was looking for, pointed out the necklace round the seeker's neck. She felt it with her hands and was happy. Did she get the necklace anew?*³

The notion in these jewel-like verses that our mistaken focus on the unreal is out of ignorance, rather than maliciousness, makes them truly endearing. In other words, if we don't focus on the mirror, it is due to unfamiliarity with it. We have not learned about it, and thus we have not become conversant with our very nature, Pure Consciousness. This truth is meant to encourage us, to give us heart.

Resuming Dattātreyā's narrative, Hemalekhā told Hemachūḍa that the Self needs no proof being above dispute and that Knowledge (*jñāna*) has no limitations, including mental concepts like time and space. They are mere appearances contained in the Self. Again, the mirror is invoked.

तत्र विप्रतिपन्नस्य न प्रश्नो नापि चोत्तरम् ।
अनपह्वचनीयं तन्महादर्शतलं भवेत् ॥

² Venkataramiah, M. (compl.), *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk§238.

³ Ibid., Talk§63.

तत्र सर्वं भासते वै दर्पणप्रतिबिम्बवत् ।
देशेन वाऽपि कालेन परिच्छित्तिर्न विद्यते ॥

*tatra vipratipannasya na praśno nāpi cottaram
anapahnavanīyaṃ tanmahādarśa-talaṃ bhavet
tatra sarvaṃ bhāsate vai darpaṇa-pratibimbavat
deśena vā 'pi kālena paricchittirna vidyate*

For one uncertain of the existence of Knowledge
argumentation will not settle the matter.

Undeniable that Knowledge is
like the surface of a great mirror.

Within That everything appears
like reflections in a mirror.

Divisions of time and space
are not perceived.⁴

In her eagerness to encourage and assist her beloved Prince, Hemalekhā told him that direct perception of the Self is within the experience of everyone in three situations, namely in the brief interval between sleep and awakening, between two thoughts, and just before an object becomes objectified. In these instances, the Self alone shines. Sorrow and grief are gone, form and sense perceptions too. She then exhorted him to experience the essential nature of everything by giving up all thoughts and efforts, including seeing or not seeing, and by going inward to the core of his Being. Under her influence, he became absorbed in the Self for a long time and completely forgot the external world.

When Hemachūḍa awoke from *samādhi* and perceived the world again, he tried to regain Pure Consciousness by merely closing his eyes. Catching his error instantly, Hemalekhā told him that state cannot be obtained by any act or by doing or not doing something. Pure Consciousness shines as whole everywhere whether the eyes are open or closed, whether the mind is restrained or not. Furthermore, she said, Liberation cannot be attained until the knots in the rope of delusion are broken. The first knot is confusing the body with the Self. The second, seeing the world as non-Self. The third, seeing God

⁴ Chapter Nine, verses 89-90.

and the individual soul as different or separate. The performance of some act in order to obtain consciousness is a knot. Also, the knot 'I am not this' must be given up. Pure Consciousness is everywhere at all times, and nothing exists without it. Abide in that, she said, and the mirror is invoked.

तदेवाखिलसंसारचित्रादर्शतलं महत् ।
 कदा क्व केन रूपेण नास्ति तन्मे निरूपय ॥
 प्रतिबिम्बो निरादर्शो यथा नाथ तथैव तत् ।
 तस्मात्तत्पदसंत्यागान्नास्ति कुत्रापि किञ्चन ॥
 पश्य सर्वत्र चात्मानमखण्डानन्दब्रंहितम् ।
 पश्यात्मन्यखिलं लोकं दर्पणप्रतिबिम्बवत् ॥

*tadevākhila-samsāra-citrādarśa-talaṁ mahat
 kadā kva kena rūpeṇa nāsti tanme nirūpaya
 pratibimbo nirādarśo yathā nātha tathaiva tat
 tasmāttatpada-saṁtyāgānnāsti kutrāpi kiñcana
 paśya sarvatra cātmānamakhaṇḍānanda-br̥h̥hitam
 paśyātmanyakhilam lokam darpaṇa-pratibimbavat*

Consciousness alone, the infinite surface of a mirror,
 reflects a picture of the entire illusory world.

Show me when, where and in what form
 That does not exist.

As a reflection in the absence of a mirror,
 so surely, my Beloved, is existence without Consciousness.
 Thus, if Consciousness is entirely gone,
 nothing at all can exist anywhere.

See the Self in all places
 as ever-expanding unbroken Bliss.

See all this phenomenal world in the Self,
 like reflections in a mirror.⁵

Seeing the Self in all places is the subject of the fifth stanza of *Aruṅācala Pañcarātna*. Here is how Bhagavan explains its significance.

*It is only after seeing the Self within that one will be able to see
 the Self in everything. One must first realise there is nothing
 but the Self and that he is that Self, and then only he can see*

⁵ Chapter Ten, verses 29, 31 and 37.

*everything as the form of the Self. That is the meaning of saying, 'See the Self in everything and everything in the Self', as is stated in the Gītā and other books. It is the same truth that is taught in stanza 4 of the Reality in Forty Verses. If you have the idea that you are something with form, that you are limited by this body, and that being within this body you have to see through these eyes, God and the world also will appear to you as form. If you realize you are without form, that you are unlimited, that you alone exist, that you are the eye, the infinite eye, what is there to be seen apart from the infinite eye? Apart from the eye, there is nothing to be seen. There must be a seer for an object to be seen, and there must be space, time, etc. But if the Self alone exists, it is both seer and seen, and above seeing or being seen.*⁶

In *Talks*, He further expounds as follows:

*Why is not that pure 'I' realized now or even remembered by us? Because of want of acquaintance (parichaya) with it. It can be recognized only if it is consciously attained. Therefore make the effort and gain consciously.*⁷

Gradually Hemachūḍa became acquainted with the Self, at all times, and lived a long, prosperous life as a *jīvanmukta*. His family members and others noted that he was above pleasure and pain, saw equally friend and foe, gain and loss. He performed his duties like an actor on a stage. In time, they too became enlightened. Everyone in the city in all walks of life became enlightened. Lust, anger and greed were no more.

Thus ends the story of Hemalekhā and Hemachūḍa told by Dattātreya to illustrate the importance of association with the wise. ▲

(To be continued)

⁶ Mudaliar, A. Devaraja, *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, 11-21-45.

⁷ Op.cit., *Talks*, Talk§314.



Sri Mahaswami

The Sage with Eyes of Light

Part Seven

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 Pīṭhādhipati Jagadguru Śrī Śaṅkarācārya, Śrī Candrasekarendra Sarasvati Svāmī which took place from 1968 until the mahāsamādhi of Śrī Mahāswami in 1994.

Kārvetinagar, Friday 3rd September 1971

The Svāmī of ancient gold

This morning Śrī Mahāswami deliberately came out of his hut so that I could see him. He was superb: a young lion. The colour of his demeanour was matt gold; the old gold sung by the poets of the ancient Indian epics; the gold of the gods and of the goddesses when they came and mixed with the human race. Only the face and hands showed a certain ageing; otherwise, he had hardly any wrinkles on the knees and on his lower back. He had almost all his teeth. From afar one would easily say he was seventeen or eighteen years of age. He can live up to any time that he wishes, two hundred years, if necessary.

Today his eyes were of a very intense black: the brilliant black of the statues in the depths of the temples.

This evening, in order to arrange a place near him, he swiftly redirected away from him a group of noisy visitors who, spiritually speaking, were staring, lifeless puppets by comparison with him.

I came to learn that the twelfth day of lunar half month from 5.30 to 7.30 pm, contains a period very favourable for the adoration of Śiva, the Great God. During this interval, the purifying effects of the noble thoughts and of all the good actions would be multiplied by thousand. It is said, alas, the results of the bad actions would be multiplied as much! The solution is the adoration of Śiva: this is what Śrī Mahāswami does by scrupulously performing the ritual named *pradosha-kāla-pūjā*.

Therefore, on this night there took place another universal *pūjā*, again by the side of the reservoir. Although I was not supposed to relive again yesterday's evening event, Śrī Mahāswami allowed me to stand in the same place, about five metres at his right, on the same stair level as himself. After the worship he kept me two hours more in his near vicinity. Did he intend to strengthen what he had constructed during the last *pūjā* or ceremony?

Kārvetinagar, Monday 6th September 1971

The day of vapaṇa, the ritual shaving

The true face of Śrī Mahāswami appears when he is clean shaved: the beautiful oval of his face appears to develop in length. His facial features are fine but rendered extremely expressive by his energy and his immense power of concentration. The nose is straight and slightly thick, while the mouth and the quite long ears are very distinct: there is hardly any place left for the cheeks. His face, seen from the front, where the eyes dominate, cuts incisively like a knife. Seen from one side, two curious folds start in front of the ears and join under the chin, forming a loop that opens upwards – as if he had concentrated certain forces in both folds by a formidable will, which nothing can resist. These immense powers are being kept in balance by the immense goodness and sensibility expressed by the dimension and the curve of the lips. The top of the head superbly crowns the face. Seen from the front, the oval of the head is perfect; seen from above, it is slightly rectangular and a little larger on the back. He has a poet's

great intellectual forehead which is in happy proportion with the rest of the face. His neck, with no wrinkles either in the front or on the nape, harmoniously sustains the head.

His face is one of a philosopher doubled as a man of action and an artist at the same time and with whom the spark of thought finds quick expression. This is the general impression we may receive in his presence, but it is his eyes which he cannot conceal, that reveal his true nature of a Saint, of a Great Sage.

The lightning in-between the fingers

Śrī Mahāswami builds with a patience he only could possess ‘something’ in my eyes. After numerous initial encounters, which, after they were over, would leave me unsteady with a headache and eye pains in the back of the eye balls that were followed by sleeplessness at night, I am now able to look straight into his eyes as much as he wants me to.

This evening, sitting on the earth before his hut, he looked at me in another way. He had kept his left hand in front of his left eye leaving a small slit in between the index finger and the middle finger. He then looked at me through this interstice in the same manner when he contemplated the stone statues of the gods and goddesses and the *Śiva-lingam* before consecrating them. The steady lightning of his eye, having become finer, gained an unimaginable force of penetration. During this time, he counted on his right hand with the thumb passing over the other fingers the same way as he does when he repeats divine names (*japa*). He allowed me to guess his intention: I stared into his left eye, then in both his eyes, as he had lowered his hand. The darkness of the night started to creep in and I clearly observed how in the place of Śrī Mahāswami’s eyes there opened up two deep wells as if coming from the centre of the Earth: out of both there gushed forth, in bubbling waves, a double jet of black light.

Soon the left eye of Swamiji began vibrating. I observed with high precision how it transformed itself in a white light that took the form of a small *sphaṭika-lingam* which was surrounded by brilliance. And while this jewel of transparent crystal, which was illuminated into white by an interior brilliance, took shape in his eye, I felt the same *sphaṭika-lingam* appearing in my heart; it was larger, less dense, but surrounded by the same white brilliance. I closed my

MOUNTAIN PATH

eyelids and turned my physical eyes towards the interior, trying not to lose anything of the wonder that had begun to develop silently, with a majestic rhythm, in my depths. During those long minutes a feeling of an immense happiness radiated from my chest; it started to withdraw little by little only when the image of the crystal gem slowly commenced to remove itself.

I opened my eyelids. He, Śrī Mahāswami, was still in front of me but had changed his position; the head had turned towards some visitors.

I left and came back later in the night. Śrī Mahāswami was sitting on his rope bed in the hut, resting. His head directed towards the door...one could have thought he was waiting for me. I observed him through a narrow slit of the door for perhaps one minute. He caught in flight my look and he replied in the same instant. His eyes were concentrating within themselves the colour of the flame that was his body: a transparent flame barely solidified. His divinity is evident, it is indisputable!

Kārvetinagar, Tuesday 7th September 1971

This morning I reached the Lotus Pond later than usual. Śrī Mahāswami had just come out of the hut; he stopped as soon as he saw me. He waited for me until I did my habitual round (*pradakshinā*) – starting on the right side of the hermitage – and then in front of him I prostrated. This time he requested through gesture that the onlookers move away showing that he wanted to have the space free in between the two of us. When I finished the traditional salute, he kept me kneeling with the hands in *añjali*, before him, in public, for several minutes. His lips moved, pronouncing something with an inaudible voice. Then he closed the eyes for a long moment in a serious and very concentrated attitude.

Kārvetinagar, Saturday 11th September 1971

Gokulāshṭamī

The morning, at home, had been peaceful enough. The time seemed short as it is taken up by four to five requisite hours for bathing and dressing, cleaning the room and washing the clothes, gymnastics,



hatha-yoga exercises, kitchen activities, and eating lunch (very early as I do not take any breakfast). These activities, strangely, take so much time, that it seems they had been planned or programmed by some Will, which is beyond my comprehension; no doubt, it is what I need! Without these types of obligations I would read – I habitually read a lot – and work mentally, and maybe I would thus overstrain the nervous system which is already tense due to the torrent of the daily *darśan* and meditations. However, I do wonder why I am not permitted to walk a little more.

By the end of the afternoon, I woke up by 5.30 pm. from a necessary sleep of four hours. The rest was better than usual and there was a mood of spiritual expectation. I hurried, for I felt as if pulled towards the Lotus Pond. Indeed Śrī Mahāswami sat as usual on the last stair of the pond and had just started his evening prayer. Round him, the air was so charged with spiritual force that I could not come nearer although the conditions were favourable: it was calm, with only a few visitors, and none of my so-called enemies on the horizon.

I started by placing myself some twenty metres distant from him, on his right, as he faced the south. Night had fallen: in the tropics the dark descends sometimes with the rapidity of an automatic and fluid setting on a theatrical stage. Śrī Mahāswami was engaged in a universal ritual or office. I could not see anything despite the oil night-lamp. I felt him however as a black flame, addressing the whole Universe. After 45 minutes, I ventured to come closer, up to ten metres from him, and then, progressively to three metres. The spiritual atmosphere was exceptionally dense. To my joy, he was keeping at a distance the more bigoted of my ‘enemies’ among the assistants by slipping one or two neutral visitors in between him and me. Then with a clear intention – he never does anything by chance – he showed me his bare foot and permitted my contemplating it for a long time. I am certain that the sole of his foot radiated a discreet, diffuse yellow-rose light.

I looked then at his eyes: they were open as during the great days full of blessings. In their centre, a channel was replacing the pupil. Through this there flowed or gushed, as if to his wish, little waves of light or shots of fire similar to lightning.

When he finished his prayer, Śrī Mahāswami ordered his assistants to recite the XVIII chapter of the *Śrī Bhagavad Gītā*, fragments from

the *Bhāgavata Purāna* and the *Nārāyaṇīyam* dealing with the relations of the Guru with his disciple. Then only I came to know that it was Gokulāshṭamī, the day of celebration of the birth of Śrī Krishna.

I then remembered my first encounter with Śrī Mahāswami, at Secunderabad, three years ago, on another Śrī Krishna *Jayanti* day in the compounds of a printing firm, which was when one considers it, a symbolic place for a seeker after Truth interested in writing.

My *darśan* continued with the meditation being elevated to new heights. For ten to fifteen minutes, Śrī Mahāswami drew me mentally very near to him. By then he had accomplished a sort of supplementary universal office: it was as if he would test me with his joined palms, by directing his stretched arms towards the right side where I stood. Immediately I felt I should offer my prayer to Kāmākshī, the Divine Mother, and at that very second the Queen of the Universe sprang up in front of me. She had taken a whitish human form; although less clear, being slightly inconsistent, I could still feel her Presence as a human being. Her form seemed to question me: “Why did you call me?” I had only one need and it stood in one word: *mokṣa*, the Final Liberation.

A problem seemed to arise: ‘what to do until then?’ I asked that Śrī Mahāswami should take care of everything, take every decision. The Great Goddess had patiently listened to me right up to the end. Then she became diaphanous, transparent and disappeared in the direction of Śrī Mahāswami, who, there in front of me, was immobile and omniscient. He seemed to be the axis around which the Universe inevitably turned.

After five hours of *darśan* I greeted him with an extended prostration and regretfully left. He quickly stood up, simply spread his orange cloth on a stone step and lay down. When I had arrived on the higher step and turned once again towards him, he seemed already asleep or at least wanted to make us believe so. ▲

(To be continued)



The Allure of Śrī Rāmacaritamānasa

I.S. MADUGULA
& SUDHA EMANY

Goswami Tulasidas was a Vaiṣṇava saint who perfected the devotional approach of total surrender to Lord Rama and taught it to the masses of India through his immortal epic *Rāmacaritamānasa*.¹

Among the multiple versions and retellings of the Indian epic *The Rāmāyana*, none has garnered as much popular appeal or enjoyed as much popular veneration as Tulasidas' *Śrī Rāmacaritamānasa* over the centuries. The enchanting cadences of its poetry, the mesmerizing devotion of its character delineation, and the utter loftiness of its sentiment do not seem to have a parallel anywhere in the literature of the world, sacred or secular.

This was hardly an accident. Far from it. Tulasidas made sure that the spiritual essence of the epic filled every part of the Indian psyche to the brim. To him the historical context of the story and the conjectured

¹ *Śrī Rāmacarita Mānasa*, with Hindi Text and English Translation, 15th repr. (Gorakhpur: Gita Press, 2018).

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thought processes of the characters were entirely superfluous. In his mind Lord Rama constituted the beginning, middle, and end of the narrative.

I. The Background

Tulasidas (1542-1623), surnamed Dubey, was known as Rambola when young, commenced his celebrated work in 1574-1575 on Lord Rama's birthday at Ayodhya and continued it in Varanasi and Chitrakuta, completing it on the day of his marriage to Sita in 1577, after 'two years, seven months, and 26 days', with the avowed purpose of 'simplifying' the Vedas, the Upanishads, and the Purānas for the benefit of the masses. It was deliberately intended to be sung and acted out while being meditated on. It was a part of the Bhakti movement and the *Saṅgana* School.

He flourished during the reign of Emperor Akbar (1556-1605) and was a contemporary of Shakespeare (1564-1616).

The Rāmāyaṇa is an *itihāsa* which must have been in circulation long before it had been crafted into a *kāvya* at a later date. Composed by Valmiki in 24,000 verses, it is known as the first poetical work, *ādikāvya* that set the tone and the standard for all later Sanskrit poetry. While recounting the story of Lord Rama, it is a thorough delineation of individual characters and their interaction in the story. It serves as a mirror to the consciousness of the nation. The great epics of other nations also attempt the same goals but on a smaller scale and a smaller canvas. The scope of *The Rāmāyaṇa* is universal. Every moral, religious, and ethical issue that humans ever face is addressed in it, while other epics focus primarily on the hero's exploits. Its popularity can be gaged from its innumerable translations into world languages and all Indian languages.

The astute litterateur and critic C. Rajagopalachari, quoted by the publisher, says:

Tulasidasa made his vision of God into a concrete reality for the commonest of men around him.

Tulasidasa could have made himself as grand or obscure as any philosopher, ancient or modern, for he had learning enough for it; but he was too pious to lose himself in that manner. His great love of the common folk enabled him to produce a work... that

has stood the test of centuries like a rock among philosophers, pandits, and lowly men and women.

Tulasidas begins his work traditionally with an invocation to the various deities that preside over literary compositions, such as Vani, Vinayaka, Bhavani, Sankara, and Hari. He pays homage to his guru Narasimhadasa as an embodiment of wisdom. He includes a special tribute to Sita, the ‘beloved consort of Rama, who is responsible for the creation, sustenance, and dissolution of the universe’. Furthermore, Lord Rama ‘is superior to and lies beyond all causes, whose *Māyā*... holds sway over the entire universe including gods Brahma...and demons...’.

Having laid the groundwork for the exaltation of Lord Rama, Tulasidas reveals the real reason for his composition:

For the gratification of his own self Tulasidas brings forth this very elegant composition relating the story of Sri Raghunatha, which is in accord with various Puranas, Vedas and the Agamas..., and incorporates what has been recorded in *The Rāmāyaṇa* (of Valmiki) and culled from some other sources.

We know then that he wrote this work for the uplift of his own soul – *svāntaḥ sukhāya*, through the graciousness of Lord Rama. The resulting poem was bound to please the masses. The notion of the author’s personal gratification is once again repeated at the end:

The...mysterious ‘*Mānasa Rāmāyaṇa*’ ... which was composed of yore by the blessed Lord Sankara, the best of all poets, with the object of inculcating unceasing devotion to the lotus feet of Lord Rama, has been likewise rendered into the dialect of the common people by Tulasidas for lifting the gloom of his heart, cognizing the fact that it is devoted to the Name of Sri Raghunatha.

Tulasidas states that his work concerns itself with the ‘Manasa lake of Rama’s exploits,’ meaning that like the Manasarovar, Rama’s story is pure, pleasing and ennobling. He clearly intended to uplift the masses with his benevolent and auspicious work, and, most importantly, inspire both *bhakti* and *jñāna* among those who study it.

Thus Tulasidas’ work is designed right from the start to appeal to the masses. The entire text then is structured around that primary goal

of the poet. We will see below the various devices that are employed toward that end.

While Tulasidas plunges in *medias res* in his depiction of the Rama story, Valmiki takes his time to get to the point. His approach is almost impersonal, universal, lofty, and high-minded. There's no direct address or reference to a personal god to whom one can turn in times of distress for immediate relief. His Rama was a historical figure, an *itihāsa* character, whom he portrays from a multitude of intertwined perspectives – as a king and leader of men, upholder of dharma, often at moral crossroads, always at the disposal of anyone who might want his help, and is capable of immense personal sacrifice. He would not hesitate to banish his wife over unconfirmed gossip, after just having rescued her from her abductor. The point is that Valmiki's Rama is a highly complex personality, as opposed to the Rama presented to us by Tulasidas. The uniqueness of the latter Rama is that he is easier for the masses to latch on to in times of need. He is literally within the grasp of the masses. Valmiki's Rama has to be studied in detail with some effort, a study that will prove rewarding to the elite, the savant, and the sophisticated reader.

Valmiki's work begins with a loaded question about who was the best human being that was head-and-shoulders above the ordinary heroes that transcended human limitations and who was the best approximation to a divinity. The questioner was none other than Valmiki, and the respondent was the peripatetic divine sage Narada who was an ascetic and well-versed in ancient lore. To this all-encompassing question, the full answer required the narration of the entire epic of *The Rāmāyaṇa*.

The eternal history of Lord Rama passed through the poetic conduit of Valmiki's mind, while it passed through the crucible of Tulasidas' heart. Therein lies the mesmerizing impact of *Rāmacaritamānasa*.

II. The Allure

Rāmacaritamānasa consists of 1073 groups of quartets, roughly a third of the size of Valmiki's work, enlisting the service of ten Sanskrit and eight Prakrit metres, composed in Awadhi, a popular dialect of Hindi. Philosophically, it establishes the primacy of Lord Rama as a synonym of Brahman the Ultimate Reality. Devotion to Lord Rama as a deity



leads to the realisation that He is All and nothing other than Him exists. Though not critical of the *advaita* view of *māyā* and superimposition, he is clearly partial to the *saguna* approach. The name of Rama is all-powerful. It literally works miracles, transcending both *saguna* and *nirguna* views of the Reality. A Western critic concludes that Tulasidas' Rama is at once: "Valmiki's exemplary prince, the cosmic Vishnu of the Puranas, and the transcendent Brahman of the advaitins."

A contemporary of Tulasidas, the staunch advaitin Madhusudana Sarasvati, pays him a generous tribute:

In this place of Varanasi (Anandakanana), there is a moving Tulsi plant (i.e., Tulsidas), whose branch of flowers in the form of [this] poem (i.e., *Rāmacaritamānas*) is ever adorned by the bumblebee in the form of Rama.

Let's examine below the many ways in which Tulasidas made his work the darling of the common folk. We will take a sampling of instances where the poet's deliberate emphasis energizes certain details in the story. These details are either absent in Valmiki's original or have received extra attention in Tulasidas' rendition.

1. Rama's childhood

With charming ears and most lovely cheeks, His sweet lisping prattle was most delightful to hear. The soft and curly hair that has not been trimmed since His birth had been beautifully dressed in manifold ways by His mother.

2. Arrival at Janaka's Palace

One dark and the other fair, the two lads were yet of tender age. The delight of all eyes, they steal the heart of the whole world. All those present there rose when Sri Raghunatha came; Vishvamitra seated him by his side. His heart overwhelmed with love, the king recovered himself by recourse to dispassion... and, bowing his head at the sage's feet, spoke...in a voice choked with emotion.

"Tell me, my lord, are these pretty boys the ornament of a sage's family or the bulwarks of some royal dynasty? Or, is it that Brahma (the Absolute) whom the Vedas describe in negative terms such as 'Not this' (*neti*) has appeared in a dual form?"

Deeply enamoured of them at their very sight, my mind has perforce renounced the joy of absorption into Brahman.”

3. Creative Portrayal of the Brothers

Shining bright in the galaxy of princes, they looked like two full moons in the midst of stars. Everyone looked on the Lord’s form according to the conception each had about Him.

Those who were staunch in the battlefield gazed on His form as though He was the heroic sentiment personified. The wicked kings trembled at the sight of the Lord as if He had a most terrible form.

The demons, who were cunningly disguised as princes, beheld the Lord as death in visible form, while the citizens regarded the two brothers as the ornaments of men and the delight of their eyes...

The wise saw the Lord in His Cosmic form, with many faces, hands, feet, eyes and heads...

To the Yogis...he shone forth as no other than the highest truth—placid, unsullied, equipoised, and resplendent by its very nature.

4. Elaborate Description of the Wedding Festivities

They (the royal couple) began to lave Lord Rama’s lotus-feet; their whole bodies were thrilled with emotion... The lotus-feet that ever sparkle in the lake of Siva’s bosom, by thinking of which even for once the mind gets purified and all the impurities of the Kali age are driven away...it is those very feet that the most fortunate Janaka washed amidst shouts of victory from all corners.

5. Guha’s Quandary (added by Tulasidas)

He (Lord Rama) called for a boat but the ferryman wouldn’t bring it. The latter said, “I know your subtle secret; about the pollen dust of your lotus feet which everyone says is some herb possessing the quality of turning solid things into human beings. By its very touch a rock was transformed into a charming woman and wood is not harder than stone. If my boat itself gets converted into a hermit’s wife... I shall be robbed of the very means of subsistence, in that my boat will disappear.

It is by means of this boat that I maintain the whole of my family; I know no other profession. If, therefore, my lord, you must cross the river, command me to lave your lotus feet (a clever way of tricking Rama into letting him wash His feet!).

6. The Sabari Episode

(Sabari said to Lord Rama): “A woman is the lowest of those who rank as the lowest of the low. Of them, again, I am the most dull-headed, O Destroyer of sins.” Said Sri Raghunatha: “Listen, O noble lady, to my words: I recognize no other kinship except that of Devotion.

Despite caste, kinship, lineage, piety, reputation, wealth, physical strength, numerical strength of his family, accomplishments and ability, a man lacking in Devotion looks as lustreless as a cloud without water.

Now I shall tell you the nine forms of Devotion; please listen attentively...

Whoever possesses even one of these nine forms of Devotion, be he man or woman or any other creature – sentient or insentient, is most dear to Me, O good lady. As for yourself, you are blessed with unflinching devotion of all types. The state which is hardly attained by the Yogis is within your easy reach today.”

This may be Tulasidas’ response to the misogyny of his times. After all, he was a rebel against tradition. At any rate, he was not going to let go an opportunity to recommend devotion to one and all.

7. Vibhishana’s Meeting with Rama

I (Vibhishana) am a demon vilest of nature and have never done any good act. Yet, the Lord whose beautiful form even sages fail to perceive with their mind’s eye, has been pleased to clasp me to his bosom.

Lord Rama said: Listen, my friend. I will tell you my nature... If a man, even though he has been an enemy of the whole animate and inanimate creation, comes terror-stricken to me, seeking my protection, and discarding vanity, infatuation, hypocrisy, and tricks of various kinds, I speedily make him the very like of a saint. The ties of affection... are like so many threads which

a pious soul gathers up and twists into a string wherewith He binds his mind and heart to my feet.

Though Valmiki also includes a similar statement made by Rama, Tulasidas gives it special prominence.

8. Ravana the Philosopher

Following his son Meghanada's death, Ravana consoles the womenfolk and his followers:

Perceive and realize in your heart... that the entire universe is perishable.

Tulasidas here is clearly taking a dig at Ravana who had no business to philosophize over questions of life and death. He was at this point entirely preoccupied with not letting Rama rescue His wife.

Then getting down to business, Ravana gives a pep talk to his soldiers.

He whose heart quails before the enemy in battle had better withdraw even now; for if he has his back on the field of battle, he will suffer for it. Relying on the strength of my own arm have I waged the war and shall give a befitting reply to the enemy, who has invaded us.

The Rāmacaritamānasa is nothing if not a masterpiece of condensation.

The epitome of the beauty of the entire *Rāmāyaṇa* is by all accounts considered to be Book V, 'Sundara Kānda'. It is in fact where Valmiki and Tulasidas exhibit their consummate literary skills. It is also where we can discern the contexts where the latter diverges from the former, in order to maximize the appeal of his work for the masses.

Valmiki's 'Sundara Kanda' has about eight times as many verses as Tulasidas.' The details eliminated by Tulasidas is as much a statement of his purpose as that which he has chosen to present. The interactions that he dwelt on and the descriptions he injected into the dialogues of the principal characters are precisely what characterize Tulasidas as a people's poet. A sampling of this strategy may be seen below.

The second invocation in Tulasidas' Book V is addressed to Lord Rama as one that pervades the entire creation (*akhilāntarātmā*), requesting further reinforcement of his overflowing *bhakti* and asking

that the Lord cleanse his mind of worldly desires. This may be looked upon as a transferred prayer that is really said by the poet on behalf of his audience. Note that the word *mānasa* occurs with regular frequency throughout the work.

And, because of the role of Hanuman in this part of the work, the second invocatory verse is addressed to him. Hanuman possesses incomparable strength, is the destroyer of the hordes of demons, the embodiment of all virtues, and the greatest among *jñāni*-s. He had the best of physical and spiritual attributes, and is therefore the fittest person to be a one-person search party to locate Sita, sort of laying the groundwork for the poet's *Cālīsā*.

Lanka's unequalled splendour is discussed in captivating detail in order to magnify Hanuman's exploits on the one hand and the opulence of Ravana dwarfed only by his concupiscence:

The charming city was enclosed by a fortification wall of gold inlaid with precious stones...and contained many beautiful houses, crossroads, bazars, lovely streets and lanes...multitudes of elephants, horses and mules, the crowds of foot soldiers and chariots...groves and orchards, gardens and parks, lakes and also wells...looked charming...Seeing a host of guards defending the city, Hanuman thought to himself, "Let me assume a very minute form and enter the city at night."

Then follow Hanuman's beating up of Lankini, meeting with Vibhishana, finding of Sita in a pathetic condition amid Ravana's threats, destruction of Ravana's forces and killing of one of his sons, voluntary submission to Indrajit, interview with Ravana, and conflagration of Lanka. All these events for Tulasidas happen over 24 pages in a rapid-fire order.

Compared to this simple, straightforward narration, Valmiki has utilized over 185 pages to cover the same ground, making his work a real *itihāsa*. His is a comprehensive, ethical, and philosophical work for an elite audience; it's aristocratic, as opposed to *The Rāmacaritamānasa* which is entirely democratic.

9. Hanuman's Encounter with Vibhishana

He (Vibhishana) began to repeat Lord Rama's name in prayer and Hanuman was delighted at heart to find a virtuous soul...

he assumed the form of a Brahmana and hailed Vibhishana... Hanuman told him all about Lord Rama and disclosed his identity... a thrill ran through the body of both and they were transported with joy at the thought of Lord Rama's host of virtues.

"Endowed as I am with a sinful (demoniac) form, I am incapable of doing any *sādhana*... and my heart cherishes no love for the Lord's lotus feet, either. But I am now confident that Sri Rama's grace is on me..."

Vibhishana fully explained to Hanuman the strategy of seeing Sita.

This incident seems to have been Tulasidas' creation to dramatize the contrast between Vibhishana and his blindsided brother.

10. Hanuman on Finding Sita

He (Hanuman) mentally bowed to her as soon as he saw her... She had her eyes fixed on Her own feet, while Her mind was absorbed in the thought of Lord Rama's lotus feet... Hanuman felt extremely miserable to see Janaki so disconsolate.

At that moment, Ravana arrived there... The wretch tried to prevail upon Her in many ways... Interposing a blade of grass between Herself and fixing Her thoughts on Her most beloved lord Lord Rama... Janaki rejoined – "Listen, O ten-headed monster... you carried me off at a time when there was none by my side, yet you did not feel ashamed, O vile and shameless rogue..."

Reacting angrily to this chastisement, Ravana walked away saying, "If she does not accept my directive in a month's time, I will draw my sword and behead her."

Then... Hanuman dropped down the signet ring... She (Sita) sprang up with joy and took it in her hand... Hanuman spoke in sweet accents.

Some of this seems to be Tulasidas' creation for dramatic effect.

11. Hanuman's Face-to-Face with Ravana

True to character, Ravana scoffs at Hanuman who seemed like a mere monkey to him, consumed as he was with a prodigious ego and trust in his own limitless might. However, the encounter with Hanuman didn't go well for him.

Asked by Ravana as to why he killed his soldiers and laid waste his prized gardens and groves and whether he was not afraid to die, Hanuman answers:

Listen Ravana, recall Him by whose might *Māyā* (*Prakṛti*/ Nature) brings forth innumerable universes...who assumes various forms in order to protect the gods and teach a lesson to wretches like you...Know me to be His envoy... I ate the fruit because I felt hungry...I am not at all ashamed of being bound, keen as I am to serve the cause of my Lord. I implore you with folded hands...Never antagonize Him who is a source of terror even to Death...Abandon pride...and adore Lord Sri Rama...

And Ravana's response is an amused and scornful dismissal of Hanuman's sage counsel: "We have found a 'versatile' Guru (preceptor) in this monkey." Soon the whole of Lanka goes up in flames. Tulasidas' narrative takes some nine pages.

III. Tulasidas, the People's Poet

It is in such poignant situations that Tulasidas' poetic imagination and creativity excel.

It would appear, on balance that the perennial popularity of Tulasidas' work may be attributed to:

- Its colloquial idiom;
- Its laser-sharp focus on the phenomenon of bhakti;
- Its resultant emphasis on characters such as Hanuman and Bharata;
- Its relentless praise of Rama at the slightest opportunity that presents itself;
- The theatrical nature of the dialogues;
- The inherent melody of the verses, and;
- The creative selection and structuring of episodes taken from a variety of sources other than Valmiki.

Rāmacaritamānasa is sometimes called the 'the Bible of North India'. But the work is really the darling of the entire nation and deserves more an appellation like the logos of the Indian national psyche. ▲

The Body is Another Name for Death

ART BAKER

As Bhagavan devotees, we've all heard this shocking statement. Perhaps hearing this for the first time, we wonder if it is some cryptic koan, or whether Bhagavan literally means it. If Bhagavan was still in the body in the present day, and cognizant of our computer era, I can imagine him smiling, and saying the following... "Do this one-minute investigation. On your computer, open a new word document and type in the word 'body.' Open your thesaurus by placing the cursor on the word 'body' and right click. Choose synonyms. You'll plainly see that the word 'body' means 'corpse, cadaver, dead body, remains, carcass, stiff, and deceased.'" End of story!

In Valmiki *Rāmāyana*, Rama tells his brother Bharata, "When you walk, death walks. When you sit, death sits. When you speak, it is death that is speaking."

So, the next time you feel or think 'I am the body' simply substitute for 'body' either 'corpse, cadaver, dead body, or carcass' and you'll be awake in no time! All joking aside, it's no wonder why the common ego in those who've done little or no conscious inner work is angry, fearful, and hysteric... it knows deep inside that its mortal coil is already doomed, already dead.

While under the influence of the ‘I-thought’ we not only believe that we are the [dead] body, but, as a consequence, the typical person’s so-called ‘normal’ subjectivity is problematic, characterized by being lazy, resentful, boastful, deceitful, greedy, anxious, lustful, and gluttonous! On the contrary, while under the influence of the true Self, we eventually come to know that we are imperturbable Peace, the very font of contentment. As a consequence, our subjectivity, when based on fully assimilated truth and insight, is non-problematic, being characterized by being genuinely serene, sympathetic, truly loving/affectionate, charitable, compassionate, being friendly to others, having real understanding, and, sometimes, even virtuous divine power. When viewed in this way, it’s amazing that there’s any choice between the two, yet unconsciously we follow the ego, because it is tenacious, determined to survive.

Sri Ramana also tells us that ‘our bodilessness is a foregone conclusion.’ Again, as Bhagavan devotees, we’ve all heard this shocking statement. Again, perhaps, hearing this for the first time, we wonder whether it is some cryptic koan, or if Bhagavan literally means it. Accepting that the body is already by definition, dead, a mere corpse, and simultaneously sensing that we are obviously alive, obviously conscious, obviously aware, this absolute certainty – if we can achieve it – cannot BUT lead us to accept that we are already bodiless.

What are we to conclude from this realization? Is our body, and all those we see and interact with, mere zombies? Are we all the Walking Dead? It does not seem so, because even though the body, according to Bhagavan, (as well as our trusted thesaurus), is by definition already lifeless, I still hear the chatter of my ego within my ‘dead’ head. In other words, if the body is indeed dead, what is it that is alive?

Bhagavan tells us “The mind...” [and therefore the body] “...can do nothing by itself. It emerges only with the illumination and can do no action, good or bad, except with the illumination. But while the illumination is always there, enabling the mind [and therefore the body] to act well or ill, the pleasure or pain resulting from such action is not felt by the illumination, just as when you hammer a red hot rod it is not the fire but the iron that gets the hammering.”¹ In other words,

¹ *Gems From Bhagavan*, Chap. III, ‘Mind’, p.12.

it is *prakṛti*, the physical elements that get hammered, not the bodiless Consciousness/‘Illumination’. So it is the illumination that is alive. That is who we are. We need to get this through our thick skull... we are in fact, this life principle that is not dependent on the brain for its existence. The brain is a mere filter through which unlimited consciousness, the illumination, manifests as the individual human experience. Once that leaves the body at death we remain as that illumination.

Furthermore, according to Bhagavan, the ego is a ghost.² Again, as Bhagavan devotees, we’ve all heard this shocking statement. Again, perhaps hearing this for the first time, we wonder whether it is some cryptic koan, or if Bhagavan literally means it. If we accept that the ego is the mind turned outwards, Bhagavan tells us that the mind is a wondrous power of the Self. Bhagavan says, “The mind, turned outwards, results in thoughts and objects. Turned inwards it becomes itself the Self.”³ But how do we do this? Bhagavan answers this question thus: “The way to merge with *svarūpa* as Pure Consciousness within, is to train the objectifying consciousness that perceives objects to pay attention to itself, to turn Selfwards, and remain sunk in the Heart.”⁴

G. Ramaswami Pillai who in 1922 was one of the first full time residents of the present day Ramanasramam, describes the ego as “being only an accretion, a shadow, a ghost, an unstable combination of *chit* and *jada*, consciousness and matter. It is the source of all mischief in our state of ignorance. Nothing is lost by its destruction. It obscures and conceals the true Self which is identical with Pure Consciousness. This false ego is to be dissolved by steady enquiry into it, or by the grace of our most gracious *Sat Guru*, Bhagavan Sri Ramana.”⁵

So, though we are still in the body, we have to understand and accept that we’re already bodiless. While having a mind, so long as we’re vigilant in turning it inwards, no longer hypnotized by the ego, we begin to see that the mind is already not different from the Self.

² Venkataramiah, M, (compl.), *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk§612.

³ Mudaliar, A. Devaraja, *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, 8-11-45 Morning. p.37.

⁴ Sri Muruganar, *Guru Vachaka Kovai*, v.899, ed. by D. Godman.

⁵ *The Mountain Path*, January 1966, ‘Early Days with Bhagavan’, p.21.

The ego is a mere shadow, a veil, like a cloud temporarily covering the sun. ‘Scorch it by ignoring it!’ is the emphatic instruction Bhagavan provides us.

So what to do upon hearing this and fully assimilating this? Do the laundry. Sweep the hallway. Buy vegetables. Take a bath. Eat a masala dosa. Open a fixed deposit. A more important question is what *not* to do. As Sri Nochur Venkataraman says, “Do not get bored with peace.” Enjoy your life, your *bhogavāsanā*-s, while entirely disregarding the bogus *vāsanā*-s, namely, your fixated habit patterns, the deeply conditioned responses that bind you to ignorance and to forgetfulness of your real nature.

Assimilating these pointers that Bhagavan provides, regarding what we truly are, will normally take time. This being the case, continual engagement with Bhagavan’s teachings is essential. Read Bhagavan’s words. Do self-enquiry. Consciously abide as the Self-nature. Read the *Śrī Bhagavad Gītā*. Read *Yoga Vashishtam*. Read the *Upaniṣad*-s. Listen to Sri Nochur Venkataraman’s videos, if they appeal to you. Chant *Śrī Aruṇācala Akṣaramaṇamālai*. Circumambulate Arunachala. And by all means, develop not just clarity, but also *bhakti* – love and devotion towards the Truth as well.

Perhaps most importantly, lead a *sattvic* lifestyle to help your mind to maintain *sattva*, which is deep restfulness in the Self, rather than following your mind’s habitual restlessness and dullness. Do not get involved with your ego’s antics – merely note them and disengage from them. This knowledge-practice will set you free. You’ll no longer be a puppet on a chain controlled by the shadow-self, the one that believes it is a separate entity. And, as Bhagavan tells us, that is the very purpose of our human birth, to wake up from our ongoing nightmare/delusion of being detached from our Source. ▲

The Maharshi and Mantra

Part Two

KAYS

The ONE mantra that is attributeless and all-pervasive

Akilandamma of Desur was one of the earliest devotees of Bhagavan. Her sole source of joy was seeing and thinking of Bhagavan and serving him with food. She had the rarest fortune of being the recipient of this ‘Guru mantra’ from Bhagavan Himself, her Guru who was the very embodiment of that mantra. Advised to get an *upadeśa* from Bhagavan on the auspicious day of a full moon, though she initially demurred, picking up courage, she beseeched Bhagavan to bestow some words of grace as *upadeśa* on her.

Looking at her graciously Bhagavan said, “Remain without losing hold of yourself.”¹ Hailing from a rural background with little knowledge, scriptural or otherwise, she could divine neither the exalted import of this *upadeśa* nor the method of practising it. But at the emergence of these words she experienced immense satisfaction flooding her heart and an upsurge of wonderful effulgence in her mind. These ‘words’ compacted of the power of Bhagavan’s ceaseless experience of the Self and his look of grace, called ‘*Guru*

¹ உன்னெ விடாமல் இரு (unnai viḍāmal iru).

Dīkṣā,² transmitting the imprint of his own experience and power, accomplished what could not be accomplished otherwise. She records that the words, repeatedly rising like waves, caused an indescribable bliss and till her life's end the sound of the *upadeśa* kept ringing in her ears.² After this verbal *upadeśa*, Bhagavan, sitting there for a long time in that eloquent silence, gave a practical demonstration as well, of how to remain as he instructed, doing exactly what Arunachala did to Bhagavan, as declared by him in verse 36 of *Akṣara Maṇa Mālai*.

“In Silence Thou saidst, ‘Stay silent,’ and Thyself stood silent, Oh Arunachala.”

Thus a single gracious utterance produced the fruit and fulfilment of all *sādhana*, for she found that thereafter Bhagavan's benign presence and grace permeated her being forever.

किमत्र बहुनोक्तेन शास्त्रकोटिशतैरपि ।

दुर्लभा चित्तविश्रान्तिः विना गुरुकृपां पराम् ॥³

“Of what use is too much exposition by crores of thousands of scriptures even? Real peace of *chitta* (mind) is very rare. How can it be attained without *Guru Kripa*?”

‘I’ is the Name of God; mere repetition of ‘I’ will do.

Saddled with the cares and chores of a household with seven children, Mrs. Khanna, bereft of much learning or traditional knowledge, pleaded to Bhagavan to bestow on her a simpler and easier way than *ātma vichara*, for which she had neither the time nor the aptitude. Bhagavan's answer, besides enlightening her by his words and look of grace, was also an initiation. All knowledge is required only to be given up eventually. “If you can do nothing more, at least continue saying ‘I-I’ to yourself mentally all the time, as advised in ‘Who am I?’ Whatever work you may be doing.... ‘I’ is the name of God. It is the first and greatest of all mantras.”⁴

Thus, direct initiation from Bhagavan assured her that no learning or scriptural knowledge is necessary to know the Self. No wonder

² Om, Sadhu, *Ramaṇānubhavam*, published by Desur Matalayam.

³ kimatra bahunoktena śāstrakoṭiśatairapi |

durlabhā cittaviśrāntiḥ vinā gurukṛpām parām || *Guru Gita*, v.128.

⁴ Mudaliar, A. Devaraja, *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, 28-6-46.

this allayed her doubts and, bolstering her confidence, set her on the royal road to the goal. Oral repetition leads to mental repetition which finally resolves itself into an eternal vibration.

अहमेव जगत्सर्वमहमेव परं पदम् ।

एतज्ज्ञानं यतो भूयात्तं गुरुं प्रणमाम्यहम् ॥⁵

“‘I am’ all this world, ‘I am’ the supreme state of emancipation – to that Guru from whom one gets this kind of realisation (knowledge), I ever prostrate.”

Salvation sans struggle: The mantra of ‘Siva’

An incident where Bhagavan rained his glorious Grace on a socially marginalised and illiterate person, by initiating him into the ‘mantra’ of a sacred name, is at once out of the ordinary and highly poignant and is in line with what Adi Sankara proclaims:

नृणामन्त्यजानामपि स्वार्थदाने

गुहाद्देवमन्यं न जाने न जाने ॥⁶

“For the bhaktas low in the social order I know not of any other Deity to protect them except Guha (the Lord of the Heart-cave, Subrahmanya).”

This humble devotee was in the habit of circumambulating the Ashram, holding in his hand, and gazing at, a picture of Bhagavan that he had tied to a string round his neck. Once as he neared the entrance gate of the Old Hall, he saw Bhagavan emerging from it and fell prostrate at his feet. Bhagavan stopped and the devotee wept and prayed with tears, “Save me!” Bhagavan’s look rained compassion, and as he wouldn’t be able to meditate Bhagavan said simply, “Go on saying ‘Siva’, ‘Siva’. That will save you.” This simple mantra had been glorified by Thirumoolar as standing for the oneness of Si and Va, *Brahman* and *jīva*.

The *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra* declares, “The moment a disciple receives the initiation with the mantra, the sacred name of God from the Guru, he becomes united with Brahman.” This is but reminiscent

⁵ ahameva jagatsarvamahameva param padam |

etajñānaṁ yato bhūyāttaṁ gurum praṇamāmyaham || *Guru Gita*, v.322.

⁶ nṛṇāmantyajānāmapi svārthadāne

guhāddevamanyam na jāne na jāne|| *Śrī Subrahmanya Bhujāṅgam*, v.27.

of what South Indian hagiography is replete with. It is especially reminiscent of the story of Petran Samban, another devotee who was socially marginalized, who was bestowed instant deliverance by Guru Umopathy Sivachariar, one of the quartet who preached the canons of Saiva Siddhanta. Another such a one was Thiruppan Alwar.

ज्ञानं विना मुक्तिपदं लभ्यते गुरुभक्तिः ।
गुरोः प्रसादतो नान्यत् साधनं गुरुमार्गिणाम् ॥⁷

“By the devotion practised towards the Guru one attains the state of mukti even without knowledge. For those who tread the path of unflinching devotion to the Guru, no other sadhana is needed than the grace of the guru.”

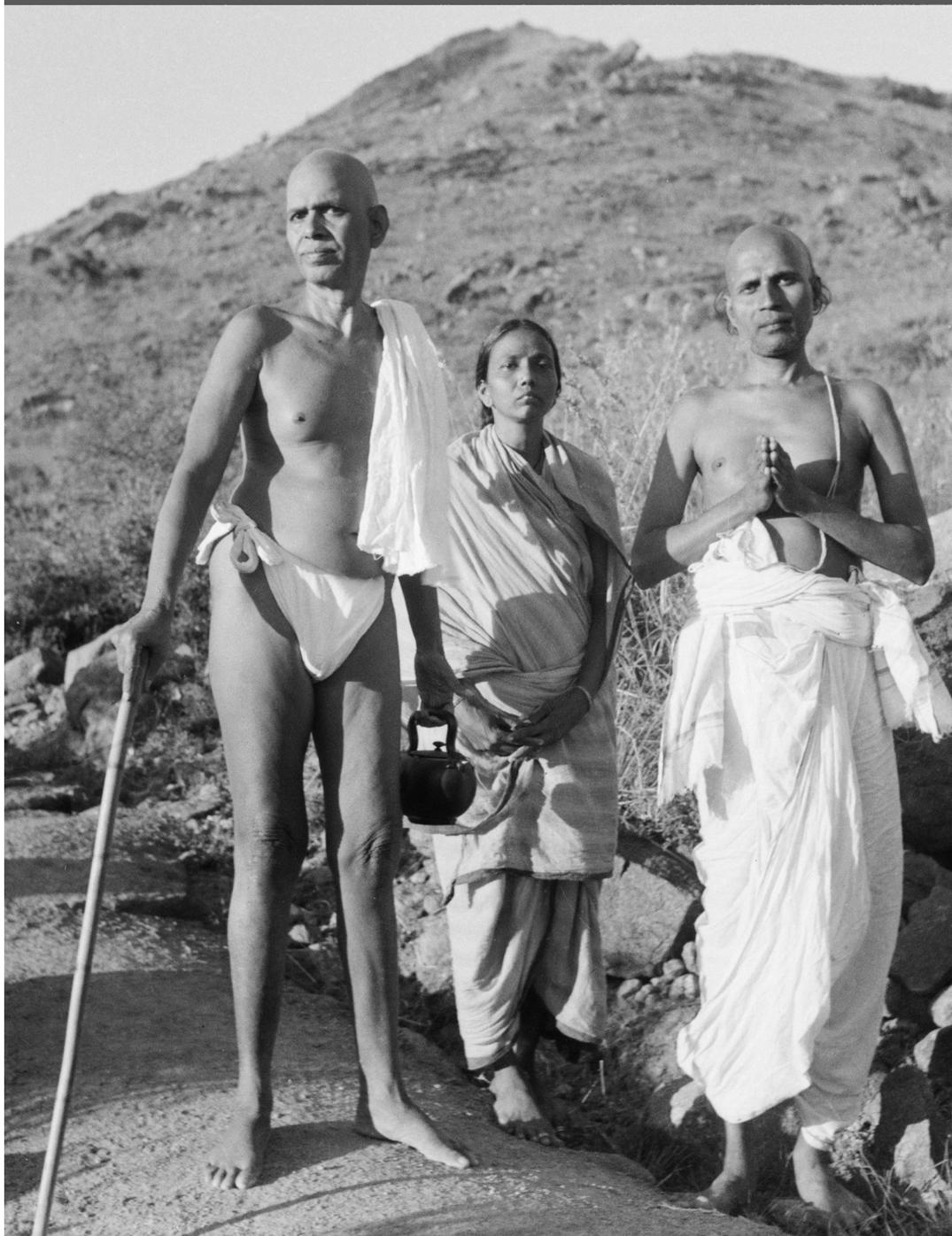
The ‘Ravi Raksha’ mantra

Sri Jagadeeswara Sastri, an ardent devotee of Bhagavan, was celebrated as the ‘court poet’ in Sanskrit of the Old Hall. The *Sahasra Nāmāvali* or the 1008 names of Bhagavan chanted at Bhagavan’s samadhi shrine was composed by him. He is the author of ‘*Prapatti Aṣṭakam*’ and ‘*Abhayāṣṭakam*’ too. ‘*Prapatti Aṣṭakam*’ was a plaintive cry to Bhagavan to save him when he was on the verge of death. Needless to say, not only was he retrieved from the jaws of death but was also gifted a long span of life thereafter. Even now it is a matter of fervent belief amongst many devotees that the chanting of this ‘*aṣṭakam*’ wards off untimely death.

He is also the blessed recipient of a mantra from Bhagavan, the Sun of wisdom, which bestowed on him permanent protection from the heat of the celestial Sun.

On a hot afternoon Bhagavan, picking up his *kamandalu*, invited Sri Jagadeeswara Sastri to accompany him on a walk on the mountain. The prospect of walking over burning rocks was far from inviting, especially for one who never wore any footwear and even the pleasure and privilege of walking along with Bhagavan was eclipsed by that fright. Sastri tried to wriggle out of the situation by making the excuses that he had no footwear and that while Bhagavan, without footwear, could walk on the toughest terrain and in any weather without feeling

⁷ jñānaṁ vinā muktīpadam labhyate gurubhaktiṭaḥ |
guroḥ prasādato nānyat sādhanam gurumārgiṇām || *Guru Gita*, v.101.



Bhagavan with Jagadeeswara Sastri and his wife

the least discomfort, he was unable to do so. But Bhagavan countered all these excuses. Realizing the futility of further argument, he gave up and quietly followed Bhagavan. The rocks, exposed to severe heat, burnt his feet. It was raining fire on all sides and this pushed him to the limits of his endurance. He cried out to Bhagavan that one more minute in that hot sun would crack open his skull and he would die. He was genuinely afraid that he was dying.

Bhagavan, however, smiled and said in a quiet, deep voice: “Jagadeesa, give up your fear and listen! You must cultivate the ‘*bhāvanā*’ (thought; attitude) that you are the Sun. Start doing *japa* of the mantra “*Sūryosmi*” (‘I am the sun’) with the conviction that it is really true. You’ll soon see the effect of it. You yourself will become the *Sūrya Swarupa*, that is, you’ll have the characteristics of the Sun. Can the Sun feel the heat of the Sun?”

Sastri sincerely followed Bhagavan’s advice, for he could find no other way to be saved from the scorching heat. Any mantra carries the imprint and power of the personal experience of the one who bestows it. If it emanates from a *jnani*, the Sun of wisdom, who is *Sarvamaya* (The All) and *Parātpara* (Beyond All), the benefit will be inestimable indeed. The effect of the ‘*Ravi* (Sun) *Raksha* (Protection) mantra started to manifest itself at once for Sastri.

The severity of the heat steadily lessened and eventually a pleasing coolness replaced the heat till the end of the walk to Skandasramam. Sastri’s feet did not feel the heat as he continued the *japa*. Later he was astonished to discover that the mantra had left a lasting effect on him though he no longer chanted it.⁸

For Bhagavan, who is “the Sun to the lotus of the Heart, and the moon to the Ocean of Grace” and who ferries devotees across the dangerous Ocean of *Samsara*, is not the protection of devotees from *Tapatraya*⁹ but natural?

⁸ Chagganlal Yogi. ‘Sri Ramana Mahima’ in Gujarati translated into English by V. Kothari and published in *The Power of the Presence*, Part II, p. 201. ed.D.Godman.

⁹ Afflictions caused by *ādhyātmikam* – one’s nature; *adhibauthikam* – physical elements (like earth quake, etc.) and *ādhi daivikam* – divine forces.

तापत्रयाग्निप्रतप्तनामशान्तप्राणिनां भुवि ।
यस्य पादोदकं गङ्गा तस्मै श्रीगुरवे नमः ॥¹⁰

“Afflicted by the three kinds of fires the restless creatures on earth wander. To such people the Guru is verily the Supreme Ganga. Prostrations to Him.”

Sri Ramana Dwadasakshari (the twelve-lettered mantra)

The mantra on Guru, celebrated as मन्त्रराज¹¹, ‘The King of mantras’ is hailed as the ‘essence of the Vedas, Smritis and Puranas’ (स्मृतिवेदपुराणानां सारमेव न संशय – smṛtivedapurāṇānām sārameva na saṁśaya). Hence no mantra can equal its glory and its power to invoke the Grace Supreme and the succour divine, this the Srutis proclaim.

गुरुरादिरनादिश्च गुरुः परमदैवतम् ।
गुरुमन्त्रसमो नास्ति तस्मै श्रीगुरवे नमः ॥¹²

“Guru is the foremost and the first. Guru is the Supreme Reality and Deity. There is no mantra equal to the Guru mantra. Therefore make prostrations to the Guru.”

The history of the origin of the Guru mantra *Om Namō Bhagavate Śrī Ramanāya* is recorded by Sri T.K. Sundaresa Iyer, one of the early devotees of Bhagavan.¹³ The whole mystery of Grace is concealed in these twelve letters and Grace is garnered by the invocation of this mantra that is beyond expression.

The mantra *Om Namō Bhagavate Vāsudevāya* had fascinated Sri T.K. Sundaresa Iyer, a devout *bhakta* of Sri Rama, in his early days. The verse of the *Gita*, which declares ज्ञानी त्वात्मैव मे मतम् (‘In my view the *jñānī* is my own Self’),¹⁴ besides causing him profuse delight, convinced him beyond doubt that Bhagavan, who was near at hand, was none other than Vasudeva. He desired to have a single mantra, the worship of a single deity and adherence to a single scripture to

¹⁰ tāpatrayāgnitaptanāmaśāntaprāṇinām bhuvi |
yasya pādodakam gaṅgā tasmai śrīgurave namaḥ || *Guru Gita*, v.83.

¹¹ mantrarājam, *Guru Gita*, v.151.

¹² gururādiranādiśca guruḥ paramadaivatam |
gurūmantrasamo nāsti tasmai śrīgurave namaḥ || *Guru Gita*, v.79.

¹³ Iyer, T.K., Sundaresa, *At the Feet of Bhagavan*, Section 23, ‘How the Mantra Came’.

¹⁴ jñānī tvātmaiva me matam, *Bhagavad Gītā*, Chapter VII, verse 18.

avoid any conflict of loyalties. Who else but Bhagavan, the Jnana Guru, could provide all this?

ध्यानमूलं गुरोर्मूर्तिः पूजामूलं गुरोर्पदम् ।

मंत्रमूलं गुरोर्वाक्यं मोक्षमूलं गुरोर्कृपा ॥¹⁵

“The object for meditation is the form of the guru, the image for worship is the guru’s feet, the sacred syllable (mantra) for japa is the words of the Guru and the cause of Moksha is the grace of Guru.”

Hence, for Sri T.K. Sundaresa Iyer, Sri Ramana Paramatman became easily the God to worship, his collected works the Gospel, and the mantra, *Om Namō Bhagavate Sri Ramanaya* became the equally potent and exact parallel (both having 12 letters) to the mantra he had been chanting till then. When Sri T.K. Sundaresa Iyer revealed this to Bhagavan, Bhagavan gave this mantra His approval. It is true that, for the devotees of that time, Bhagavan Himself, the ocean of Bliss, was there in human form to be directly worshipped, making the chant of a mantra redundant. However, Bhagavan, out of His infinite compassion, probably wanted to bestow on the seekers and devotees of posterity a potent mantra that would invoke His presence for them and establish mental contact with Him, thus ensuring succour and definite progress for them on the path of *jnana* advocated by Him. Bhagavan further stamped this mantra with the seal of his authority, as the following incident reveals.

In those days, the air in the sacred presence of Bhagavan reverberated with the sound of the Vedas between 4.30 a.m. and 6.00 a.m. (during the *Brahma Muhūrta*) every day. The divine vibrations of sound and sight would fill the atmosphere with purity and serene peace. Kamakshi, the daughter of Sri Munagala Venkataramiah, the compiler of *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, was in the habit of attending this *Veda Parayana* (chanting) daily during her visits to Tiruvannamalai. One day when she entered the Hall at 4.30 a.m. there was no one present except Bhagavan. When Kamakshi got up after prostrating to Bhagavan he showed her a small slip of paper on which was written *Om Namō Bhagavate Sri Ramanaya*. Then he told her to chant it always, which she thereafter did, throughout her life.

¹⁵ dhyānamūlaṁ gurormūrtiḥ pūjāmūlaṁ gurorpadam |

mantramūlaṁ gurorvākyaṁ mokṣamūlaṁ gurorkṛpā || *Guru Pādūkā Stotra*, 16.

To be initiated into the *guru mantra* by the guru Himself is an extraordinary good fortune and can only be the outcome of divine grace. Emanating as it does from the guru's abidance in the bliss of Being and the joy of Awareness, it is a certitude that it will, through the expansion of one's consciousness, ferry one to the supreme goal. Though many have derived immense benefit from chanting this तारक मन्त्र (*tāraka mantra*), the cure of the disease of *samsara*, they have chosen to keep it a closely guarded secret. But a few have shared their experience of the potency of this mantra as the following narrative reveals.¹⁶

In 1935, Mr. Arnold Sedderling, a Polish gentleman diagnosed to be ailing from terminal cancer, was predicted to live for just eight more months. Desperately desirous of fulfilling his greatest and last wish of meeting Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi and to die in peace and solitude, he discontinued all treatment and set sail from Poland for Bombay. But his deteriorating health forced him to halt in Mahabaleshwar, a salubrious hill-station near Bombay.

One day, coming out of his lodge, he entered the Mahabaleshwar temple. Feeling extremely weak and leaning on a pillar he watched the *abhisheka* of the Siva Linga there. Suddenly he saw Bhagavan Himself in the place of the Siva Linga but at first wondered whether he was hallucinating. But it was indeed Bhagavan who stood before him, for whose *darśan* he had come all the way from Poland. His wonder increased manifold when he saw Bhagavan's extended hand of protection (the posture of giving *anjali*, or *abhaya*, freedom from fear) and heard Bhagavan say clearly, "Stay here! I shall come here for your sake."

एक एव परो बंधुर्विषमे समीपस्तिते ।

गुरुः सकलधर्मात्मा तस्मै श्री गुरुवे नमः ॥¹⁷

"There is one Supreme support, relative and friend in this, when one is faced with adverse situations; Guru is the best Dharmatma, [Dharmatma means saint or holy person] therefore, prostrations to the Guru."

¹⁶ From a free translation of an article that appeared in June 1980 issue of *Kadambini*, Vol. 20, No. 8 and reprinted in *Surpassing Love and Grace*, p. 282.

¹⁷ eka eva paro bāndhurviṣame samīpasthite |

guruḥ sakaladharmātmā tasmai śrī guruve namaḥ || *Guru Gita*, v.80.

Needless to say he was cured of his cancer and the precious gift of Grace – a long span of life – was gratefully acknowledged by Mr Sedderling who embarked on a life of purity, penance and playing the part of a good Samaritan to those around him.

A noted Hindi scholar, Sri Ratanlal Joshi, was unable to divine the meaning of life despite his contact with eminent intellectuals of the age like Albert Schweitzer, Albert Einstein and Sri Aurobindo. Yet a wonderful incident made him tumble into Bhagavan's fold which cried a halt to his interminable quest and led to the fulfilment of his life. Prolonged illness had made him depressed, weary and wayward and the burden of life became heavier with every passing day. Desiring a change of air he came to Mahabaleshwar. Soothed by the verdure of the green forests and the meandering rivers, one day he ventured out for a morning walk. He sat by the side of a murmuring brook and dozed off only to wake up late in the evening. He found to his dismay that he had lost his way in this forest.

“To one confused in the forest of transmigration about the correct direction, the one who shows the right path, to that Guru, be this salutation.”

भवारण्यप्रविष्टस्य दिङ्मोहभ्रान्तचेतसः ।
येन सन्दर्शितः पन्थाः तस्मै श्रीगुरवे नमः ॥¹⁸

Providentially he found his way to a hut in the jungle out of which emerged Mr. Sedderling with the book *Maha Yoga* in his hand. He took the stranger in and treated him with loving hospitality to a simple meal and a warm bed. And Mr. Sedderling himself settled down to his meditation. When Mr. Joshi woke up at the break of dawn, he was told that he had been delirious with fever the previous night and that continuous prayers were being offered on his behalf throughout the night to the shrine of Bhagavan by Mr Sedderling and that he would be alright.

Mr Joshi discovered that Mr Sedderling's ceaseless chant was *Om Namō Bhagavate Sri Ramanaya* and each invocation was accompanied by Mr Joshi's tears of tender piety and love. His tears had the sanctifying effect of washing away his doubts, troubles and sins. That

¹⁸ bhavāraṇyapraviṣṭasya diṅmohabhṛāntacetasaḥ |
yena sandarśitaḥ panthāḥ tasmai śrīgurave namaḥ || *Guru Gita*, v.82.

the magic of the immense power of this mantra wrought a miracle in Mr Joshi is beyond doubt. He then had an unforgettable experience. He perceived Bhagavan's benevolent figure entering the hut. Each chant of the *japa* appeared to create another image of Bhagavan and soon the hut was filled with effulgent images of Bhagavan. Mr. Joshi felt pure and liberated.

“By the *japa* of the Guru's name, O Devi, the sins acquired in countless lives are destroyed. There is not the least doubt in this.” So does Lord Siva assure us.

गुरुनामजपाद्देवि बहुजन्मार्जितान्यपि।
पापानि विलयं यान्ति नास्ति सन्देहमण्वपि॥¹⁹

The *japa* of the name ‘Ramana’ is recommended by Sri Muruganar for a variety of reasons. True to the name, (‘Ramana’ means ‘one who is delightful’) Sri Muruganar affirms that the name ‘Sri Ramana’ is most auspicious and most suitable for remembrance because of its sweet taste.²⁰ Further it flourishes as an excellent and eternal asylum for those who seek refuge in Him. It is a rare ambrosia and an antidote for the ruinous poison of forgetting the Self. And “it is the mantra that is effulgent in us as the content of the ‘I’ and dances in the Heart forever.”²¹ Like a fire that ignites cotton, this holy name acts in the heart on the deadly sin of being a slave to the senses.²²

It is also the great epoch-ending fire (*vadavāgni*) that dries up the sea of delusion that causes transmigration²³ and it is the medicine that dispels the disease of mental anxiety (ibid, Vol.I, V, 168). Finally, one who ever remains with the mental chant of this mantra, Sri Muruganar asserts, “Will gain liberation by [Bhagavan's] Holy Grace.”²⁴

Thus we find that Bhagavan's *nāma japa* is as potent and effective as the ancient Hill and just as the name of Arunachala was dear to Him, so too is His name dear to His devotees. Further Bhagavan Himself affirmed that this name, even when pronounced without one's mind

¹⁹ gurunāmajapāddevi bahujanmārjitānyapi |
pāpāni vilayaṁ yānti nāsti sandehamaṅvapi || *Guru Gita*, v.297.

²⁰ *Ramana Anubhuti*, v.556.

²¹ *Tirumandiram*.

²² *Sri Ramana Anubhuti*, v.557.

²³ *Sri Ramana Jnana Bodham*, Vol. VII, v.1049.

²⁴ *Ramana Sannidhi Murai*, v.1240.

fully concentrated on it, will nonetheless grant merit, like the grace marks given in an examination.²⁵

Not only was Mr. Joshi entirely cured of his fever but in a matter of weeks his depression disappeared and he regained his old vigour and zest for life. Both the *gurubhai-s* (co-disciples of the Guru) regularly visited the Ashram for years, with their bond with their Guru and with each other becoming stronger with each passing year.

Let us also pay our obeisance to Sri Bhagavan:

By whose blessings alone the two evils of sorrow and delusion are destroyed, to that Supreme Lord, my saviour Guru, I prostrate.

It was this very same mantra – *Ramana Dwādaśākshari* – along with Sri Bhagavan’s *Aṣṭottaram* that was chanted near Cow Lakshmi as her sojourn on earth was nearing its end and Suri Nagamma records: “She appeared to hear them carefully.”

Later on when Bhagavan came to the *goshala* (cowshed) he remarked, “In the case of people who die in Kasi, people say Lord Siva will whisper *Rāma Tāraka Mantra* into the right ear. Lakshmi too has her right ear up.” The efficacy of this mantra – ‘*Om Namō Bhagavate Śrī Ramanāya*’ – in ferrying one across the ocean of *samsara* to ultimate deliverance needs no further stamp of authority.



(To be continued)

²⁵ Mudaliar, Devaraja, *My Recollections*, Chapter IV, p.106-7.

Australian Kailash Yatra 2018

Our Sherpas

CHEENU SRINIVASAN

*Om Nama Shivaya
Om Namo Bhagavate Shri Ramanaya*

Our Kailash Yatra of 2018 was as I had written earlier, a spiritual quest, both in time and space over many days and varied geographies but more importantly for each of us a journey within. It was one where our very attitude and actions at every moment was critical for not only our wellbeing but also of our fellow Yatrikas.

We may all lay claims after a successful Kailash *parikrama* that ‘we made it’. But should we just ponder for a moment, we would know that we never did anything and that some hidden force carried us through that rarefied atmosphere with its rugged terrain and landslides punctuated with unpredictable chilly winds and changes in weather.

While I have no doubt that Bhagawan’s unseen divine grace guided us at all stages, the visible force that made it happen was no doubt our team of Sherpas. As Bhagawan would remind us, Grace is always there. We just need to tune and tap into it which we must have done as if on autopilot via the Sherpas guiding us all the way.

Cheenu Srinivasan lives in Sydney, Australia, was drawn into Bhagawan’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 Bhagawan’s shrine in February 2019.

MOUNTAIN PATH

Typically, our Sherpas would be up early in the morning to serve us steaming tea (or Horlicks, Bournvita) from around 5 am, breakfast between 6-7 am (fresh fruits with cereals, oats, bread or *uppuma*) and lunch a little after mid-day, afternoon tea and nibbles around 4 pm and dinner between 7-8 pm with the mandatory soup with its dash of garlic. On trekking days, we were provided packed lunch of bread, cheese, chocolate bars and fruit juice. Water refills were carried by our Sherpas and that meant our personal backpacks contained only our bare essentials.

While these were the daily feeding routines with some flexibility, spare a thought to work that follows late at night to clean and pack up, move and set up camp yet again the following day while also attending to collecting/delivering our duffel bags and where needed our personal errands. In addition, there were travel days when lunch had to be prepared at wayside open spaces with a semblance of shade and shelter. The Sherpas also did the needed grocery purchases and never was a day of food shortage.

To serve as above during the 10 day yatra (from Kathmandu and back), requires enormous planning and logistics. There were butane gas cylinders, groceries (rice, semolina, millets, salt, pepper and seasonings), fruits and vegetables, cooking utensils, potable water, plates, cutlery and napkins, tents and toilet seats and our duffel bags (two per person), emergency medical supplies, oxygen cylinders and decompression unit that needed a place in their three four-wheel drive workhorses.

With 12 Sherpas in their vehicles and our 24-seater minibus, you can well imagine that logistics is no small issue when given that plans can change at a moment's notice and they did on several occasions! Even our journey from Kathmandu required a last minute switch from roadworthy SUVs to helicopter sorties due to landslides en-route to the Nepal-Tibet border.

An important part of the logistics is coordinating ground transportation and yes, that of yaks too! During the four days of our parikrama, the duffel bags with our personal belongings were transported on yaks along with the rest of the much needed supplies for the various stages of the yatra. It was not uncommon that our duffel bags would be returned to us literally ripped by the yaks with little or no name tags. Yet, our Sherpas seemed to have an intuitive

sense of who the owners of these ripped bags were that none of us lost any of our personal belongings.

Our Kailash Yatra Sherpas were special and will always be so, for without them a Kailash Yatra is wellnigh impossible for a group of high-altitude novices that we mostly were. The exceptions were our tour leader who was on his fourth and his deputy on the second Yatra.

All of us had our personal story of ‘above and beyond’ service from a Sherpa that is still fresh. In preparation for this article, I had asked my fellow Yatrikas for any personal story about our Sherpas that stood out in their memory. Some of these are given below starting with one of my own.

It was Ganesh Chaturthi in September 2018. While trekking up close to the North Face of Mount Kailash, I had expressed a desire to find a piece of rock that looked like the holy Mountain. Hardly had I thought of it, a very striking piece of rock was collected from the stream bed and given to me by the Sherpa accompanying me!

Some of our more enterprising Yatrikas, three of them in particular, had decided to go as close as possible to the North Face and touch the holy mountain if possible. Having assessed the weather and ground conditions, a Sherpa team of four with a pickaxe in hand guided these men across crevices and frozen ice to experience the touch of their lifetime. This adventure was successfully undertaken thanks to the Sherpas who took this added responsibility while hazarding potential risks.

On our return to our overnight base from the North Face trek, one of my fellow Yatrikas regretted not having an unused bottle during our morning trek to collect the mountain water running down the North Face while we were close up there. Our athletic Sherpa who happened to hear us volunteered to collect some water and returned just minutes before sudden darkness and chilly winds made their early evening entry.

My wife recalled how she found it difficult on the steep slope coming down at Dolma La Pass and was carried down the incline by a young Sherpa. On the descent he had shown her the lake called Gauri Kund to her right and had said that its waters were very sweet. From her facial reaction that would only have suggested ‘Oh, wouldn’t that be nice to taste’, he set her down and literally sprinted to the lake and returned with a bottle of Gauri Kund water that included two small pebbles he had put in.

Stories such as the above no doubt leave long term imprints of a Sherpa's service of that special kind in our mind's canvas. Readers who have been on a Kailash Yatra would no doubt recall their own similar special moments.

Saluting our Sherpas

I wrote this tribute 'Saluting our Sherpas' after returning to Sydney on 21 September 2018. I distinctly recall getting very emotional as I composed these lines and it was my way of expressing our gratitude to our Sherpas for without them, our yatra would not have been possible. Verily they are rightly regarded as Shiva Ganas in the service of all those who aspire to have a *darśan* of Shiva's abode Mount Kailash.

A myriad thoughts once swirled in mind's space
Yet they settled quietly without any trace
In quiet admiration where our mere words fail
We must in awe narrate our Sherpas' tale

In the rarefied atmosphere of Lord Shiva's abode
Our Sherpas braved all and majestically strode
Able led by Wangchu Sherpa on his Kailash Kora 119
There were his novices too who were just as fit and fine

Oh of what sterner stuff these men are made
That we mere mortals for their lungs would trade
Ever with a cheerful smile that adorns their face
They had banished their fatigue without a trace

Early they rose to serve us both breakfast and tea
Their passion for prompt service beaming for all to see
Lunch, tea and dinner provided on the dot
Their tender motherly care we would at all times spot

While we Yatrikas took time to gather our pace
The Sherpas ran their admirable workaholic race
There were scores of errands we asked each day
Yet not a sign of protest nor a word they'd say

A Kailash Kora is not for the weak of body and mind
One wonders wherefrom the Sherpas their resolve find
To have seen them at work is poetry in graceful motion
Did they partake of a magic elixir or was it Shiva's potion?

And as I must now my words lay to rest
Surely there is more unsaid that is their best
Let us join palms in gratitude and in a collective chorus
Say Thanks to our Sherpas who are simply wondrous!



Who Am I?

Geetha Ravichandran

The mind has a sky like quality,
so say the wise.
It is vast and alluring,
holds immense possibilities,
displays colours, streams lights,
is fickle and inconstant, shrouded and brooding
– even claims credit for the rain and the stars.

A cloud moving stealthily,
its contours brushed with light,
slides in and out of patterns of blue.
Much like an upstart thought,
that clamps on to a universal truth
and holds it possessively.

When a comet shoots through
the dome of the sky
the mind shivers in
the cold perfection of its beauty,
– freezes like a hail stone,
and then melts at the touch of light.

Just so, the mind's edifice crumbles,
when that one question pierces
through the knotted, quilted sheaths
and lets in a flood of light.



Sri Subramaniya's Reminiscences of Sri Poondi Swamy

RECORDED AND TRANSCRIBED FROM THE TAMIL BY
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EDITED WITH INTRODUCTION BY RAM BROWN CROWELL.

Editor's Introduction

A mong the distinguished saints who have resided within the holy precincts of Arunachala, drawn by the ineffable grace of Arunachala's liberating power, perhaps the greatest in modern times apart from Ramana Bhagavan was the fabled *avadhūta*, Sri Poondi Swamy.¹ He took *mahāsamādhi* in 1978 in Poondi, near Kalasapakkam within the sacred 38 km. radius prescribed by the *Śrī Aruṇācala Māhātmyam* in *Skanda Purana* as Siva's sacred home (*Śivabhūmi*), where those who die are guaranteed *mokṣa*.² It is interesting to note

¹ *avadhūta*, Skt., lit., 'cast or shaken off'; term for highest order of Hindu ascetics, consisting of *jivanmuktas* who have 'shaken off' all worldly and social conventions to roam the earth homeless and alone, often naked (*digambara*), sunk in the bliss of Self-realization (*ātmabhāva*).

² The *Śrī Aruṇācala Māhātmyam* in the *Skanda Purana* states: "The land within a radius of three *yojanas* (38 kms) of Arunachala is renowned as *Sivabhūmi* (Siva's home). Those who reside within this radius of Arunachala will get My *Sayujyam* (absorption into Me), freed of all bonds, even without taking *dīkṣā*. This is my express command." Bhagavan cited this quote in politely declining *dīkṣā* offered

that Arunachala's summit could originally be seen from where Poondi Swamy was sitting, before his view was obstructed by the *dharamsala* now opposite,³ and that Sri Bhagavan reportedly said there will always be one fully-realized saint living within the sacred 38 km radius of Arunachala.

Poondi Swamy is memorable because his divine state exemplified *ajagarabhāva* ('python-mood'), the rarest form of asceticism, in which descent of divine grace (*śaktipāt samāveśa*) is so intense and all-consuming that its recipient requires nothing further from life, not even movement, only air and light, being nourished within by descent of nectar (*amṛita*) falling from *sahasrāra*. Sri Poondi Swamy lived thus for the last nineteen years of his life, without moving day or night, immersed in unbroken bliss. The historical incidence of such saints is very rare.⁴

Although largely unknown to the outside world during his lifetime, Poondi Swamy was esteemed among his notable peers, themselves *jīvanmukta*-s, who praised him in highest terms. Sri Gnanananda Giri of Tapovanam called him 'topmost of the top', and the Kanchipuram Sankaracharya, Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswati, India's leading *ācārya* at the time, paid him this gracious tribute: "If you consider us [saints] as lightbulbs, then he is the giant transmitter behind, giving us current." The profound sense of security found in his presence

by an acolyte purportedly on behalf of Sri Narasimha Bharati, Pontif of Sringeri Mutt, in a moving incident recorded by many early devotees, and confirmed its truth in his collected Talks (13e rep. 2013), No. 473 (1948), pp.465-466. The best treatment is by Robert Butler in his masterful edition of *Sri Arunachala Puranam* (Sri Ramanasramam, 1e 2015), pp.xxviii-xxx, a work of imposing scholarship.

³ I am indebted to Christopher Quilkey for this previously unrecorded fact, derived from personal observation in 1975.

⁴ Four other modern examples are known: 1) the guru of Shirdi Sai Baba (Baba's testimony to this effect is cited first-hand by Swami Sai Sharan Anand in his *Sri Sai Baba* (Sterling Publishers, 1998), p.22, and, at greater length, in his *Sri Sai the Superman* (Shirdi: Sai Baba Sansthan 5e 1998), pp.16-17. See also Sri Ekkirala Bharadwaja, [online @SaiBharadwaja.org](http://SaiBharadwaja.org), sub *Sri Sai Baba-A Sketch of His Life* (I); 2) Bhagavan Nityananda of Ganeshpuri, guru of Swami Muktananda; 3) Sharir Maharaj of Chhatrapur, described by the late Swiss Swami, Jnanananda Giri, in his memoirs, *Transcendental Journey* (Dehra Dun: K Publications, 2e 2015), pp.235-239; and 4) the original Balyogi of Mummidivaram, seen by the editor at his annual *darśan* in 1976.

endeared him to local villagers and scores of Tamil devotees, the simple farmers, herders and tradesmen who make up the vast majority of rural India, who had no other way of having their prayers answered, their illness cured, babies born, jobs obtained or problems solved, except by seeking his refuge and blessings. For some, these took the form of miracles that deepened their faith and transformed their lives as can be seen in the reminiscences given below. Like Shirdi Sai Baba, such great masters do not teach, but use their divine powers to confer miraculous outcomes and experiences to devotees as their way of teaching, since miracles confer immediate, tangible experience of grace, requiring no special knowledge or qualification, and thus give ordinary people irrefutable evidence of divine reality and power. Thus, the reminiscences given below by a simple, local villager, drawn to the master's side to become his lifelong, devoted attendant – who cleaned his body and faeces, fed him when he ate (often he did not eat and never fed himself), and served him daily all the years of his public life until his passing (and whose descendants still officiate today at his samadhi) – may be seen as testimony to a mode of communicating divine grace privileged only to exceptional saints favoured by god. Such authentic accounts from reliable witnesses are as uncommon as the miracles they relate.

During his lifetime, Poondi Swamy was visited by saints and sadhus from all over India who had heard of his attainment and wished to have his *darśan*. But his fame outside the Tamil-speaking world grew when a precocious young Telugu saint, barely twenty years old, named Sarath Babuji, visited him in 1974 and had *sākṣātkāra* of his *iṣṭadevatā*, Shirdi Sai Baba, in his presence.⁵ Sri Babuji went on to attain fame as an eminent devotee of Shirdi Baba, and to become a renowned Sadguru in his own right with numerous Indian and foreign devotees.

Sri Babuji (1954-2010) had been inspired by reading Sri Bhagavan's life to take up the path. He loved *Marital Garland of Letters* and shared Bhagavan's deep *bhakti* for Arunachala, even taking his early sadhana on its slopes, and writing an insightful, full-

⁵ *sākṣātkāra*, lit., 'accomplished with eyes'; the vision of one's chosen deity (*iṣṭadevatā*,) before one's open eyes, considered in Bhakti Vedanta equivalent to Self-realization (*Ātma-darśan*) in Advaita.

length biography of Bhagavan's life, as yet unpublished. His love for Sri Bhagavan and Arunachala brought him often to Tiruvannamalai, where he lived away from public gaze, giving occasional *darśan* and satsang to Indian and foreign devotees. In these, he spoke with reverence of Sri Bhagavan, Shirdi Sai Baba and Sri Poondi Swamy, and periodically visited the latter's samadhi with devotees, enhancing its appreciation within the *saṅgha*. Once, in explaining miracles, Sri Babuji said, "A miracle immediately gives the seeker the experience of faith and confirms the reality of the saint or sage as being one with the whole universe, which is the goal of Realization itself."⁶ His fascinating impressions of Poondi Swamy were published in the *Mountain Path*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (Jan.-Mar., 2017).

It is clear that devotion to Arunachala played a unifying role in linking the lives of these three saints, fostering awareness of their lives and teachings among devotees, and effectively broadcasting the inspiration of their lives and attainment to a worldwide audience.

Reminiscences of Sri Subramaniya Swamy

I was doing business selling and stitching clothes. I knew [Poondi] Swamy from the time he was first seen walking around the village [c.1947-1959]. No one knew anything about Swamy's name, his village or his parents. He never disclosed this information to anyone. He never asked anyone for food or water. Those who knew him as a saint would take food to him and feed him when it was time for him to eat. Those who knew him and met him on the way would take him to their house and feed him as well [when he accepted food, often he did not eat for long periods].

One day in May of 1943,⁷ Swamy was sitting on the banks of the Cheyyar River in Kalasapakkam when there was a huge flash flood due to heavy, unexpected rains. Everyone thought that Swamy had been swept away in the flood. When the waters receded, people went to the place where Swamy was sitting and saw strands of his hair visible above the sand. Everyone got together and removed the sand.

⁶ *Rose Petals: Select English Satsangs of Sri Babuji*, Vol. 5, p. xxix.

⁷ The exact date of this celebrated incident, 26th May 1943, is provided by Sri Annadurai Mudaliar, a devotee of Swamy who was present and recorded the incident in his diary. He related it in an interview with Sainathuni Gunasekhar in Poondi, in 2005, when Sri Rao was compiling his research for these reminiscences.

Poondi Swamy with Subramaniya Swamy



To their surprise, Swamy got up unfazed and walked away as though he had been awakened from sleep. Persons who until then thought that Swamy was a mad man realized that he was a great saint, of unknown name or place.

In those early days, a lady devotee from Chennai came to see Swamy, and on the way thieves waylaid her, threatened her, and robbed her of her gold jewelry. She went to the Kalasapakkam River where Swamy was sitting. She had his *darśan* and related to him with sadness all that had happened on the way, and cried. Swamy took mercy on her and asked her to go to Kalasapakkam, get a piece of iron, then go to Manickam Nainar's house. She got the iron, went to Manickam Nainar's house, and gave it to the Swamy. Swamy's merciful grace fell on that piece of iron and it turned into gold! Swamy gave it to the lady and said, "Here, take this and live well".

After taking Swamy's blessing, the lady left. However Manickam Nainar, who was hiding and watching all this, demanded that Swamy make gold for him also. Even though Swamy warned, "If you seek gold, you'll be ruined", the fool did not heed him and tried to coerce Swamy.

Nainar told his friends what Swamy had done. They became angry that Swamy did not make gold for them and took Swamy to Mallavadi forest, where they hurt him and injured his hands. According to various versions, what happened next is as follows: It was as if Nature herself rose up in fury: foxes howled, tigers growled, birds and peacocks attacked and pecked at them. Frightened out of their wits, Nainar and his friends then ran away.

In the middle of the night, with bleeding hands, Swamy came to Dimal Chettiyār's grocery shop in Poondi. Dimal Chettiyār came running to me in fear and told me what happened. I went to Swamy and asked him, "What happened Swamy, your hands are full of blood!" Swamy said, "Yes, yes. There, my hands got injured!", and did not say anything more, but kept quiet. I cleaned and bathed Swamy's hands, then put some medicine on the cuts and bandaged them. Ever since then, Swamy has stayed in Poondi. Many devotees from Kalasapakkam came and entreated Swamy to come back to Kalasapakkam, but he never returned. It is said that the family of those who hurt Swamy was ruined and no one remained to carry on their family lineage.

A few days after Swamy started sitting on the pyal⁸ of a house in Poondi, I went to see him on a Makara Sankranti day. I gave him new clothes, put a flower garland around his neck, lit a lamp, touched his feet, and was standing aside, worshiping him. "Tell me, what you would like?" asked Sri Poondi Swamy. I stood quietly and did not respond. He asked me again, and again I did not respond. When he asked me a third time, I said, "Swamy, please grant me the boon that I will be in your presence always and not leave you." It may be a bond of love with him from a previous birth which impelled me to seek that blessing.

Since then, Sri Swamy has showered his grace on me, and I became very close to him. I started serving him with love and devotion. From the time he got up in the morning, just like cleaning a child, I would clean his stool and urine, then give him a shower and change his clothes. I would wash the place around him, decorate him, do pooja and arati to him, and get him ready for devotees' *darśan*. I would feed him on time [when he was taking food] and put him to sleep. Every day I had the blessing and privilege of serving him intimately in this manner until Swamy attained *mahāsamādhi* [in November, 1978]. Even after he left his body, Sri Swamy graced me with the privilege to construct his temple, and install his *murti* [statue] there. I am blessed to live in his memory and his service to the end of my life, by worshiping him at the temple, doing *abhiṣekam*, *pūjā*, and offering *naivedyam* to him in his *arca-mūrti* form every day.

During the time when Sri Swamy was in his body, I had many experiences of his divine grace and powers. Once, a few persons from our village were getting ready to go to Tirupati. "Swamy, every year I used go with these village people to Tirupati. They are all getting ready to go now, but I cannot go," I said sadly. "You don't have to go, you stay here," said Swamy. Disappointed that I could not go to Tirupati, I slept by Swamy's pyal that night. That night Sri Poondi Swamy appeared as Sri Venkateswara Swamy (Tirupati Balaji) and said, "There (in Tirupati) is me and here (in Poondi) is also me. Everything is one and the same." He made me realize that all forms of the Gods and Goddesses are not different from him.

⁸ A pyal is a kind of roofed-in verandah, open on three sides at street level, common to the one-storey, old-style, tiled-roof houses typical of Poondi and Kalasappakam.

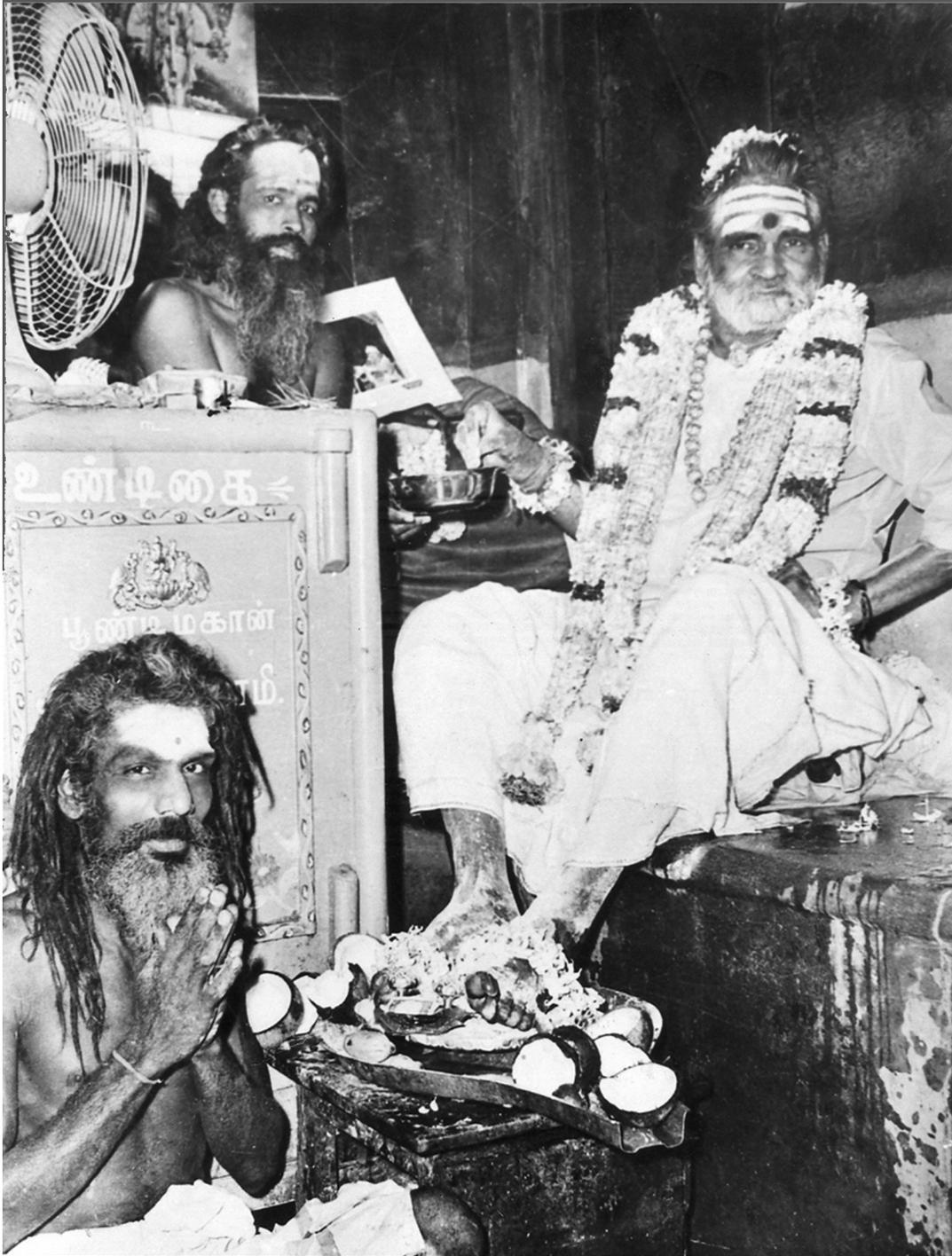
Every year at Kartigai Deepam on Silver Chariot Day, people from Poondi would go to Tiruvannamalai for the Arunachaleśwara festival. The deities are taken around the temple in procession, and at night there are special poojas. I went to Swamy's place and pleaded, "Swamy, all these people are going to the festival, can I please go also?", I asked humbly. "If you go, who is going to be here?", replied Sri Swamy. "You don't have to go. Stay here and sleep," commanded Swamy.

I did not dare to disobey Swamy and so slept by the pyal as usual. That night Sri Swamy placed me like a child on his shoulder and transported me to the festival. People from my village who went to the festival saw me and stood in awe, seeing Swamy carrying me on his shoulder and showing me around the festivities. Swamy also took me to the temple of Arunachaleśwara. There also a few devotees saw us and stood in wonder. Everything was like a dream for me. At last, Swamy said, "Come, let's go back." I felt as if I had directly seen everything in person. Next day people from the village told me that they saw Sri Swamy carrying me to the temple and going around the festival. I was awestruck. No one can describe in words the wonders and miracles of Sri Poondi Swamy.

One night when I was sleeping near Sri Poondi Mahan, I woke up in the middle of the night and saw all of Swamy's limbs severed and lying disjointed as though someone had murdered him. I shook in fear, afraid Swamy had been killed. Then, in the next moment, I beheld Swamy sitting calmly on the pyal as usual. I consoled myself with the thought that maybe Swamy had been doing *Khanda Yoga*.⁹

When devotees brought a new shirt to Swamy he would wear it on top of the old one that he already had on. He never removed the old shirts. Since he was wearing shirts upon shirts, the old ones became stuck to his body. When I requested him, "Swamy! Can I please cut these old shirts with scissors and remove them?" Swamy said, "Let

⁹ A rare form of yoga in which the limbs are dis-membered so the subtle body floats free of *prāṇa*-s governing bodily functions, yielding deep ecstasy. Sri Babuji once characterized it ironically as 'the best form of relaxation'. Sai Baba of Shirdi was seen to perform this yoga by reliable witnesses, but ceased doing so when it attracted undue attention. Cf. G.R. Dabholkar, *Sri Sai Satcharita* (Tr. Kher), Ch. 7, verses 60-68.



Poondi Swamy with Attendants in the 1970s

them be. We will see after two days”. Again and again I requested him, but every time he would say, “Ok, we’ll see.” Then finally after many days he accepted my requests. When I was cutting the old shirts little by little with the scissors and removing them, the skin that was stuck to the shirt also came off. Even Swamy’s bones were visible! I fainted dead away and fell over Swamy. After a while I came back to my senses and looked at Swamy. There was not a trace of any wound. It took me three to four days to cut and remove all the old shirts.

When Swamy was sitting on the pyal he had used one of his hands as a support. No one knew for how many days he had had his hand fixed in this way; the skin of the palm was stuck to the pyal floor. After requesting and praying to Swamy, we forcibly pulled his hand off the floor. The skin of his palm stuck to the pyal and separated from his hand, and the hand was bleeding. But, in a few days the wound healed.

After putting Swamy to sleep on the pyal, I would sleep on the floor. But often, when Swamy would ‘go outside’ [bilocate, a well-authenticated feature of his life], he would remain on the pyal manifesting a different form. He assumed various forms during those ‘outside visits’. Once, I saw him as a leopard and prayed to him with folded hands saying, “Swamy, why are you testing me?” The leopard disappeared and Sri Swamy appeared in its place. Then I sat Him down and did Pooja. Once, he even appeared as Lord Shiva.

Near the pyal where Sri Swamy sat, there was a chai shop. Every day, in the early morning, the owner would offer Swamy the first cup of tea he made and then start his business. He would bring the tea, stand outside, then call Swamy, and after he got permission would slip the curtain aside and go inside. Once, he ventured inside without asking Swamy’s permission and was terrified to see a huge Boa constrictor lying in the place where the Swamy was. He dropped the tea tumbler and retreated in haste, screaming. The shock sent him into delirium and he had fever. He was brought to Swamy, who blessed him and applied holy ash, warning him not to open the curtain and come in again without his permission. After this he got well.

The pyal graced by Sri Poondi Mahan was always filled with devotees. The rich and the poor were all treated alike. There was no discrimination based on caste, creed or religion. The poor daily wage earners would come for Swamy’s *darśan* and would give him a quarter

or half Anna [former Indian coin, worth 1/16 of a rupee] as an offering. Sri Swamy would accept them with love and hold the coins tight in his palm. On the other hand, when the rich gave him a fifty or one-hundred rupee note, he would throw them away into the back room. Later on, all those bills were put in a ditch and buried in the earth.

There was a Chennai gentleman by the name of Vishwanathan who was working as a Revenue Board Officer. He had a cancerous tumour on his forehead. Doctors had examined him and advised him that surgery might be fatal. He went to America for treatment and could not get healed. Film actor S. V. Subbiah brought Vishwanathan to Poondi. Vishwanathan prostrated at Sri Poondi Mahan's feet and requested him to cure him. "Nothing is necessary", said the Master and applied some *vibhūti* [holy ash] on the tumour. After that Vishwanathan came three times to see Swamy, got Swamy's *vibhūti* applied to his tumour, and became completely healed. Vishwanathan prayed to Mahan (Tamil for Swamy) and said, "You saved my life, what can I give you?" Swamy said, "Give me a title to the land nearby and nothing else." Immediately, Mr. Viswanathan brought the District Collector and got the title for the land made out in Poondi Swamy's name.

A person in the next village was bitten by a snake. Medical treatment was of no use. At last they came to Swamy and asked, "Swamy, he has been bitten by a snake. Will he survive?" Swamy replied, "It has been cut asunder by a sword and chopped by an axe. Go away." When they went back to the village, the man was dead.

A lady devotee by the name of Margamma [Subramaniya's wife] used to come for Swamy's *darśan*. She had been delivered of a baby boy. On the third day after delivery the baby died of a scorpion bite. Around 10 pm that night, Margamma's eldest daughter brought the dead baby to Swamy and prayed, "Swamy, this baby is dead", and placed it on his lap. "Leave it here and go," said Swamy. Around 12 midnight, Swamy turned his gaze towards the baby. Then the baby was heard crying. "Take it back now, the baby is alive, nothing to fear anymore", said Swamy. They were very happy, and, after worshipping Swamy, went away with the baby.¹⁰

¹⁰ The baby was Subramaniya Swamy's son who succeeded him as *pujari* in Swamy's Samadhi.

In our next village gypsies had set up tents and were settling down. A pregnant woman was in labour pain. Her husband could not get money for medical expenses. He was returning in disappointment and happened to see Sri Poondi Mahan sitting on the pyal, he appeared to him like a Deva [God] ready to give refuge. Immediately, he went near Swamy and said humbly, “Swamy, I tried to borrow money and I could not get a loan from anyone”. “Come here”, called Poondi Mahatma. He gave him some *vibhūti* [holy ash] and said, “Take this and apply it on her abdomen and everything will be fine.” Then Swamy blessed him. By the time he reached home his wife had had a safe delivery. He thanked Swamy mentally, applied the holy ash, and came back happily to give him the news.

Once in our village a thief had stolen six cows and took them away. One of the stolen cows was ours. I went to Sri Poondi Swamy and said, “Swamy, at night thieves have stolen our cows.” “They have not gone anywhere, they are near Pennathur. Go and see”, said Swamy. We all went to Pennathur and found the cows. We beat up the thief and brought him to Poondi, then let him go. Everyone got their cows back.

One time out of the blue, the Master said, “They gave me number 9 lock with number 11 key and all the responsibilities. I was tired of taking care of everything, couldn’t do it anymore, so I gave all that back and left.” I couldn’t make out anything and asked Swamy again for an explanation. Swamy stated that he was working as a manager for the chief of a Mutt in Tiruporur near Chennai, and didn’t like it and left. A few devotees went to that Mutt and examined their records. Even though they went back seven or eight hundred years, they couldn’t find any authentication.

Swamy said that long ago when they were building Sri Arunachaleshwara temple in Tiruvannamalai, there were only forests around and the temple was very small. Swamy further said that he carried stones for the *sanctum sanctorum* of the temple. “My grandfather gave me one Anna for carrying the stones and I would buy roasted peas and peanuts.”

In August 1974, during the time Poondi Mahan was settled on the pyal, Sri Sarath Babuji came and got *sākṣātkāra* with Mahan. He would worship Swamy, sit by the side of the pyal, and meditate for

a while.¹¹ At that time, Swamy would raise his hands in protective blessing and say, "All that happens will be good." Many times Swamy blessed Sarath Babuji in this way. Sri Swamy showered his complete grace on him. After Sri Poondi Deva attained *mahāsamādhi*, Sri Sarath Babuji came many times late at night to the *mandir*. He would go around Swamy's *Samadhi* and worship him. If I happened to see him I would give him the *āratī* plate. He would go inside the temple and do *āratī* for the Swamy. Sometimes he would wake me from sleep and sometimes not. Then he would be seen walking to the outer entrance and disappear.

A devotee by the name of Arumugam used to come from Chennai, pray at Sri Poondi Mahatma's *Samadhi*, then go to Parvatha hill. Once, he gave me a wedding invitation and asked me to send Sri Swamy to the wedding. On the day of the wedding, when everyone was having a feast, Swamy appeared as a mad mendicant. Arumugam recognized him as Sri Poondi Swamy and gave him food. He came out and announced that Sri Poondi Mahatma had come. At that time the mendicant disappeared mysteriously. Even after a long search they couldn't find him. This happened just four years ago, in 2001, 23 years after Swamy attained *mahāsamādhi*. ▲

[Excerpted with permission from *Purna Avadhuta Poondi Swami: Devotees' Experiences* by Sainathuni Gunasekhar (Chennai: Poondi Swami Publications, 2011), Ch. 2. (gunasekhar@saimail.com)].

¹¹ For *sākṣātkāra*, v.n.3, *supra*.



Bhagavan Samadhi Shrine

John Maynard

Śravaṇa, Manana and Nididhyāsana

NADHIA SUTARA

None are more hopelessly enslaved than those who falsely believe they are free. — Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*

Someone once said that knowledge is a rumour until it lives in the body. Sri Bhagavan explained this much more clearly when Kunjuswami asked him why he had lost the experience of the Self after he left Sri Bhagavan's presence. He recorded this in his autobiography, *Reminiscences (Enadu Ninaivugal)*:

One day I ventured to ask Bhagavan why those exalted states which I had first experienced in Bhagavan's proximity began to wane and then were altogether gone when I left him and reached Kerala. By way of answer to my query, Bhagavan asked me to read verses 88 to 93 in the '*Tattuva Vilakka Padalam*' ['The Exposition of the Truth' Section] of *Kaivalya Navaneetam*, wherein lay the answer to my query:

88. "My Lord! Can such realisation as has transcended the dual perception of 'You' and 'I' and found the Self to be entire and all-pervading, fail me at any time?"

The Master replied: "The truth that 'I am Brahman' is realised from the scriptures or by the grace of the Master, *but it cannot be firm in the face of obstructions.* [Italics mine]

89. Ignorance, uncertainty and wrong knowledge are obstacles

resulting from long-standing habits in the innumerable incarnations of the past which cause trouble, and then the fruits of realisation slip away. Therefore root them out by hearing the Truth, reasoning and meditation [*śravaṇa*, *manana* and *nididhyāsana*].

90. Defective realization will not put an end to bondage. Therefore devote yourself to hearing the Truth, reasoning and meditation, and root out ignorance, uncertainty and wrong knowledge.

92. Hearing the Truth is to revert the mind repeatedly to the teaching: 'That thou art.' Reasoning is rational investigation of the meaning of the text, as already heard. Meditation is one-pointedness of mind. If every day you do these, you will surely gain liberation.

93. The practice must be kept up so long as the sense of knower and knowledge persists. No effort is necessary after that. Remaining as pure, eternal Consciousness, untainted like the ether, and thus liberated while alive, one will live forever as That – after being disembodied also.¹

Śravaṇa, *manana* and *nididhyāsana* are, thus, the cornerstones, the enzymes as it were, of spiritual ripening. And, all the great ones, including Sri Bhagavan, say they are to be carried out not once, but *till the end*.

What follows now are my own observations, experiments and conclusions about what these three terms mean and how I have applied them over the years so as to deepen my own *sādhana*. I therefore make no claim to authority. However, as I have encountered so many newcomers who have not understood the importance of these stages of practice, perhaps my observations may be of use.

In my experience *śravaṇa* refers not only to the act of listening but, in this age of multi-media, also reading the words of the Great Ones: the Upanishads, Adi Shankaracharya, Sri Bhagavan, Sri Ramakrishna, and so forth. *Śravaṇa* is, to me, like taking food into the mouth in order to get nourishment.

¹ *Reminiscences*, by Kunju Swami, pgs. 35-36, trans. P. Ramaswamy. The same teaching is also contained in such classical Sanskrit works as *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, and is widely commented upon by Adi Shankaracharya and other great Advaitic teachers.

But *śravaṇa* alone is not enough, just as having a mouthful of food is not enough. The food must be thoroughly chewed before swallowing to avoid indigestion. Similarly, merely hearing or reading the Teaching is not enough, however many times it may be repeated. Unless one is a very mature soul it must be reflected upon, not just once, but repeatedly, lest one risks spiritual indigestion, quite as painful – and much more destructive – as the physical sort and having far greater consequences. A silly but accurate example is when someone sees a person who’s just been hit by a lorry and tells him, “Don’t worry. None of it is real,” and goes off to lunch.

This is the sense and purpose of *manana*, literally reasoning, but reasoning in the sense of poring over and reflecting upon the Teaching: “How does this teaching apply to me? Can I find some application for this teaching in my life? Can I hold it up as a mirror to guide me? If not, what in me is blocking my understanding? If I do not yet understand it, let me keep it on a handy shelf in my mind in case something comes up to illuminate it. Then I can reflect upon it further.”

The slokas referred to in *Kaivalya Navaneetam* normally refer to the *mahāvākya*-s – the four Great Sayings of the *Upaniṣad*-s:

1. *Prajñānam Brahma* (Awareness is Brahman, or the Absolute);
2. *Ayam Ātmā Brahma* (This Self is Brahman);
3. *Tat Tvam Asi* (That thou art);
4. *Ahaṁ Brahmāsmi* (I am Brahman).

For myself, I have always found these Truths undeniable but quite beyond my experiential grasp. In my hunger to really comprehend and live them, I was forced to break things down into smaller pieces. If the experience of the *mahāvākya*-s is my great aim, then eliminating whatever obstacles to abiding in them became my intermediary aim.

Many of the things Sri Bhagavan (or the Upanishads, Adi Shankara, and so forth) said may be over our heads at the beginning, and I believe this is a common experience. I have noticed several ways people deal with this initial lack of understanding.

One way is to swallow the teaching whole and undigested so that it remains like a rock in the stomach – that is, in the mind – as an ironclad impregnable obstruction to further ‘digestion’. Never seeking to really understand it, they thus make of it nothing better than the dogmas of whatever religion they have abandoned. They thus suffer again for the very same reason: the inability to swallow the required

dogmas, formerly delivered by unenlightened ministers having no direct experience of the dogmas in the first place. ‘One isn’t a good Christian unless one believes in the Holy Trinity.’ And ‘One is a terrible Catholic if one does not believe in the infallibility of the Pope.’ Organised religion does not provide for enquiry into the profound truths behind the dogmas upon which their faith is built. And there have been religious wars over whether one should cross oneself with two fingers or three, and whether from left to right or right to left. The same may be the case with the outcropping of new teachers or gurus until the seeker has developed the requisite maturity.

Even a *bhakta* must perform this process. While faith and surrender are the Path, if one remains at this stage – believing rather than understanding – and turning someone else’s (Bhagavan’s for instance) experience into ‘unchewed’ blind faith, they remain at the stage of religion, which of course has its purpose but is not an end in itself.

There is also a great risk of killing the teaching in oneself, making it into an intellectual, hardened conceptual understanding, incapable of modification, even preventing further experience. Sri Bhagavan’s teachings, for example, are intended to take the mind beyond itself, not further burden it with more thoughts. This kind of crystallisation can become so complete that it actually becomes a jail; and rather than modify one’s understanding of the initial teaching through continual *manana*, one throws away what experience may come as invalid – so unfortunate! – and continues to construct a conceptual bunker leading from the ‘ground floor’ of ignorance to an imaginary ‘roof’ of enlightenment. A great tragedy.

Another possible wrong turn is for the undigested Teaching to be enveloped by the imagination. As the Great Ones have said, mere belief and/or imagination cannot lead to realisation. Sri Ramakrishna used to comment upon this with an analogy. He said that the floor of a house, the stairs, and the roof are indeed in the same house and are made of the same materials, but it is of no use whatsoever to sit on the floor and say, “I am on the roof. I am on the roof.” He exhorted his disciples to make the effort (*śravaṇa*, *manana* and *nididhyāsana*) to climb each stair, making of whatever stair one is standing upon a thrust block essential for attaining the next stair: *neti-neti*. Alas, there are many contemporary teachers teaching just the opposite: ‘We are

on the roof. There is nothing to do. We are already perfect.’ Indeed the acorn contains the tree, but without being buried in the earth, watered and receiving sunlight, that acorn will remain an acorn and eventually die to its possibilities.

Effective *manana* can be likened to a cow chewing its cud. We know that first the cow eats grass and other fodder. Then comes a time of day when the cow stops eating and stands or lies quietly (and gets very annoyed if disturbed!) while the grass is regurgitated so that the cow can chew it properly. Only after proper chewing does the cud become nourishment for the cow.

Next comes *nididhyāsana*. As we digest and understand some aspect of the teaching through repeated hearing, reflection, experience and further reflection, all of which lead to deeper experience and so on, the time of *nididhyāsana* comes: one-pointedly meditating on the truth of the Teaching until all impurities, doubts and obstacles disappear and permanent *sākṣātkāra* (realisation) alone remains.

An important note regards backsliding, something we are all familiar with. Once one has come to know the truth of some aspect of the Teaching, when no doubts remain, it is incumbent upon one to live that Teaching and not allow any kind of backsliding. An example is indulging a tendency even though one has no doubts whatsoever about its undeniably negative impact; for example, overeating, taking drugs or indulging in gossip. That is, allowing the old habit of enjoying the tendency to overtake the insight into its negative effect upon oneself or others.

Another example:

One hears that there is more to life than mere eating, sleeping, procreating, money and death. Many hear about this now, both in the West and East, but much fewer are stirred to action. Some (and I know one personally) investigate aliens as the source of higher wisdom, some take *haṭha yoga* or seek teachers in the West, some go back to sleep, and some come to India or other Asian countries to seek a guide. This usually marks the ‘supermarket’ phase of spirituality. Just as one who has never tasted corn flakes goes to a supermarket and tries every brand of corn flakes until they find the one they like best, seekers come to India and sample all that India has to offer before they settle on the ‘brand’ that suits them best. Only thus can they become mature enough to settle down to one particular teacher

or path. For the beginner this is a very important stage, not to be belittled in any way.

Once the seeker has found a teacher he believes in, it is of no use to continue looking. To do so means that one either does not really have confidence in their teacher or is not ready for a teacher. But once one is committed to a particular teacher or path, wandering here and there is counterproductive.

When I first came to Tiruvannamalai, I had done with my first teacher in the West, and was most certainly *not* looking for another one. I was, however, madly and one-pointedly in love with Arunachala, and nothing could keep me from the Mountain. Within a few months I was living on it. People used to visit occasionally and tell me that Krishnamurti or Anandamayi Ma were in Chennai, Sai Baba was in Puttaparti, and so on. Ammachi personally invited me to come with her to her ashram in Kerala and be her disciple. Everybody was recruiting, it seemed, and my peers were running around looking for someone to hand them the ‘Truth’, Enlightenment, whatever they imagined their goal to be.

I found this perpetual frenzy confusing but was saved by reading a line in Sri Ramana’s *Talks*, where he says: “Attend to the purpose for which you have come.” It rang so true and sound that I stayed where I was, and everything I needed did, indeed, come to me. Thus this teaching of Sri Bhagavan became my guiding principle. I referred to it again and again as events cropped up, and it has stood me in good stead for the past 40 years. Further, it has deepened over time. While in the beginning it kept me from dissipating my energy by running around to all sorts of teachers, later it displaced numerous activities and tendencies that dissipated my mental and physical energy so that I have become ever more one-pointed. And it continues to deepen and ripen me.

Thus, I arrive at *nididhyāsana*: repeatedly, one-pointedly meditating upon the Truth as I understand it so far. Of course, there are still obstacles; of course, I am most certainly NOT ‘cooked’. And while I firmly believe that ‘The Kingdom of God is within me’, and have had more and longer and deeper glimpses of it, it is not permanent. And so *śravaṇa*, *manana* and *nididhyāsana* continue. ▲

Maha Bhakta Vijayam

Namdev Feeds the Lord

Chapter Two

NABAJI SIDDHA

Having summed up the events preceding Namdev's advent into the world, Nabhaji resumed his most charming narrative of Sant Namdev.

“O Mahanubhavas, you great beings filled with the sublime experience of Inner Silence and steadfast mind, and revelling in the purifying stories of Sants! Please listen to this strange story!”

The parents of Namdev were in perfect accord with each other in bringing up the child with care and love. Namdev reached the age of five. He spent delightful hours in playing with other children. One day Damaseth told his wife, “O dear woman, I want to visit my younger brother. I shall leave in the morning and return by evening. Cook all the items as usual and send them with Nama to be offered to Lord Panduranga.” Then he addressed his son, “O my incomparable jewel! Today go to the temple, decorate the Deity with garlands of flowers with your tiny hands and sing His glories in your tender voice. Then, placing the feast before the Lord, invite Him to partake of the same, praise Him with hymns and then return home safely. After performing

this sacred duty diligently, you can join your friends and indulge in boyish sports with them.” Thus instructing Nama in detail about the worship ritual, Damaji left for his brother’s village.

Next morning, Gunabai arranged all the food items which were to be offered to the Lord nicely on a plate. She bathed Namdev and adorned him with new clothes and flowers. Admiring his beauty, she felt that he looked as handsome as Balasubramanian, the Divine Child of Lord Shiva and Parvati Devi. Handing over the offering plate to him, the mother said, “O my pretty child! Hold the plate carefully and carry it to the temple. Just as instructed by your father, go straight there without tarrying anywhere or touching anyone on the way or letting anyone come in contact with the tray to pollute it. While walking, keep your mind on God, uttering His Names such as ‘Panduranga’, ‘Sriranga’ and so on. After finishing the worship and offering the food to the Lord in the holy sanctum, return home at once.”

Overjoyed at the new task entrusted to him, little Namdev started singing the Lord’s Names and dancing, while holding the tray of food carefully. When he passed through the streets, he found some of his friends playing. Being a young boy, he started watching their sports and becoming absorbed in them, he forgot the task on hand. Suddenly, a ball, missing its target, fell on the plate of offerings. At this, little Nama lost his composure and became annoyed with the boys. He said, “O naughty ones, don’t you have any sense of respect for the Lord that you have carelessly flung your ball at the sacred food to be offered in His temple?”

The children were highly amused by this and in a mood of bullying, surrounded Namdev and replied, “O Nama! O Pot-bellied Rama! Do the tailors, who stitch pieces of rags together to earn their living, also have the tradition of preparing *naivedyam* for the Lord? Aha... what a great servitor you are that you became lost in our sports while carrying the sacred offering? Why did you tarry here? If you had carefully taken the offering straight to the temple, would our ball have fallen on your plate and polluted it?” To tease him further, they deliberately let their fingers touch the food while taking away their ball. This provoked Nama further. He said angrily, “On top of polluting the food, you are also making fun of our caste of tailors. Do you take us for lowly people like you who eat your food without offering anything to God?”

The other boys became wild and made fun of Namdev further, “O Nama, the great devotee! There is none greater than you in our town! Oh... you never eat your food without offering something to God! Besides showing off, you are also insulting us. Watch your tongue! We will knock your teeth out for your impertinence!”

Namdev became more furious at this attack. Placing the plate on a nearby ledge, he jumped into the midst of the boys and started beating them. They came to blows with each other. Possessed by rage, Namdev attacked them madly with the energy of a lion cub. News of this brawl soon reached Gunabai. She came running to the spot and, restraining Namdev, she scolded him, “O Nama! I sent you to the temple to perform a sacred duty. But you have carelessly left the food in the dirt to indulge in a street fight! Now, how are we to take this food to the temple? All the ritual purity that I had observed in preparing the food for the Lord has been wasted. You have brought ill-fortune on us by your negligence. Ah... on seeing me, you are hastening to pick up the plate! Crafty fellow!” She rushed at him with raised hands to deal him severe blows.

Frightened at this, little Nama picked up the plate hastily and getting away from his mother said, “O Mother, I will go there quickly and offer the food!” Gunabai became very agitated and screamed, “O rascal! Don’t you dare take the food polluted by the touch of these boys and left unattended on the ledge to the Lord. You will incur the Lord’s displeasure....” Without waiting for Gunabai to complete her sentence, Nama sprinted in the direction of the temple.

Entering the courtyard hurriedly, and panting for breath, he started his preparations hastily. He cleaned the place around the idol and lit the lamps. He adorned the Deity with sandalwood paste and flowers and worshipped Him by uttering His glorious Names. He broke a coconut into two halves, placed it in front of the Deity and spread out the feast consisting of sweets, rice, vegetables and fruits before Him with great faith, love and humility. He closed the door of the sanctum and then requested the Lord thus, “O Supreme Lord, my Beloved, please partake of this food with Your auspicious hand.” Then he himself took a morsel of rice in his hand and tried to feed Him. Seeing no response, he pleaded with folded palms, “Dear One, are you displeased because the food has become impure? If I go

back home for fresh food, my mother will have my hide. Please take pity on me and graciously accept at least one fistful of rice.” Nama pleaded again and again to the Lord in a pathetic voice. Still there was no response.

Approaching the Deity closer and placing his lips near the Deity’s ears, little Nama spoke loudly, “O Pandarinath, Friend and Protector of the Pandavas, don’t You hear me? Are You hard of hearing? In spite of my piteous appeals to accept just one mouthful of rice, You are standing motionless like a stone. I am sure You have equal love for all people, irrespective of their caste. Aren’t the boys who touched this food also Your creation? Then should You not accept food from any hands without bias? What kind of pollution can the touch of their little hands cause? Can You really hold any prejudice based on the caste? Why don’t You answer me one way or the other? Don’t You have a tongue to answer me? Have I caused you so much trouble? Are You asleep? Have I brought Your food too late? Or have You already had Your fill? Please tell me, is the food impure or are my hands impure? Or isn’t the food to Your taste? Without mincing your words, please tell me frankly. Is it that You don’t want to eat in front of me? Is the quantity not enough for you? Or are You upto some mischief?”

Finding no response, Nama said to himself, “O what a troublesome affair! Hunger is eating my vitals. This Lord is quite a difficult One!” Suddenly, becoming aggressive he started yelling, “O Lord! You intend to drive me mad with anger before You relent! Are You dimvisioned that You cannot see the food that is right in front of You? Or are You waiting to devour the food when I look the other way for a moment, just like an eagle that snatches away the food from our hands when we are careless?”

Now changing his tactics, young Nama said, “Don’t You know that I am a small, helpless child? Then why do You vex me like this? You exasperate me by Your non-cooperation. You may get annoyed if I force feed You. How much I have begged You to eat! If You finish quickly, I will believe that You are really the Lord, not a mere stone idol. I will glorify You with sweet titles and play with You, and teach You new games!”

In anguish, he muttered to himself, “My father used to feed Him daily and bring the sanctified left-over food home for us. But today

He is willful and stubborn. He has clearly indicated His reluctance to accept my service by refusing to even touch the food. He has rejected me and my service. What is the use of my life when the Lord has not accepted me as His beloved and friend, but is dismissing me as immature and a sinner?"

So young Nama prostrated himself before the Deity and said, "O Panduranga! I am at a loss to know how to make You eat. So there is only one way out for me. This very moment I am going to give up my life, placing my head at Your feet. May Your renown spread all over the world! I have resolved to give up my life. But listen, listen carefully – I resolve to afflict You hereafter by taking the form of a Brahma-Rakshas, a Brahmin turned into a ghost. I will harass the townsfolk too. I will make sure the people don't approach Your temple! You are a cheat!" Lamenting thus and again overwhelmed by anguish and love, which caused tears to stream down his cheeks, he embraced the idol and then started banging his head on the stone platform at the feet of the idol, saying, 'You have ruined my life!'

At this moment, the Lord emerged from the idol and lifting Nama's head with His hands said tenderly, "O My Nama, I delayed only to test you and to prove to the world the strength of your devotion to Me! O My jewel, please don't abuse Me or become annoyed with Me. You are as precious as a crown jewel, you are a blemish-free gem!"

Caressing the body of little Nama, the Lord continued, "Oh, your body is smeared with dust. Are your feet hurting because you came running to be here in time for My offering? Are your hands aching with the weight of all these items of food? Is your body aching with the blows that you received in the scuffle with the other boys?" So saying He wiped off the dust and made Nama wear His yellow silk cloth and took Namdev's apparel in exchange. "Oh My dear Nama, you must be hungry and tired. Let Me feed you!"

So saying the Lord mixed the rice well with the vegetables and fed it into the mouth of Namdev. Then, He asked Nama to feed Him with his tender hand. Young Namdev felt blessed and started to put food in the Lord's mouth. Thus, feeding each other, they polished off the entire plate. Then, the Lord smeared Nama's body with fragrant sandal paste, offered him the courtesy of *tambulam*, made of betel leaves and areca nut, and bade him farewell, saying, "It is quite late,

go home quickly! I will be eagerly waiting for you tomorrow!” Then He turned back into the stone idol.

With thrills of joy coursing through his little frame, Nama left the temple. He sauntered with relaxed gait, mulling over what had happened, and taking his own time to reach home. He then narrated the whole thing to his mother thus, “O Mother! The Lord was peevish initially and refused to eat because of the delay. But after some cajoling and threatening, He finished off everything that you had put in the plate. He was very happy and presented me with His own silk garment and offered me *tambulam*.” Sitting in the courtyard, munching the *tambulam*, he flaunted his new silk apparel and kept laughing in joy: “Don’t be angry with me for my late return! I spent a very nice time with Vittal!”

Can you imagine Gunabai’s state of mind on seeing the empty plate brought back from the temple and Nama’s body adorned with flower garlands, fragrant unguents and the silk cloth belonging to the Lord! Frightened and angry, she rasped at Nama, “Where are all the offered items, the fruits and sweets? How dare you remove the *pitamber*, the yellow silk cloth, and the garland from the Deity? What did you do with your dress? Answer me at once!”

“O Mother! Panduranga ate up all that food. I was also hungry, so I too had a few mouthfuls along with Him. Now I don’t want any food. Look at my stomach, how full it is!”

Her fury barely under control, she flung a stick at him saying, “You rascal, a rank liar! Aha.. aha...! ‘Panduranga ate all the food!’ you say! When did such a thing ever happen? Having filled your belly with all that food, you are lying to protect yourself!”

To escape the stick coming at him, young Nama ran out of the house into the street muttering to himself, “Why is she making such a fuss about nothing? A new trouble here at home!”

Loudly he said, “O Mother, why do you wail as if a calamity has occurred? Even at the cost of my death, I don’t lie! The One in the temple made me weep and wail for a long time because of the delay. He forced me to take a few mouthfuls along with Him that is all! I couldn’t disregard His wishes. Is that an offence? There is enough food in the house for you! Your words of abuse, your screaming at me and your actions are out of line with your age. In order to assert yourself, how loudly you speak!” Nama retorted angrily.



Infuriated, Guna scolded Nama again, “You naughty fellow! Let your father return home! He will cut you to pieces for what you have done!”

She hastily started preparing fresh food offerings again. Young Nama was thoroughly confounded by the situation. “Oh, what a day this has been for me, full of trouble! When the old man returns home, what greater trouble is going to come on me, O Lord?” Assailed by fatigue and anxiety, he remained quietly outside, in the outer courtyard of the house.

When Damaseth returned home a little later, he found his son standing outside. He embraced little Nama fondly and said, “My dear! Have you taken the offering to Panduranga and gratified your mother’s heart? Did you perform the worship ritual? I am indeed blessed that the Lord accepted the worship done by these little hands of yours!” With extreme affection, he smelt the crown of Nama’s head.

“Yes, father,” replied Nama in a feeble voice.

When Gunabai saw the son and father entering the house together, she leapt in fury, crying out, “Don’t caress him! Cut him into pieces right now!”

With a surprised look, Dama asked, “O woman! What has he done to deserve such treatment within the short time I have been away? Has he behaved terribly towards anyone?”

Then Gunabai related all the events of the day, how Nama had left with the food offering (*naivedyam*), and how he had carelessly left the sacred plate on the ground, engaging in an exchange of blows with the boys, and then, taking the polluted offering to the shrine, had returned home with an empty plate long after the scheduled time, wearing the Lord’s Own silk cloth and garland and, saying that the Lord Himself had eaten up all the food!

On hearing this tale, Damaseth’s eyes glowed with anger as if emitting sparks of fire and he roared at the boy, “Let me cut you to pieces for this atrocity!” As he lunged at the boy, Nama took to his heels. Chasing him through the streets, Damaseth cried, “O wicked fellow, I won’t spare you for this blatant lie! This will be nipped in the bud. If you exhibit such evil tendencies at such a tender age, what evils will you not do when you grow up? You will bring infamy to our family honour and our lineage!”

As he was fleeing, young Nama thought, “O this man is a perfect match to that old woman! I must escape their hands. I have no friends left in this world! Vittal alone is my Saviour. I must reach Him fast.” With this aim, he ran hither and thither, giving many a slip to his pursuer and, finally reaching the temple, he hid himself behind the idol. Utterly exhausted he sank to the floor. Damaseth was no less tired, when he, panting and breathless, reached the temple. He spied the small form of his son behind the Deity. He swiftly reached the boy and dragged him out from there. Threateningly he asked, “Don’t utter any lie in the holy sanctum. Tell me, what did you really do with the *naivedyam*? And why are you wearing the *pitamber*, the yellow silk cloth of the Lord?”

Little Nama replied fearlessly, “Panduranga ate the whole *naivedyam*! And He himself gave me the *pitamber* to wear!”

“Okay, son. Now, will you feed the Lord in front me one more time?” asked his father incredulously.

“Why father only once? I will feed Him again and again. And you are going to see it with your own eyes!” said the little boy.

“Well, let us do it now, right away!” They went home and then returned to the temple with freshly prepared food.

“O Nama, now make the Lord eat the food! And if you fail and are proved a liar, I will offer you as a sacrifice at the altar!” said Damaseth, still under the sway of his fury.

Young Nama started the worship by applying fragrant unguents on the Deity, adorning it with a colourful garland and showering flowers on the crown and feet of the Deity. After waving perfume sticks and frankincense in front of the idol, Nama lifted the lid of the food plate and spoke lovingly to the Lord thus, “O my Friend, don’t delay like You did in the morning! This is pure and fresh *naivedyam* brought to you carefully and it is unpoluted! My Beloved, my dear Friend, please partake of the offering quickly.”

When there was no movement from the idol, Nama was frightened that Panduranga was, once again, being mischievous. He told the Lord, “Please don’t make me look like a liar in front of my Father. He is waiting to slaughter me here! I don’t need to repeat this to You, as You are aware of everything.” He took a handful of food and tried to feed Him. But the playful Lord remained like an immobile stone.

Young Nama became angry, “You stubborn One! You are a liar Yourself, and given to deceitful ways! So, it is in Your nature to betray me and prove me to be a liar! You have certainly lost all respect in my eyes!”

Damaseth lost his patience and yelled, “O thief, how dare you abuse the Lord as a thief and a liar! With your own mouth, so polluted with falsehood, you have eaten His food! Now, the time has come to thrash you to death!”

Nama caught between the two – one divinely Deceitful, the other a human terror – trembled like a kitten and shrank in fear. Yet, turning to his Asylum, he entreated once again, “O Lord, don’t belie my words, please eat a mouthful fast or else ...!” saying this, Nama leaned forward to fulfil his threat and smash his own head on the stone.

Lo and behold! The Lord appeared at once and, catching hold of Nama’s head, said, “O my dearest child! Supreme among devotees, endowed with noble attributes! Your parents being ignorant of your greatness, your guileless and spontaneous love for Me, were going to harm you! So were your playmates who had no idea of your glory. How much they have hurt you by their lack of faith in you! Without anyone to come to your aid, you came running to Me, My dear! Now I am waiting to be fed by your tender loving hands!” As Namdev fed the food into His mouth, the Lord eagerly swallowed mouthful after mouthful with relish. Then He fed a few morsels into Nama’s mouth. After revealing the glorious devotion of Namdev to all present, the Lord then reverted to His idol form.

Wonderstruck by this marvellous scene, Damaseth stood for a while spellbound. Slowly coming to his senses, he addressed the Lord thus, “O Lover of devotees! Lotus-eyed one who rides on fast-moving Garuda, the Divine Eagle, who serves as Your vehicle! You are the primal and ultimate Cause, O Perfect One! O Janardana Krishna! Slayer of demons! What great auspicious fortune has come my way that, even though a sinner, I have been bestowed with Your vision! What penance have I done to deserve this blessedness? In my ignorance, I treated the words of Your dear young devotee as mere lies. It is my evil nature that drove me to abuse this innocent child, to beat him and to cause great agony of mind and body to him. O Gracious Lord! What a terrible sin I have committed, offending

against You and Your child-devotee!” With inconsolable remorse he continued wailing.

At this point, he heard the ethereal voice of the Lord gently say, “O Dama! From now onwards look upon Nama as My own Self and treat him and worship him with love.” On hearing this, Damaseth praised the Lord in many ways and then turning to Namdev, he drew him close in his embrace and said, “O child, I was foolish enough to abuse you as a liar. Please look upon this offence as *ninda stuti*, (a form of worship offered with words of rebuke by intimate devotees) and forgive me!”

Then both left for home and Damaseth apprised his wife of all that had happened in the temple. Thereafter they treated Nama with great love and devotion and sent the food offering everyday with him to the temple. The Lord and the child-devotee fed each other and revelled in each other’s company.

“O Siddhas! What a wonderful play of the Lord it was!” said Nabhaji, concluding for that day his account of the childhood miracles that happened to Namdev. ▲

(To be continued)

How Else?

Suresh Kailash

A grain of sand, a pebble, a stone,
Many are the forms I must’ve worn,
While in inert ignorance I lay,
On the winding mountain trail.

Did I happen to catch your eye,
Or touch your feet as you walked by,
Did your shadow one moonlit night,
Enclose me in its womb of light?

Tell me, Ramana, my mother, my life,
How else am I born your child?



View of Arunachala from the Thamarai Kulam, where The Forest Way is restoring the devastated land around the lake and the mantapam for a public park. See www.theforestway.org/

Sonasaila Malai

Song Garland to the Red Mountain

SIVAPRAKASA SWAMIGAL
TRANSLATED BY ROBERT BUTLER

May you grant to me
eyes that you alone
behold endlessly,
a mind that dwells
on you alone,
and a tongue that your praise
alone intones,
and last of all by your grace
at your holy feet a place.

‘To those who climb them, other mounts
will show the world entire laid out.

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 Māṅikkavācakar 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>.

With such as these you disagree,
since for those who thus approach you,
it is their Self alone you make them see!¹
thus does [the world] proclaim.
Lord Sonasailan! Kailash's Lord!

93

The gleaming expanse of your chest;
The ruddy forest of your locks¹
whose colour lightning sore covets;
the lotus blossoms of your feet,
where Indra, king of gods,
prostrates himself in worship meet,
when shall these within in my mind
as their home come to abide?

[Men praise you] saying,
'Mount Meru once
A black crow's colour
turned to gold.² So let it be.
For you're the Mountain high

¹ *ceñ caḍai aḍavium* – the forest of [your] ruddy tangled locks. *caḍai*, Skt. *jaṭā*, are the tangled or matted locks worn by Lord Śiva and his devotees in imitation of him.

² There is a Tamil proverb, quoted in Winslow's dictionary, which says *mēruvai cārnta kākkamum poṇṇiṇam* – Even a crow which resorts to Mount Meru [will become] gold coloured. Sri Ramana Maharshi expresses a similar sentiment in lines 311-314 of *Ramaṇa Purāṇam*:

Even the blackest of crows,
when it alights upon beautiful golden Mount Meru,
is transformed into the form of pure gold.
In just the same way even those *jivas*
who are entirely without distinction,
upon joining the presence of divine consciousness,
their own reality, will shine
attaining through its glorious majesty
the sublime form of the Self.

that changes all that cometh nigh
 into the colour that is Thee,
Lord Sonasailan! Kailash's Lord!

94

To aspire to serve your devotees,
 the apple of my eye to me,
 and at their service [ever] be,
 is sweeter than a king's renown,
 who rules the world
 clad in a brightly jewelled crown.

Lord Sonasailan! Kailash's Lord,
 where the glow from rubies
 from cobras' jaws spat out,
 upon the silv'ry moon doth cast its light.
 like a [ruddy] morning sun that soars
 up to the fair, wide heavens' heights.

95

For those who praise
 the strength that as the *cimbul* bird
 stole the powerful lion's might,³
 the greatness that razed
 three cities [in their flight]
 and the force that one head
 of Brahma on his lotus seat⁴
 severed quite,
 what suffering can there ever be?

You who rising up into the sky
 as a column vast of fire bright,
 into the heavens towered high,
 as, leaping from your hand [in fright],
 the deer in your fair hand

³ See v. 23 and note.

⁴ *ambuya ataṇaṇ* – *He whose seat is the lotus*, i.e. Brahmā.

did on the heavens' fair moon alight,⁵
Lord Sonasailan! Kailash's Lord!

96

Bidding me, 'Do not fear,'
 may you place me, wicked
 and worthless as I may be,
 in the company of your devotees.
 For is there anyone who would dare
 to scorn you fair throat saying,
 'This throat is besmirched by
 the swallowed poison that it bears?'⁶

You rise on high as if to proclaim
 that if that argument ever arose again
 between the artful Five Armed One⁷
 and his younger brother, Murugan,
 the task of circumambulating You⁸
 would not be an easy thing to do,
Lord Sonasailan! Kailash's Lord!

97

My mind that's firmly fixed
 on jewels, on sandal paste,

⁵ The idea is that when Śiva rose up as an unfathomable mass of fire, the deer, which he customarily holds in his hand, was frightened by the heat and leapt onto the cool moon for safety.

⁶ The poet is saying that, just as no one would ever blame the Lord for holding the deadly poison *halāhala*, churned from the Milk Ocean, in his throat, no one could blame Him for accepting himself as a devotee, in spite of the dark defilement of *āṅava malam* from which he is not yet free.

⁷ *aīṅkaraṅ* – the five-armed One is Ganeṣa. He is most often depicted as having four arms, with his trunk making the fifth.

⁸ *valam koḷ vādu* – the dispute about circumambulating. The reference is to the well-known story of the dispute between Ganeṣa and Murugan over the possession of a special mango. It was determined that the first one to circle the world three times and return would win it. Murugan set off at great speed on his peacock, whilst Ganeṣa simply walked around his parents three times and successfully claimed the mango. The poet says that such a feat would not be so easy now with Śiva bearing the form of a great mountain.

on cloth of shining silk
 and ladies' sweet embrace,
 will it ever clearly see
 in Thee the one Reality?
 Alas, I do not know, poor me!

You who, soaring high, abode,
 so that all the pomp of Mal and Ayan
 by many much adored,
 though on high they rode
 on flying creatures borne,
 came to naught and was no more,
Lord Sonasailan! Kailash's Lord!

98

Will there ever come a day
 that my mind [flourishing],
 like a lotus covered pool,
 like the heavens lit by the moon,
 like a comely form
 with jewels adorned,
 like a city where dwells a king
 who long rules over the world,
 shall unite with your holy feet
 girt with warriors' anklets [meet]?

You who in your grace vouchsafe
 sure liberation's lofty state
 to those who on you meditate,
 so that other mountains
 stand abashed,
 bearing only trees for men
 to build a house that cannot last,⁹
Lord Sonasailan! Kailash's Lord!

99

⁹ *ōvu uṛum maṅai* – houses that will undergo destruction, i.e. perishable, material dwellings, which are provided by other mountains in the form of forests, are contrasted with *tāvu uṛum uyar viḍu* – strength possessing lofty liberation, conferred by Sōṅasailan. *viḍu* also means *house*, providing a neat, punning ending to the verse.

MOUNTAIN PATH

You it is that grant your grace
To those who praise you,
that they may gain learning
and the noble ornament of fame,
great wealth and children,
that like a fine jewel adorn
the householder and his mate,
and finally liberation's high estate.

Through your great, supernal grace
you show yourself to all the world,
so that those who from the righteous path
have strayed, forgetting you, may see
and hold you in their thoughts,
Lord Sonasailan! Kailash's Lord!

100

(Concluded)



Isolation

Upahar

Nowhere to go; watching the leafy moon
cast shifting texts of light upon the stillness,
a door swings open onto endless space.
Form falls away; something is known by Heart,
numinous, unconfined, self-evident.

No fear can enter here, though far and wide
our lady of the changes spreads confusion,
spinning her magic wheel; and sister death,
unmasked, is strewing flowers at the wake.
All false alarms and mere bewilderment.

Just being is the only circumstance.
True love admits no other, keeps no distance,
enjoys its own eternal company.
A solitary nightbird's high complaint
contains the universe. Nowhere to go.

ASHRAM BULLETIN

National Lockdown

On 14th of March, the Ashram stopped accepting overnight guests. On 17th, rules for congregating in the Ashram were imposed. On 21st March, the Ashram limited visits to two one-hour segments. On 22nd March, the Ashram was closed completely the whole day in keeping with the national Janata Curfew Day. By the evening of 24th, all airports around the country were closed, all trains cancelled and all national, state and district borders closed. Later that night, a nationwide lockdown was initiated. The Ashram has now been totally closed up to 1st June when the July MP went to press.

A deep silence pervades the entire Ashram. The Ashram office is closed as are the other facilities. Only essential activities continue such as taking care of the many cows in the gosala and preparing food in the kitchen while a handful of priests maintain austere pujas in the temple.

When the lockdown began, the Ashram was in doubt about whether local authorities would allow the daily Narayana Seva ('poor feeding') to continue. With their permission obtained, however, the Ashram is serving meals to about 200 sadhus per day. Simultaneously, at the request of the Municipality, the Ashram is providing meals for 200 poor in the town for distribution at Amma canteens.

Sri Bhagavan's 70th Aradhana

Sri Bhagavan's 70th *Aradhana* on 20th April was celebrated before a near-empty hall. A few Ramana family members came, but out of respect for the lock-down, only remained a short period of time before returning home. Tiruvannamalai District Collector Thiru. K.S. Kandasamy, IAS, joined the sparsely attended celebration and graciously served at *Narayana Seva* afterward.

Events in Sri Ramanasramam

On 14th April 2020, the skeleton crew of inmates remaining at Sri Ramanasramam celebrated the Tamil New Year. That afternoon, *Sri Chakra Puja* was preponed in order to conclude in time for the fifteen or twenty resident inmates to gather at Bhagavan's Nirvana Room to memorialise the day. As per tradition, at 8.47pm when *Śrī Aruṇācala Akṣaramaṇamālai* was over, attendees prostrated in veneration at the Nirvana Room entrance.

Sri Vidya Havan

The *Sri Vidya Havan* had been scheduled for 20th March but on 14th March, the government stopped all incoming international flights which meant that Mr. and Mrs. Venkat S. Ramanan who were to conduct the rite were unable to enter India. The *havan* was thus postponed. Subsequently, the government declared the nationwide lock down. As the annual rite takes place after mid-March around the time of *Vasantha Navaratri*, the Ashram leadership decided to conduct the ceremony in a truncated format in the New Hall on 1st May. Purohits, pujaris and participants practised social distancing throughout the 4-hour *homa*.

MahaPuja

The Mahapuja celebrations in honour of Bhagavan's Mother has been postponed from the 16th May to the 14th June.

Obituaries



Soona Dara Nicholson, maiden name **Soona Framji**, popularly known as Soona, first met Bhagavan in the early part of July 1943. She was so captivated meeting Bhagavan that she cancelled the remaining part of her south India tour and returned to the Ashram.

During her second visit, a humorous incident occurred. It was about four or a little past four in the evening. Bhagavan was narrating to the devotees the habits of the peacock, saying that if food was given at a certain time, it would return at the same time the following day. As he finished saying this, Soona entered to offer her prostration. Devaraj Mudaliar, who was seated opposite Bhagavan, remarked "the peacock has just arrived". Everybody had a good laugh. Thereafter, she visited Bhagavan frequently and stayed for longer period.

Sometime during the period 1945-46, an incident happened as follows. It was nearing 6.30 pm when according to Ashram rule, ladies had to leave the Ashram. This particular evening, Soona, offering her prostrations, proceeded towards Bhagavan, who was reclining on the sofa with his legs stretched. She prostrated and touched his feet. Bhagavan was taken aback and when she lifted her head he looked at her very sternly. Soona got mortified as if a deer was confronted before a tiger. Tears started flowing from her eyes. Bhagavan, the Lord of compassion, watching her flow of

tears, immediately softened and looked at her with immense tenderness, for though this action was one of indiscretion (else everyone would adopt this practice), this action was an act of devotion and would not let the devotee suffer. And with a tender gentle look, he soothed her heart. The flow of tears got arrested, the heart became light and joy sprang in the heart and with a smile akin to laughter she turned toward the door and went home.

She, along with her family, was present for the last fortnight of Bhagavan's earthly life.. On the night of April 14th, at about 8.15 pm, she had to rush home on some errand. As she was returning with her mother and Mrs. Talyarkhan she saw the light passing on the hill and knew that Bhagavan had left his body.

In 1953 she entered *grihasthashram* and continued her regular visits to the Ashram, which were like returning home; a source of joy to meet the old devotees, whose number was slowly dwindling and she had risen high on that ladder. Rumi had said, "Pilgrimage to the place of the wise is made to escape the pain of separation". Her last visit was in April 2010 and she left the haloed presence in July 2010. Thereafter, she was in Mumbai.

She was besieged with a number of ailments, foremost loss of vision and very feeble hearing, but the name of Ramana and Arunachala were on her lips constantly. On the early morning of March 7th, 2020, when her son entered the room as he always did to check her condition, he found that Soona had entered the Great Beyond.



Sri S.V. Venkatesan passed away from a cardiac arrest at the age of 80 on 24th March, 2020 in Chennai. He was predeceased by his wife and spiritual companion of 45 years, **Malathi Venkatesan**, who passed away on 2nd November, 2015. Born in Kolkata in 1939, Venkatesan was a brilliant student and gold medalist at Vivekananda College. Despite many hardships in early childhood, he had a highly successful career in finance at State Bank of India for 25 years and subsequently at Essar Group. S. V. V. and Malathi Venkatesan played a

leading role in many charities and NGOs, including nearly three decades as trustees for the TamilNad Kidney Research (TANKER) Foundation. They were both universally beloved and respected, deeply spiritual, and long-time devotees of Bhagavan, frequently visiting Ramanasramam.

Malathi bravely battled kidney disease for over two decades while serving underprivileged patients. Venkatesan's brilliant intellect and earthly achievements were exceeded only by his simplicity, humility and joyful good-naturedness. Venkatesan and Malathi were wonderfully inspiring parents, grandparents, mentors and human beings.



After a long life of service to Bhagavan, **Sri Anjaneyalu**, aged 75, merged at the Feet of Bhagavan in Bangalore on 14th May, the very same day he had come to Bhagavan as a chief mason 53 years earlier. He is survived by his devout wife Kanthamma, and son Sekhar and daughter Ramani.

Sri Anjaneyalu came to Bhagavan in 1967 at the age of 23 as chief mason when he was asked to put the finishing touches on the mantapam work over Bhagavan's Samadhi. Anjaneyalu recalled his second night in the Ashram, where he had a vivid dream of a snake crawling up his body. He woke in a fright: "I did not see any snake but saw a long serpentine blaze of light going from the top of my head into the darkness beyond. I sat upright, shivering uncontrollably, with palms intertwined between my folded legs." Till then he had not considered himself a spiritual man but from that day onwards, he got up early each morning.

As his faith deepened over time, he was engaged by the Ashram to carry out numerous constructions and renovations. So much so, he became a permanent inmate, in charge of all civil works. Notable constructions include the Library and guest cottages in Morvi Compound and extension to the Veda Patasala; the complete reconstruction of the Old Hall in May 1986; renovation of Sri Ramana Mandiram, Madurai and Sri Sundara Mandiram, Tiruchuzhi, where Bhagavan was born; the ashram sponsored renovation of the massive Thousand-Pillard Mantap in Arunachaleswarar Temple in 2002 and Pavazha Kunru Shrine in 2004; the Arakandanallur, Tirukoilur in 2003 and the large mantapam roof of Bhuminatha Temple, Tiruchuzhi; and the ancient Adi Kamakshi Temple in Tiruvannamali in 2007. All the above jobs and many other smaller works were carried out with dedication and efficiency. He was humble enough to say, "It is All Bhagavan's Grace." He took keen interest in the welfare of his workers and their families and they responded with loyalty in the workplace.

