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Original ink sketch of Arunachala by Sri Ramana Maharshi, from Kunju Swami's notebook

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in the conditions of our modern world.**

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Divine Names of Arunachala

29. ॐ कलिध्वंसिने नमः

Om kalidhvamsine namaḥ

Prostration to the One who destroys kali.

Kali means ‘strife, quarrel, war, battle’ and is the name of the last and worst of the four *yugas* or ages. *Dhvamsin*, from the verb root *dhvam*s, means ‘destroying, removing’.

There is a particularly arresting description of the *kali yuga* in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, dating from the first millennium of our era, that is worth quoting. We are in the *kali yuga* “When society reaches a stage where property confers rank, wealth becomes the only source of virtue, passion the sole bond of union between husband and wife, falsehood the source of success in life, sex the only means of enjoyment, and when outer trappings are confused with inner religion.”¹

Who today cannot relate to this dire portrayal of our time? Yet Sri Ramana Maharshi was not swayed by it. When asked when this *yuga* is to end, he replied: “I don’t consider time real. So I take no interest in such matters. We know nothing about the past or the *yugas* which were in the past. Nor do we know about the future. But we know the present exists. Let us know about it first. Then all other doubts will cease.” He went on to say, “Further, there is nothing to attain and no time within which to attain. You are always that. You have not got to attain anything. You have only to give up thinking you are limited, to give up thinking you are this *upadhi* or body. When time itself does not exist, as for instance in sleep, what is the use of bothering oneself with all these questions?”²

That said, how else does Śiva conquer *kali*?

— BKC

¹ Sri Sadhu Om and Michael James, *Sri Arunachala Stuti Panchakam*, Sri Ramana Kshetra, 2007, pp. 154-157.

² Mudaliar, A. Devaraja, *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, 16-9-45 afternoon.

The Next Chapter

It is clear that the ashram has entered a new phase of its existence. The one-hundred-year celebrations at the ashram in December 2022 are not just a commemoration of this major milestone in the life of Sri Ramanasramam, but also a reminder to devotees that the future course of the ashram may be different from the past. A chapter has concluded and a new one is about to open. How it will affect us and what will be the developments remains to be seen. The ashram, like all responsive institutions, reflects the external world and the needs of its devotees. The ashram is the instrument by which Bhagavan's Grace is made available to those who seek wisdom and healing. As the world changes so too does the ashram.

The Covid pandemic has had a major impact. The way we conduct business, the way we communicate with friends and family, and the way we view our lives, are all now radically different. The growth and assimilation of the internet which influences so many aspects of our lives, also changes the way we perceive the world and events. We see this too with the ashram where one can participate from the other end of the globe in say the Jayanthi rituals, and other activities on a regular basis. We are alone in our bubble yet paradoxically we are connected with all parts of the earth if we so wish.

The popularity of the ashram due to these new facilities brings with it certain consequences. One of them for the ashram is that it now experiences an almost daily surge of pilgrims touring the various temples and holy places of Tamil Nadu. They come once and probably

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never again. For those of us who anticipate or who are used to a relatively quiet, sparse attendance in the Samadhi Hall, the Old Hall and the Mother's temple, this is hard to accept.

The ashram is also no longer isolated but part of a vibrant expansion of the Tiruvannamalai township. Gone are the days when one could view the ashram as a rural retreat where outside accommodation and food were hard to procure. The noise and amount of traffic outside the main gates are substantial. At times it is like a bazaar.

There is no point in bewailing the conditions, they are as they are and nothing we wish for will change the circumstances, but the introduction of the bypass road south of the ashram years in the making, may reduce some of the heavier traffic passing through Tiruvannamalai.

Though many now regard the ashram as something of a temple to visit, to pray in, and ask for their desires to be granted and their sorrows assuaged, there are many sincere seekers who come to be quiet and meditate particularly in the Old Hall. Somehow a balance has been tentatively struck according to the time of the day, between the demands of the outside world and those who wish to delve deeper into their own hearts and minds through the silent guiding presence of Bhagavan Ramana.

There is a *vachana*¹ by Allama Prabhu,² which may provide some clue as to the predicament we encounter now that the free days of immediate and quiet access to the ashram have been not so much terminated as diminished.

When the camphor hill catches fire
Does the charcoal remain?
Does the snow-built Shiva temple
Have a sunlight cupola?

¹ A *vachana* is a form of poetry used in particular by the Lingayats. *Vachanas* are short verses that conclude with one or more local names by which Lord Śiva is called. They are concise and suggestive and use similar words to emphasise the import of the *vachana*. They reflect on the vanity inherent in the world, the vacuity of repetitious ceremonies or book study that only enhances one's delusions, life's precariousness, and above all else, the value of being a Śiva *bhakta*.

² *I Keep Vigil of Rudra, The Vachanas* translated by H.S. Shivaprakash. Penguin India. 2010. p.48. Allama Prabhu was one of the original principal proponents of what we know now as the Lingayat tradition.

When the hill of cinders is shot
 With a wax arrow
 Why look for the arrow again?
 After seeing Gogeshwara³
 Why remember him again?

This *vachana* implies that once you experience the divine touch of Sri Ramana's Grace there is no further requirement. The seed has been planted, and the fire of knowledge has begun to burn away the dross of negative obstacles that impede one's vision. We know from our own experience that once we are in 'the mouth of the tiger' there is no turning back. We belong to Lord Ramana. Occasionally we may try to wiggle out but the exception proves the rule: we want to be eaten up, we want to be lifted to a higher plane of reality, and we want to be free of all those thoughts and feelings which bedevil our lives.

Whenever we become despondent and think we have been forgotten or abandoned we should realise that once that link has been forged the bond can never be broken. Time is irrelevant in this respect and sooner or later we will climb that arduous summit and reach what we call 'self-realisation' (*ātma sākṣātkāra*). But perhaps it is better to name it 'self-fulfilment' as the expression 'self-realisation' is so timeworn by mindless repetition consequent of a lack of insight into its true nature. We can name it 'self-fulfilment' whereby the doors of our perception are cleansed and we can see with bright eyes that all our projections about the world and ourselves are ephemeral. It does not mean that all our worries and problems go away and that we can fly like superman, but that by pure active awareness we realise we have no permanent shape or form. That our nature is pure awareness, a consciousness that is not a result of our past actions but an ever fresh consciousness that is very much here and now. In Sanskrit this

³ Another spelling of this word is Guheshwara. That is, Lord of the Cave. The image or symbol of the cave is important in the Vīraśaivite and Lingayat traditions. On the eastern side of Arunachala hill is the sacred Virupaksha cave. The eponymous cave of the *tapasvin* Virupaksha is a significant place for Ramana devotees. Virupaksha who was a Kannada Vīraśaivite resided there in the 13th Century. Sri Ramana Maharshi lived there from 1899 to 1916. The word Virupaksha means eyes without form; *virupa* means no form, and *aksha* means eyes. That is, the consciousness that sees but has no form. Virupaksha Cave is a place of great spiritual *tejas* or power. It is said that one can easily hear the sound of *Om* resonate throughout the interior.

spontaneous experience is called *sphurana*. The result of that state has been described as *ānanda*, bliss. For those who have had a taste, there is nothing else quite like it. Like bees to a honey hive, we search for it again and again.

Sri Bhagavan and Sri Ramanasramam are our portals by which we can enter a new dimension and never turn back.

If we cannot enter through the gates of that subtle world named Sri Ramanasramam, meditate to our heart's content in the Old Hall or behold the *samādhi* of Bhagavan Ramana or The Mother; if we cannot walk upon Arunachala and feel the energy seep up through our feet; if we cannot walk around Arunachala and breathe that indefinable air that inspires us, what then can we do?

We know that Bhagavan has time and again stated that he is not this physical body we ascribe to him. Then the question is: if he is not the physical body that was dropped in 1950, then if we are limited in access to the physical presence where he historically resided that helps us dive into our true nature, where then is he that we may direct our prayers and purpose?

Yes, we have his writings and recollections by devotees, photographs, and participate in various events at the ashram. We can read to saturation level all about *ātma-vicāra* and Bhagavan's advice. It may satisfy us for a time but the real question is: What truly fulfils us? What is it that answers our longings and dreams?

There is a wonderful song by Carnatic composer and saint Tyagaraja titled *Sandehamunu tirpum ayya*:

I have a question for you,
Rama of Saketa. ⁴
Which is better:
Your feet worshiped by the gods
Or your sandals
Reverently carried by Bharata
That reminded the sages
Of your penance? ⁵

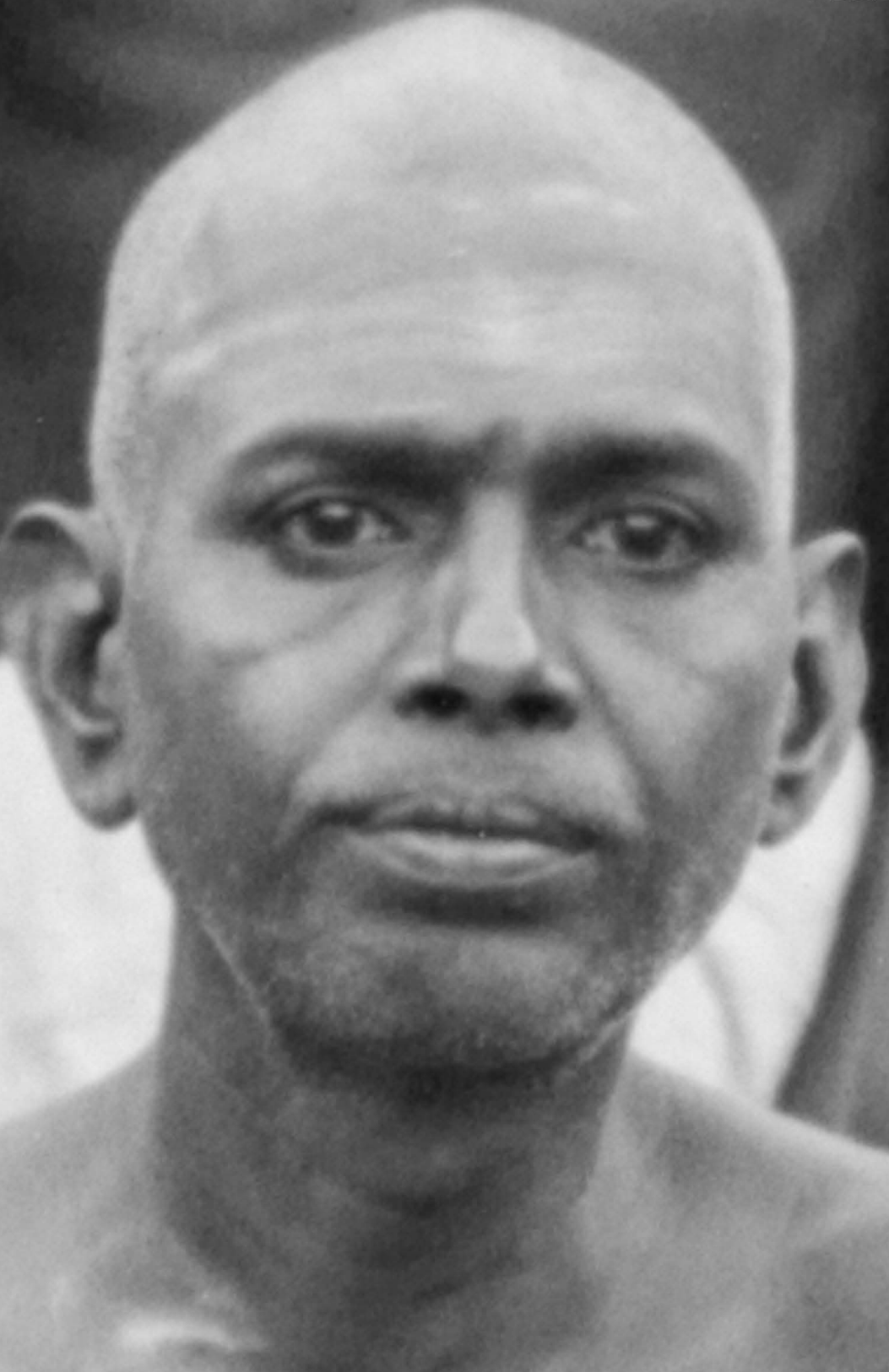
⁴ Literally, a place where God resides. It is a concept associated with Ayodhya.

⁵ Emany, Sudha, *A Companion to Tyagaraja, Lyric to Liberation*. Motilal Banarsidass Publications. 2022. pp.123-4.

You could say that we are worshipping the sandals (*pādukā*) of Bhagavan. Not that it is any less effective. For when we think of someone, in a sense they are with us, though they are on the other side of the world. There is the well-known incident of Kitty Osborne writing a letter to her mother from boarding school, which her mother showed Bhagavan. It was an ordinary school letter full of everyday school news. At the end, Kitty said: "... love to all the family and remember me to Bhagavan." Bhagavan read the letter and his response was: "If Kitty remembers Bhagavan, then Bhagavan will remember Kitty." That applies to all of us. If we only think of Bhagavan then he will be with us.

When we think of Bhagavan in any shape or form, be it in a photograph, an incident in a book about him, or watching online the *pūjā* at the *samādhi*, we are connecting not with a lifeless memory but a living presence however subtle and tenuous the connection. To our ordinary minds, this is inexplicable. We are unable to comprehend the immensity of who Bhagavan is. We tend to fondly believe that he is still clothed in a human form. How is it that one form, one name consciously remembered by so many can appropriately reciprocate instantly to all in return? If one could cautiously use the word cosmic then perhaps it could go some way to explain the physical illogicality of what we grapple with. Understanding slips through our fingers like water. We cannot hold it let alone control it. We can only marvel at this mysterious fact.

It is our job to feed that connection by concentration, discrimination, and detachment. The focus of our attention cannot be maintained unless we focus to the exclusion of all else. This is our *yoga*. The word *yoga* comes from the Sanskrit root *yuj*, meaning 'to yoke', or 'to unite'. Over time the smallest hint, the flimsiest of associations turns our minds to that which is the centre of our lives. Whether we know it or not Bhagavan is nourishing us if we but think of him. Eventually, it makes no difference whether we are at the ashram, or whether we are in the presence of Arunachala. There is no such thing as distance or separation from Bhagavan. The trick is to preserve and foster our faith whatever the external evidence to the contrary. The rest is out of our hands. ▲



The Advent Speech 2022

VENKAT S. RAMANAN

This is an adaptation of the speech by Dr. Venkat S. Ramanan, President, Sri Ramanasramam, Tiruvannamalai on the occasion of the Advent of Bhagavan to Arunachala on September 1. This speech is available in full in YouTube and was telecasted live at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yjkKzWpCk4w>.

Om Namo Bhagavate Sri Ramanaya

September 1st symbolises a great day in the spiritual movement by Bhagavan coming from the mother's lap at Madurai to the father's lap in Arunachala. Thanks to Bhagavan's persistent demonstration of the teachings over the next five decades, an ancient arduous practice of *jñāna mārga* has been easily adapted to the modern-day settings. The teachings of Bhagavan enable people from all walks of life such as a busy banker, a modern-day professor in an urban setting etc. to easily practise this ageless direct part of *ātma-vicāra*, which the ancient *rishis* had to spend years in forests and achieve self-realisation to prevent the cycles of deaths and rebirths.

This function also represents the start of the celebrations of the anniversary of the formation of Sri Ramanasramam which will continue till Jayanti which is on December 28th, 2023. On this occasion, there will be a pictorial book on Arunachala by Dev Gogoi, revival of *satsaṅg* groups all over India and in the west. In addition, there will be *satsaṅgs* and seminars that will be held in the big cities of India and in the West.

This is a great opportunity for us to pay our respect to Bhagavan both by practising his teachings and by opening the path for other newer devotees who should get the benefit of Bhagavan's teachings in this human birth.

One of the primary responsibilities of the ashram is to constantly communicate with the devotees, listen to their suggestions and answer their queries. At this juncture, it is important to list some of the ashram policies and the reasoning behind these policies.

There are three questions that are often asked by the devotees to the administration. The first is regarding the lack of lectures, the second is on publication of new books and the third is on social service. This article will address all the above queries.

The first question that is often asked is why there are no lectures in the ashram and the lack of a formal guide who introduces or explains Bhagavan's teachings. The simple answer is that Bhagavan has categorically assured us that he has not gone anywhere, and there is his constant living presence in this ashram. Thus, there is no importance given to the physical presence of the *Sat Guru* and it is assumed that he will guide us.

The other answer is that the devotee does not choose Bhagavan. Bhagavan chooses the devotee. There must be some past *janma punya* for the devotee to come to Bhagavan. This avatar of Dakshinamurthy is constantly guiding us in silence. In fact, Ramanasramam can be rightly called the temple of the silence of Advaita Vedanta. Everywhere in the world we are surrounded by the cacophony of noise. One needs a pure place where the silence is almost deafening but there is also a meaningful silence. This is not a silence one encounters walking through the wilderness or 20,000 feet above in the sky. This is a silence heavy with spiritual truth, heavy with ancient wisdom which will cleanse the devotees and answer every question they have and much more.

Thus the emphasis is on trusting the guru and receiving his grace which is ever-flowing, in abundance and available to all, that continues to overwhelm us. As Bhagavan said, it is the size of the bowl a devotee brings that determines the quantum of the grace that one receives.

Further on this path, there is no learning. It is only unlearning. As Bhagavan has repeatedly emphasised that anything new that is

gained will be lost and it is not worth having. The ancient wisdom of the Atman is already within us but it is covered by several layers of dust due to ego. In the ashram, it is the washing away of the dust to expose ourselves so that the true Truth will blaze forth. Adi Shankara compares this to the cloud coverage over the sun. The clouds are the ego that needs to disappear so that the full force of the sun i.e., the Atman can shine through. As Bhagavan has stated, it is better to sit quietly and go back as a changed man instead of listening to many wonderful lectures and still remain the same.

An incident from the life of Narayana Iyer bears testimony to the above. Once many learned Sanskrit scholars were sitting in the Old Hall discussing portions of the Upanishads and scriptural texts with Sri Bhagavan. Bhagavan was giving them proper explanations to the texts. At the same time, Narayana Iyer felt that it was so great to be learned and how fortunate these learned people are as they have a deep understanding to discuss these spiritual texts with Bhagavan. He felt that he was a zero in spiritual learning compared to them and felt miserable.

After the pandits had taken leave, Bhagavan turned to him and without even giving an opportunity for him to speak, told Narayana Iyer that this is all husk. Bhagavan then confirmed that all the book learning and the capacity to repeat the scriptures by memory is absolutely of no use and to understand the truth, one need not go through the torture of learning. Further, Bhagavan suddenly turned towards Iyer and asked him “Do you shave?” When Iyer replied yes, Bhagavan continued “You use the mirror for shaving, don’t you? You look at the mirror and shave yourself but you don’t shave the image in the mirror. Similarly all the scriptures are meant only to show you the way to realisation, they are meant for practise and attainment. Mere book learning and discussions are comparable to a man shaving the image in the mirror.” From that day, the sense of inferiority in Narayana Iyer due to the lack of scriptural knowledge disappeared.¹

This incident illustrates a simple truth. One wakes up in the morning, looks into the mirror and observes a growth of hair. It is

¹ *The Mountain Path*, January 1966, pp.100-1. Adapted from ‘Divine Glimpses’ by ‘Vishnu’, the pseudonym of Narayana Iyer.

best to get rid of it by shaving it after looking into the mirror. There is no use of looking into various different mirrors and observing the same. Similarly, all the books will tell you the same, perhaps in slightly different ways, and thus instead of wasting time reading books after books, it is best to realise for yourself what was obvious in the very first book.

In *Day by Day with Bhagavan* Devaraja Mudaliar quotes, “As for reading books on Vedanta you may go on reading any number of them, they can only tell you realise the Self within you. The Self cannot be found in books, you have to find it out for yourself in yourself.”²

Despite the above, it should be also categorically stated that Bhagavan was never against Upanishad teachings or any form of *sādhana*. In fact, he said these are accessories on the path to *jñāna mārga* but he wanted to make sure that we should not get caught into the intellectual trap the ego can set for us. Arthur Osborne has said in many of his editorials that the spiritual ego is the highest form of ego and the one who thinks that he does not have the ego ends up getting trapped by it. Thus Bhagavan is saying that an ounce of practice is worth ten pounds of reading and the same principle will continue.

Bhagavan’s guidance was available to all who turned to him and even to people who never visited the ashram. The same presence radiates from the ashram to this day at the foot of Arunachala.

The same presence that radiated from the ashram during his physical days continues to this day. This is especially felt during the Pujas, Veda Parayana including the evening Parayana. Definitely during the morning and the night hours, the Old Hall constantly breeds soft mellow life-presence of Bhagavan. One feels the intimacy with Bhagavan the most in that holiest place on earth. The very air and ashram is vibrant with his presence and the peace encompasses one and all. It is no passive peace but a state of vibrant exhilaration.

Realisation is a result of the guru’s grace more than lectures and teachings. These are only secondary aids whereas the former is the primary and essential cause. Guru’s grace is always there, contact with *jñāni-s* is good as they will work through silence. A guru is not the physical form and his contact remains even after the physical form vanishes.

² Mudaliar, Devaraja, *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, 16.03.1946 Morning.

During Bhagavan's lifetime, the answers were intensely direct and adapted to the questioner's character. As one devotee said Bhagavan answers the questioner more than the question itself. When Paramahansa Yogananda asked Bhagavan what spiritual instructions he should carry back to the west from Bhagavan for the uplift of mankind, Bhagavan replied, "They differ according to the temperaments of the individuals and according to the spiritual ripeness of their minds. There cannot be any instruction *en masse*."³

In spiritual instruction and transmission of the truth to the right devotee, according to Bhagavan, speech is the least effective means of communication. In fact, as we all know the sage of Arunachala is known as the great master of silent teaching.

Bhagavan emphasises that silence is the most powerful form of transmission. Speech is always less powerful than silence so mental contact is the best as such *mauna* silence is not inertness but great activity and it is the most powerful speech. In *Talks*, yet again, he says that speech is the great grandson of the original source, the silence. The silence *mauna* Bhagavan talks about is not just the absence of speech but it is when the mind-ego becomes silent, free from thought and comes to rest in the Self. If ego or the mind is fully absorbed in the Self, it will not appear anymore and assert itself as a separate identity.

Such a one in whom the ego has been fully vanquished is called a *jñāni*. He will abide in the Self constantly and only he who is present permanently in this silence can also transmit his teaching in silence.

The disciple is not yet in the state. However, with the guru's grace and with this constant effort, he will soon get the same level of spiritual truth as Bhagavan.

This teaching can be summed up as the teaching that is passed on from the spiritual heart (the *hrdayam*) of the guru, to the devotee's spiritual heart. Bhagavan's teaching is beautiful, unique and direct. There are no rituals, no secret mantras to be whispered in anyone's ears, no fancy handshakes, no hugging and no unusual postures. Bhagavan's teachings are that there are no special requirements to be met and there is no examination by the guru to test your worthiness.

³ Munagala S. Venkataramiah, *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk§107.

Bhagavan says that you are the Self and you just don't know it. Being the Self is being the pure being, pure experience and you have the power to discover the natural state of bliss inherent in you and abide as that.

The highest, the purest, and the most sublime teaching that leads to Self-realisation is open to all and is completely free. There are no special secret techniques or methods. In fact, in *Day by Day* Bhagavan quotes, "There is nothing more to be known than what you find in books. No secret technique. It is all an open secret, in this system."⁴ We can also say that there are no middlemen and no spiritual successors appointed by Bhagavan.

Recently, a Tamil scholar pointed out the following,

“பகவான் இருந்த ஆசிரமம் இல்ல. பகவான் இருக்கின்ற ஆசிரமம்.”

This means this is not the ashram where Bhagavan lived but this is the ashram where Bhagavan continues to live. He said it is blasphemous for somebody to sit and explain his own teachings in the Bhagavan's Presence.

Finally, we can use an analogy which will appeal to the computer users. The administration is like hardware and supports the best software. The software that constantly updates itself is vibrant and unique. Each individual is like a new device and gets a unique form of software from Bhagavan. The job of the administration is that of the hardware and is to make sure that this software is transmitted well to the devotee from Bhagavan.

The second question the administration is often faced with is the release of new books. Lately, there have been a few books which have been describing the experiences of the devotees and have some anecdotes of teachings. Though these authors have good intentions, are devotees of Bhagavan and mean very well, it is imperative that embellishments to his teachings or anecdotes do not creep in. Therefore, all new publication material is viewed and scrutinised by a publication committee. The main question before the committee is that whether the material is verifiable or whether it will tangentially dilute the teaching going forward and finally whether it is going to help the devotee to take him closer to self-realisation.

⁴ Op. cit., *Day by Day*, 08.10.1946.

We have to realise that everything that we need to know of Bhagavan is already in many beautiful books that have already been written and Bhagavan never used his five senses. Therefore, all these emotional descriptions can be the lapses of the memory of the author or their extreme devotion to Bhagavan or they want to show how these devotees were intimate with Bhagavan. But we have to remember that Bhagavan in *Talks* did not answer many of the frivolous questions, did not interfere with the *karma* of the devotees and he let the *prārabdha* of the devotees burn itself out in his august presence.

Bhagavan has given a reply to a lady devotee when she complained about suffering, “Suffering is the way but it is to mean that external life will only lead to pain and only the inward life will avoid suffering. Thus the only true life is the inward journey and which leads one to the eventual *mokṣa*.”⁵ So this is the ashram’s publication policy that all books should be genuine and not distort the teachings of Bhagavan that would lead to *mokṣa*.

Thus the devotees are requested to stick to books that Bhagavan has quoted or to the books that have been vouchsafed by him or books he has personally gone through or the original publications of the ashram or the publications found on the website of the ashram. We are at a pivotal time. If one traces the religious books, things have been changed after the master has left the body, quotations have been introduced with mischief and deviations have occurred from what the master meant.

If we do not remain vigilant on these manipulations, then it will be like rocket science. A small deviation in the calculations can mean several miles off the target and we will completely lose the purpose of the teaching and we cannot let this happen to Bhagavan’s teaching.

The last topic that people often ask about is the social service done by the ashram. In the era of global warming, floods, water shortages, the administration will continue to add to the activities which were started during Bhagavan’s time, which are the dispensary, the *Narayana Seva* (free food to *sādhu-s*), the empowerment of women and children.

The administration has supported the environment surrounding Arunachala by upgrading the tanks and lakes around the hill in addition

⁵ Op.cit., *Talks*, Paraphrased from Talk§107 and Talk§272.

to local temples. It has also helped for the education of the children of the inmates. Sri Ramana Maharshi Heritage in USA will be a big support along with Arunachala Ashrama and even in Ramanasramam, Tiruvannamalai, we have started a special charities organisation which has been registered. This will slowly take shape and will not interfere with the spiritual activities of the ashram and this will be in small incremental steps.

karma mār̥ga is only an agent to the *jñāna mār̥ga* as it only prepares the mind for self-realisation and it will never be the substitute for that, so this will also never be the prime activity of the Ramanasramam. But Bhagavan encourages us in many ways to act kindly towards the weak, render help to fellow beings when the opportunity comes your way without deliberately seeking an opportunity to help with, without any motivation for appreciation from others or desiring self-satisfaction of the feeling that we are good people. God alone can do good to others. We should never think that we are helping a man below us. In the *karma mār̥ga*, the ashram will do service but only as a means of worshipping God in that man.

Lastly, the attitude of the administration can be summed by an incident. Alexander the great when he visited India came to know of a holy saint. He goes to meet him. It is midday and the sun is shining hard on the holy man. Alexander notices this and feels that the person is getting sun burned. Therefore, he stands in the way of the sun and gives him temporary shade. He then asks the holy man what else he can do for him. The spiritual master looks at him in a kind way and finally says “Please move out of the way and do not obscure the path of the sun towards me.”

Similarly, the Ashram administration will never obscure or stand in the way of the relationship between the *jñāni* and the devotee.

Thus to summarise the three roles of administration are (a) to ensure that the transmission of the teaching is preserved in its pristine form by not initiating lectures but rather not interfering in the relationship between the devotee and Bhagavan, (a) to protect and preserve the teachings by carefully monitoring the publications from the ashram, and (c) continue the social work with the clear understanding that it is a secondary path for the *jñāna mār̥ga*. The devotees are welcome to contact the administration with queries and suggestions through email. ▲

Sri Guru Ramana Prasadam

History of the Work and Introduction

ROBERT BUTLER

Other than your grace, in my mind I cannot conceive
Of aught else that exists as the one enduring Reality.
Grant that my heart may as the Absolute its true state find
In your Siva nature unapproachable, transcending mind.

Śri Ramaṇa Jñāna Bōdham volume 7, v. 1228

Here, in vol.7, v.1228, of *Śri Ramaṇa Jñāna Bōdham*, in the most simple and poignant terms, Sri Muruganar prays for the grace of Sri Ramana, in order that he may enjoy the blissful and immutable state of dwelling as the self. There is no doubt however that when he wrote this, Muruganar was already permanently established in just that state. It is very common, in situations where a disciple has attained realisation through the intervention of the self, in the form of an embodied guru, that, in the eyes of the world, the two will carry on the divine play of guru and *śiṣya* (disciple) as if nothing had changed,

Robert Butler has published, independently and through Sri Ramanasramam, a number of translations and commentaries on works by Sri Ramana, Muruganar and earlier authors of works in the Tamil advaita tradition.

and such was the case with Sri Muruganar and Sri Ramana Maharshi. Muruganar made no pretension in his outward demeanour to being established in the natural state, 'self-realisation' as it is called, but we may perhaps glean a few hints from his writings.

In all his vast output of 20,000 or so verses that have survived, there are surprisingly few prayers for Bhagavan's grace, like the one that began this article. If we take *Śri Guru Ramaṇa Prasādam* as a case in point, out of its 1039 verses, only a handful, less than ten, are prayers.

On the other hand, however there are large numbers of verses of thanks to Bhagavan, expressed in the most effusive and moving terms, for the state of grace that has been granted to him through Bhagavan's grace. Muruganar here is clearly in no doubt as to the state he has attained and gives eloquent and moving expression to it in many verses, as in the following.

He who nurtures all things within his own Self through the power of his consciousness eclipsed my own self's firefly glimmer with the blazing sun of his grace. The illusory world of the senses, created by the lustful mind's teeming desires, disappeared completely and as I came to dwell at my spiritual centre a state of equanimity reigned within my heart.

– v. 116 (v. 33 in the original edition of *Śri Ramaṇa Anubhuti*, pt.1)

Śri Guru Ramaṇa Prasādam is a devotional work by Muruganar, comprising 1039 verses in its final form. In it he speaks of his devotion to Sri Ramana, the teachings he received from him, and the nature of the experience he gained as a result of those teachings.

It has been said that Muruganar composed over 20,000 verses in praise of Sri Ramana during his lifetime. I personally suspect the number may be much greater. Muruganar was a prolific composer of Tamil verse and his relationship with Bhagavan, as I will refer to Sri Ramana henceforth, extends over 50 years, from 1923 to 1973. If he composed only three verses a day over that period, a mere 12 lines of Tamil verse, the number would come to nearly 57,000 or over 200,000 lines.

It is no surprise that Muruganar was so prolific, as he belonged to the long tradition in India and throughout the world, in which verse,



poetry, was principally created in the mind and stored in memory and only later, and only in small part, committed to writing. Such scholarship was quite common long into the 19th century at least, as we learn, for example from U.V. Swaminathaiyar, speaking of his guru, Sri Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai (1815-1876). This is hardly a surprise, when we consider what was involved in committing anything to writing in the days before, not only printing, but even simple paper and pen were not available to scholars.

A cured and trimmed palmyra leaf had to be acquired and the letters painstakingly carved into it with a metal stylus. Even then the writing was still not easily visible and soot or black powder had to be rubbed over it, so that it lodged in those scratched marks, making the writing visible. Such skills were difficult to acquire and were the province of trained scribes. In those days the mind was perforce the pen or keyboard, and the memory was the notebook, the hard drive or the cloud storage.

In the 1980s I had the privilege of knowing Aruna, the French nurse charged with taking care of Muruganar during his final days. She told me that to the very end he would compose verses, all in his head. When they were complete, they would come out in a rush fully formed, to be written down by someone in attendance with pen and paper. Those who are aware of the strict rules that govern the composition of Tamil poetry will realise what a great feat that is, especially considering the complex metaphysical concepts that were the subject of those verses.

Very little of this massive oeuvre has been translated into English or any other modern language and most of it therefore remains hidden except for the very few who are highly schooled in both classical, literary, Tamil and Advaita Vedanta. The situation is somewhat like that of an iceberg, nine-tenths of which remains under the water, invisible. *Śri Guru Ramaṇa Prasādam* is a portion of that small part that is visible, protruding above the water line. There are a few other peaks poking up above the surface, principally, *Guru Vachaka Kovai* and some small portions of *Śri Ramaṇa Sannidhi Murai* and *Śri Ramaṇa Jñāna Bōdham*, but by and large this is the situation.

Nothing is known about this work until it begins to be mentioned as being completed shortly before Bhagavan's *maha samadhi*.

Bhagavan regularly read over Muruganar's compositions and suggested corrections and minor additions. With *Guru Vachaka Kovai*, for example, a collection of 1254 sayings by Bhagavan, which were recorded in Tamil verse by Muruganar, each verse (or at least the vast majority of them) was checked and approved by Bhagavan and he even added a few verses of his own, to clarify certain points. But in the case of *Śri Ramaṇa Ānubuti*, as it was titled then, Bhagavan's health no longer permitted that. At this point we will give a translation of part of Smt. Kanakammal's brief account of its composition. This account was written before the republication in 2004 of *Śri Ramaṇa Ānubuti Part One*, under its new title *Śri Guru Ramaṇa Prasādam* Kanakammal says:

The work *Śri Ramaṇa Ānubuti* is in two parts. It was written during the time when Sri Bhagavan was still in the body. However, due to Sri Bhagavan's ill-health, it was never formally presented to him. It is certain however that he would have seen some sections of it. Once, when Bhagavan was seated on the stone sofa, in the *mandapam* which stands in front of the Mother's shrine, *Sri Matrubhuteswarar Alayam*, a lady *bhakta* (devotee) called Pragatambal was singing a section of a composition by Muruganar in 32 verses, entitled *Sri Ramaṇa Alangaram*. As soon as he heard the song, Sri Bhagavan looked at her and said, 'What is that you're singing?' To which Pragatambal replied rather hesitantly, 'It's called an *Alangaram*.' [*Alangaram* means an embellishment or ornament, in this case, a literary one]. Sri Bhagavan, recognising the style in which it was written, turned and looked at Muruganar and asked, 'Hello, what's this? Are you composing an *Alangaram* to me?' Muruganar did not say anything. The tears that rolled down his cheeks were his only reply.

Śri Ramaṇa Ānubuti was the work that Muruganar composed immediately following that *Alangaram*. Kanakammal goes on to describe the efforts made by devotees to get the work published, and then she says:

Muruganar addressed himself to the task of singing [his guru's] praise [Here Kanakammal paraphrases a line from

Arunagirinathar's *Kandar Anubhūti* and says பாடும் பணியே பணியாய்க் கொண்ட முருகனார் – *Muruganar who took it as his duty to sing his praises*]. Channelling his poetic genius into grace-filled verses, he joyfully adorned Sri Bhagavan's holy feet with them. As he reflected upon the great good he had received, all his thoughts, taking the form of Sivam, were transformed into verses and imprinted themselves upon the page. The state of realisation (*aṇubhūti nilai*) which shone unbrokenly in Muruganar's heart, through the compassionate nature in which Sri Ramana Bhagavan had curbed his ego and made him his servant, was expressed with shining clarity in his words. The reader is referred to these songs, which he sang whilst revelling ecstatically, permanently absorbed in meditation upon the form of his guru.

At this point Kanakammal quotes verse 33 of the original work, which became verse 80 in the revised version, *Śri Guru Ramaṇa Prasādam*

Like a honeybee I dwelt in *mauna* at his lotus feet which reach up to the celestial sphere where Lord Siva's grace bestows *jnana*. And so my body, breath, consciousness and senses all were merged in the sweet tranquillity of his divine nature as *Sivam*.

Finally, we should talk a little about why this work seems to have found such a special place in the hearts of both devotees of Sri Bhagavan and Muruganar. The most dominant themes that emerge in reading these verses are firstly that of pure rapture. Muruganar is overwhelmed by the total transformation of his very consciousness, which was brought about through Bhagavan's grace. He struggles with might and main to express the inexpressible joy of realisation of his true nature, piling epithet upon epithet in a series of rapturous attempts to convey some hint of this experience.

When I lost myself to the power of *Sivam* that impels me towards itself, totally eliminating the bondage of my deluded mind, an authentic existence lived in true awareness came sharply into focus, so that I experienced a love in which I myself was that glorious *Sivam* that shines within the Heart as the life of life itself.

v. 72

Henceforth for me there is only bliss and no sorrow. Now that I have experienced love at my good Lord's gracious feet, the desires which attended that illusory existence, lived on the level of the flawed and untrustworthy mind, have ceased and the Supreme has merged with me as my own essential existence.

v. 73

The second theme is of course that of his gratitude to, and love for, Sri Ramana, who was the catalyst that brought about this transformation of his very being. *Prasād* is of course food offered to a guru or deity, who then partakes of it and offers it back to be consumed by the devotees. We might then imagine why Muruganar may have adopted the new title *Śri Guru Ramaṇa Prasādam*. Surely the *prasād* that Muruganar offered was his own ego, which Sri Bhagavan transformed through his touch and returned to him in the form of the Self. The following two verses give full expression to the feelings of gratitude and wonder experienced by Muruganar on receipt of Bhagavan's grace.

Through the joyous power of the true love that took as its goal the feet of my guru, a life lived in the vast space of the Self that shines fearlessly within the Heart burgeoned forth within me, as the unflinching awareness that is *mauna* grew stronger and stronger. Birth's suffering was abolished and my eye became fearless as I obtained the vision of grace.

v. 6

He entered my heart, imparting the state of supreme bliss upon which it is delightful to dwell. Grace flowed sweetly from him as he filled me with the richness of *mauna*, the beautiful life of *Sivam* that is the experience of the knowledge of the Self. My eyes' jewel, he stood granting me the vision of the Real that was sweet to my sight.

v. 5

Thirdly, the work is in its own way a practical guide to spiritual practice. Even the most rapturous verses convey some underlying practical truth, but in addition to this, there are sections, such as *Imparting Wisdom to the Mind* and *The Enquiry that Leads to True Jñāna*, which give very pertinent instructions on the nature of the mind and the technique of self-investigation advocated by Bhagavan. In

verses 551 and 559, he gives a very succinct account of the method of self-investigation, advocated by Sri Bhagavan.

The network of thoughts that fills the mind branches out from the perception 'I am the body'. The proper course of action is to ask the question, 'What is the place in which this I am the body idea has its source?', and thus reach and become established within the Heart.

'Who am I?' is the source of all acts of questioning. If in stillness we direct our attention inward to the place of its arising, so that its truth is known, the dispute that gave rise to the question will be ended completely. vv. 551 & 559

In the verses of *Śrī Guru Ramaṇa Prasādam* there is no suggestion of a blind devotion that absolves the devotee of any responsibility for his own salvation. In Muruganar there is no question of a conflict between the paths of *bhakti – devotion*, and *jñāna – enquiry*. *Śrī Guru Ramaṇa Prasādam* shows them to be entirely convergent and interchangeable, as evidenced by the following:

I show my deep gratitude to him who brought about his victorious rule within my heart by maintaining self-attention without a break. There is no other way than this. Benedictions upon the glorious Self that shines alone within the Heart through the non-dual truth of its Self-nature! v. 409 ▲

Sri Bhagavan and the Mother Principle

A Collage of Facts

SANJEEV KUMAR NATH

Some of the events described here may not look logically related, hence the word 'collage' in the title, but when we consider the facts described here, one thing becomes abundantly clear: that the Mother Principle has always been at work in the making of the Maharshi and his Ashram.

One hundred years have passed since that day in December 1922 when Sri Bhagavan first spent the night near His mother's shrine instead of going back to Skandasramam in the evening, as he was wont to do during those early days of the fledgling Matrubhuteswara shrine. After Mother Azhagamamal attained *mokṣa*, breathing her last while Sri Bhagavan placed his hands on her head and heart, the body was brought down from Skandasramam and buried, as a saint's body

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should be buried, with all due honours, at the foot of Arunachala. Thus, the Matrubhuteswara shrine came into existence. It would take years for the shrine to be built properly, but this was indeed the beginning. Sri Bhagavan would come down daily to His mother's shrine and then return to Skandasramam in the evening. One day, however, someone offered *bhiksha* and also requested Sri Bhagavan to go on *giripradakshina* with them. The same thing happened the next day, and the day after, too. This was tiring for Sri Bhagavan because the routine meant that he had hardly any time for sleep and his close devotees were concerned about his health. Of course, the ocean of compassion that Sri Bhagavan is, he did not complain, and tried to muffle the complaints of the companions. Anyway, after this apparently accidental stay of one or two days at the site of the shrine, Sri Bhagavan just stayed on there. The same force that brought him from Madurai to Tiruvannamalai in 1896, now made him stay there so that Ramanasramam could grow around the Matrubhuteswara shrine.

Sri Bhagavan's connection with the Mother Principle, however, does not seem to be accidental. Right from the beginning of his life on earth, the Mother in Her various manifestations, has played very crucial roles. It is said of the young Venkataraman, that when he was just a breastfeeding baby, he would sometimes invite tiny tots like him to be suckled by mother Azhagammal. I think this is a pointer to what was to come: that Sri Bhagavan's mother would become a mother for all, and of course, the incident also illustrated Sri Bhagavan's generosity and equality. Which infant would want to share his mother's milk? Sri Bhagavan's devotees who worship the Mother Principle in the form of Matrubhuteswara are blessed by the Mother, just as some infant, invited by the little Venkataraman, may have been suckled by his mother.

Devotees who have visited Tiruchuzhi must have noted how close Sri Bhagavan's ancestral home is to the Bhuminathaswamy temple. It is as if the Lord could not bear any distance from Him and His son. So young Venkataraman lived just across the street of the Bhuminathaswamy temple at Tiruchuzhi; at Madurai he lived very close to the south *gopuram* of the great temple of Mother Meenakshi, and after reaching Tiruvannamalai he spent all his life in close physical proximity to Arunachala.

On one occasion, the young Venkataraman had made paper boats out of old legal papers that his father Sundaram Iyer the pleader had preserved. Scolded by the father for this prank, the young boy ran into the Bhuminathaswamy temple, and took shelter behind the image of Mother Sahayambal, the divine consort of Lord Bhuminathaswamy, and it took some time for people to finally find the boy. The point to be noted is that it was the Mother that young Venkataraman chose to seek protection from.

And of course, when Venkataraman at Madurai read the *Periyapuranam* and was deeply affected by the stories of the Saivite saints, when, on hearing the word “Arunachala” from a visiting relative he was transported to another realm, when love of God consumed his whole being, he shed tears before Mother Meenakshi and her divine consort, Sundaeswarar. Sri Bhagavan’s devotees generally understand the oneness of Arunachala and Ramana, but what about Mother Meenakshi who first witnessed Sri Bhagavan’s God-intoxication? Can we say that She didn’t have a hand in planting the seed of *para bhakti* in the young boy? And if Mother Meenakshi is famous for bestowing grace through her look, hasn’t the power of Sri Bhagavan’s look been extolled in Sri Muruganar’s verses and the accounts of so many devotees?

When the God-intoxicated young Venkataraman finally left Madurai, one of the brief stops was in the house of Muthukrishna Bhagavata, and we read about how the lady of the house took a special liking for the boy, fed him well, and sent him off with a packet of sweetmeats for the journey. It is said this lady would later visit Sri Bhagavan at Tiruvannamalai.

During Sri Bhagavan’s stay in Tiruvannamalai, especially during the first difficult days, there were so many mothers, so many women who took care of Sri Bhagavan. These included Ratnammal the dancer who brought food to him while he was in the Arunachaleswara temple precincts, Meenakshiammal who fed him and gave him a proper oil bath while he was at Gurusurtham, Keerai Paati who would beg and feed Bhagavan on the hill, Desurammal who made it a point to bring food to Sri Bhagavan everyday when he was staying in the Virupaksha cave, Echammal and Mudaliar Paati who also regularly supplied him and his devotees with food. Also, there were many women devotees

and ashram workers who adored and worshipped Sri Bhagavan, who in turn, bestowed them with his grace.

During an onslaught of the plague in and around Tiruvannamalai, Sri Bhagavan and a few others stayed near Pachaiyamman Temple. It was as if the Mother was anxious to keep Her son safe. We also learn how, in recounting the old story of the Divine Mother coming on a penance to the ashrama of Gautama rishi—the area of the Pachaiyamman Temple—Sri Bhagavan would be moved to shed tears.

Once, when a lady from Sri Bhagavan's village Tiruchuzhi came to Ramanasramam, she asked, with some hesitation, if Sri Bhagavan remembered her. She was then a widow with a shaven head. Sri Bhagavan then told the people in the hall that in his childhood, his family was planning to get him married to this person who was a little girl then. Apparently, the girl's family did not agree to the match because they said that this boy Venkataraman was always following his mother, wearing a single piece of cloth. In fact, young Venkataraman would often follow his mother and help her in certain rituals and tasks which required him to be dressed like that. But the thing to note is that Sri Bhagavan, destined to be a *sādhu* and a *jñāni*, ever established in the Self alone, was, in a way, helped by his mother from entering wedlock and becoming a householder. It was his attachment to her and his service to her that apparently disqualified him for being chosen as a husband!

Vasishtha Ganapati Muni the great Sanskrit scholar, *tapaswi* and poet *extraordinaire*, was so wonderstruck by Sri Bhagavan's unique answer when he sought to know what *tapas* was, that he gave the name Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi to the young saint (Venkataraman) known as Brahmana Swami in Tiruvannamalai. Ganapati Muni was an ardent worshipper of the Divine Mother. The history of the composition of his *Uma Sahasram*, a wonderful hymn to the Divine Mother, shows how Sri Bhagavan actually worked as his muse on that crucial night when Ganapati Muni shot off four different verse lines to four different amanuenses to be able to finish the great poem in time.

Great sages and avatars have always had wonderful and special relationships with their mothers. When Sri Ramakrishna was in Vrindavan and Mathura during a pilgrimage, he got so intoxicated with the love of Krishna that he refused to return to Dakshineswar. Then,

it was pointed out that his mother Chandra Devi would be waiting for him at Dakshineswar, and he immediately agreed to return. We all know about Adi Shankaracharya's great devotion to his mother. The Bible tells the story of how Jesus on the cross, noticing his mother, his disciple John and others, ensured that John takes care of her as his own mother.

Our Bhagavan, who could look supremely indifferent to all ties, was actually all love for his mother. When the adolescent Venkataraman, intensely absorbed in the Self, left Madurai for Tiruvannamalai, no one at home knew where he had gone, and they were all anxious for him, but mother Azhagammal suffered the most. When she finally got news of his being in Tiruvannamalai and came seeking him, Sri Bhagavan refused to go with her, although she made her plea relentlessly, day after day. Finally, on the request of a devotee, he gave her a written answer which said that she should not grieve over the fate of her son, but should be at peace, and that whatever happens is ordained by Providence, and one can do nothing about it. This statement is sometimes interpreted in terms of fatalism, but before coming to a conclusion on this issue, we need to remember that it was not Sri Bhagavan's practice to give general advice applicable to all. He gave a specific message to a specific devotee or inquirer in a specific context. What he said to his mother, therefore, needs to be seen in the context of his effort to lessen her sorrow. By urging her to reconcile herself to the doings of providence, Sri Bhagavan was providing her with some solace. However, it is interesting that this first recorded teaching of Sri Bhagavan is directed to his mother.

Although her son refused to go back with her, Azhagammal continued to visit him. Once, in 1913, she came to ask for a blessing. She wanted him to bless his younger brother and his wife with a son so that the family line could continue. A year later, a son, a future president of the Ashram, was born. He was named Venkataraman after Sri Bhagavan. When Sri Bhagavan was in the Virupaksha cave in 1914 and his mother came visiting, she suffered from a terrible attack of typhoid fever. Sri Bhagavan composed a moving song to Arunachala, begging the Lord to save his mother. Probably this is the only instance in which Sri Bhagavan actually asked such a favour from Arunachala. Indeed, Arunachala listened to Sri Bhagavan (if at

all we take the two to be different) for she recovered from her ailment. In 1916, the young Venkataraman's mother Mangalam died, and the little boy came to be brought up by his aunt and Sri Bhagavan's sister, while Azhagammal came to live with Sri Bhagavan. Some of the devotees apparently were against the mother joining the son, but Sri Bhagavan's resolve not to abandon his mother did not change. Over the years of her stay with her extraordinary son, Mother Azhagammal began to shed off her stiff orthodox ways in regard to caste and other rules, and gradually matured into a quiet, saintly lady. The *jñāni* that Sri Bhagavan is, even mundane events turn to spiritual experiences under his influence.

Once when Azhagammal prepared *appalams* so relished by her son in his younger days, Sri Bhagavan composed the *appalam* song, which while talking of the process of making *appalams*, talks of *brahma-vidyā*. One day, when some lower caste women gathering grass on the mountain had dropped in, Sri Bhagavan asked his mother to provide them with food. She hesitated because according to her strict orthodox rules, serving the food to them would necessitate her to take bath and cook again. Understanding her state of mind, Sri Bhagavan said, "Do you know who they are? They are God — the forms of Sri Arunachala Himself!" Immediately, she served them the food. On another occasion, she would tear a portion of the sari she was wearing to give to a needy mendicant.

Everyday, under the influence of Sri Bhagavan, Azhagammal's soul bloomed, so that it broke through all narrow confinements of caste, creed, etc. Can any darkness stay when the sun comes out? Sri Bhagavan's proximity cleansed every little speck of ignorance that may have been there in Azhagammal's mind, and she matured into a *jñāni*, worthy to be revered. Thus, Sri Bhagavan moulded her, taught her, and finally gave her liberation. It is her *samadhi* that was the beginning of Sri Ramanasramam. It is Matrubhuteswara, God as Mother, that is the originator of Sri Ramanasramam. It is the Mother Principle that gave birth to Sri Ramanasramam. ▲

The Paramount Importance of Self Attention

Part Forty Four

SADHU OM
AS RECORDED BY MICHAEL JAMES

30th January 1979

Sadhu Om: Once in the presence of Bhagavan a devotee asked what the benefit of the *mantra* ‘*namō ramaṇāya*’ [which means ‘obeisance, (prostration, salutation, adoration, subsidence or surrender) to Ramana’] is, and since Bhagavan did not answer, several devotees started to offer their own views. In the course of the ensuing discussion one devotee said, ‘*namō ramaṇāya maṇō maraṇāya*’, which means ‘*namō ramaṇāya* is for the death of the mind’. Hearing this, Bhagavan laughed and expressed his approval.

[When I heard this, I asked Sadhu Om who said this, in response to which he just smiled and said, ‘Some devotee, it doesn’t matter who. The idea would anyway have been given only by Bhagavan’,

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.

but later I was told by another devotee, who was present at the time, that it was Sadhu Om himself who said this.]

The efficacy of *mantras* lies largely in the fact that particular sounds have particular effects on the mind, so *mantras* have been revealed by sages who have observed the effect of each sound by meditating deeply upon them. For example, the *mantra* ‘*aruṇācala śiva*’ has the effect of making the mind turn back within and thereby subside into the source from which it rose, so this is the purpose for which Bhagavan gave us this *mantra*. In my experience the syllable ‘*ṇā*’ in both *aruṇācala* and *ramaṇā* is particularly powerful in its ability to draw our attention back to ourself, the first person, thereby withdrawing it from all objects, which are second and third persons. However, the power of these two names, *aruṇācala* and *ramaṇa*, lies not only in their respective sounds, but more importantly in what these names refer to, namely our own real nature (*ātma-svarūpa*), which is what has appeared in the forms of Arunachala and Bhagavan in order to turn our mind back within to see what we actually are.

The power of these names, therefore, will be recognised by us and will have their effect on us to the extent to which we love what they refer to. This is generally true of any name of God, not only because such names derive their power primarily from God himself, to whom they refer, rather than from their sounds, but also because the power of true heart-melting love is far greater than the power of any sound, since love is the very nature of God. Since he himself is love, love for him is the only means by which we can know him as he actually is, namely as our own real nature.

However, no particular sound or combination of sounds, and not even any other name of God, has power to make the mind turn back and subside within equal to the unique and natural power of the first person pronoun, ‘I’. As Bhagavan often said, ‘I’ or ‘I am’ is the first and foremost name of God, so no other *mantra* can equal it in power and efficacy. Unlike other *mantras*, the power of ‘I’ or ‘I am’ is not derived from its sound but only from what it refers to, namely awareness of one’s own being, because it is equally powerful and efficacious in whatever language it may be expressed, provided that one is sufficiently familiar with that language to recognise whatever sound or sounds in it mean ‘I’ or ‘I am’.

So long as we use ‘I’ or ‘I am’ to refer to anything other than our own being, it will not turn our mind back within, but if we carefully consider what these words actually refer to, it will be clear that ultimately they refer only to our awareness of our own being, so by meditating on their true import we are automatically turning our attention back towards our own being. Therefore, more than any other *mantra*, the *mantra* ‘I’ or ‘I am’ has the power to help us fix our mind on what God actually is, because his own being and our own being are one and the same *poruḷ* [substance or reality], as Bhagavan explains in verse 24 of *Upadēsa Undiyār*:

By [their] being nature, God and soul are just one *poruḷ*. Only awareness of [their] adjuncts is [what makes them seem] different.

This is why he often said [as recorded, for example, in *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, 28-6-46] that ‘I’ is the greatest and most powerful of all *mantras*, greater even than *ōm*. As he sometimes expressed it, ‘I’ is the elder brother and *ōm* is the younger brother. Whereas *ōm* derives its power from its unique sound, ‘I’ derives its power from the fact that it is the natural name of ourself.

In verse 13 of *Śrī Aruṇācala Akṣaramaṇamālai* he sings:

Arunachala, *poruḷ* [substance, reality, import or referent] of *ōmkāra* [the sacred syllable *ōm*], you for whom there is not [anything or anyone] equal or superior, who [other than yourself] can know you [as you actually are]?

He does not say that Arunachala is *ōmkāra* but that it is *ōmkāra-p-poruḷ*, the import of *ōmkāra*, meaning that it is the reality to which the syllable *ōm* refers, namely *brahman*. Since *brahman* is *ātma-svarūpa*, the real nature of ourself, it is what is always shining in our Heart as ‘I’, so *ōmkāra-p-poruḷ* is what he refers to as ‘*nāṇ eṇum sol-poruḷ*’, the import of the word ‘I’, in verse 21 of *Upadēsa Undiyār*:

That [the one infinite whole that appears as ‘I am I’ when ego investigates its source and thereby dies, merging in it] is at all times *nāṇ eṇum sol-poruḷ* [the real substance or true import of the word called ‘I’], because of the exclusion of our non-existence [that is, because we do not become non-existent] even in sleep, which is devoid of ‘I’ [namely ego].

Therefore he implies that what we should meditate on is not merely the sound ‘*ōm*’ but what it refers to, namely our own being, which is

the real import of the word 'I'. However, in order to turn our attention back to fix it on our own being, a much more powerful and effective aid than *ōm* is the word 'I' or the phrase 'I am', because 'I' and 'I am' are the natural names by which we refer to ourself, so they draw our attention back to ourself more effectively than *ōm* or any other *mantra* or name of God.

1st February 1979

Sadhu Om: I do not say that self-attention is easy for the mind, but that it is easy for us, because our real nature is just to be aware of ourself and nothing else, which is what we are trying to be by being self-attentive. The nature of the mind is to be constantly wandering from one second or third person to another, so attending to ourself, the first person, is diametrically opposed to the mind's nature. For ourself as we actually are, however, nothing is easier or more natural than just being self-attentive.

So long as we mistake ourself to be a person, we seem to be this mind, so as such we will always have to struggle to hold on to self-attentiveness. Since Bhagavan or God is pure awareness, which never mistakes itself to be the mind or anything else, he is said to have conquered the mind, which means that he is never affected by the mind in any way whatsoever, because in his clear view there is no such thing as mind at all. This is why he is rightly regarded as the greatest of the great.

Even ordinary greatness is achieved only by curbing the mind. For example, if we never tell a lie, we can be said to have achieved the greatness of impeccable honesty, but we have achieved such greatness only by curbing the mind's inclination to tell lies whenever it is more convenient than telling the truth. The greatness of never rising as ego, which is the goal that Bhagavan has advised us to achieve, is infinitely greater than the greatness of impeccable honesty, so if we aspire to achieve such greatness, we need to curb every outward-going inclination of the mind, and hence we should not be discouraged or disheartened by any amount of seeming difficulty that we may encounter on the way. If we take one step towards Bhagavan, he will take nine steps towards us, so we should try our best to be self-attentive, knowing that if we do so, his grace will take care of everything else.

THE PARAMOUNT IMPORTANCE OF SELF ATTENTION

Though it is not necessary for us to ask ourselves any questions when we are trying to be self-attentive, if our mind is greatly agitated by other thoughts, it may be helpful for us to ask ourselves questions such as ‘To whom do all these thoughts appear?’ or ‘Who is aware of all this mental agitation?’, because such questions can help us to turn our attention back to our fundamental awareness of our own existence, which is always distinct from the mind and all its thoughts. That is, what is agitated or disturbed is only the mind and not our being, so in order to separate ourselves from the mind all we need do is to hold on to our being.

The surface of the ocean may be disturbed and agitated by waves and storms, so if we are floating on the surface we will be tossed about by the waves and buffeted by the storms, but if we dive deep into the ocean, neither the waves nor the storms will affect us. Likewise, if we float on the surface of the mind, we will be tossed about by the waves and storms of mental activity that arise to the extent to which we allow ourselves to be swayed by *viṣaya-vāsanās* [inclinations to attend to objects or phenomena], but if we hold on to self-attention, we will thereby sink deep within ourselves, separating ourselves from all such waves and storms.

For a beginner on the spiritual path, it may seem easy to meditate for eight hours a day, because he is like a blind man, who does not know what he is doing or where he is going. Such a person may think that what they are doing in the name of meditation is self-attention, whereas they are actually just floating on the surface. However, to the extent that we go deep in the practice of self-investigation, our understanding of the practice will grow deeper and clearer, and thus we will recognise that we cannot actually hold fast to self-attention even for five minutes, because our eyes will have been opened, so we will know what we are doing or where we are going.

It is not necessary, however, to meditate for eight hours or even for five minutes, because if we attend to ourselves keenly enough for just one moment, we will thereby be swallowed by the infinite clarity of pure awareness. That is, if we turn our attention 180 degrees back towards ourselves, it will thereby be completely withdrawn from everything else, so what will then remain is our natural state of pure awareness, in which we cannot survive even for a moment as ego. Until that

moment, we must repeatedly try our best to turn our attention the full 180 degrees back towards ourself, which means to be so keenly self-attentive that we cease to be aware of anything else whatsoever.

Though it is certainly beneficial for us to try to hold on to at least a limited degree of self-attentiveness whatever else our mind, speech or body may be doing, we should also try repeatedly to go deeper within by attempting to be as keenly self-attentive as possible, even if only for one or two moments at a time. These two degrees of intensity should be practised side by side, because each will help the other, but ultimately it will only be during one of our repeated attempts to be as keenly self-attentive as possible that we will thereby lose ourself forever in the infinite clarity of pure awareness, which is the light of Bhagavan's grace. ▲

To the Iluppai Tree

Suresh Kailash

Oh, gnarled and ancient iluppai tree,
How old and wise you must be,
What are the wonders you must've seen,
And the secrets you haven't yet revealed?

Do the evergreen leaves in your canopy,
Whisper of him who once stood beneath,
Resting his soothing gaze on everyone,
Who sought shelter from the burning sun?

How did he quench their thirst and save,
All those who came seeking his grace,
What were the precious words he said,
Hearing which you too were blessed?

Where did his hand caress your bark,
The ocean of love, compassionate ark,
Which are the spots around your girth,
His feet touched and hallowed the earth?

Oh, gnarled and ancient iluppai tree,
All you know of my Ramana, tell me, tell me!

Sankara's *Saundaryalaharī*

A Hymn *sui generis*

I.S. MADUGULA

The Sanskrit term *laharī*¹ is variously translated as a wave, a billow, or inundation. Once you read the poem, however, it is hard to resist the temptation to translate it as something like a hurricane or a tsunami. During the course of this article, I will explain just what I mean.

The poem weaves the elements of bhakti, yoga, dualistic and nondualistic philosophy, and tantra into a unique fabric of uncompromising devotion transforming apparent physical beauty into divine effulgence. The phenomenon is shown really to be the noumenon. Divine beauty is the same as beatitude.

Sankara accomplished this transformation through the alchemy of his versecraft.²

¹ Etymologically derived as *lena indreṇa vāyunā hriyate ūrdhva gamanāya*, waters whipped up by high winds.

² Some of the more common poetic paraphernalia that Sankara habitually uses includes: the rhetorical question, alliteration, assonance and consonance (figures of sound and speech), highly charged diction, rhyme and partial rhyme, strategic combination of words to achieve *yamaka*, manipulation of syntax to suit the occasion, and an infinite variety of striking metaphors.

I.S. Madugula, Ph.D., longtime contributor to *Mountain Path*, has just published the third volume of his Sankara 'trilogy' titled *Beauty and the Saint*, a study of *Saundaryalaharī* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2022). This article is a digest of that work.

The Supremacy of Śakti

The hymn's enduring popularity may be understood in terms of Devi worship being already popular in Sankara's time, especially its Tantric components, which promised guaranteed results. The *Samayin* sects internalised the prayers and the worship, emphasising the awakening of the symbolic *kundalini* from its rest in the base *cakra*. The other major Tantric sect, the *Kaulas*, focused on the physical aspects of Śakti worship, sometimes to an undesirable extent. Regardless, the schematic representation, *Śrī Cakra*,³ symbolising Śakti's supremacy is venerated by the masses.

Maybe we are getting ahead of ourselves here. Let's first look at the basic concerns that we have with the hymn.

One word distills the essence of *Saundaryalaharī*: Śakti, with a capital S. Śakti as in *Satyam* (Truth, Reality), and as in *sat* (existence, *per se*), *cit* (Supreme Consciousness), and *ānanda* (bliss). If Śiva is *ānanda*, then Śakti is its incandescence (*saundarya*).

According to Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa, the *jñanis* who adhere to Nondualistic Vedanta say that the acts of creation, preservation, and destruction of the universe itself and all its living beings are the manifestations of Śakti, the Divine Power.

Sankara, the saint-devotee, brings this Śakti to life who is then adored by all those who desire anything mundane or spiritual.

Saundaryalaharī, thus, is first and foremost a hymn of prayer to the goddess variously referred to as Durgā, Lalitā, Tripurasundarī and, literally, a thousand names.

A Hybrid Hymn

It would appear as though two disparate parts have been fused together in the hymn, verses 1-41 constituting the first part and 42-100 the second. The first focuses on the design and description of the *Śrī Cakra* in Tantric terms, while the second half comprises the hymn proper. Tradition has several fanciful stories to explain the break between the sections, including the assertion that they were written by two different people. But on the basis of the unity of theme and poetic style, we assume that Sankara wrote the entire hymn.

³ Famously known as *Śrī Cakra* or *Śrīvidyā*, this continues to be worshipped in most southern Indian households. *Śrī Vidyā* is the same as *brahma vidyā*, 'that which confers unalloyed bliss, through the union of *jīva* and Brahman'.

Then one might ask: how come a realised saint of the highest order wrote about dualistic bhakti? The dichotomy between *jñāna* and bhakti is a whole another topic but suffice it to say here that the goal of dualistic bhakti and the nondualistic *advaita* is one and the same, namely self-realisation, where bhakti leads to *jñāna*. Any distinction between the personal and impersonal approaches to the knowledge of Brahman does not imply difference.

Tantra

Some study this hymn as a Tantra text but, unfortunately, in the common imagination Tantra conjures up black magic and related perverse practices. The tantra presented in *Saundaryalaharī*, however, is of the *Samaya* ('right-handed,' *dakṣiṇācāra*) type that has little to do with the '*Kaula* ('left-handed,' *vāmācāra*) type.

Tantra in its broad original sense is worship which is performed even once benefits many.⁴ Cast in the form of dialogues between Śiva and Śakti, tantras have for their components *jñāna* (theoretical basis), yoga (meditational techniques), *kriya* (ritual guidelines), and *caryā* (personal conduct in life). The 64 original tantras accept the principles of *advaita*, with Brahman re-christened *Parama Śiva* or *Sadāśiva*, consisting of a passive principle, Śiva, and an active principle Śakti, also called *Kāmeśvara* and *Kāmeśvarī* and *Prakāsa* and *Viṃarsa* respectively. The would-be *Tantric* should by appropriate means rouse the *Kuṇḍalinī*, which lies coiled in him like a serpent in the *mūlādhāra* or the groin area, and make it go up. It then passes through the intermediate *cakras* and reaches the cerebral plexus *sahasrāra* where *Sadāśiva* resides.

Śiva is the power-holder and Śakti is the power. There is no Śiva without Śakti; the two are one. They then morph into name and form, mind and matter, and Consciousness and Bliss. Śiva is the static aspect of Reality, and Sakti is the moving aspect. They are changeless as well as changing. Devi is the Mother of the Universe and is its life-force.

In the practice of Tantric worship, two components named *mantra* and *yantra* play a pivotal role. The former is a potent utterance, such as a Vedic hymn, or just a special sound or sound sequence that grants

⁴ *yat sakṛtaṃ bahūnām upakaroti tat tantram ity ucyate.*

wishes when repeated. A *mantra* is believed to help with the quest for liberation.⁵ The other component, *yantra*, consisting of angles and circles, is a pictographic representation of cosmic energy, sometimes embedding within itself a potent letter or letters. The *yantra* used by the Tantrics is the *Śrī Cakra* in their worship of the goddess. There is a unique *yantra* for each of the 100 verses of *Saundaryalaharī*.

As a rule, the worship of Devi in a home or temple setting involves the recitation of her one thousand names, the well-known *Lalitāsahasranāma*.

The first 41 verses of the hymn are generally concerned with the Tantric worship of Devi. They cover the following topics, among several others:

i. The bimodality of cosmic energy, where the energies of Śiva and Śakti are melded into a single power that creates, sustains, and terminates the universe. In the very first verse of the poem, Sankara states boldly:⁶

*In union with Śakti is empowered Śiva to create,
Or He is powerless even to stir;
worshipped by Hari, Hara, and Brahmā
She is unattainable by the meritless.* (1)

ii. The supreme hyphenated power is Śiva-Śakti, where Śiva is empowered by Śakti. The Trinity itself is subordinate to Her!

Sankara uses the *Śikharinī* metre throughout the hymn.

iii. Devi is *Kuṇḍlinī*.

iv. She generously grants the wishes of the devotees.

v. Her beauty is unequalled.

vi. She restarts the creative process after the Great Dissolution.

Devotees of Devi attain powers exceeding those of Śiva.

vii. *Śrī Vidyā* is the ultimate Tantra.

viii. Devi is everything in the universe. She is Consciousness-Bliss.

Divine Beauty

The second part of the hymn describes the exquisite beauty of Devi and praises her unique charm. Described in succession are her crown,

⁵ *mananāt trāyate iti mantraḥ*.

⁶ These translations are not word-for-word. They are more like restatements in verse.

hair, face, eyebrows, unblinking eyes, earrings, speech, nose, lips, tongue, voice, chin, necklace, chest and breastmilk, navel, waist, thighs, and feet.

- i. All the gods eagerly serve Devi.
- ii. Deep devotion to Her is not easy.
- iii. Her devotees will have everything and are liberated alive.

*One devoted to you will be favoured by Sarasvatī
and Lakshmī and envied by their husbands;
one's handsome form entices Ratī, wife of Manmatha
and, transcending the flesh, one becomes immortal.* (99)

The devotee will be able to transcend the human condition, get rid of all his base instincts, and enjoy eternal bliss in this very life.

It needs to be noted that, among the first 41 so-called Tantra verses, some 22 are themselves descriptions of the transcendent beauty of the goddess. This makes us think that Sankara presses Tantra into the service of Devi, who is not only non-different from Śiva, but is actually an integral part of His person. It is still the Śiva of *Śivānandalaharī*, with his dormant power celebrated under a different name.

Note that all ostensibly physical descriptions of Devi are transcendental in nature and are meant to be interpreted that way. A foot is not to be looked at as a foot, nor a hand as a hand, but as an object of worship that offers refuge to the lost souls and lifts them out of their misery.

Anyone examining these verses from the above perspective cannot find the slightest hint of prurience in any of them, as some moralists would like us to believe.

While *Śivānandalaharī* is a unified, uninterrupted praise of Śiva as the Truth transcending mundane distractions, *Saundaryalaharī* is presented as a way to obtain both worldly happiness and divine grace at once. The concepts of *Kuṇḍalinī*, and *Śrī Cakra/Śrī Vidyā* serve as appurtenances in the achievement of the same goal. It is held out to be an alternative available to those whose natural tendencies lead them to yoga and ritual.

The goal

It's worth noting that Sankara, at every turn in these verses reminds us of the need to surrender to the Supreme, whether it is conceived

as male, female, or a union of the two. While he ‘revealed the fundamental and subtle truths of the Veda for the intelligent student...’ ‘out of compassion for the mediocre intellectual, he laid down the path of devotion (bhakti) as the means of salvation through jñāna...’ ‘... the *Saundaryalaharī*, in praise of Devi in one hundred verses...in the *Śikhariṇī* metre ranks as one of the foremost and most popular ones.’⁷ *Paramātman* is devoid of attributes.

In the form of *Śakti*, however, It makes itself accessible to worship. There is a transition from the *advaita* of the Upanishads to the Śaktism of the *Samayins*. The metaphysics of the *Brahmasūtra* is filtered through the crucible of Tantra to form the basis of the *Śrīvidyā* of the ritualists. Sankara made sure of that. ▲

⁷ *Saundaryalaharī*, ed. A. Kuppuswami (Tiruchirapalli: A. Kuppuswami, 1976). p. iii.

Ourself

Upahar

Calling us, at day’s end,
the lonely path leads, beautifully, nowhere.
We walk into ourself.

A high crescent of birds
sweeps perfectly across the glowing sky;
for our eyes only.

Song of the flute, soulfelt,
echoes among the rocks; stilling the mind,
calming the fragile heart.

We turn into ourself.
Within a wayside temple, god is sleeping
as we pass softly by.

KEYWORD

Sākṣī

The Witness

B.K. CROISSANT

Some old stories never seem to die and, centuries old, still have relevance today. They are often based on a memorable analogy that cuts to the quick and makes sport of fantasies that are mere products of our imagination. Sometimes they adhere to the brain in mysterious ways and render difficult concepts easy to grasp. Such an analogy is the tale of the Tenth Man. Here it is told by Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi, a great *ṛṣi* in our time who excelled in storytelling.

“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 of them had counted the others leaving himself out. The wayfarer gave each in

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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.”¹

What is the nature of the Self we so easily ignore, the Reality that supports everything we think and see? That is the subject of the *Pañcadaśī*, a revered classic on *advaita vedānta* from the Fourteenth Century AD that treats three traditional aspects of It in fifteen chapters, namely *sat*, existence as discrimination between the Real and unreal, *chit*, the Light of Consciousness, and *ānanda*, pure and unending Bliss. Although argument and refutation are sometimes used, the overall aim of the *Pañcadaśī* is to assist mature students, whose hearts have already been purified by devotion to a guru, to realise the Supreme Truth through the study of scriptures, reasoning and experience. The protagonists are the Teacher, in this case the author Vidyāraṇya Swāmī, and his disciples or imagined detractors. Vidyāraṇya Swāmī, whose name means a forest of knowledge, was an outstanding Vedānta thinker of his day. After playing an important role in the establishment of the Vijayanagara Empire and serving early kings as Prime Minister (at that time his name was Mādhava Tīrtha), he left worldly honours behind, took *sannyāsa* and, in about 1377, was elected to the spiritual throne of Śaṅkarācārya at Śringeri Pīṭha.²

In reality, all of the chapters in the *Pañcadaśī* are free standing entities and contain the essential elements of the entire teaching. Chapter X, entitled ‘The Lamp of the Theatre’ (*Nāṭaka-Dīpaḥ*), follows four chapters on *chit*, the Light of Consciousness, two of them quite extensive, and constitutes a glorious culmination to the longest section in the treatise. Although notably short in length, its twenty-six verses feature a potent and symbolic analogy meant to hold us in its grip. Within it and in other verses in the Chapter, the Self is referred to over and over again as *sākṣī*, the witness (*sākṣī* is the nominative case of *sākṣin* composed of *sa* meaning ‘with’ plus *akṣi* meaning ‘eye’).

¹ Venkataramiah, Munagala S, *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk§63.

² The authorship of the *Pañcadaśī* is a bit uncertain, some scholars claiming it was finished by Śrī Bhārati Tīrtha, Vidyāraṇya Swāmī’s brother and guru. For this article, the author consulted translations and commentaries by Swāmī Tejomayānanda, Swāmī Anubhavānanda, Swāmī Swāhānanda, Hari Prasād Shāstri and John Denton.

Sākṣī does not appear immediately in Chapter X, in fact not until verse 9. The first verse is magnificent. “*Before the projection of the world the Supreme Self, the secondless, all-bliss and ever complete, alone existed. Through His Māyā He became the world, and entered into it as the Jīva, the individual Self.*” The second verse takes us a step further. “*Entering the superior bodies like that of Viṣṇu, He became the deities; and remaining in the inferior bodies like that of men He worships the deities.*” Then the third verse brings us back to Perfection. “*Due to the practice of devotions in many lives the Jīva desires to reflect upon his nature. When by inquiry and reflection Māyā is negated, the Self alone remains.*”³ What a perfect summary of *advaita vedānta* in a nutshell! Hold onto the Peace it invokes.

The next several verses focus on the *jīva* who is suffering from bondage. The source of his bondage is duality or the subject-object relationship that separates him from his original state of bliss. Having identified with the ego or I-thought and with the body, the *jīva* imagines himself as the agent or doer. His mind, which is a succession of thoughts, produces through the senses the external world as objects, and they appear to be independent and real. Bondage arises from the absence of discrimination between what is Real and unreal but can be removed through inquiry, which is the path to liberation.

Having described the individual soul’s state as well as bondage and liberation, Vidyāraṇya suddenly switches gears and now presents us with a dramatic allegory, a kind of analogy popular in the Middle Ages, to unambiguously illustrate the nature of the Self. Occupying eight verses, he gives it centre stage, and Chapter X, ‘Lamp of the Theatre’, takes its name from it.

In verses 9-11 *sākṣī*, the Witness, is compared to a lamp in a dancing hall occupied by a patron, an audience, a dancer and musicians, all of whom are compared to our thoughts and everything we experience through our senses. They are illumined equally and uniformly by the lamp. Most importantly of all, however, the hall continues to be illumined by the lamp even in their absence! That Truth is repeated emphatically in verse 12, suggesting that the Self is always there

³ Swāhānanda Swāmī, *Pañcadaśī of Śrī Vidyāraṇya Swāmī*, English Translation and Notes, Sri Ramakrishna Math, pp. 426-427.

whether we are in the waking, dream or deep sleep states, self-effulgent and unaffected by what It causes to shine.

अहङ्कारं धियं साक्षी विषयानपि भासयेत् ।

अहङ्काराद्यभावेऽपि स्वयं भात्येव पूर्ववत् ॥

ahankāraṁ dhiyaṁ sākṣī viṣayānapi bhāsayet |

ahankārādyabhāve'pi svayaṁ bhātyeva pūrvavat ॥

*The Witness (sākṣī) illumines the ego, intellect and sense objects. When the ego etc. are absent, It alone shines as before.*⁴

[*Sākṣī* is in a prominent place at the end of the first *pāda* and rhymes with *api* in the third *pāda*. By using two different forms of the root *bhā*, *bhāsayet* and *bhati*, meaning to shine, light is emphasised. *Ahankāra*, the ego, is an important word here and appears twice at the beginning of a *pāda*.]

The immutable Witness, like an anvil, is contrasted with the dancing intellect illumined by It in verse 13. It is only due to the light of the Witness that the intellect can perform its various movements. The next verse provides the key to all of the symbols in this allegorical illustration. In other words, the patron or king corresponds to the ego, the audience to the objects perceived, the dancer to the intellect, the musicians playing instruments to the senses, and the lamp to the Witness shedding its equal light on all. Verse 15 continues to compare the Witness to a brilliant stationary lamp and introduces the notion of space.

स्वस्थानसंस्थितो दीपः सर्वतो भासयेद्यथा ।

स्थिरस्थायी तथा साक्षी बहिरन्तः प्रकाशयेत् ॥

svasthāna-saṁsthitho dīpaḥ sarvato bhāsayed-yathā |

sthirasthāyī tathā sākṣī bahir-antaḥ prakāśayet ॥

As the lamp, standing in its own place, illumines everything around it, so the Witness (sākṣī), ever motionless, shines everywhere within and without.

[Symmetry is remarkable in this verse. *Dīpaḥ*, meaning lamp, and *sākṣī* are in the same relative position at the end of a *pāda*, *svasthāna-saṁsthitho* corresponds to *sthirasthāyī*, both denoting firmness or steadiness, and *bhāsayet* to *prakāśayet*, meaning illumines or shines.]

As Absolute Consciousness, the Witness is devoid of distinctions. In other words, when a clay pot is broken, the space within and without

⁴ Translations of verses in devanāgarī are by the author.

is the same. Distinctions of space exist only with reference to the body, objects being outside of it and the ego within. That Truth having been stated in verse 16, the allegory ends.

If the subject of the allegory is the nature of *sākṣī*, including the distinction between It and the *jīva*, the next three verses focus on another key concept in *advaita vedānta*, namely falsely assigning the properties of one thing to another, often expressed by the proverbial snake on a rope. Here in verse 17, superimposition is described through the lens of the fickle mind.

अन्तःस्था धीः सहैवाक्षैः बहिर्याति पुनः पुनः ।
 भास्यबुद्धिस्थचाञ्चल्यं साक्षिण्यारोप्यते वृथा ॥
 antaḥsthā dhīḥ sahaivākṣaiḥ bahir-yāti punaḥ punaḥ |
 bhāsyā-buddhistha-cāñcalyaṁ sākṣiṇyāropyate vṛthā ॥

The mind within the body goes out through the senses over and over again. Illumined by consciousness, its unsteadiness gets attributed to the Witness (sākṣī), but wrongly.

[Notice the *visarga* used over and over again in the first line and the repetition of sounds in *sahaivākṣaiḥ*, *punaḥ punaḥ* and *cāñcalyaṁ*, all imitating the movement of the restless mind. The important word here is *āropyate* which comes at the end of the second line. It is followed by *vṛthā*, a forceful two-syllable word ending in a long vowel, which gives emphasis to the meaning, namely ‘wrongly’.]

In verse 19, false attribution is compared to a motionless streak of sunlight that, entering a room through an opening, appears to dance when a hand is moved to and fro in its rays. The immutable, unchanging *sākṣī* is compared to the motionless streak of sunlight.

निजस्थानस्थितः साक्षी बहिरन्तर्गमागमौ ।
 अकुर्वन् बुद्धिचाञ्चल्यात्करोतीव तथा तथा ॥
 nija-sthāna-sthitaḥ sākṣī bahir-antar-gamāgamau |
 akurvan buddhi-cāñcalyāt-karotīva tathā tathā ॥

In the same way, the Witness (sākṣī), established in its own place, although not going out or coming in, due to the mind’s restless nature, appears to do so.

[Notice the repetition of syllables or words (*gamāgamau*, *cāñcalyāt* and *tathā tathā*). The first *pāda*, ending in *sākṣī* and meaning ‘the Witness established in its own place’, stands in firm contrast to the fickle mind’s superimposition.]

The final seven verses of the Chapter, 20-26, inspire awe and wonder at the utter mystery of Pure Consciousness! They involve paradoxes and lead us to the highest realms of awakening when contemplated deeply.

Verse 20 takes up again the notion of space and negates it. Not something that limits Pure Consciousness but that binds the jīva until inquiry is made. Then the Self alone remains, everywhere and nowhere.

न बाह्यो नान्तरः साक्षी बुद्धेर्देशौ हि तावुभौ ।

बुद्ध्याद्यशेषसंशान्तौ यत्र भात्यस्ति तत्र सः ॥

na bāhyo nāntaraḥ sākṣī buddher-deśau hi tāvubhau |

buddhyādyaśeṣa-samśāntau yatra bhātyasti tatra saḥ ||

The witness (sākṣī) is neither inside nor out. Both are concepts of the mind. When the mind is completely stilled, the Witness (sākṣī) exists there where It shines.

[Notice that *sākṣī* is again positioned at the end of a *pāda*. Repetition of *na* in *na bāhyo na antaraḥ*, ‘neither inside nor out’, emphasizes the negation. Be sure to read aloud and savor the repetitions, the rhythm and the rhyme (*samśāntau* rhyming with *deśau* and *tāvubhau*) in the third *pāda*. You can’t miss the rhyme (*yatra* and *tatra*) in the final *pāda*, meaning ‘the Witness exists there where It shines’, which is loaded with profundity.]

The contrast between the fickle mind and the eternal Witness is continued in verse 22.

अन्तर्बहिरर्वा सर्वं वा यं देशं परिकल्पयेत् ।

बुद्धिस्तदेशगः साक्षी तथा वस्तुषु योजयेत् ॥

antar-bahir vā sarvaṁ vā yaṁ deśaṁ parikalpayet |

buddhistad-deśagaḥ sākṣī tathā vastuṣu yojayet ||

Whatever place the mind imagines, whether inside, outside or everywhere, the Witness (sākṣī) pervades it. Thus know the same applies to all objects.

[Lots of repeated syllables in this verse, namely *va* or *vā*, *deśa* and *yet*, making it such a pleasure to read! *Sākṣī* is in its usual place.]

Four more stirring verses follow that beautifully depict the unparalleled grandeur of the Self. As Witness it incessantly and absolutely illumines every form imaginable but Itself lies totally

beyond the mind's reach. Speech too is futile! If one asks how to know the Self, the answer is by not grasping It. When all efforts have ceased, when the mind is perfectly stilled and there is no more duality, the self-effulgent, self-evident Pure Consciousness alone remains. If you cannot give up all concepts within and outside the mind, says the compassionate Vidyāranya, look for the 'I' in every thought and focus on that. Thus ends the mighty Chapter X.

It is interesting to note that Ramana Maharshi quoted Vidyāranya's theatre analogy from Chapter X as mentioned in Suri Nagamma's *Letters from Sri Ramanasramam*.⁵ Most often, however, He invoked the screen in a cinema, making the analogy even more accessible to modern audiences. The screen appears over twenty times in *Talks* alone to illustrate and give life to important elements of His teaching. According to K. Swaminathan, He also makes the analogy more powerful and profound.

“Whether we like it or not and whether we know it or not, all of us are advaitins in pure being as awareness and dvaitins in thought, word and deed. To illustrate both these aspects of our life the Maharshi often brings in the analogy of the cinema, which is an improvement on the older image of the stage play. ‘The Self comprises the screen, the film projected, the spectators, the operators, the light and everything else. The mind shines by the light reflected from the Self. The pictures are not seen in a strong glare or in total darkness. So too the world picture is perceived only in the reflected light of the Self through the darkness of *avidya* (ignorance). The world cannot be seen in pure ignorance (as in sleep) or in pure light (as in Self-realisation where the mind is merged in the Heart). *Avidya* is the cause of variety. The figure watching and the figures acting, the subject and objects, have the same order of reality. An illusory being watches an illusory world.

There is *samadhi* (basic awareness) even in *vyavaharadasa* (practical life). The screen is there both when pictures are projected on it and when they are not; the Self is always there in *vyavahara* (practical life) as well as in *shanti* (stillness of pure being). The cinema-screen cannot see itself and so requires a seer. But the seer is all awareness and is himself the screen, the light, the spectator and the actors in the picture.”⁶

⁵ See 28th April, 1948.

What more can be said about the Light of Consciousness? Recall the soaring, infinite column of light beyond the grasp of mind and speech. It is right there in Tiruvannamalai for all to see, the holy Arunachala, especially with Its Lamp or Beacon of Light on a Deepam day. Sri Muruganar wrote about its meaning in a well-known *sloka*.

*“What rose high and wide as an effulgent column of fire between Brahma, the Lord of Creation, and Vishnu, the Lord of sustenance, when they, unable to reach it (as they had vaunted), stood with their glory and fame challenged, is the Atman, the Heart-centre. The intellect and the arrogant ego, unable to grasp it, come to grief.”*⁷

Bhagavan wrote about its significance too.

*“Getting rid of the mind that mistakes this perishable, insentient body as ‘I’ and turning it inwards to merge firmly in the Heart, realise the effulgence within as the Truth of non-dual pure Awareness. This is the Truth of the beacon of light on the crown of Arunachala, the Heart-centre of the universe.”*⁸

Shine on, shine on! Carry that Light in your Heart and be happy.

Śāntiḥ, śāntiḥ, śāntiḥ. ▲

⁶ Swaminathan, K., *Ramana Maharshi*, National Book Trust, 1996, pp. 98-99.

⁷ Kanakammal, T.R., *Commentary on Aruṇāchala Stuti Pañchakam and Upadēsa, Nūn Mālai*, Sri Ramanasramam, Tiruvannamalai, 2009, pp. 3-4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

Arunachalam and Kanchipuram

RAVI IYER

Everyone in the Ramana fold is one family. We all belong to a single pair of parents, Parameshwara and Parameshwari; Arunachaleshwara and Apeethakuchambāl. We have only a single residence, Shiva Lokam. The path that Bhagavan pulls us all towards Him has infinite forms but one common theme of continuous work by the Guru to put the aspirant in as many situations and circumstances as may be necessary to ripen and thresh the soul free of its illusions. Some of us He impels in one direction, others He drives differently. This story is similarly one more tale among the multitude.

In 2006 Bhagavan began pushing me away from *grihasta* life. But instead of pushing me into retirement he pushed me deeper into *samsāra*. He gave me the *kriyā* of Sri Vidya worship by inspiring me in 2007 to first draw my own Sri Chakra and then sending to my house a Sri Vidya Guru to initiate me in the practice, an event of worship that was formally performed at my residence in Virginia in the

Dr. Ravi Iyer came to Bhagavan at the age of 19 in 1977 during a period of intense distress and emotional turmoil. He has practiced Self Enquiry ever since and serves Bhagavan as a physician in Virginia, USA.

presence of the late Sri Ramanasramam President Sri V.S. Ramanan and Smt. Sushila Ramanan. The guidance of Bhagavan and Mother Azhagammal through the medium of my Sri Vidya worship continued, manifesting as insights that allowed me to compound a liniment of camphor and various herbs that became so effective and popular in relieving muscular and arthritic pain that it received approval by the FDA and evolved into an independent enterprise in addition to my already intense engagement in my clinic.

In 2014, I was granted the opportunity to participate in the Sri Vidya Homa at Sri Ramanasramam. As I prepared for the trip something made me pack several bottles of the pain liniment in my suitcase. When I reached Chennai, Bhagavan guided my feet to Kanchipuram to visit Mother Kamakshi. I reached Kanchipuram and decided to have the *darśan* of the Shankaracharya. At the time the elder Shankaracharya, Sri Jayendra Saraswati had withdrawn from everyday affairs of the *matham* and all the daily activities of the *matham* were being attended to by the younger (next-in-line) Shankaracharya, Sri Vijayendra Saraswati, who was also affectionately addressed by everyone as Bala Periyavāl (The Younger Ancient).

As I approached the *matham*, I was overcome by a desire to offer something to Periyavāl. I felt that I should offer something directly made by me instead of simply purchasing the labour of somebody else in form of flowers and fruit. I decided that the only thing I could offer was the bottle of my liniment which I placed along with the customary *patram* (betel leaf), *phalam* (fruit), *pushpam* (flowers). I stood nervously to one side. I was afraid that I was not orthodox enough to stand among all the people at the *matham*. Seeing an elderly gentleman, I approached him and said, “I have come to the *matham* for the first time. I am not conversant with the proper protocols of this place. So please tell me what I must do and I will do it.”

The old man smiled and gently said, “What protocols are you worried about my son? Love is the only protocol that is followed here. If you follow that, all will be well.”

Hearing these words, my anxieties were greatly relieved. A few people were sitting in front of a door that was closed and I was informed that Bala Periyavāl, would emerge out from this doorway soon. I sat down with my wicker basket of offerings to await his



His Holiness Sri Sankara Vijayendra Saraswati Swamigal

arrival. At 7:30 am the door opened and the Bala Periyavāl dressed in the ochre robes and staff of his standing came out and stood at the head of the steps. He surveyed the crowd that was immediately prostrate before him. I performed my full body prostrations and raised my head to find him looking directly at me. He regarded me silently and then pointing his finger at my wicker basket he raised his bushy eyebrows in a manner which made his question obvious. I stammered my explanation, “I am a physician. I have personally prepared this liniment with my own hands for use to provide relief from muscular and arthritic pain. No one has touched this other than me.”

Bala Periyavāl turned to an attendant and with a subtle gesture instructed that my basket be accepted. The wicker basket was taken from my hands and he moved onwards through the small crowd. I stood there not knowing what else to do. At this juncture an attendant came up to me and told me that I was being summoned into the inner chamber of the *matham̃*. I followed the attendant who took me into a small room where an old priest was seated on the floor. He invited me to sit down in front of him and asked me details about the liniment, what its ingredients were and a brief synopsis of how I made it. He also wrote down my name and my address.

At this juncture another attendant came into our room and informed us that Bala Periyavāl had instructed that i) I be taken to have *darśan* of Sri Jayendra Saraswati Swamigal (the elder Shankaracharya); ii) After that I should be escorted to see the Maṇi Maṇḍapam (Jewel Hall) of Maha Periyavāl and then; iii) that I should stay and see the full Chandramouleeshwarar *pūjā*. I agreed, though inwardly the thought crossed my mind that my original plan of a quick one hour visit to Kanchipuram was steadily expanding to cover most of the day. But I told the attendant that I was prepared to stay for as long as I was instructed by Bala Periyavāl.

I was escorted to the room where the elder Periyavāl, Sri Jayendra Saraswati was seated giving *darśan*. I sat at a corner at some distance in the senior pontiff’s presence for about half an hour before I was escorted to the Maṇi Maṇḍapam. I spent some time there in silent meditation before the huge altar of Maha Periyavāl at the Maṇi Maṇḍapam. As a child my brother and I have sat before Maha Periyavāl singing chapters from the *Śrī Bhagavad Gītā*.

Back at the *matham*, the Chandramouliswarar *pūjā* had begun. The hours rolled by and it was 1 pm when the *pūjā* ended and everyone proceeded back to the small hall. I stood quietly at the very end of the long queue formed outside the door of the room where Bala Periyavāl was giving *darśan*.

Suddenly a priest walked up to me and exclaimed, “Come, Bala Periyavāl is asking for you.” Amazed that he would call for me, I followed the priest who took me into the small room where the junior pontiff was seated. I bowed before him and he smiled in welcome and with his hand indicated that I take a seat at his feet. As he indicated a thought crossed my mind that I was hungry. The thought had barely registered in my mind when he raised his hand and said, “STOP! Have you eaten?” When I shook my head, he turned to the priest and said, “Take this gentleman and feed him in accordance with formal protocol.” I was immediately taken to the kitchen and seated with other people and fed a full meal. After the meal was over, I was escorted back to Bala Periyavāl’s presence.

The room where he was sitting was about twelve feet by twelve feet. On one side a large bed on elevated legs with bolster cushions had been placed, and this was his seat and he sat cross-legged in the Indian fashion on it. Everyone else was seated on the floor around this bed. The height of his seat was such that the heads of anyone seated on the floor would be below the level of his seat.

Bala Periyavāl welcomed me with a smile and indicated for me to take a seat on the floor beneath his left side. The position he indicated would place my head directly six inches beneath his right foot jutting out beneath his left knee as he sat cross-legged on the bed above me. The significance of this position was not lost to me and I was filled with a growing sense of wonder over the day’s events. It was 1:30 pm.

Bala Periyavāl then completely ignored me for the next three hours. I sat there beneath his feet as people streamed in for *darśan* and informing him of their problems. To each person, he would listen compassionately, acknowledging their difficulties and giving them assurance of relief along with *prasādam* of *vibhūti* and *kumkum* and some fruit. The stories were simple. An old mother praying for a good son-in-law for her unwed daughter. A father praying for

promotion for his son in his job. A group of people praying for rain in their village. Another family praying for relief from a disease that had beset their child. For three long hours, I watched as hundreds of people streamed before this saint, everyone asking for some material welfare for themselves or their loved ones. Through all this his smile of compassion and gentle benediction never faltered even once.

A deep emotion of sorrow and regret rose in my chest. Everyone was only asking for things to appease their own selfish desires. No one had asked one word about whether this saint had had even a glass of water to drink. Everyone was only concerned about themselves and no one even had a thought about the welfare of this child of God. Tears welled up in my eyes as I saw the reality of all our desires. We were like vultures feasting on diseased carrion flesh and I saw that this blindness was the real basis of all the evil in the universe.

Simultaneously I was witness to the divine grace that shone forth as benediction from the face of this saint. I felt so meek, small and humble. I realised that I was seated at the feet of God himself. I sat there as this flow of beggars begged for small change before this Emperor who had the entire universe to offer if asked by a worthy person. And I marvelled at the work of *māyā* that cast its veil of illusion over all of us, making us blind to the Ultimate Reality.

Finally, after three hours, he looked down at me sitting below his foot and asked with a smile, “Hmm! Tell me! What do you want?”

When he said that my mind suddenly went blank and all the thoughts about all my troubles or needs disappeared. I could not think of a single need that remained to be fulfilled. I stammered... “I do not know what to ask. Whatever I think of I receive immediately. I practise my craft as a physician with great joy. I see Parameshwara and Parameshwari coming to me in every patient bringing me their problems to erase and cure and so I feel I am treating Parameshwara and Parameshwari themselves carrying the ills and burdens of the universe. What I wish for is this. Wherever I go the people all around me should have all their regrets erased, and I want *svarūpa jñānam*.”

As soon as I said this, the entire room became silent. Bala Periyavāl looked at me with a big smile for a long moment in which I could not hear a single breath. Then he said, “Someone please bring me a *rudrākṣa mālā*” He indicated with his hand for me to get up and stand.

My hands and feet began to tremble as I tried to get up from my seat and stand before him, tears flowing from my eyes. He told me to stretch out both hands. He took a piece of newspaper and put a huge handful of *vibhūti* on one hand and on the other hand, a huge handful of *kumkum*. He then placed a pomegranate fruit in each and the *rudraksha mala* on top and dropped all of it into my outstretched hands. I fell into a *sāṣṭāṅga namaskāram* (full body prostration) and as I got up he turned to a lady in the crowd and told her, “Please take this gentleman to Kamakshi Amman Koil and show him to Ambāl.” As I turned to leave, he asked me for the very first time... “*Onga Peyer enna*” (What is your name, sir?).

With a trembling voice I declared my name. Turning I followed the lady to the Kamakshi temple. We arrived just as the priest was getting ready to do *abhiṣekam* and I was blessed with the vision of her being bathed and then bedecked in finery. In my own worship back in my shrine in the US I would mentally bathe and anoint and braided Her hair and then dressed Her as part of my inner worship. Now seeing the same actions being performed transported me to another world and I lost all sense of time and place. I could not move my eyes away from this vision. In my entire life I have never seen anything more beautiful than that moment before Goddess Kamakshi.

After having *darśan* of Goddess Kamakshi I resumed my journey to Tiruvannamalai. As we reached the outskirts of Tiruvannamalai I saw workers removing multiple police barricades and checkpoints from the roads. My driver informed me that Chief Minister Jayalalitha had been at Tiruvannamalai that day and all day no one could enter or leave the town.

In a flash it dawned on me that if Bala Periyavāl had not stopped me in Kanchi I would have spent the whole day stuck in traffic. By forcing me to stay, the saint had prevented me from wasting a whole day, ensured the blessing of *satsaṅga* with both Periyavāls, and the blessing of Maha Periyavāl’s *samādhi* and *darśan* of the Maṇi Mandapam, the blessing of the Chandramouliswarar *pūjā*, the blessing of a *matham* meal, the blessing of the prayer for Self-knowledge, the Highest Blessing of Kamakshi Ambāl *abhiṣekam darśanam* and the clearance of obstacles from my path to reaching Ramanasramam in time for the Divine meal at Bhagavan’s Feet. Nine blessings! Is it possible for

anyone to remotely sing even a syllable in praise of such compassion and *anugraham*? The Guru IS PARABRAHMAN and nothing more can be said!

The effect of my *darśan* of Mother Kamakshi continued. Everywhere it was as if I was looking at the entire world through a transparent image of Kamakshi such that Her image was superimposed on everything I saw. After dinner I began my *giripradakṣiṇā* at 9 pm. The streets were empty except for a few village folks and some stray dogs. Everywhere I looked, I still saw the superimposed image of Kamakshi Amman.

As I walked, the peak of Arunachala was visible clearly in the moonlight of a half-moon. Arunachala is a Maha-Meru and I was chanting the *mūla mantra* as I proceeded in my *pradakṣiṇā*. I had the distinct impression as if Goddess Kamakshi was sitting on the left side of Parameshwara on the peak of Arunachala and watching me do *pradakṣiṇā*. This feeling was so crystal clear that I did not even for a moment consider it as an imagination. I could see the Universal Couple and they could see me, and I was in *ānanda*.

Suddenly I heard Mother Kamakshi say to Parameshwara, “Look at our child. See how he does this *pradakṣiṇā*. Does it not please you?” And Parameshwara replied to her, “What great thing has he done that you should speak so highly of him. Shall I test his worth?” (*Pariksha panni pārkalāmā?*)

On hearing this immediately I prayed in fear to Mother Kamakshi, “Amma! Please tell Appa not to test me. I cannot survive His test.” At this the Mother gently reassures me, “Don’t worry! Have no fear. Simply go on chanting Śivoham, Śivoham ... all will be well.” I immediately switched from chanting the Maha Shodashakshari to chanting Śivoham.

I proceed with my *giripradakṣiṇā*, chanting Śivoham, Śivoham. Suddenly a deep anger rises up in me and with uncharacteristic boldness I declare, “Why do you bring me to your *sannidhi* and then make me speak a lie in Your Presence?”

“Why do you make me chant Śivoham, Śivoham like a parrot when I do not have *Śivajñānam*. Give me the experience of Śivoham RIGHT NOW! I refuse to chant Śivoham like this devoid of any experience of Śivoham.”



During the year 1985, under Maha Periyaval's instructions and with His Gracious Blessings, Sri Ghovi drew this drawing sitting inside the Kamakshi Amman *garbhagriha*.

I stopped all chanting in defiance and continued my *giripradakṣiṇā*. I must have taken about 9 steps or so, when suddenly a vast Infinite Silence descended and enveloped me. The silence contained everything. The entire *brahmāṇḍam* (Universe) was contained within this silence. Everything was within it, moving in it. I could witness even my body performing *giripradakṣiṇā* around Arunachala within this Infinite Awareness, this Infinite Conscious Silence. There was profound stillness within and without me.... a sense of conscious awareness of infinite depth. Space and Time which until then were the defining boundaries of my existence were themselves swallowed in this Silence. A profound stillness of unconcerned and unaffected awareness that was me but so much greater than anything that I had ever associated as me before. Even as I write this after the passage of time my hair stands on end from the memory.

I remained in this state until I completed the circuit and reached the main temple door of the Arunachaleshwara temple. As I passed by the main temple door, my awareness transformed into the conventional form and the sights and sounds of the normal world began to be experienced as before. A vast *ānandam* (joy) permeated my being. This freedom cannot be described in words. It is beyond any corporeal experience. In front of this *ānandam*, all the happy experiences that I had known till that moment appeared painful. I realised what the scriptures were talking about when they spoke of Bliss. It is truly indescribable.

Along with this *ānandam* there arose an emotion of infinite gratitude towards the shower of Grace from Parameshwara and Parameshwari. So great was my *ānandam* that I performed the *giripradakṣiṇā* three times that night walking for nine hours in three circuits around the Hill. Not for a single instant did I even experience the slightest bodily discomfort. It was 6 am in the morning when I finished my 3 circuits and the sun had risen. Going into my room, I cut the two Pomegranate fruits that Bala Periyavāl had given me as *prasādam* and found that both the fruits were three quarters spoiled. The fruit looked very good on the outside, then the thought arose that the seeds of the pomegranate fruit represented my *āgāmi karma* and that the Guru's Grace had destroyed 75% of my karmic burden leaving only 25% for me to work through. Tears sprang to my eyes as

I was once again submerged in the *ānandam* of *anugraha prasādam*. I woke up my driver and proceeded straight to Kanchipuram.

Bala Periyavāl was seated greeting people. I bowed to him, my heart singing. I had asked for *svarūpa jñānam* and like a king giving spare change to a beggar you gave it to me. Oh! What a miracle! How can I even express what I am feeling! But those words did not come forth.

He raised his eyebrows in surprise as if to say, “What? You returned so soon like a lost puppy returning home?”

I was overcome by shyness and with embarrassment, I stammered, “I was not satisfied with the Kamakshi Amman *darśanam*, so I returned for more.” He smiled and I knew that he knew. He handed me some fruit and waved me away as if to say, “Go fulfill your *prārabdha*.”

I returned to Ramanasramam and presented the *kumkum* from Kamakshi Amman shrine to Smt. Sushila Ramanan saying, I have brought Kamakshi here to the Sri Vidya Homam.” My job was done.

The experience of 2014 was like a copper nail driven into a huge Banyan tree and its effect on this ego has been slow, a testament to the density of dirt and darkness remaining to be excavated. But it has never been the same again and though the curtain of illusion dropped back it was a tattered fabric and the underlying reality of Awareness has continued to be readily accessible at will. Strangely there is no conflict between the two modes of functioning, and I have been able to operate just like before but with a tremendous freedom this time from being a prisoner of the outcome of my action. Bhagavan continues to push me deeper into the world of business and enterprise where I wield the sword of gain and loss, competing and posturing outwardly like any other person in the games of the world. Yet all the while He continues to pull me in the Heart deeper into Himself.

During the Covid-19 pandemic He continued to protect me and my staff as we tested more than 6000 people and treated more than 900 positive patients. In a world engulfed by the fire of disease and with death at every door, He commanded us and protected us as we remained with open doors as a sanctuary for the diseased and distraught. With His protection we have walked freely into the homes of sick people shunned by others to care for them with no fear of contagion. The magnitude of this miracle can be understood if it is

MOUNTAIN PATH

realised that my staff and I work with people at a proximity of 6-9 inches from their face as we are being coughed and sneezed upon. Yes, we are wearing protection, but it is not physical protection that has kept us safe and everyone in my team have remained completely untouched throughout this entire period while the staff of my physician colleagues with equal protection have fallen ill and recovered. In fact, recently my front desk staff came to me asking for epoxy glue. When asked why, she said she needed it to fix our protection back and then she took me to the front of the clinic to show me where the photo of Bhagavan was peeling off!

Being rooted at His Feet puts us at the centre, at the Eye of the Cyclone of sensory experience and gives one an indescribable lightness of being that suffuses one's life and touches everyone. When He has you in His Grasp you remain unconcerned as your *prārabdha* unfolds.

Conventional expectations and definitions of spirituality become trite and every action is defined only by the rules of compassion and love. The great beauty of Abidance is that at some point you get rooted in silence and then everything slows down. What the world sees as a dizzy blur of activity presents to one seated at His Feet, is a slow appearance of manifestation.

Thus, it become incredibly easy to engage in activity of immense proportions. Everything in this space of Grace unfolds in slow motion since this is the fulcrum of the Universal Wheel. Time and Space have their origins at this place. Your own thoughts arise in exceptional solitary clarity and having received the necessary attention they subside into the ether of Consciousness with no resonance whatsoever. This is the magic of *siddhi* of Ramana. His alchemy. It is not your *siddhi*; it is His and you are merely a witness at His Feet. ▲

Om Namo Bhagavate Sri Ramanaya

The Benediction is Here and Now: The Essential Kabir

MUKESH SRIVASTAVA

Introduction

Kabir (1456-1575) remains one of the most enigmatic and powerful mystic saints in the long Indian spiritual traditions. Combining a wide variety of philosophical currents such as *nirgun bhakti* and tantric symbolism with Nad Yoga and Advaitic thought in his own inimitable style of poetic composition, Kabir strikes an immediate chord with the modern humanist sensibilities across different religions. This essay is a modest attempt to present to the readers of Mountain Path the quintessential Kabir in his variegated tones and range of themes: at once simple and profound, abstruse and enigmatic, melodious yet iconoclastic.

Mysterious Life

The life of Kabir (1456-1575) is just as full of uncertainties, enigmas and mysteries as is his bewildering range of poetic compositions — at once lyrical, meditative, detached and esoteric but also very rough, abrasive, argumentative, even outrageous to his wide range of interlocutors and listeners. His several biographers report that Kabir was found floating on the surface of a lake as an abandoned infant,

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hidden inside a straw basket, when he was picked up by a weaver couple in Varanasi who raised him to become a weaver. The historical record has it that weavers (*Julahas*, from the Persian root *jola*) in North India originated from the union of a *Kuvind* (untouchable artisanal class) woman and a Muslim man. These weavers had only recently converted to Islam when Kabir was discovered, so they hadn't completely given up the customs and habits of their caste as yet. Kabir does refer to his low caste status along with his being illiterate:

I don't touch ink or paper,
This hand never grasped a pen.
The greatness of four Ages
Kabir tells with his mouth alone. (*Bijak, Sakhi* 187)

He was thus neither a Hindu, nor a Muslim, neither a *yogi*, nor a formal *bhakta* (devotee) yet he somehow combines shades of all these identities, in his inimitable and unrelenting search for Truth, which often leads him to chastise different communities at once:

Vedas, Puranas — Why read them?
It's like loading an ass with sandalwood!
(*Kabir Granthavali*, henceforth K.G., 181)

And again,

If God had wanted to make me a Muslim
Why didn't he make the incision? (K.G., 189)

All his verses were composed orally and collected by disciples, scholars and admirers over a long period of circulation, thus forming the Kabir repertoire.

Like his mysterious birth, Kabir's death is equally mysterious. While living in the 'holy' city of Kashi (currently Varanasi) for all his life, Kabir chose to die in Magahar, a place near the city of Gorakhpur. This was done only to confirm his uniform disdain for religious beliefs of all. According to the Hindu legend, death in Kashi would guarantee liberation from the cycle of repeated births and deaths, and Kabir in his characteristic style just wanted to shatter that myth by offering a personal example. When Kabir, however, passed away, the two camps of Hindus and Muslims, both claiming to be his followers, and both wanting to perform his last rites according to their custom, set upon

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each other with fury, each trying to lay claim to the dead body. But much to their dismay, when they lifted the piece of white cloth that had covered the body, they found instead two separate piles of flowers! The Muslim camp buried one pile of flowers, whereas the Hindus chose to cremate them. Kabir thus continued to teach till his last breath, and the dying gesture itself was a lesson of profound significance!

What is Kashi? What is barren land of Magahara?
Only if Ram dwells in my heart! (Bijak, *sabda* 103)

Ram and the figure of *Virahini* in Kabir

In many verses of Kabir, in the *Bijak* as well as in the *Kabir Granthavali*, and other sources of compilations, such as those translated by Rabindranath Tagore in his well-known *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, we find a frequent reference to Ram who lives in the heart, one who liberates from the world of illusions. At first sight, this might create an erroneous impression that this Ram is indeed the famous king of Ayodhya, the deity of popular Hindu mythology, and the hero of the epic *Ramayana*. On closer scrutiny, we discover two closely related possible interpretations. First, Kabir's Ram represents a most finely tuned universal sound, a reverberating *mantra* in the cosmos, as in the human heart, which the *sadhak* has to master following the disciplines of inward meditations of *Nad Yoga*. The repetition of the mantra (japa) has been a well-known practice in India since antiquity to withdraw one's attention from all outer thoughts and focus inward on the origin of consciousness with the naturally occurring sound. Whether or not Kabir needed this practice for himself, he does seem to recommend this to his listeners and interlocutors in very different modes of address:

Kabir is done with stretching and weaving
He has written on his frame the name of Ram. (K.G., *pad* 12)

Like a sharp arrow
Is the name of Ram.
Only someone struck by it
Knows the pain. (K.G., *pad* 8)

The second possibility of interpretation would relate to Ram as the metaphor for universal principle of consciousness expressed in love

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residing in one's heart, both as conscience and primal consciousness. Therefore, the intense longing for a union with beloved as embodied in the figure of a *virahini* (a bride separated from her beloved husband, burning in flames of desire for the union) would be a fitting image:

O Dear Me! Come to my House
Away from you my body aches!
I spend sleepless nights with no desire for food.
They all say I'm your wife
But I have my doubts...
If we don't sleep together on one couch
What kind of love is that? (K.G., *pad* 13)

And again,
Away from you
My body burns forever.
In water, see a fire ablaze
And me, the fish in water
In water I live, yet for water I pine... (K.G., *pad* 9)

This form of divine madness, often culminating in the emergence of a new genre of androgynous mind-body complex, is indeed characteristic of a unique *sādhana*, *not quite unknown to the path of some Sufi orders, and some bhaktas as well*. The significance of the figure of *virahini* lies in the inner transformation effected by the adoption of female persona in male voice. This mode of *sādhana* (contemplative practice) is a marker of sublime courage arising from the awakening of inner intelligence, or insight, as it clearly involves a delightful willingness to sacrifice one's all at the altar of Love, including all signs of one's social identity, and the very concept of *maleness* itself, which is usually *the last defence of men* everywhere.

Kabir, The Iconoclast

We find ample evidence from Kabir's biographers to think that he was hated both by Hindus and Muslims alike as he constantly 'assaulted' them with his verbal darts, exposing their humbug, trivialities, and religious hypocrisies, thus separating himself clearly from all forms of ritualistic worship, including the worship of formal scholastic achievements, classical learning of scriptures and canonical texts.

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This indeed drove him to solitude where the light within was his only refuge. The power-structure of the *Brahmanical* – priests and *Mullahs* (Islamic clergies) came down very heavily upon him with an aim to crush his spirits, even to physically eliminate him on several occasions, but Kabir survived and continued to speak fearlessly:

Saints! I see the world is mad!
If I tell the truth they rush to beat me,
If I lie they trust me... (Bijak, sabda 4)

If you are true, a curse can't reach you
and Death can't eat you..
walking from truth to truth
what can ever destroy you? (Bijak, sakhi 308)

The zeal to tell the world what is wrong with it is unparalleled in the intensity of Kabirian discourse. Let us consider briefly a pastiche of this genre of poems:

Think Pundit, figure it out:
Male or female?
Pundit tell me (Bijak, sabda 44)

Where does caste and untouchability come from
Since you insist on it?.....
Go naked if you want
Put on animal skin; (K.G., pad 174)

What does it matter till
You see the inward Ram...
And Brother! If holding back your seed
Earned you a place in paradise
Eunuchs would be the first to arrive!...
Hey Qazi!
What's that book you're preaching from?...
If God had wanted to make me a Muslim
Why didn't he make the incision? (K.G., pad 178)

You cut away the foreskin, so what about your women?
Are they only half-formed men?
Throw away that book

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And sing of Ram within...
Your mind is blind, you have no knowledge of yourself.
Tell me brother, you slaughter living being. (K.G., *pad* 191)

And call it religion?
If putting on that thread makes you a Brahmin
What does your wife put on?
That Shudra's touching your food, pundit!
How can you eat it?
How is your Lord?
The Mullah cries aloud to him from the roof top
Is your Lord deaf?

(R.Tagore, *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, XVII)

Oh Ram! The knot of confusion
Won't loosen, so Death keeps
Plucking you off!
Monks and Yogis give up their pedigrees
But still brag of their lineage.
Scholars, poets, philosophers, philanthropists,
With a variety of worldly talents and gifts
Can't break through the state of delusion.
They read hymns, legends, epics and the laws
But still miss the vital inner experience...
If you don't cross over alive,
How can you cross when you're dead? (*Bijak*, *pad* 14)

In these lines we find a very direct, almost personal mode of address, as if Kabir is talking to us, here and now, to Hindus and Muslims, Shudras and Brahmins alike. He is indeed very intense, striving to shake his listeners and interlocutors out of their secure identities and a false sense of pride; out of their belief in heaven and hell; driving them to the limits of their selfhood. His poems therefore bristle with questions, enigmas, riddles and paradoxes, yet all of that arises from a profoundly compassionate heart and from a lived experience of the inner realm of reality. It is that vision of the holistic universe that commands him to confront directly the most powerful forces of his times, and exhort others to cleanse their doors of perception.

Kabir: The Reflective Artist

Kabir embodies yet another dimension of consciousness in him that goes far beyond the abrasive, rough rhetoric of admonitions and chastisements to the pretentious priests, *yogis* and Mullahs. This Kabir is more akin to a modern reflective artist: subtle, abstruse, detached as if speaking from a distant horizon. In this genre we discover reflections on the nature of the universe, space, time and the human condition, sometimes expressed in the esoteric language of tantric symbolism, especially in the famous mode of *ulatbamsi*, upside down language, also known as *sandhya bhasha*, a kind of twilight language.

Kabir's *bhakti* thus represents a unique awareness, if not fusion, of very disparate elements: the *sādhana* of a *virahini*, the *japa* of a reverberating sound as *nad* yoga; tantric ascent of kundalini through different centres, or *chakras* of the body, and a calm detached contemplation leading to self-inquiry, penetrating several layers of delusion of the phenomenal world or Maya. Each of these elements, taken independently, would be a sufficient spiritual practice, but in Kabir's world, illiterate though he was, they are all present simultaneously:

I'm neither pious, nor impious,
neither virtuous, nor bereft of virtue.

I'm neither a speaker, nor a hearer,

(R.Tagore, *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, LXXIX)

I'm neither bound nor free.

I do all work, yet I'm apart from all work,

Only a few could grasp the secret of this!

Divine knowledge is the branch

And the Name is the root;

The root will lead to the branch

The flower and the fruit.

(R.Tagore, LXXXI)

Confused about sin and purity

Heaven and Hell?

Benediction is wherever you are

Here and now.

(*Bijak*, *sabda* 42)

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Haven't you heard the tune which
The Unstruck (*anahad*) music continues to play
In your own inner chambers.
Where is the need to go out? (R.Tagore, LV)

Subtle is the path of Love.
It's beyond asking and not asking,
Kabir knows the secret... (R.Tagore, LIV)

Maya and mind are one
Maya permeates mind
The three worlds whirl in doubt
To whom can I explain? (*Bijak, sakhi* 105)

I have burnt down my own house
With the torch in my hand.
Now if you wish to follow me
You will burn yours! (*Bijak, sabda* 95)

Drop falling in the ocean
Everyone knows
Ocean absorbed in a drop
A rarest one would know. (*Bijak, sakhi* 69)

Within this earthen vessel
Are bowers and groves,
And within it is the creator;
Within it are the seven oceans,
And countless stars;
Within this vessel are all space and time and eternity,
For Kabir: my beloved lord is within! (R.Tagore, VIII)

What is that flute whose tune sends me to raptures?
The flame burns without a lamp, and the lotus blossoms
Without a root... (R.Tagore, LIII)

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Where do you look for me my friend?

I am here and now!

Not in temples, not in mosques —

Not in the Ka'aba, not on Kailash.

Not in rites, not in rituals —

Not in Yoga or renunciation.

If you are true in your search

You'll find me in an instant.

Kabir says, Listen, O brothers —

He is the very Breath of all our breaths. (*Kabir Vani*, pad 1)

Three spheres are cut

From the cosmic egg,

A blind man watches the show.

A cripple leaps over mount sumeru swings free

Through the three worlds.

A dumb man illumines knowledge and ignorance

Pronouncing an endless word.

He ties up the sky and hurls it down

To the snake-world...

(*Bijak*, pad 23)

It's obvious that the mind can't grasp this 'experience' because the mind is indeed a part of the problem! Yet, a searching and intensely devoted mind can discover the limits of selfhood and feel the futility of its own strained effort, caught as it inevitably is in the net of causality and a linear existence. For Kabir, the existing structure of all human language — based on dualistic perceptions of subject and object, time and space, good and evil, man and woman, form and emptiness, and finally man and God — must be brutally disfigured; its syntax loosened; its morphology disjointed, and its metaphors often exploded to somehow express what is otherwise inexpressible! In the Kabirian language a true *sadhak* is the one who is ready to drop the mind and can 'live' with death every moment, emptying oneself totally of all mental labelling, living thus in a state of meditative surrender to what simply is:

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Wherever I look
Only this, only this
The diamond pierced
My ruby heart. (*Bijak, sabda 7*)

If I say one, it isn't so
If I say two, it's slander
Kabir thinks carefully,
As it is, so it is... (*Bijak, sakhi 120*)

When there isn't a trace
Of creation or destruction,
What do you meditate on? (*Bijak, sabda 74*)

What form or shape to describe?
Who is left there to see? (*Bijak, sabda 6*)

It's all a heavy confusion
Vedas, Koran, Holiness, hell —
Who's man? Who's a woman?
A clay pot shot with air and sperm.
When the pot cracks apart, what do you call it?
(*Bijak, sabda 74*)

Kabir Today

Kabir remains timeless and universal in his appeal to humankind. In a world devastated by psychological hatred, racial conflicts, nationalistic divisions and massive economic inequalities — many of us, as part of a social and political system, are looking outward for a fundamental change, but in vain! Kabir asks us to look within deeply and earnestly to realise the timeless within us in a fleeting and impermanent universe, and thus rotate into a new dimension of consciousness. That act of change in one's consciousness alone can become the harbinger of an abiding and meaningful transformation in the 'objective world' — not as an escape from 'what is', but rather a total and ruthless commitment to understanding what is.

W.B. Yeats had once remarked that it takes more courage to peep into the dark corners of one's own soul than for a soldier to fight a

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war on the battlefield. Kabir would add to that dictum by saying that the courage to examine oneself ruthlessly — in a state of meditative contemplation — shatters the boundaries of the illusory self, leading to the blossoming of all pervasive love as the only ground of existence. When you actually come to know that you own nothing, absolutely nothing, that realisation is truly liberating from oneself, and from the world, as it may create an explosive witnessing consciousness where one is observing everything clinically, including the subtlest movement of one's own thought. Death then is no longer a menacing mystery to be theorised or 'conquered'. It is welcome, because it loses its sting.

As Kabir has it:

What scares away the whole world
Is pure bliss to me O Death
For I have known you well! (K.G., *pad* 115)

To know Death intimately is to live with it every day, not in one's imagination, *at the end of time*, but here and now, emptying completely the psychological contents of one's mind:

O friend! search on while you're alive.
If your bonds are not broken now
What hope of freedom after death?
Learn the art of living with death
And then you have arrived home. (R.Tagore, p.38)

The uniqueness of Kabir thus lies in the *transformative mode* of his *bhakti*, which is a very curious combination of the didactic and the rhetorical with delicately lyrical, esoteric and deeply meditative forms of poetry. As such, it defies classification into a modern, democratic or secular form of expression. The Middle period of Indian history witnessed a flowering of devotional literature in several outstanding saintly figures, both men and women, who sang or composed from their direct experience of inner reality but Kabir remains *sui generis* blazing his own trail to this day. ▲



Ardhanārīśvara, Sri Arunachaleswara Temple

ADVAITA PRIMER

Īśvara

Part Five

M. GIRIDHAR

In the first article of this series, we examined why we should study Advaita Vedanta. In the second article, it was explained that the *jagat* (world) is classified as *mithyā* and this illusory appearance of the world is due to ignorance (*avidyā*). The third article explained that this ignorance stemmed from wrong superimposition (*adhyāsa*). The fourth article dealt with the relationship between the triad namely *jīva*, *Brahman* and *jagat*. In this article, we examine the concept of *īśvara*. Therefore, here, we will discuss the relationship between each of the above entity with *īśvara*.

It is important to define *īśvara* and examine the relation of *īśvara* and its relationship with *jīva*, *jagat* and *Brahman*. *Brahman* is normally considered as *nirguṇa* (without attributes) but *Brahman* associated with auspicious attributes is called *sagūṇa* *Brahman* and this is referred to as *īśvara*. Advaita considers all forms of *īśvara* as equal. Though, in essence, everything is *Brahman*, it is important to differentiate between *īśvara* and *jīva*. The *jīva* and *īśvara* share the same substratum of *Brahman* but have significantly different attributes (*upādhi*). *Īśvara* is *sagūṇa* *Brahman* and is the creator, sustainer and destroyer of *jagat* with the help of *māyā* but is unaffected by *māyā*.

Jīva, on the other hand, has very limited powers and is bound by *avidyā*. On the removal of *avidyā*, the *jīva* can realise its unity with Brahman but can never become *īśvara*. Shankara considers *īśvara* or Brahman with attributes as ultimately unreal, as he explains in his *bhashya* on *Brahma Sutra* (BSSB) on III.II.18:

Brahman is by nature Consciousness Itself, distinctionless, beyond speech and mind, and can be taught by way of negating other things, hence in the scriptures dealing with liberation an illustration is cited by saying that it is “like the sun reflected in water”. Here the aspect kept in view is the one with attributes, which is not real and which is created by limiting adjuncts, as it is done in such texts. “As this luminous sun, though one in itself, becomes multifarious owing to its entry into water divided by different pots, similarly this Deity, the birthless, self-effulgent Self, though one, seems to be diversified owing to its entry into the different bodies, constituting its limiting adjuncts.”

In the *shata sloki*, verses 26 and 27, Shankaracharya explains this:

Māyā has two powers, the veiling power (*āvarana śakti*) and the projecting power (*vikshepa śakti*). *māyā* veils Brahman and projects the universe. *Brahman reflected in pure (sattvic) māyā is īśvara. jīva is Brahman reflected in avidyā, which is impure māyā because of the mixture of all guṇas.* It is, therefore, stated that both *īśvara* and *jīva* dwell in *māyā* but with a difference: *īśvara* controls *māyā*, while the *jīva* is under the control of *avidyā* and *māyā*. *īśvara* is totally unattached while the *jīva* under the influence of *avidyā*, forgets its nature as Brahman and sees the world as dualistic with multifarious names and forms as real, though they are only appearances and have no reality apart from Brahman.

In the *Māyā Pañcakam*, verse 5, Shankaracharya explains this further:

māyā makes the impossible happen. It imposes on Brahman, which is eternal and devoid of parts and pure Consciousness, the false distinctions as the *jīva*, *īśvara* and *jagat*. It makes the *jīva* (who is Brahman which is infinite bliss, pure consciousness and non-dual) struggle in the ocean of *samsāra* by associating it with the body made up of the five elements. It imposes on the *jīva*

(who is Brahman which is devoid of qualities, and distinctions of colour, caste, etc.) attachment to wife, son, possessions and the like. It creates even in non-dual Brahman distinctions such as Brahma, Vishnu and Siva and deludes even the learned into thinking that they are different from one another.

These concepts are explained in detail below.¹

Consider a sheet of paper and it is uniformly of a single white colour and has no other distinction. In that white paper, suppose we draw a big circle which splits the area of the paper into two and then several small circles outside this large circle. Separate areas *appear* as if some were inside the big circle and some inside the small circles. Let us assume that we tell a person to write something within the biggest circle and he fills it up with some words and sentences. After seeing his work, now we demand that he should write the exact same thing that he has written within the bigger circle and within the smallest circle also. He is sure to respond with his incapability that it is not possible to do so, as the smallest circle is much smaller than the big circle. The point to note is that though all of the circles lie within the same paper, how come the same text cannot be written in the different small circles? Why should it be that ‘more’ can be written on the outer circle, while ‘less’ only in the inner circle when it is the same paper? The person says ‘That is because the outer circle is bigger than the inner circle’. These circles with respect to which apparent split in the writing space arises, is an analogy for *upādhi* (apparent limiting adjunct).

Just as the sheet of white paper exists without any divisions or differences, the only existence is Brahman, which is described as *nitya shuddha buddha mukta svarupa* (eternal, pure, intelligence, free from forms) and also as *ashabdām arupam asparsham avyayam* (wordless, formless, unexperienceable, unchanging) and is *nirguna*. In Brahman, there is an *upādhi* called *māyā*. Analogous to the various circles that we drew on the single sheet, in the same way this *māyā*

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4nKTT06agD4>. Adapted from the talk of Sri Sri Vidhushekhara Bharati Mahaswamiji of Sringeri Math

is also modified into various objects, with different names and forms. The Brahman apparently limited by *māyā* is *īśvara*, like the large circle which limits (apparently) the white sheet into a big enclosed area. Similarly, analogous to the smaller areas arising (apparently) from the smaller circles, the *upādhis* such as *avidyā* apparently limit the Brahman to create the *jīva*.

Thus *īśvara* and *jīva* are not independently two but indeed arise out of Brahman. *īśvara* is Brahman endowed with all the auspicious qualities i.e., the *Saguṇa Brahman* and can be considered as the *māyā* limited Brahman. *īśvara* has infinite powers, capable of manifesting the *jagat* and is worshipped in different names and forms, as Shiva, Vishnu etc. However, the *jīva* is limited by the *avidyā* and hence cannot display those powers. This is equivalent to the situation where one can write a lot more in the bigger circle (*īśvara*) than the smaller one (*jīva*) though they are both within the same sheet of paper. As there is a difference in the *upādhis* just like the differences in the size of the circles, differences exist in the capabilities of *jīva* and *īśvara*.

Thus three-fold consciousness are available – *jīva chaitanya* and *īśvara chaitanya*, which are consciousness limited by *avidya* and *māyā*, respectively but rest on *śuddha chaitanya*, which is pure consciousness that is not limited by any adjunct. The underlying reality of the first two is the third. However, seen from the standpoint of the *upādhis*, they are indeed different but this is only apparent and false in the absolute sense. In the context of this difference, that is, as long as the *upādhi* of *avidya* has not been removed, the *jīva* needs to worship *īśvara*. But from the *pāramārthika* view, *jīva* and *īśvara* are only Brahman. As in the analogy, in the case of the sheet of paper, as long as the different circles remain, there is also a difference in the writing space available within these circles. But if we erase the circles, then these differences vanish and only a sheet of white paper remains.

In simple words, *īśvara* is simply Brahman in *śuddha māyā* while *jīva* is Brahman associated with *avidyā māyā*. *īśvara* is not deluded by his own *māyā* while the *jīva* is deluded by *avidyā*. Both *śuddha*

māyā and *avidyā māyā* are *upādhi*. If we remove *śuddha māyā* from *īśvara*, what remains is *nirguṇa* Brahman. In the same way, if we remove *avidyā māyā* from the *jīva*, what remains is *nirguṇa* Brahman.

īśvara has created this world with different *padārtha* (objects) and this creation is called *īśvara sṛṣṭi*. These objects have no intrinsic meaning. However, the *jīva* (due to *avidyā*) adds attachment to this object. He may like or dislike or remain neutral to this object or have any other *bhava* (attachment). For example, *īśvara* created gold. A person values its possession and is happy about it, while another person is unhappy because he is unable to possess the same. A third person who has never seen or heard about gold may think it is some useless metal and does not worry about its possession. This *bhava* of possession is *jīva sṛṣṭi*. Similarly, a woman may be viewed as a wife, daughter, sister, colleague and the relationship and attributes of this person is entirely dependent on the intellect of the *jīva* and thus *jīva sṛṣṭi*. This is the cause of bondage as the feeling of I and mine arises due to these possessions and relationships. This creates *rāga* and *dveṣa* i.e., likes and dislikes. When we fail to procure what we like or when we obtain what we dislike, it gives rise to *krodha* (anger), which eventually results in ruin.² Thus the fault entirely lies with *jīva sṛṣṭi* and not with *īśvara sṛṣṭi*. This can be attributed to the underlying *avidyā* associated with the *jīva* and the entire journey to Self-realisation is based on the removal of this *avidya*.

We have to end with a cautionary note: *īśvara* is sometimes referred as *nirguṇa* Brahman as well as *saguṇa* Brahman and we have to be careful in its distinction. For example, the first verse of *Īśā upanishad* states “*īśā vāsyam idaṃ sarvaṃ yat kiñca jagatyāṃ jagat*”. This means all that whatsoever that moves in the world is due to the *īśvara*, who is the ruler of all, being the Self of all beings. Shankara in the commentary of this verse emphasises that there is nothing other than Brahman, pure consciousness. He does not use the concept of *saguṇa* Brahman as *īśvara* here but implies *nirguṇa*

² *krodhād bhavati sammohaḥ sammohāt smṛiti-vibhramah | smṛiti-bhranśhād buddhi-nāśho buddhi-nāśhāt praṇaśhyati || (Bhagavad Gita 2.63)*
Anger leads to clouding of judgment resulting in delusion, which results in bewilderment of memory. When memory is bewildered, the intellect gets destroyed and intelligence is lost leading to ruin.

Brahman. Similarly, in the Bhagavad Gita verses 15.17³ and 18.61⁴, *īśvara* refers to *nirguṇa* Brahman. The terms *Nārāyaṇa* and *Shiva* can also refer to either to *sagūṇa* or *nirguṇa* Brahman depending on the context. For example, the verse ‘नारायणोऽहं नरकान्तकोऽहम्’ where the *jñani* proclaims that he is *Nārāyaṇa*, the destroyer of *Naraka*. What it means really is that he is none other than the pure consciousness, the realisation of which destroys the *Naraka*, which is bondage (*samsara*). Similarly, in *dashashloki* written by Shankara, the verses end with the refrain ‘शिवः केवलोऽहम्’ meaning I am Shiva but actually refers to pure consciousness. Therefore, translations wherein statements such as I am God should be interpreted very carefully. As the *jīva* can never become *īśvara*, the statement I am God does not mean one becomes Krishna, Rama or Shiva etc., and reproduce their supernatural abilities. Further, the I does not represent the ego or body or even the mind, and only represents consciousness or awareness. All it means, the consciousness that “appears” in the *jīva* is the same consciousness that ‘appears’ in *īśvara* and both are the pure consciousness (Brahman).

Thus we can conclude that *īśvara* is an integral part of advaita philosophy but should be interpreted in context and carefully. The *jīva* has necessarily needs to go through the ritual of devotion and worship to *īśvara* as a purificatory discipline and then only gradually acquire knowledge of Brahman through Self-enquiry. Bhagavan says:⁵

The *Sagūṇa* merges into the *nirguṇa* in the long run. The *sagūṇa* purifies the mind and takes one to the final goal. The afflicted one, the seeker of knowledge, and the seeker of gains are all dear to God.

And then again emphasises this elsewhere:

We pray to God for Bliss and receive it by Grace. The bestower of bliss must be Bliss itself and also Infinite. Therefore, *īśvara* is the Personal God of infinite power and bliss. Brahman is Bliss, impersonal and absolute. The finite egos, deriving their

³ *uttamaḥ puruṣastvanyaḥ paramātmetyudāhṛtaḥ |
yo lokatrayamāviśya bibhartya vyaya īśvaraḥ || (Bhagavad Gita 15.17)*

The Supreme Divine Personality is the indestructible Supreme Soul. He enters the three worlds as the unchanging Controller and supports all living beings.

⁴ *īśvaraḥ sarva-bhūtānām hṛd-deśe ’rjuna tiṣṭhati | (Bhagavad Gita 18.61)*
The Supreme Lord dwells in the hearts of all living beings, O Arjuna.

⁵ Munagala S. Venkataramiah, *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk§ 619.

source from Brahman and then *Īśvara*, are in their spiritual nature bliss only.⁶

To summarise, in advaita vedanta, *Īśvara* ultimately is the One, non-dual entity. From a *jīva*'s viewpoint, this has to be understood from two levels. The first level is that he is like Bhagavan, the Lord and Master of all beings. As long as the Ego or I-sense is functional, it has to relate to the infinite as a finite, to the Creator as the created, to the bestower of fruits as the recipient or as the doer. In fact, this level of understanding is common to all dualistic philosophies and is extremely important for the growth of the individual spiritually and erasing the ego. Once the ego is sublated, the I-sense has been understood to be an illusion, the sense of separateness vanishes. What remains is just Consciousness, the timeless eternal truth. Thus the higher level of understanding is that *Īśvara* is as the substratum or truth about Everything and Everyone are all Brahman.

The specialty of Advaita Vedanta is it does not make any distinction between gods of one religion or another or between gods within *sanātana dharma*. From the *paramarthika* standpoint, both *jīva* and *īśvara* are Brahman, but on the *vyavaharika* level, their relation is akin to that of the deity and devotee. *īśvara* knows his oneness with Brahman and therefore enjoys eternal bliss whereas *jīva* is ignorant of his divinity and is therefore subject to the self-deceptive trials and tribulations of a mundane existence. Only with the help of *īśvara* can the *jīva* realise Brahman. Thus Shankara says, *īśvara*, out of compassion, takes on, by His *māyā*, a form to grace the spiritual aspirant⁷ and is discussed in the *Bhagavad Gita*.⁸ Further, this is obvious from the writings of Shankara himself, who expounded hundreds of *stotras* in praise of various deities. The purpose of this article was to point out the great importance of *īśvara* within the context of advaita vedanta and encourage us to take refuge at the lotus feet of Arunachala Ramana. ▲

⁶ Ibid, Talk§28.

⁷ BSSB 1.1.20

⁸ *yo yo yām yām tanuṃ bhaktaḥ śraddhaya arcitum icchati | tasya tasya acalām śraddhām tām eva vidadhāmyaham ||* (*Bhagavad Gita* 7.21)

In whichever form, through whichever ritual a devotee worships with faith and sincerity, I respond through that same form to strengthen the faith of that devotee.



Thiruvachakam

The Soul Stirring Sacred Letters

V.S. KRISHNAN

O Lord, the day you claimed me as Thine own, You coveted my body, spirit and belongings, My Lord of Three Eyes, can then any ill befall me? Whether you bless me or abandon me, That is Thy responsibility, not mine. — *Thiruvachakam*

Once, when Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi was intensely gazing in the direction of the Arunachala Mountain a devotee nearby asked him: “Are you looking at Arunachala Mountain?” “No”, said Bhagavan, “I am looking at myself”.¹ Bhagavan never saw Arunachala as apart from himself. Bhagavan is synonymous with Arunachala. He is inseparable from Arunachala. He has identified himself with Arunachala. Ever abiding in the Self, he was still (*achala*), silent, motionless, unmoved and ever at peace. But there were occasions when even a saint of rock-like calm like him was moved.

While hearing *Thiruvachakam*, the sacred poetic verses composed by Manikkavachakar, even Maharshi appeared emotional. Tears rolled from his eyes. Referring to Manikkavachakar, Maharshi said: “We

¹ Kanakammal, T.R., *Cherished Memories*. Chapter 2, ‘Arunachala and the Sage of Arunachala’, p.12.

V.S. Krishnan comes from a family tradition of Muruga worship performed through the songs of Arunagirinathar, known as *Tiruppugazh*, a tradition which he follows even now at the age of 83. The devotion which *Tiruppugazh* kindled prompted him to the teachings of Bhagavan.

have not seen nor heard of those who had seen God. One cannot see God and yet retain his individuality. The seer and the seen unite into one being. There is no cogniser, nor cognition, nor the cognised. All merge into One Supreme Siva only.”²

Speaking of the phenomenon of devotional tears, Maharshi said: “It is the symptom of the subtle mind. There is no definiteness about it. Manikkavachakar and other saints have said that tears rush forth involuntarily and irrepressibly. Though aware of tears, they are unable to repress them. I had the same experience when I was staying at Virupaksha cave,” Bhagavan said.³

Quite often, Bhagavan quoted Saivite saints like Thirujnana Sambhandar, Sundaramurthy Nayanar, Thirunavukkarasar and Manikkavachakar, among the 63 saints whom Sekkizhar portrayed in the *Periyapuranam. Thiruvachakam*, the immortal work of Manikkavachakar had a profound influence on Bhagavan.

Vadhavurar, as Manikkavachakar was known earlier, was born in the 7th century to Sambhupaadhasiruthar and Sivajnanavathi. Since he was born at Thiruvadhavur, on the banks of the Vaigai River, he got the name as Vadhavurar. Even when young, he acquired knowledge of the Vedas and the scriptures. Having come to know of his prodigious talent and knowledge, the Pandyan King, Arimarthanan (c. 862 CE–885 CE), appointed him as a Minister in the Royal Court. The King entrusted him with the responsibility of buying horses and asked him to explore the market, find the best horses and buy them at a good price. The King also gave him a bag containing gold and pearls to make the deal.

Vadhavurar proceeded on his mission and reached Tirupperunthurai. Here, he became aware that a mysterious divine air pervaded the place. He therefore asked the soldiers accompanying him to go back to the palace and to tell the King that he would return with the horses soon. He then took a bath in the river nearby, applied sacred white ash (*vibhuti*) to his forehead and entered the Siva temple nearby. There, in the temple precinct, he saw a Master, sitting under a Kuruntha tree⁴

² Munagala S. Venkataramiah, *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk§450.

³ *Ibid.*, Talk§372.

⁴ The yellow amaranth.

teaching students. Vadhavurar immediately realised that Siva, the Lord who resides at Thiruperunthurai temple, had manifested as the Divine Guru. Vadhavurar fell at the feet of the Guru and sought his blessings. Just as a flash of lightning appears in the sky, he immediately got the experience of realising God. In that very moment he was transformed into an enlightened sage. He later came to be known as the saint Manikkavachakar.

He realised that it was only by the grace of the Guru that he had got this experience. He was therefore immediately immersed in devotion towards Lord Siva and, becoming detached from the world of illusion, he totally forgot the purpose he had come for. He gave away all the money he had brought to poor people and also towards the renovation of the temple.

Hearing that Manikkavachakar had failed to perform his duties, a message was sent to him asking him to come back to the court immediately along with the horses. Not knowing what to do, Manikkavachakar went into the temple of Lord Siva and prayed to Him to save him from his predicament. Suddenly, he heard a voice from above which said: “The horses will come soon!”, a message he passed on to the king, but he was disbelieved and imprisoned by the king.

All the wandering foxes in the forest were turned into horses and the Lord dispatched His servants (the *bootha ganas* or spirits) to ride these horses and reach the palace. When the enchanted horses reached Madurai the king ordered the release of Vadhavurar. But when night fell, all the horses turned into foxes again. The King became furious at this deception and imprisoned Vadhavurar again.

But could Siva remain passive when his devotee was imprisoned? Immediately, as a result of heavy rain, the whole of Madurai was flooded. The Vaigai river rose steadily. In order to contain the flood, the king ordered that one member from every family had to come and work in the joint task of raising a flood embankment.

An elderly lady called Vandhi, a great devotee of Siva, lived by preparing *pittu* (a food) and selling it. There was no one in her home to help her and being old she could not do manual work. An unknown man volunteered to do her share of embankment work for her. After eating the food offered by her, this man went to attend the community work. But instead of doing his allotted work, he started singing and

dancing. Seeing this, the supervisors reported him to the king. The angry king arrived and started beating the man. But the blows he gave were felt by the entire population, including the king himself!

The man was none other than Lord Siva Himself, who said: “O King! Manikkavachakar is my beloved devotee. I did all this to show you how great he is. Release him immediately and seek his blessings!” The king prostrated before Lord Siva and asked His pardon. The Lord then stopped the flood and disappeared. The king released Manikkavachakar and requested him to rule his entire kingdom, but Manikkavachakar renounced his worldly life and left Madurai to go on a pilgrimage.

He visited many holy shrines like Uttrakosamangai, Thiruperundurai, Thiruvarur, Sirkazhi, Thillai, Thiruvannamalai and Thirukazhukundram and composed songs in praise of the Lord wherever he went.

When Manikkavachakar reached Thillai (Chidambaram) he stayed in a small cottage. That night, hearing a knock, he opened the door. The stranger standing outside introduced himself as from the Pandya region. He said he had heard high praise about Manikkavachakar’s songs and requested the poet to sing all his songs to him, so that he could write them down and recite them to the people of his own Pandya region. Manikkavachakar readily agreed and sang all the *Thiruvachakam* songs, through the night. Then, at the request of his visitor, Manikkavachakar also composed and sang a ‘*kovai*’ song praising ‘Thillai Natarajar’, as Lord Siva is known in Thillai, as the Master of dance and music. After writing down this song also, the stranger disappeared. Though Manikkavachakar looked for him, he could not find him anywhere. The realisation dawned on him that his mysterious visitor had been none other than Lord Siva Himself.

The next day, when the priest opened the sanctum sanctorum of Lord Nataraja’s temple he was surprised to find a set of palm leaves placed near the deity. He soon informed the temple devotees of this. Pundits, scholars and devotees assembled to examine the wonderful songs written on the palm leaves. They noted that it was titled ‘The *Thiruvachakam* and the *Thirukkovai*’. At the end of the manuscript were the following words: “Dictated by Thiruvadhavuran



Atmanathaswami Temple, Tirupperunthurai

(Manikkavachakar) and written down by Chitrambalamudayar (the One Who Resides In the Temple)’’.

Reading this, everyone marvelled at the grace of Lord Siva and at the greatness of Manikkavachakar. They realised that Manikkavachakar’s poetic creation, the *Thiruvachakam* had received the divine approval of God Himself. Since these songs had got the divine approval, they got the name *Thiruvachakam*, ‘the sacred letters of God’. Manikkavachakar himself was called and he came to the temple. He saw that the manuscript was an exact replica of his songs. Overwhelmed by happiness that Siva Himself had given His stamp of approval to his songs, Manikkavachakar felt totally fulfilled — there was nothing more to achieve in life. When the devotees requested him to explain the miracle and how the palm leaves had entered Lord Nataraja’s shrine, Manikkavachakar just said: “The Lord in front of us is the answer to your question!” He then walked into the sanctum sanctorum and miraculously merged into Siva, disappearing from human sight forever.

The Canadian missionary, G.U. Pope, happened to read the *Thiruvachakam* and was captivated by its teachings. Never before had he read a devotional work as magnificent and as heartrending as the *Thiruvachakam*. He studied it thoroughly, followed the principles it enunciated and then translated it very accurately. The glory of the *Thiruvachakam*, until then confined to Tamil readers, spread far and wide. Once, when Bhagavan was reading the translation by Pope, he observed that Manikkavachakar had been one of those rare human beings whose bodies had finally resolved themselves in a blaze of light, without leaving a corpse behind. When a devotee asked him how this could be possible, Bhagavan said that the gross body is only the concrete form of the subtle stuff, the mind. When the mind melts away and blazes forth as light, the body is consumed in the process.⁵

The *Thiruvachakam* has 51 sections, containing a total of 656 songs. It opens by hailing the glory of Lord Siva (“*Namasivaya Vazhga, Nathan Thal Vazhga!*”). The poet says that Lord Siva is the supreme master of the universe. “Even for the blink of an eyelid, that Sacred Name should never leave me!” He says: “O Siva, I do not desire power or position. Let me be born again and again to

⁵ Ibid., Talk§215.

recite Your Holy Name and to worship You. Bless me with a mind that surrenders at Your Lotus Feet! O Siva, the Lord who could not be reached by Vishnu and Brahma, who dances wearing a garland of skulls in the graveyard, remove my karma and accept me unto You!”

The poet continues: “O Lord Siva, though you graced me, I failed to hold on to You, and allowed my mind to stray. You were kind enough to take possession of me but still my mind was deluded by the dictates of the body. You have graced many disciples and elevated them, but instead of following the path shown by them, I strayed from the path of devotion. Having distanced myself from you, I am suffering the pangs of separation. I take refuge in You and pray that You come to me, that by Your grace I may be united with you.”

In ‘*Thirusathakam*’ (the Sacred Ten) every ten sets of songs convey a particular spiritual message. In the first song, the poet says: “O Lord Siva, I would melt in devotion, shed tears and never leave you – please do accept me. I do not aspire for power or position. Grace me with the privilege of always being at your Lotus Feet.” In the second verse, he says: “If the birth one takes in this world has any worth, one should think how insignificant one is and how great God is and keep praising the glory of God by word and deed, taking refuge at His lotus feet and worshipping Him with deep devotion.”

The poet’s outpouring of devotion continues thus: “O Lord, you took special care of me, a sinner; a care which was even more than that a mother takes, when, even before her child starts crying for milk, she feeds it lovingly. You shed the light of wisdom on me, poured out for me the honey of eternal bliss and roamed everywhere with me. O my treasure, Lord Siva, I clasp you firmly and will ever remain with you.”

“This human birth is very rare and it is reached only after we have been born as different animals and insects.” (*Sivapuranam*, 1:26-31). It is rarer still to be blessed with a mind that seeks to distance itself from the world of illusion and that seeks to reach the Lotus Feet of God. But Manikkavachakar emphasises that even to get the desire to reach the Lotus Feet of God, the individual needs the prior grace of God. In fact, it is only by the grace of God, that one is blessed with the desire to earnestly seek the Lotus Feet of God (*Avan Arulale Avan Thal Vanangi*).

The poet defines the true nature of a prayer thus: “O Lord, who resides at the temple of Kuttralam, I do not seek the company of

relatives, nor do I seek to reside in a prosperous city. I do not seek fame, nor do I seek to be a master of the present kind of education. All that I seek is to remain forever at your Lotus Feet!”

In the fifth verse of the *Thirusathakam*, he says: “O Lord, you have beckoned me towards you, but I could not hold on to you, as the baby monkey holds on to its mother with a very firm grip and instead I was influenced by my deceitful senses. I failed to worship you with true devotion!”

In subsequent verses the poet says: “Discarding the world of illusion, your true devotees have followed the path that leads to Your Lotus Feet but I have remained glued to my own world of attachment. Having rescued all other devotees, would it be right if you left me behind?”

These prayers of Manikkavachakar are written from the standpoint of ordinary devotees; in his own case, his mind was pure and he was perfectly conscious of his true spiritual nature.

Though there are many devotional works, each unique and with its own appeal, the *Thiruvachakam* remains distinctly divine and supreme for its depth, erudition and the powerful impact it has on our hearts. Pundits have hailed it as a marvellous work of devotion. In *Nanmanimalai*, Sri Sivaprakasara has compared it with the Vedas. He says, “No other works reach the inner core of the heart as does the *Thiruvachakam*.”

There are many commentaries on the life and teachings of Manikkavachakar, some written before Sekkizhar and some after him. While one of the earliest is *Thiruvāla Vayudaiyar Puranam* composed by Perumpatrapuliyur Nambi, the most recent commentary is the *Thiruperunthurai Puranam* written by Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai.

Apart from the *Thiruvachakam*, Manikkavachakar composed many other works. His *Sivapurānam* starts by hailing the glory of Siva (‘*Namasivaya Vazhga*’). The *Sivapurānam* extols the greatness, the compassion, the kindness and the infinite power of Lord Siva, saying: “Hail to Thy Lotus Feet which do not leave my thoughts even for a moment!” Another, the ‘*Keerthi Thiru Agaval*’, consisting of 101 songs, portrays the various divine sports (*Thiruvilayadal*) performed by Siva at various temples. And the ‘*Thiru Anda Paguthi*’ describes the magnificence of Lord Siva, His compassion and His divine qualities.

‘*Pottri Thiru Agaval*’, consisting of 159 songs, hail the glory of Lord Siva. It says: “One should seek to escape from being born as other kinds of animals or species. One should seek to escape from being confined in the womb of the mother. One should seek to escape from facing the many obstacles in life. One should seek to escape from desires. One should seek to escape from the distracting and illusory phenomena of the world. Having escaped from all these illusions, one should become convinced that Lord Siva controls all that happens, and one should therefore solely aim at reaching His Lotus Feet.”

Bhagavan quoted the following lines from the *Thiruvachakam*: “Though I am worse than a dog, you have graciously undertaken to protect me. This delusion of birth and death is maintained by you. Who am I to judge? Oh Maheswara, it is for you to roll me through bodies by way of birth and death or to keep me fixed at Your own feet.”⁶

On the day of his mother’s death, Maharshi requested all his disciples to sing the *Thiruvachakam*. This was also the favourite hymn of Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswathi Swamigal, the Sankaracharya of Kanchi Kamakoti Math, who highlighted its glory in all his discourses.

It was the *Thiruvachakam* that Arut Prakasa Vallalar (as known as Ramalinga Swami) always carried with him. In fact, on the first night of his marriage, when he entered the room of his wife, he was carrying the *Thiruvachakam*. On another occasion, speaking about controlling the mind (with a Mr B.C. Das, a Physics Lecturer) Bhagavan quoted this famous line from the *Thiruvachakam*: “O humming bee (mind) why do you take the pains of collecting tiny specks of honey from innumerable flowers? There is One from whom you can have the whole storehouse of honey by simply thinking of Him. Get within and hum to Him.”⁷

The greatness of the *Thiruvachakam* cannot be described. A question has been raised as to why its author, Manickavachakar, was not included in the 63 Saivite saints and why his name is not included in the *Thiruthondar Thogai* composed by Sundarar. This is because the *Thiruthondar Thogai* was dedicated to highlight the glory of Siva devotees and its author did not consider Manickavachakar to be a mere devotee of Lord Siva but to be an incarnation of Lord Siva Himself!

⁶ Ibid., Talk§30.

⁷ Ibid., Talk§220.

MOUNTAIN PATH

The *Thiruvachakam* is regularly sung in many South Indian temples. As one listens to the *Thiruvachakam*, flowing as sweet as honey, the devotee is elevated to the very height of bliss. It is said that the person whose mind does not melt on hearing the verses of the *Thiruvachakam*, will not melt on hearing any spiritual verse ever (*Thiruvachakaththukku Urugar Oru Vachakaththukkum Urugar*).

When Sri Muruganar decided at long last to pay his first visit to Tiruvannamalai and see Sri Ramana, he composed eleven verses on the Arunachaleswara Temple. Most of these verses, addressing Bhagavan as Lord Siva, contained pleas for His Grace. In his verses, Sri Muruganar says: “Will I, an unworthy, ignorant one, ever be accepted as a devotee by Lord Siva who, as the Divine Guru, with the wealth of grace, showed clearly to the world the greatness of Manikkavachakar? And even if I get such a chance, will I be able to sing of the glories of His Grace-Showering Feet in the same way as the *Thiruvachakam*?”

Guru Ramana, Siva, as once you left
Mount Kailas and the company of the gods
And came to cool Perunturai to drink in
The sparkling words of Vachakar,
Now again you have come to fair Aruna town
Wishing to hear this fellow’s puerile words.

Thus, when Sri Muruganar showed up at Ramanasramam with a poem in praise of Bhagavan, that mentioned one of Manikkavachakar’s most famous works, it was clear that Sri Muruganar had begun to fulfill his long-held desire of having a relationship with Bhagavan that was similar to that of Manikkavachakar’s with Lord Siva. ▲

This article is based on two publications:

The article *Manikkavachakar* by Munaivar The. Jnanasundaram in ‘*Jnanaparambarai*’ published by Ramanantha Adigalar Arakkattalai, Coimbatore and presented by Arut Selvar, Dr N. Mahalingam.

And, *Saints of South India* by V.S. Krishnan.

Īśāvāsyopaniṣad

Fundamentals of Vedanta

RAKESH BHARTIYA

Among all the major *Upanishads*, the *Īśāvāsyopaniṣad* is tiny. Yet, in its small size it encapsulates the fundamentals of Vedanta so effectively and in so forceful a poetry that seekers of spiritual enlightenment can study it again and again. It is understood to all seekers of spiritual truth willing to tread the path, that all the Upanishads aim at giving some idea of the Truth (termed Brahman), which is beyond any limits, that is to say, to the limited extent possible in the language and mental understanding of human beings. The Upanishads repeatedly caution seekers on the tendencies which can hamper that journey to Truth. The very first mantra (verse) of the *Īśāvāsyopaniṣad* says:

ॐ ईशावास्यम् इदम् सर्वम् यत्किञ्च जगत्यां जगत् ।
तेन त्यक्तेन भुञ्जीथा मा गृधः कस्यस्विद्धनम् ॥
om īśāvāsyam idam sarvam yatkiñca jagatyāṁ jagat |
tena tyaktena bhujjīthā mā gṛdhaḥ kasya-sviddhanam ||

Om. All this, whatever moves on this earth, is permeated by *Īśā* (Brahman). Protect (yourself) through (that) detachment. Do not covet (other's wealth). After all, whose wealth is this?

Rakesh Bhartiya was a former Joint Secretary, Government of India, and a former advisor, National Commission for Protection of Child Rights. He is a published writer and poet in English and Hindi.

This mantra/verse establishes the omnipresence of Brahman to a seeker in easily relatable words, and simultaneously admonishes him or her on the derailing effects of being greedy i.e., desiring something beyond one's requirements and at the cost to others. This is the basic and essential quality required for treading on the spiritual path.

The visible world, with all its creatures, is for everyone to see. But, the difference between a true seeker of Truth and the ordinary person lies in the way ('दृष्टि', *dr̥ṣṭi*) they see it. The following mantra defines what that *dr̥ṣṭi* for a seeker should be:

यस्तु सर्वाणि भूतानि आत्मन्येवानुपश्यति ।

सर्वभूतेषु चात्मानम् ततो न विजुगुप्सते ॥

yastu sarvāṇi bhūtāni ātmanyevānupaśyati |

sarvabhūteṣu cātmanam tato na vijugupsate ॥

verse 6

Whoever sees all beings in *Ātman* (Brahman) and Brahman in all beings feels no hatred (or ill feelings) by virtue of that realisation.

This is the core of Vedanta. All kinds of prejudices in the name of caste, race generate most of the distress and sufferings which mankind sees and experiences every day. Vedanta aims at removing any kind of discrimination from the very thought or action of any human being by making him understand that the same Supreme Being (Brahman) resides in all beings. When we witness the turmoil in the 21st century world, we can appreciate how clearly and simply this mantra of the *Īśāvāsyopaniṣad* reveals how the key '*dr̥ṣṭi*' is required to find release from the constant tumult which defines our material world.

The *Īśāvāsyopaniṣad* contains prayers addressed to *Sūrya* (Sun), *Agni* (Fire) with very beautiful and meaningful words; all evoked with the request to show the seeker the ultimate Truth. As the only Truth is Brahman and that can be only known and realised by following the right path of truth, the following is appropriately addressed to *Pūṣan* (Sun):

हिरन्यमयेन पात्रेण सत्यस्यापिहितम् मुखम् ।

तत् त्वं पूषन् अपावृणु सत्यधर्माय दृष्टये ॥

hiranyamayena pātreṇa satyasyāpīhitam mukham |

tat tvaṁ pūṣan apāvṛṇu satyadharmāya dṛṣṭaye ॥

verse 15

A golden vessel conceals the face of the ultimate Truth (Brahman). O Sun! Please make it open [remove that vessel] for all seekers, who

are truthful and who walk the path of virtue, so that Truth (Brahman) could be realised.

Vedanta, if understood in its proper perspective, is a practical guide for all seekers. The ‘golden vessel’ is nothing but all kinds of attractive temptations which look ‘attractive’ in the short term but distract one from the spiritual path. The enduring message in the mantra/verse is to remain unshakable in one’s conviction and thus by overcoming all such temptations the ultimate goal (Truth) is realised. Here, one clarification is needed. Vedanta does not recommend running away from this world or negating its very existence. Rather, it stresses the limitations of avoiding it. All great seekers of Truth, from Ramana Maharshi to Swami Vivekananda, showed by their examples how one can seek the Truth while engaged in day to day duties in this world, and also by example can help others in their pursuit of the same.

Like other Upanishads, the *Īśāvāsyopaniṣad* also employs our limited vocabulary to give us some idea of the Brahman which is beyond all limits, beyond all words that a human being could command in order to understand anything.

अनेजदेकं मनसो जवीयो नैनद्देवा आप्नुवन्पूर्वमर्षत् ।
 तद्भावतो अन्यानत्येति तिष्ठत्स्मिन्नपो मातरिश्वा दधाति ॥
 anejadekaṁ manaso javīyo nainaddevā āpnuvanpūrvamarṣat |
 taddhāvato anyānatyeti tiṣṭhattasminnapo mātariśvā dadhāti ||

verse 4

It is unmoving, it is one and faster than the mind. The senses cannot overtake it as it ran ahead of them. Even though remaining unmoving, it outruns everything that runs. [By virtue of] it existing, *Mātariśva* (*Vāyu*, air) supports all the mundane activities.

The simple idea is to make the seeker understand that Brahman is much beyond all the gratification imaginable from the limited faculties of human beings and that Brahman alone is the source of all that which happens around us. The Upanishads are beyond comparison in spiritual literature on account of their rare quality of educating and guiding the seekers on Supreme Being (Brahman) without ever making it appear too obvious or simple. There is a hidden mystery which captivates our intelligence. Another excellent example in this regard from the *Īśāvāsyopaniṣad*.

स पर्यगाच्छुक्रम अकायम् अत्रणम् अस्नाविरम् शुद्धम् अपापविद्धम् ।
कविर्मनीषी परिभूः स्वयम्भूः यथातथ्यतः अर्थान् व्यदधात् शाश्वतीभ्यः समाभ्यः ॥
sa paryagācchukrama akāyam avraṇam asnāvīram śuddham
apāpavidddham |

kavirmanīṣī paribhūḥ svayambhūḥ yathātathyataḥ arthān vyadadhāt
śāśvatībhyaḥ samābhyaḥ || verse 8

He (Brahman) is all pervasive, pure, bodiless, without any wound, without sinews, without any taint, not touched by sin, omniscient, ruling the mind, transcendent and exists in its own right. He has duly allotted the [respective] duties to the eternal years [the *Prajāpatis* referred as years] as per their respective competencies.

Any seeker of Truth should read and understand the mantras with this fact always in mind; the words and adjectives used have to be taken by their indicative meaning, not the literal one. Brahman is beyond ‘he’, ‘she’ or ‘it’. We are trying to somehow get an idea of Brahman with these limits in place. For example; ‘कविः’ (*kaviḥ*) is not used here as we understand i.e., as ‘poet’, that meaning can only be with reference to humans. Here *kaviḥ* means (indicates) one who knows past, present and future. Similarly *manīṣī* means (or indicates) one who rules the mind instead of ‘the knowledgeable person’ applicable in case of humans.

How the indicative meaning of Vedanta could be so entirely different from what people generally understand from the words may be seen from the example of ‘विद्या’ (*vidyā*) and ‘अविद्या’ (*avidyā*) as illustrated in the following two mantras:

अन्धं तमः प्रविशन्ति येऽविद्यामुपासते ।

ततो भूय इव ते तमो य उ विद्यायाम् रताः । ।

andham tamaḥ praviśanti ye’vidyāmupāsate |

tato bhūya iva te tamo ya u vidyāyām ratāḥ ||

verse 9

Those who worship *avidyā* [ritualistic methods] enter into utter darkness. But a still greater a darkness awaits those who are engaged in *vidyā* [meditation or worship of Gods].

विद्यां चाविद्यां च यस्तद् वेदोभयम् सह ।

अविद्यया मृत्युं तीर्त्वा विद्यया अमृतम् अश्नुते ॥

vidyām cāvidyām ca yastad vedobhayam saha |

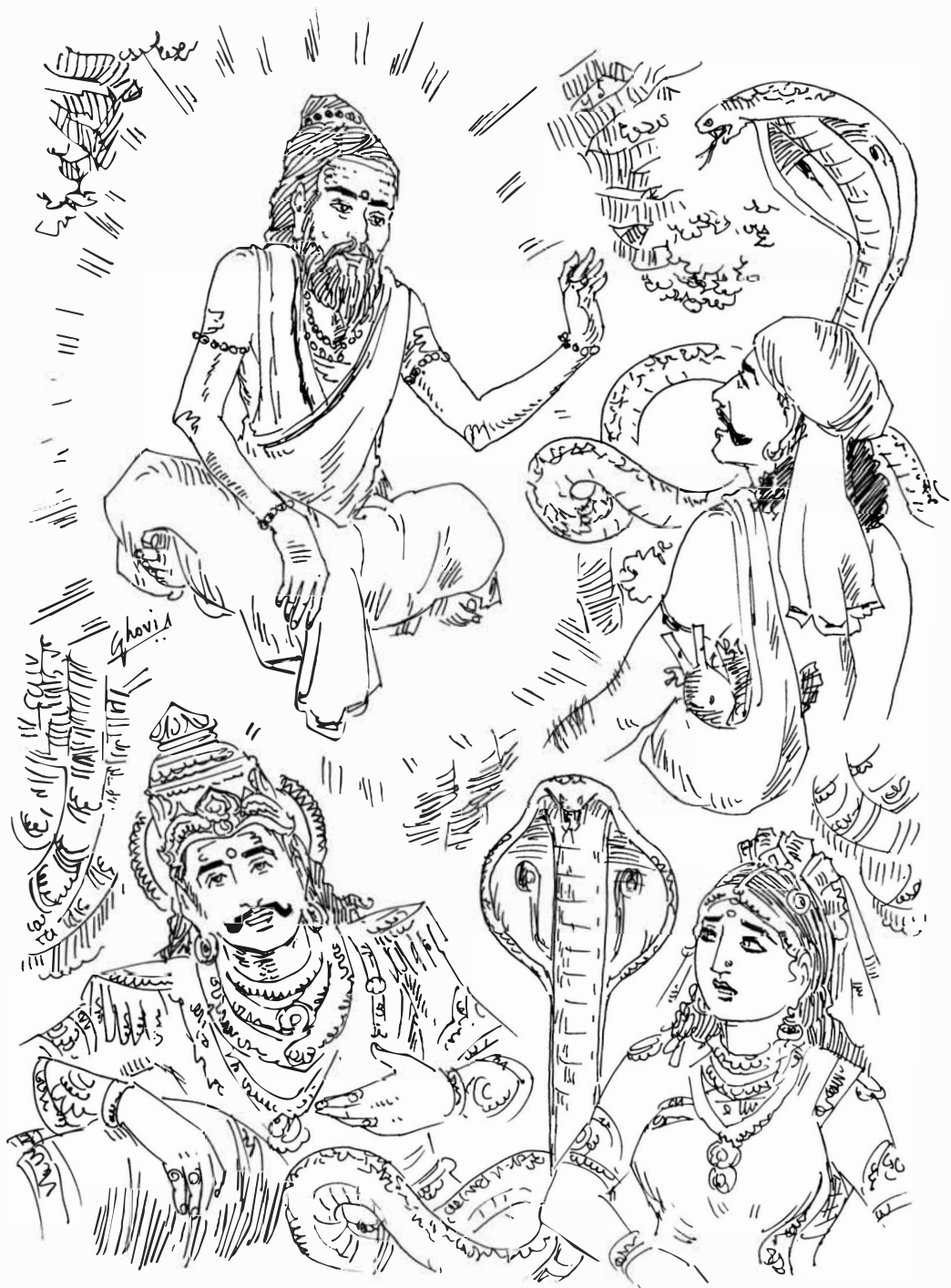
avidyayā mṛtyuṁ tīrtvā vidyayā amṛtam aśnute ||

verse 11

Whoever knows both *vidyā* and *avidyā* crosses over the death caused by *avidyā* and achieves immortality through *vidyā*.

Here, *avidyā* means all those ritualistic religious practices engaged in to avoid death and *vidyā* means all those practices of worshipping various gods (which we do witness even today). The underlying message is clear; you may master *vidyā* and *avidyā*, you may overcome death and go to higher '*lokas*' (abodes) by pleasing the Gods but you are yet to reach and realise the Truth. The Upanishads do not recommend and endorse anything which does not help the seeker to reach and realise the Truth (Brahman). In Vedanta one and only one thing that is worth aiming for and that is 'एकत्वं' (*ekatva*, oneness) with Brahman.

The way to Truth is not an easy one by any account, another important Upanishad the *Kāthopaniṣad* has rightly said, क्षुरस्य धारा (*kṣūrasya dhārā*) i.e. that traversing the true spiritual path is like walking on the razor's edge. Just a cursory reading of the mantras will not serve any purpose. Each and every word of it has to be understood with its indicative meaning and pondered over again and again so as to come anywhere near the spiritual guidance left by our great seers in the form of the Upanishads like the *Īśāvāsyaopaniṣad*. Fortunate is the land of *Bhāratavarṣa*, the birthplace of the supreme philosophy of Vedanta. Words cannot describe the good fortune of those ones who live by the spiritual guidance contained in the Upanishads like the *Īśāvāsyaopaniṣad*. They will surely succeed in realising the Ultimate Truth. ▲



Tamil Siddhas

Part Seven

Pambatti: The Most Outspoken Siddha

P. RAJA

Powerful are we to grasp the eight monstrous serpents and make them dance. Mighty are we to bring the Heaven of Lord Indra down to this very Earth. Potent are we to charm and subdue the serpents that are beyond control. Dance, O Snake, and eject your deadly venom. (1)

What if Adhishesha is great? Empowered are we to bring him under our thumb and bid him obey our commands. Competent are we to make him disciplined. Be firm and dance O Snake. (2) Qualified are we to make a huge pillar look a trivial straw and the straw a pillar. Proficient are we to transform a male into a female and a female into a male. Stand upright before me, O Snake, and dance with great gusto. (3)

Solid are we to lift up the eight mountains and hurl them like balls and to swallow up the seven seas with ease. Efficient are we to span the vast stretches of sand. Station yourself facing the King and dance, O Snake. (4)

Potent are we to hide the whole Earth by our hands. Capable are we to bend the sky like a bow. Able are we to instill into the minds of the devotees the nature of nonentity. Stand before the Great and dance, O Snake. (5)

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MOUNTAIN PATH

Powerful are we to dive into the ravaging fire. Strong are we to hold our breath at the very bottom of the sea. Sturdy are we to attack the ferocious tiger that comes pouncing. Chest up before the Captain and dance, O Snake. (6)

Endowed are we with powers to transform the three wondrous worlds into nothing less than pure gold and transfigure the torrid Sun himself into a cool Moon. So powerful are we, that we can make this gigantic Earth vanish. Realise our might and dance, O Snake. (7)

Competent are we to bring forth creations similar to those of the Great Creator. Powerful are we to make the Great Creator Himself cower before us. Qualified are we to live on a par with the Supreme Being. Dance, O Snake, and trumpet our miraculous powers. (8)

Familiar are we with the sixty-four arts and cognizant are we of yet another. Strong hearted are we to shun all the earthly attachments. Dance, O Snake and proclaim that the king is the Master. (9)

Vigorous are we to subdue the growling tiger, elephant, *yali* (mythical temple lion) and lion and to bid them be our slaves. Dance, O Snake, and declare that we could make the Almighty God our Playmate.¹ (10)

The above ten verses speak volumes about the might of the Siddhas. No other Tamil Siddha ever spoke so frankly of the powers bestowed on them, through their austerities and penance. Pambatti was the only one of his kind to glorify their energy, vigour, and vitality. Highly confident in himself and his clan, his aim was not to frighten the public but to brainwash them to lead a better life, meditating upon the one and only Lord of the Universe.

Pambatti, meaning ‘Snake Charmer’, was the most popular of all the siddhas because his words of wisdom helped ordinary people to know about the art of attaining Siddhahood and liberation.

To know oneself is to know God. Such a height can be reached only when one turns one’s eyes inward and realises the slumbering

¹*Pambatti Siddhar Paadalgal*, vv. 25-34.

God and awakens Him to enjoy the bliss of spiritual life on planet Earth. It is no wonder that the Siddhas were feted by everyone who knew their powers.

According to legend, a snake charmer, who was the most ambitious, bold and imaginative of forest dwellers, used to do the very dangerous job of extracting venom even from king cobras. He did this to help village physicians to cure the sick with herbs and venom.

This snake charmer began to gain popularity through his lionhearted attitude towards snakes. And that emboldened a physician to approach him for a great favour. He told the snake charmer of a strange snake of great value that dwelt in a mountainous region known as Marudha Malai. If the snake charmer could catch that snake, which held nine gems² in its hood, he was ready to reward him amply.

The snake charmer jumped at this offer, for he knew that nobody else would dare to execute such a venture. He was advised to go into the forest only at midnight, for that venom-spitting snake only moved out of its hole at that time. He was also informed that the snake spat out its precious gem and in its glowing light slithered in search of its food. It stayed within a radius of three to five metres from where it stationed its gem.

Up the mountain went the snake charmer, then deep into the forest. His frantic search for the snake proved futile. What snake would dare to come out of its pit, once it sensed that such a snake charmer, of indomitable courage, was somewhere nearby?

In a fit of fury, the snake charmer destroyed one anthill after the other, in order to trap that elusive snake. But nothing happened. Only his blood pressure went up.

Ha...ha...ha...ha...ha...An uproarious laughter began to reverberate through the forest. The laughter was perhaps intended to bamboozle the snake charmer into obedience.

“Who the hell are you? Show yourself... you cannot weaken my nerves by your hysterical laughter!” howled the snake charmer. His howling too reverberated through the forest, as did the stranger’s laughter. A thin old man came into view.

² The nine gems are the emerald, the topaz, the cat’s eye, the diamond, the ruby, the sapphire, the pearl, the coral, and the garnet.

The snake charmer mistook the stranger for someone who had lost his way in the forest and needed help. But it was the other way round.

“People call me Sattai Muni Siddha. I have come to help you and put you on the right track,” said the Siddha.

The snake charmer stood dumbfounded.

“You are like any other common man, always searching for something, but in the wrong place. You are on the hunt for snakes, to catch them, tame them and then make them dance to your tunes. No doubt your professional expertise is laudable. Yet you are unaware of the snake slumbering in you,” said Sattai Muni. He then raised himself two or three feet above the ground and remained suspended in the air for quite a few minutes and then floated towards the snake charmer.

Like a snake that remains spellbound before its charmer, the poor snake charmer stood before the Siddha.

Sattai Muni lowered his voice to a whisper and revealed the great secret of the mysterious snake within the human body, known as the Kundalini or the serpent power.

Siddhas are those who have gained complete control over this internal serpent power, that is the vagus nerve and the sympathetic nervous system. *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism* explains the practice of Kundalini yoga thus:

“The Goddess Kundalini is the power (*sakti*) dwelling within the body at the base of a central channel thought to pervade it, who, once awakened, rises up through this vertical axis of power to the crown of the head, whereupon the yogi awakens to the truth of his identity with Siva.”³

After assigning him the great challenge of discovering the serpent power within himself, Sattai Muni expressed his curiosity to know the name of the snake charmer.

Pat came the reply: “Before I met you, I was Pambatti. I was searching for the snake in its pit. After meeting you, I will be searching for the snake within me. In either case I am Pambatti.”

“Then may you be widely known by that name,” was Sattai Muni’s blessing, and he disappeared from the scene. Only his echoing laugh was heard through the forest.

³ Flood, Gavin, *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, Blackwell Publishing, UK, 2003, p.222.

Pambatti, as advised by his guru, Sattai Muni Siddha, went on his inward journey and by the time he realised the snake power within him, several years had gone by. Yet the long and profound journey was worth it.

Pambatti Siddha, after realising all the powers within him, began to use them for the welfare of the public. His knowledge of herbs and venoms enhanced his value, and people from various lands and walks of life began to seek him out. He travelled widely and taught people the magical powers of the kundalini, and herbs and venom.

As Siddhas are capable of flying through the air, Pambatti too loved to travel in the traffic-free sky. On one occasion he saw, from the sky, a crowd of mourners around their dead king. Curiosity drove him to that place.

As soon as he landed, he searched for a live snake, found it, killed it, and then hurled it into the crowd. All the mourners except the queen ran pell-mell at the sight of the snake.

The Siddha understood that the queen was really in distress and needed help. He went into a nearby wood, placed his body in a safe place and moved out of it to enter the king's body. His knowledge of *prakamyam* (the power to disembodify and enter into other bodies) helped him.

The body of the king began to show signs of life. The jubilant queen cried, "The king is not dead... The king is not dead... A miracle has happened." All the mourners who ran for their lives returned.

The king sat up. He stared at the dead snake. "Awake O Snake," he said and the poor creeper came back to life. The moment it realised that it was alive, it began to wriggle out of the place.

"What is the hurry, O Snake? Still interested in meeting your wife and kids, eh? Not now. Stay here with me," the Siddha in the king commanded.

The serpent stood still without harming the panic-stricken crowd.

Suspicion began to bud in the queen's mind. Never before had she seen her husband in such a mystic state. She knew him as a fun lover but not as a yogi who could bring the dead back to life or speak to a dangerous snake and gain complete control over it. Her suspicion grew all the more when her husband began to sing verses of social critique.

Listening to her husband, the queen's suspicions grew. She knew that her husband liked every woman he came across. How could such

a lecherous man ever rail against women? His verses also railed at the great books of yore, the Vedas, Puranas and Shastras, calling them nonsense. And when he sang: “Dance, O Snake, and affirm the fact that the mouth that once devoured tasty fruits of varied sorts, delicious puddings and other delicacies, will find nothing to eat but earth when it loses its life,”⁴ the queen was sure that a Siddha’s soul had entered her husband’s body and was using him as an official mouthpiece.

When the verses ended the snake that was dancing to the charmer’s tune, slithered away. The queen looked askance at the king. Her very look unnerved him. She asked, “Who are you?” and forced him to tell the truth.

“Virtuous and wise woman that you are, you detected the new soul in your husband’s body. I am Pambatti Siddha. I heard the wailing of a woman and came down to console her. I think I performed my duty well,” answered the Siddha, and he left the king’s body to enter his own body, and to continue with his task of giving counsel to people and adjuring them to think of the Divine.

The verses that Pambatti sang when he was in the king’s body were passed on through word of mouth and recorded on palm leaves, but only 129 of them survive.

Pambatti is also remembered for his excellent work *Siddhar Aaroodam* (‘Foretelling by Divination’). His experiments with herbs and the treatments he gave to his patients have been recorded and made available to the Siddha school of medical practitioners.

Some believe that Pambatti attained ‘*mokṣa*’ in Virudhachalam. Some say he left his body in Dwaraka. It is believed that he lived in Marudha Malai in a cave at the southern end of the precincts of the Subramaniya Swamy temple which is near Coimbatore. Since there is no extant authentic biography of Pambatti, it is widely assumed that he attained ‘*samādhi*’ in Marudha Malai, at the cave close to a mountain spring that he used. They are named after him. ▲

Note: All the translations of the verses of Pambatti Siddha quoted in this article are free renderings done by the author. All verse numbers refer to *Siddhar Paadalgal* edited by Tha. Kovendhan and published by Poompuhar Prasuram, Chennai, in November 1976.

⁴ *Pambatti Siddhar Paadalgal*. V.46.

MAHA BHAKTA VIJAYAM

The Blessed Life of Sant Jayadeva

Jayadeva Swami Reaches the Kingdom of Krauncha

NABAJI SIDDHA

A few days passed. One day, the king of Krauncha region came to the forest on a hunting expedition. The party growing thirsty due to the exertion, reached the well into which Jayadeva Swami had been hurled. When the king looked into the well for water, he saw someone inside, the great Preceptor in human form shining with the radiance of a full moon. The soldiers immediately rescued Jayadeva Swami from the well. The king was appalled at the Sant's condition.

He enquired, "Is your present state due to your participation in some conspiracy against a king or is it that you have turned mad? Did any evil-doers inflict this grievous injury on you? Or any personal sufferings have driven you to this end? Why and how have you been reduced to this miserable plight? Please tell me the truth." There was no reply from the Swami. Again and again the king probed him in various ways, "Are you one of the devas, a siddha or a great devotee? Or are you deaf or dumb?"

After some time, Jayadeva Swami returning to normalcy from his absorption and opened his eyes. Then he answered, "O king! Why did you disturb my state? I am none of the virtuous men you allude to.

I am merely a poor brahmin and a low-minded person. I got into this state because of my own destiny. The great blemishless Lord Rama adored by devotees incarnated out of compassion in this region. Yet, He underwent untold difficulties by a quirk of fate. Lord Shankara, the Lord of the universe roamed in the world like a vagabond afflicted by brahmahatya, the sin of killing a brahmin. My destiny alone is responsible for this condition. It is the will of the Lord, you may call it fate, which has wrought this dismemberment on me when I was in Samadhi. Kindly leave me here and return to your kingdom. O king! Don't get agitated by this sight. The hands and legs urge man to indulge in sinful acts of harming and killing. It is well that they have been cut off, saving me from prospective sins. Whoever did it has rendered me a great service. The hands and feet are the agents by which violence is wrought on other creatures. Haven't you heard of how Jada Bharata jumped this way and that way while carrying the palanquin to avoid crushing small insects underfoot, thus infuriating the king who was sitting inside? Intelligent people will never take the body for oneself. I must thank them for weaning my mind away from the seen and fixing it on the Seer. Don't persuade me to go with you. Living in the midst of crowds makes the mind restless. Solitude is most conducive to communion with God."

Thus he spoke to the king in a kind and courteous voice and relapsed into absorption, closing his lotus eyes and cleaving to the gracious Presence within.

The king's heart melted with love on hearing the nectar-like words of the Sant. He was puzzled and a searing pain consumed his heart, "Alas! I shudder to see that such a terrible thing has taken place under my rule. O Siva! What kind of atrocity has been perpetrated by the wicked, causing indescribable torment to this noble person? How can I undo this harm, O Lord? It doesn't augur well that such misfortune should befall great souls in my kingdom."

The king shed tears of sorrow, circumambulated the Sant with reverence and laid himself in full prostration before him. Then getting up, he held the Swami in loving embrace. His body shook with sorrow at the sight of the crippled form of the Mahatma. Taking him as his Ishta, Lord Siva himself, the king glorified him, "O great being! You are indeed the dearest of the dear, rarest of the rare and most glorious among the glorious! How can I return to my kingdom leaving you

behind in this condition? You must be my favourite deity Lord Siva himself who has come in this form to bless me. O King of renunciation, the dancing Lord! Your forehead adorned with white sacred ash, Your body decorated with snakes and Your head bearing the holy Ganga, You present an enchanting sight to Your devotees. O pure One, eternal Truth, Unblemished, Indestructible! O Consumer of the Kalakuta poison, Sustainer of all beings in the universe, Source of all welfare, the Beginningless and Endless, Destroyer of worldly impressions! O Uplifter, You reside in Chidambaram, the space-consciousness, and also as the Preceptor in the cave of our hearts. You are the Bestower of liberation and eternal Bliss! You are indeed my beloved Siva who has come to shower Your grace on me!”

Turning to his retinue, the king said, “Behold the exalted Guru who has come to bestow the fortune of His grace on us. Nothing will be lacking for us in our life any more.” Then he ordered the ministers to convey the Swami gently in the palanquin to his palace.

Jayadeva Swami was settled in the palace with all comforts and the king arranged for treatment of his wounds. He served the Mahatma day and night with great care. He organised his own daily routine in such a way as to be conducive to the utmost expression of his love and service to the Sant. He remained in the company of Jayadeva Swami so much that it appeared as if both were like life and body, needle and thread, milk and water, eye and the eyelids, and ocean and its waves.

The king feasting his eyes on the holy personage of the Sant and then falling at his feet in joy would express his yearning, now and then, to renounce the kingly life and take to meditation. He felt that everything was a passing show and there was no point in continuing to wallow in delusion. One day, he made obeisance to the preceptor and implored him, “O uplifter! Please be compassionate and show me the way out of this material existence. How long am I to wallow in this mire? When will the eternal blissful nature be revealed in me? What avail is it whether one eats sumptuous delicacies or partakes of meagre alms, wears rich attires or remains in tattered clothes, sleeps on soft fragrant beds or lies down on mud and stones, rules over other kings as the supreme monarch or serves as a menial servant, or lives in luxury and comfort or toils like the bull going round and round the oil-presser endlessly, so long as one has not tasted the nectar of the Self? The state of a liberated one who has learnt about the ultimate

goal, the Beyond, and by renouncing everything has sought the final Abode, and whose being is permeated by bliss, is beyond compare, even if he begs his alms going from house to house, sleeps on the rough ground and endures all sufferings like you with equanimity, and transcending all thoughts, slaying the devil of the mind, wanders like a madcap, oblivious of the body and world. Please be gracious and enable me to abide steadfast in the blissful Self.”

The Sant pouring his love through the shining orbs of his eyes said to him, “O king who is dear to citizens of Krauncha! Will it be of any use to give up the householder’s life and change into the robes of a sannyasi while clinging tightly to the sense of ‘I and mine’? By merely ridding yourself of the vexatious responsibilities of family and kingdom, can you conquer the internal enemies? Without dying to the lower self, can the Lamp of the heart be lit or can the Light of knowledge dawn? Service to the sadhus will earn you the eligibility, grace, abundance and auspiciousness. By rendering loving service to the liberated ones, you will attain all glory. While being in the world, perform your duties as a king dispassionately without arrogance and egoism. Be a householder outwardly, like me, and remain detached within.” ▲

Choices

Suresh Kailash

In this world of forever forking paths,
Who decides which one to take,
Is it free will or is it fate?

Never will there be an end to this debate,
So, boldly forward I make my way,
In each step, keeping my faith.

For, being intent now on returning home,
It matters not what choice I make,
My feet will be guided by grace.

Bhagavad Gita Sara

The Essence of the Gita

SWAMI SHANTANANDA PURI
COMPILED AND EDITED BY
SWAMI SADASIVANANDA GIRI

Introduction to *Bhagavad Gītā*

Early in the year of 2006, during the weeks that lead up to *Mahā Śivarātri*, Swami Shantananda Puri of Vasistha Guha gave a long series of lectures on the 42 verses from the *Bhagavad Gītā* that Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi selected to portray the ‘essence or Sara’ of the entire 700 verses spoken to Arjuna by Lord Krishna. These lectures were recorded and transcribed, then edited to render the sentence structure more cohesive.

Contained in this work are many of the most remarkable aspects of spiritual instruction ever shown in the vast collection of commentaries on the *Gītā*. Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi has beautifully selected and arranged these slokas that point the reader to the very essence of what has come to be known as the cream of the Upanishads — the *Srimad Bhagavad Gītā*. He has done so in a way that approaches each major teaching of the Lord systemically from all three *mārgas* or ways. Bhagavan Ramana has shone that in essence the Lord has instructed

Swami Shantanada (1928 - 2014) was a scholar and saint, and above all, a lover of God. He was a disciple of Swami Purushottamananda at Vasistha Guha and later in life spent many years in residence at Sri Ramanasramam. There are a substantial number of books available derived from his spiritual talks.

Arjuna in the Way of Liberation according to all three of the Karma, Bhakti and *Jñāna mārgas*. Thus with perfect clarity Sri Ramana has shed abundant light on the darkness of philosophical squabbling which argues that the *Gītā* is a work of ‘this or that’ *mārga* alone. Now in truth, this Bible of Sanatana Dharma can be seen as a synthesis of all *mārgas*, into essentially what should be called the ‘Lord’s *Mārga*’.

“In the *Bhagavad Gītā* it is said that it is the nature of the mind to wander. One must bring one’s thoughts to bear on God. By long practise the mind is controlled and made steady.”

Introduction to *Bhagavad Gītā Sāra*

The *Bhagavad Gītā Sāra* is Sri Ramana Maharshi’s selection of 42 slokas out of the entire 700 *ślokas* of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*. The first point is, “What do you mean by the *Bhagavad Gītā*?” The term tells you what is going to be told in this book and who is the author. The samasaya of the word *Bhagavad Gītā* can be two-fold. The first is the common rendering, *Bhagavad Gītā*. The second is *Bhagavatāha Gītā* or *Bhagavatam Gītā*. *Gītā* means a song, a melodious song. Why?

When a subject is very difficult to grasp, or when the subject is very complex, the style of presentation used should be appealing to the mind. Otherwise, the mind of the listener tends to become distracted and drowsy. If someone sings, it is naturally very appealing to the heart. Therefore, even if the mind finds it dry, the heart will appreciate it. And that is why the *Gītā* is in poetry. And a second reason is that the vast majority of these *ślokas* are in *Arasthu Chanda* or metred verse. *Chanda* is the limiting of the number of syllables in each line.

In prose, one can express a single idea in an enormous number of pages. There is virtually no limit to the length of that style of writing. But in poetry, the number of words and sentences are strictly limited. The *Chandas* are of various styles, and in the *Bhagavad Gītā* the type of *Chanda* used is the *Arasthu Chanda*. In this style of *Chanda* eight syllables are used for each of the four lines encompassing every verse. Thus, there are 32 syllables assigned to over 90% of all the verses found in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. These syllables are further characterised by their restricted length of intonation. For instance, in this *Chanda* the fifth, seventh and ninth syllables are designated to be pronounced in a short form. These rules of length and pronunciation of individual syllables not only enables the verse to be sung melodiously, but also serves as a strict limitation on the metre and melody.

The idea is this; if you want to catch something that is vast and infinite, you should take a finite vessel, a limited vessel. If you take an unlimited thing, you simply will not catch it. So, when you are trying to grasp the Lord who is vast and infinite, you require a vessel that is limited by the number of words and style of its pronunciation. It is for this reason that poetry is used. And not only poetry, the metre must be sung, for it is a ‘*Gītā*’.

At first glance, a contrast is noted, the battlefield, a place of violence, is described in short metre poetry. What is described is a violent place, a place where the very violence is in the blood of the Warriors. When violence is in the blood, you cannot think of what is right and what is wrong. So for that purpose, the description has to be cooled down. Poetry and music are the best means to cool your senses. The Lord knows that if a description of the “battlefield of the mind” is set in prose, Arjuna (or us, the listeners) will not understand. But the moment the Lord begins to sing, his mind will become calm, the tension will go. This is the means the Lord employs to divert the listener from his tension, and therefore to acquire his attention, that he may attend to Bhagavan’s words. It is for this reason that the *Bhagavad Gītā* is sung. So, ‘*Bhagavatam Gītām*’ means firstly, that the Lord himself is the author. Secondly, the Lord is singing of his own Divine consciousness, and showing the way to approach and find It. Therefore, the contents are Bhagavan and the author is Bhagavan. Who can better be able to tell of Bhagavan, than Bhagavan himself? He is so infinite; no finite person, however great a Sage he may be, will be able to understand Him in full. When the Lord tells, “This is what I am, and this is a method to approach Me”, it will be the most objective description, and it will be complete in full. There will not be any ground for doubt or objection.

And finally, one will be told what they will get out of it. One will become Srimān; you will become full of Lakshmi. You will possess all eight qualities of Aṣṭa Lakshmi. Therefore, the Lord is saying that if one comprehends in full, and takes the directions into practice, finally Mokṣa Lakshmi will be theirs. You will be bestowed with that Grace and become Srimad, One.

The Wise Grieve Not

From Shankara’s most highly acclaimed commentary on the *Gītā* up to the present day, most of the great Mahatmas have begun their

commentaries with the 11th verse of the second chapter, when the Lord first spoke to Arjuna:

*aśocyānanvaśocastvaṃ prajñāvādāmśca bhāṣase |
gatāsūnagatāsūmśca nānuśocanti paṇḍitāḥ || 2-11||*

You are grieving over those who are not fit to be grieved for, though you speak words like a man of great wisdom. For the wise grieve neither over the living nor over the dead.

The Lord was declaring the basic foolish error in Arjuna's reasoning by making him understand that he was talking all high philosophy without knowing what was what. The Lord declared the truth that Arjuna was not having pity for those who were arrayed in battle against him, but rather it was self-pity.

A man of philosophy does not bother if a man is dead or alive, for both are useless. It is with this teaching that the Lord Sri Krishna is going to start. But Bhagavan Sri Ramana is dutifully going to start with the very first verse of the second chapter because he wanted to show the purpose of the entire *Gītā*.

Qualified to Hear God Sing

In any text on Vedanta, the first verse should be able to say four important things about the text. The four are; first, who is fit to read this book? For instance, children without the developed ability to properly understand should not read this book. They are not *Adhikāri*. *Adhikāri* is a very important term in Vedanta; it means 'the qualified one, the one who is fit for this particular purpose'. So, the first thing is; who is the one who is fit to hear the narration concerning Bhagavan?

Therefore, the first thing told, the first verse chosen by Sri Ramana, declares who is the *Adhikāri*. The *Adhikāri* is literally described in the first verse of Chapter two:

Sanjaya uvācha:

*taṃ tathā kṛpayāviṣṭamaśrupūrṇākulekṣaṇam |
viṣīdantamidam vākyamuvāca madhusūdanaḥ || 2-1||*

Sanjaya said:

To him thus overcome with pity, despairing,
Whose eyes were filled with tears, and downcast,
Madhusūdana (Lord Krishna) spoke these words.

First before we begin, there is a beautiful thing that should be explained. The *Bhagavad Gītā* forms part of the *Bhīṣma Parva* of the

entire *Mahabharata*, which consists of one lakh slokas. Nowadays, when we count it comes to only 97,000 slokas. The full one lakh does not come, but still, we call it Ekalakshatma Kamyatma.

The Light and the Truth of God

The term *Mahābhārata* itself denotes a spiritual meaning. What is the spiritual meaning of *Bhārata*? *Bhārata* is the name of that *Purāna*, and also the name of India. People have said that the name is derived from the name of the King ruling ancient India. But then we ask what was the name of the land before that king's incarnation? There would have been thousands of kings, why should the name of that one be taken for the name of the entire country?

Mahābhārata means that which contains the entire wisdom. The wisdom means the *jñāna*, not only of the Lord, but the *jñāna* of this world also. *Bhārata* is derived from the root "Bha" meaning light; and light means knowledge.

Whenever you do not understand a passage of scripture, you ask: "Can you throw some light on this, I do not understand it?" So light means knowledge only. It is only metaphorically referred to as light. 'Bha' is the root, *bhātī* means 'it shines', *bhāmi* means 'I shine', *bhāsi* means 'you shine'. So, *bhasa* is the light that comes out. Therefore, '*bhārata*' is the one who is fully engaged in that knowledge, solely wanting the knowledge of the Lord.

The *Upanishads* were being taught perhaps 5,000 to 6,000 years back in India. It is believed that at that time there was no other place in the world that equalled that semblance of civilisation. While the world outside India was mainly inhabited by non-evolved "cave dwelling" civilisations, concerned mainly with the external effort of preservation of the body, India's inhabitants were striving to enter the 'cave of the heart' and realise the internal Divinity of their True Nature. And so the term '*Bhārata*' came to India itself because:

Bhayam ritaha bharataha bhayam ritam bharatam

You see because *ritam* means *napamsam linga*, we are talking of a book, and *rita* means we are talking of the people. So as far as the book is concerned — '*bhayam ritam*', it is steeped in the supreme knowledge and thus it is called '*Bhārata*'. The entire book is supposed to be knowledge, and that knowledge has been brought to the mind of the people of India in this portion called the *Bhagavad Gītā*.

Dhṛtarāṣṭra went before Vyasa, who said: “Here is my disciple who will relay all of the events of the battle though you yourself have no eyes to watch.” Thus Sanjaya was brought before Dhṛtarāṣṭra. What is ‘Sanjaya’?

Sanyuktijanaḥ sanjayaḥ

It means the ‘one who knows how to succeed’. Later we are going to see that the entire *Bhagavad Gītā* is about how to be successful in battle. True success is not necessarily winning in the battle and subjugating the other party, not at all. You may lose the battle, and you may still succeed. Success means expertise, the kushalata, fighting the battle without anger, without any recrimination, without revenge and fighting by surrendering oneself and the work of fighting and the final result to the Lord. And this is: *Yogakarma sukamsha...*

Skilful Karma

What is the best way of doing any Karma? Whatever karma you do is going to involve you in birth and death again. You do good things, you give to Swamijis, you give to orphanages, you may build a hundred hospitals and you must get the result out of it. So therefore, you must take another birth. So you may be born as a rich man’s son, but then you do what you like and thus accumulate papas and then you take another birth of ill fortune.

Then you do more good things and you are again born into fortune. Thus, you will go on from birth to death to birth to death, on and on. You are not going to stop; you are not going to get *mokṣa* out of it. You will be tempted to do work because you have Vasanas within. Thus, you will not be able to remain without work.

The right way to work must be known. Whatever you do, you must say to the Lord: “You are doing it, I am doing nothing!” All is being dedicated to the Lord. “O Lord, because You are making me do it, thus I am doing it, I do not want the result of it”. I am preparing for the examination because my father wants it, I do not care if I pass or fail. So when you disclaim the doership saying: “I am not doing this work, it is all being done by God”, the result will go to somebody else, the result will not come to you. Otherwise, the papas and *punyas* come to you.

So the best way of doing a work is to do it without taking the credit for it. You may build a school and receive a letter of praise from the

President for the work, which you frame and place at home for all to see. But if the President writes and reprimands you for terrifically shabby work, you don't frame that at all. You are careful that the praise comes to you, but the blame is avoided like the plague. You will give a thousand excuses that you were unable to get the proper cement and there was no water for curing it. The blame you will spread as thin as ice, the credit to will hoard like the most precious jewels. This is what happens. When we completely surrender all of the work to God, all of the results are His as well. That is the best and most expert way of doing any karma. Any other way you are going to get entangled either in the *punya* or the *pāpa*, resulting in other births.

Befriending Dharma, the Eternal Rhythm

So, in this entire *Mahābhārata*, this is mainly the wisdom which is going to be expounded. To accomplish this, Sanjaya was given the power to see the entire war, with the ability to relate the events that were happening in any order, whether in the past or into the future. Sanjaya was also given the power to know the thoughts of those involved, as well as the outcome of every battle. But poor fellow Dhṛtarāṣṭra did not avail himself to these God given powers. Not only that, the blind king Dhṛtarāṣṭra was very confident at the outset of the war. He had almost double the number of warriors than the Pāṇḍavas. And his General Bhīṣma had never been conquered in battle. Bhīṣma even overcame his own Guru, Paraśurāma, who himself was up to then invincible. The blind King Dhṛtarāṣṭra symbolised the ego blinded by ignorance and thus gave no concern to the consequences of actions. He simply told his army to go into battle and at the time of their victory to return and inform him. His blindness was deadly, because he did not understand that though you seem to have everything on your side, you may lose if you do not have Dharma on your side. He failed to comprehend that what really protects you is love towards God, and that springs forth from God.

God's only begotten child is Dharma itself. God has caused His child to manifest in Vedānta. Unless we follow the Dharma, we can never win.

yato dharmah tato jayah

The code of Dharma is the rule of law, the Dharma yudha, even for this greatest of battles. In the morning a signal was sounded and

the fighting would begin. At sundown the signal would again sound and the fighting would cease. So early in the morning Yudhiṣṭhira, the chief of the Pāṇḍavas (the Dharmaputra) would go after his bath to Gangaji, his cousin, and do *namasakar* to her. And she would reply: “yato dharmah tato jayah”, meaning: “Wherever there is dharma, justice and righteousness, there is victory. Wherever there is *adharm*a, there will be no success.” This was of major importance, for it is by this understanding that spiritual success is attained.

Bhagavad Gita Sara The Essence of the Gita

Sanjaya said:

To him who was thus overcome
By pity, and whose eyes were filled
With tears, downcast and despairing,
Madhusudana spoke these words: v.2:1 (1)

The Holy Lord said:
This body is known as the Field,
And he who knows it thus is called
The Knower of the Field by those
Who know of both Field and Knower. v.13:1 (2)

Know Me also, O Bharata,
To be the Knower in all Fields.
The knowledge of Field and Knower
I consider as the knowledge. v.13:2 (3)

I am the Self abiding in
The Heart of all beings; I am
The beginning, the middle, and
Also the end of all beings. v.10:20 (4)

Of that which is born, death is sure,
Of that which is dead, birth is sure.
Over the unavoidable,
Therefore you never should lament. v.2:27 (5)

Neither is the Self slain, nor yet does it die,
 Nor having been will it e'er come not to be,
 Birthless, eternal, perpetu'l, primeval,
 It is not slain whene'er the body is slain. v.2:20 (6)

This Self cannot be cut, nor burnt,
 Nor wetted, nor dried: 'tis changeless,
 All-pervading and unmoving,
 Immovable, eternal Self. v.2:24 (7)

That by Which all is pervaded —
 Know That is indestructible.
 There is none with the power to
 Destroy the Imperishable. v.2:17 (8)

The unreal never comes to be,
 The real does never cease to be.
 The certainty of both of these
 Is known to those who see the truth. v.2:16 (9)

As the all-pervading ether,
 Through subtlety is not tainted,
 The Self seated in the body
 Is not tainted in any case. v.13:33 (10)

That the sun illuminates not,
 There shines neither the moon nor fire;
 For that is My Supreme Abode,
 Going whither they return not. v.15:6 (11)

The unmanifest, eternal,
 Is declared as the Supreme Goal,
 Attaining Which they return not.
 This is My supreme dwelling place. v.8:21 (12)

Without pride, delusion — attachment conquered —
 Dwelling in the Supreme Self, without desires,
 Freed from the dualities — pleasure and pain —
 The undeluded reach that eternal Goal. v.15:5 (13)

MOUNTAIN PATH

He who sets aside the counsels
Of scriptures from desire's impulse,
Attains not unto perfection,
Nor happiness, nor Goal Supreme. v.16:23 (14)

The one who truly sees is he
Whoever sees the Supreme Lord
Existing equally in all
Beings, deathless in the dying. v.13:27 (15)

By single-minded devotion
I may be known in this true form,
Seen in reality, also
Entered into, Scorcher of Foes. v.11:54 (16)

Each one's faith is according to
His natural disposition.
Yea, the man consists of his faith;
In truth, he is what his faith is. v.17:3 (17)

The man of faith, and devoted,
And the master of his senses,
Attains this knowledge, and having
Attained quickly finds Supreme Peace. v.4:39 (18)

To them, the constantly steadfast,
Worshipping Me with affection,
I bestow the buddhi-yoga
By which they shall come unto Me. v.10:10 (19)

Out of compassion for them, I,
Abiding in their hearts, destroy
The darkness born of ignorance
By the shining lamp of knowledge. v.10:11 (20)

But those whose ignorance has been
Destroyed by knowledge of the Self —

That knowledge of theirs, like the sun,
Reveals then the Supreme Brahman. v.5:16 (21)

Above the body are senses;
Above the senses is the mind;
Above the mind is intellect;
Above the intellect: the Self. v.3:42 (22)

Thus, knowing Him Who is above
The intellect, and restraining
The self by the Self, then destroy
That enemy, that foe: desire. v.3:43 (23)

As fire reduces wood to ash,
In the same way, O Arjuna,
The fire of knowledge does reduce
To ashes all karma — know this. v.4:37 (24)

Whose undertakings are devoid
Of plan and desire for results,
Whose actions are burnt in the fire
Of knowledge — him the wise call wise. v.4:19 (25)

Released from desire and anger,
With thoughts restrained, those ascetics
Who know the Self, find very near
The bliss of Brahma-nirvana. v.5:26 (26)

With intellect set in patience,
With the mind fastened on the Self,
He gains quietude by degrees:
Let him not think of anything. v.6:25 (27)

Whenever the unsteady mind,
Moving here and there, wanders off,
He should subdue and hold it back —
Direct it to the Self's control. v.6:26 (28)

MOUNTAIN PATH

Controlling sense, mind, intellect;
With moksha as the supreme goal;
Freed from desire, fear, and anger:
Such a sage is forever free. v.5:28 (29)

He, disciplined by yoga, sees
The Self present in all beings,
And all beings within the Self.
He sees the same Self at all times. v.6:29 (30)

Those who direct their thoughts to Me,
Worshipping Me with steadfast mind,
For them I secure what they lack
And preserve that which they possess. v.9:22 (31)

Of them, the wise man, e'er steadfast,
Devoted to the One, excels;
Supremely dear am I to him,
And he is dear to Me, as well. v.7:17 (32)

At the end of his many births
The wise man takes refuge in Me.
He knows: 'All is Vasudeva'.
How very rare is that great soul! v.7:19 (33)

When he completely casts away
All the desires of the mind,
His self, satisfied by the Self,
He is called 'of steady wisdom'. v.2:55 (34)

He who abandons all desires
Attains peace, acts free from longing,
Indifferent to possessions
And free from all egotism. v.2:71 (35)

He who agitates not the world,
And whom the world agitates not,
Who is freed from joy, envy, fear,
And worry – he is dear to Me. v.12:15 (36)

The same in honour and disgrace,
 The same to friend and enemy,
 Renouncing all undertakings –
 He has gone beyond the Gunas. v.14:25 (37)

He who is content in the Self,
 Who is satisfied in the Self,
 Who is pleased only in the Self:
 For him there is no need to act. v.3:17 (38)

He has nothing to gain by acts;
 Nothing to gain by inaction;
 And no need of any being
 For any purpose soever. v.3:18 (39)

Content with what comes unbidden,
 Beyond duality, envy,
 The same in success or failure,
 E'en though acting, he is not bound. v.4:22 (40)

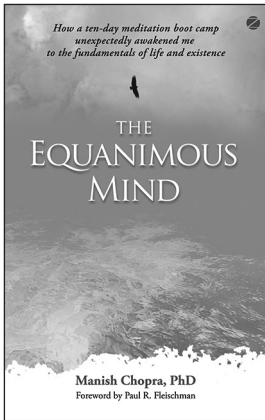
O Arjuna, the Lord dwells in
 The Hearts of all beings, causing
 Them by His Maya to revolve
 As if mounted on a machine. v.18:61 (41)

O Bharata, with all your heart
 Take refuge in Him; and you shall
 Surely attain unto supreme
 Peace and the eternal abode. v.18:62 (42)

Om Tat Sat

He, Who seated in Arjuna's car,
 Spoke the Gospel to Arjuna
 And removed his distress, may that
 Embodiment of Grace save us! ▲

BOOK REVIEWS



THE EQUANIMOUS MIND. Manish Chopra. Zen Publications. pp.292, Rs.399. ISBN: 978-8195269235.

A ten day retreat in a *Vipassanā* centre (of S.N. Goenka) across the world require you to visit a simple centre and live by the following rules: complete silence, no reading or writing materials, no electronic items, be vegetarian and completely segregated from the opposite gender. While this sounds very hard, especially for a westerner, there are millions who have taken this course. The course is entirely free and even boarding and lodging are not charged. Therefore, it is entirely one to oneself to be free for ten consecutive days without contacts with the outside world and register in one of these courses. The meditation course is like a boot camp as it requires you to wake up by 4 am and go to bed by 9:30 pm and meditate nearly eight hours during the day. Though the *Vipassanā* meditation is based on Buddhist teaching, the practice does not require you to follow a specific religion.

Buddha supposedly taught two primary techniques: *Samatha*, which is calm abiding that steadies and concentrates the mind; *Vipassanā* is insight, which enables one to explore and discern. The author does not write at all about the background of *Vipassanā*, its philosophy or method and why it is considered to be important in mind training. Further, the book does not even talk about advanced courses offered by the same Goenka's group or the meditation techniques that are practised at higher levels. The author also does not provide any detail that in Buddhist literature, this is the first step towards *nirvāṇa*. Buddhism isn't about being good and doing good, it is not having less vices or having lower stress. Those are just beneficial side effects of seeing reality for what it is, which is *nirvāṇa*. Ultimately, these teachings are about freeing oneself from the cycle of rebirth, and not just about making the *samsāra* cozier. The side benefit of these teachings is that it provides practical instructions for developing peace

of mind, living in harmony with others with compassion, how to be happy without depending on the material benefits, and how to feel sadness without wallowing in the world but these are not the final destinations. Taking this course is akin to the high school graduation, while one can study further to get a doctoral degree. Though one will certainly benefit from a high school diploma, the benefit from a doctoral degree is naturally much higher. Of course, there are indeed many other books that deal with these topics in great detail.

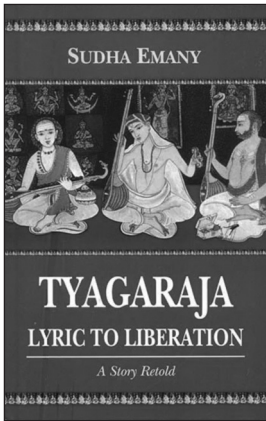
Instead, this book is a retelling of Chopra's personal experience. There are, again, several blogs that describe their ten-day retreat experience in quite some detail but they are not so detailed that a book can be written based on it! Further, as the author constantly reminds us, he is a high-functioning consultant in a highly competitive industry, and has to deal with stress and concentration everyday. This book is primarily meant for people like the author, who are not regular meditators but those who are considering taking the course and leery of what they will go through.

The book primarily has ten chapters with each chapter providing the details of that day. It is amazing that the author was able to recall the experience of all ten days so accurately especially since no notebooks or writing pads are allowed. Chopra suggests that by the end he had greater mental clarity, decreased drinking, increased mental capacity etc. As with every other skill, mastering meditation takes time and effort. Further, there is the need of a regular practise. Just as one cannot become a proficient violinist without a regular practise routine, it is unreasonable to expect the full rewards of meditation without daily practise. Therefore, it is not just attending the retreat but continuous practise everyday thereafter that really improves the mind.

The food offered during the retreat is presented in some detail but that is applicable only for people taking the course in Maharashtra as the food offered in these courses vary depending on the region. Similarly, the air conditioned rooms and laundry service provided are exclusive to the executive course taken by the author. Similarly, he wonders about the cost of "cheap" laundry and other items in India forgetting that it appears cheap only because he has been earning in dollars. The constant references to stress he encountered while advising CEOs, the lifestyle that requires social drinking are more of

that of an extremely affluent person in India and not a layperson. This is understandable as the author is settled in USA and only visits India once or twice a year. Simply put, this book is meant for a certain class of people who are considering taking the course and wish to meditate for sometime every day. The book will be fairly useful to learn on how it is like to sit for ten days and what trials and tribulations one may need to pass through during the course. The book may not be interesting to those who have no plans of taking the course.

— M. Giridhar



A COMPANION TO TYAGARAJA LYRIC TO LIBERATION By Sudha Emany. Motilal Banarsidass Publications, New Delhi. pp.219, Rs.525. ISBN: 978-93-91759-78-0 (HB)

We reviewed Volume One of the learned author's book on the same subject a few issues ago and it is a pleasure to say a few words on what is more of a very good thing.

As the author, Sudha says, [though the great composer Tyagaraja lived spanning eighty years of the 17th and 18th centuries (there were eyewitnesses of his departure who were alive in the early years of the 19th century)] no exact count of his amazingly beautiful compositions is available. Some believe that he composed 24,000 songs which is very unlikely for he had very capable students around him who wrote down as the master sang and they were not the kind to let even one song pass into oblivion. So, Sudha rightly concludes that the 700 songs which are available to this day represent more or less his actual output. What rare gems are these 700!

Out of these gems, Sudha Emani reproduced 148 songs in original Telugu in Roman transliteration, meaning in English and her perceptive comments. We saw the wide gamut of emotions they covered — the undivided devotion to Lord Rama the divine incarnate being the main *leitmotif*.

In Volume Two under review, the author adds another 168 gems chosen and arranged under three themes, viz. Morals, Moods and Meditations. Tyagaraja was a highly ethical man and set a great store

by the purity of conduct and character. He is very harsh on hypocrisy. In his songs, though he seems to chastise people of lax morals, he is not being self-righteous in attacking any individuals. To him, music is barren if bereft of purity of thought and deep devotion. Music is not for diversion but for spiritual liberation through total surrender to the Lord, in his case Lord Rama.

In the section on Moods, the author shows how the matchless saint-composer has sung on Rama under diverse circumstances. In her own words, he has sung when “angry, reproachful, apologetic, critical, frivolous, sensuous and desperate but not for one moment straying from the strictest devotion to Him.” She adds “The changing Moods are meant to represent the attitudes of people in general who can redeem themselves through surrender to God.”

The third section is full of songs that are informed by a quiescent self-absorbed mood which Sudha calls meditation. Take for example the song *Bhajana seya maargamu* in *Raga Narayani* where he asks Rama the be-all and end-all of existence to teach us how to worship Him properly. Is that not meditation pure and simple?

Those who know Carnatic Music can go on humming the songs in this collection they know as they turn the pages and when the meaning is given in flawless simple, modern English, it serves to enhance highly one’s enjoyment.

— T.V. Ganamurthy



A Few Advaitic And Zen Hi Coo V

Kevan Myers

Seeking for himself
he looked all around
but found nothing else

Can the silence of the wood
be understood
by the human mind?

ASHRAM BULLETIN

Karthikai Deepam Festival

This year, the Karthikai Deepam Festival began with a flag hoisting ceremony at Sri Arunachaleswara Temple, between 5.30 and 7 am on Sunday, the 27th November. On Tuesday, December 6th, the sacred Maha Deepam was lit at 6 PM at the Mountain peak. Only 2500 devotees were allowed to climb the 2668 feet Hill to witness the Maha Deepam. Earlier, Bharani Deepam was lit in the temple at 4 am followed by the processions of Vinayakar, Murugar, Arunachaleswarar, Unnamulai Amman and Chandikeswarar around the temple. The festival concluded with the 3-day Theppam Utsavam and the Chandikeswarar Utsavam on December 10.

Post Covid Pandemic, Tiruvannamalai is back to its best. For the last 2 years, due to the pandemic, the festival was held inside the temple premises and this year, it was held with much grandeur. Over 30 Lakhs devotees, from India and foreign countries, attended this grand occasion. Residents of the temple town also lit earthen lamps at their homes.

Earlier, for the first time, the four massive and majestic towers of Arunachaleswara Temple had a water wash to appear spic and span during the festival.

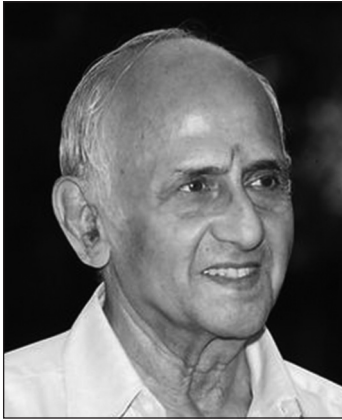
At Sri Ramanasramam, a special *abhishekam*, decoration and Vedic recitation were held at Bhagavan's Shrine. At 6 o'clock in the evening, when the lamp was seen at the top of the hill, with the *slogan* 'Annamalaikku Arohara', a lamp was lit in front of the Bhagavan's Shrine and *Aksharamanamalai Parayanam* began.

Obituaries

Smt Prema Srinivasan was born in 1932. She married T.S. Srinivasan, the youngest son of the TVS Group founder, T. V. Sundaram Iyengar. She studied Vaishnava ritual, earned a Ph.D. in children's literature, and later took an advanced degree in Anthropology at Columbia University. She wrote and published numerous books, including a novel for children entitled *Treasure Hunters*, a



cookbook on traditional south Indian cuisine, *Pure Vegetarian Cookbook*. She also pursued her unquenchable spiritual longing and came regularly to Sri Ramanasramam. In 1988, she helped upgrade the Ashram kitchen by bringing in industrial gas cookers, industrial-scale appliances to meet the cooking demands of the Ashram. She also introduced machine milking into the Ashram *gosala*. As founder of the Madras Environmental Society, Prema worked closely with Bhagavan's grand-nephew, V.S. Mani, on Arunachala's reforestation. She was also actively involved with J. Krishnamurti and his Foundation. Premaji demonstrated grace, elegance, and sincerity in all her activities. Prema passed away suddenly on Sunday the 25th of September. She will be missed by all devotees who had the good fortune of knowing her. She is survived by two sons, two daughters, and grandchildren.



Sri Dwaraknath Reddy was born to a rural agricultural family in 1924 and spent his early years in Pulicherla Village, Chittoor District. In 1948, he graduated in chemical engineering at Louisiana State University (USA), and there had practical experience at a candy company in Chicago. Later, he and his father founded the Nutrine Confectionery Company, Pvt. Ltd., Chittoor. The company thrived under his care, but at the age of thirty-five, the tragic death of his wife led him to the basic existential questions about

creation and creator and the ultimate purpose of life. The successful family company gained through his sheer hard work, was handed over to the next generation and he dispersed his personal assets to charitable causes. He was drawn to the teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi. In 1983, he came and settled near Sri Ramanasramam and led the life of a seeker. For the following 40 years, he provided great support to seekers who benefitted not only from his numerous books but also from the direct support he provided them when a financial or medical crisis struck. For decades, Dwaraknath led a simple life and served mahatmas and ordinary devotees equally with the utmost humility.

At the age of 95, he suffered age-related issues but remained lucid throughout. His presence exuded inner peace and he bore his ailments

quietly with fortitude. Up till the very end, he was overflowing with affection and compassion for all who came into contact with him.

At 11 pm, on the 28th of September, Sri Dwaraknath was Absorbed in Arunachala. He will be missed by family members and Ramana devotees alike. He is survived by his son, three daughters, and his grandchildren.

Smt. Nagalakshmi Bama w/o of the late Sri S.Subramania Sastrigal of Manalurpet was born in 1936 and her father was a Vedic Pandit. In her 66 years of married life, she gave her fullest support to her husband for all his endeavours and achievements in his teaching profession and in Vedic and spiritual activities despite her own health issues. She assisted him in performing 65 anniversaries of her father-in-law with full devotion. She was always cordial to all relatives, neighbours, and also the students of her husband.

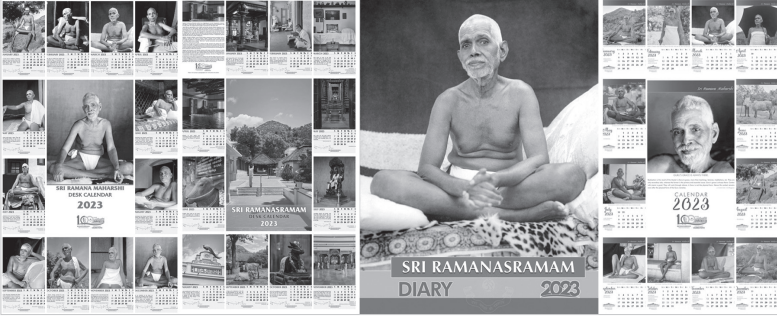
Due to her cooperation, Sastrigal was able to render sincere Vedic service at Ashram for many decades. She chanted *Aksharamanamalai* with her husband innumerable times and supported him in performing ashram homas. She also made it possible for her husband to participate in many of the *koti archanas* at Ashram in his retired life.

She melodiously sang many devotional songs including on Bhagavan like *Ramana Bhagavan Arulai Nambinen...*, and *Thavamani Dhanya...*, at the Samadhi. Her *satabhishekam* (80th birthday celebration) was held at the shrine of Bhagavan in 2009. Having led an exemplary life, Smt. Nagalakshmi attained the Lotus Feet of Sri Arunachala on the 1st of August (*nāga chaturthi* and *ādi pūram*) at Tiruvannamalai. She is survived by 2 sons and 2 daughters.

Sri Sundaramoorthy was born on 28th July 1952. He was known as 'Electrical Sundaram'. He first worked in the ashram in the early 1980s. Later, he took over the entire electrification and plumbing work and faithfully served in the Ashram for more than three decades. On coming to work in the morning, he could be seen quietly circumambulating Bhagavan's Samadhi or sitting quietly in meditation in Bhagavan's Old Hall. Soft-spoken and mild-mannered, he was a tireless worker loved by all who knew him and worked with him. He was an example of quiet, unassuming karma yoga. Sundaram retired five years ago due to failing health and convalesced at home with his family. After a long illness, Sundaram passed away on 13th November at the age of 70. He is survived by his wife, two daughters and his son, Senthil, who continues to serve the Ashram as an electrician. ▲

NOW AVAILABLE...

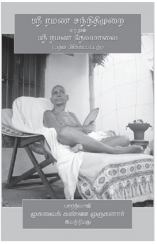
DIARY AND CALENDARS - 2023



The wall calendar 2023 has six sheets (12 pages) with photographs of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi. The special days in the ashram during the year are mentioned in the calendar. The calendar is approximately 16 inches in width and 23 inches in height. Price: ₹150.

Two desktop calendars are also available each containing six sheets (12 pages) — one having the photographs of the various Ashram Buildings (This collage of the photographs of the Ashram buildings is to commemorate the 100th year after the establishment of the Ashram), and the second having the photographs of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi. They are 6.5 inches in width and 10 inches in height and contain quotations for each month from Bhagavan's teachings. Price: ₹100 each.

Sri Ramanasramam Diary 2023 consists of 365 pages with quotations both in English and Tamil based on the teachings of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi and in addition, there are 12 full-page photographs of Bhagavan. Price: ₹300.



Sri Ramana Sannidhimurai Matrum Ramanadeva Malai — Split Version (Tamil) by Bharatvaji Mugavaik Kanna Muruganar. ISBN: 978-81-8288-301-7; pp. approx. 700; price: Yet to be announced. Sri Ramanasramam Centenary Celebration — Special Edition. There have been five previous editions of *Ramana Sannidhi Murai*. In this sixth edition, *Ramana Deva Malai* has been included as part of the book. The verses have been splitted for ease of chanting. In addition, the chanting of the verses has been recorded and is provided at our Ashram's website for free download through the following link. https://www.sriramanamaharshi.org/resource_centre/audio-2/sannidhi-murai-audio/

Online Bookstore



Sannidhimurai Audio

Available from: Sri Ramanasramam Book Depot, Sri Ramanasramam PO,
Tiruvannamalai 606603, Tamil Nadu, INDIA.

Also available online: <http://bookstore.sriramanamaharshi.org>
(Postage and packing charges extra).

D: Is the aforesaid Self-experience possible, even in the state of empirical existence, for the mind which has to perform functions in accordance with its *prarabdha* karma?

M: A brahmin may play various parts in a drama; yet the thought that he is a brahmin does not leave his mind. Similarly, when one is engaged in various empirical acts there should be the firm conviction ‘I am the Self’, without allowing the false idea ‘I am the body, etc.’ to rise. If the mind should stray away from its state, then immediately one should enquire, ‘Oh! Oh! We are not the body, etc. Who are we?’ and thus one should reinstate the mind in that pure state. The enquiry ‘Who am I?’ is the principal means for the removal of all misery and the attainment of the supreme bliss. When in this manner the mind subsides in its own state, Self-experience arises of its own accord, without any hindrance. Thereafter sensory pleasures and pains will not affect the mind. All phenomena will appear then, without attachment, like a dream. Never forgetting one’s plenary Self-experience is real devotion (*bhakti*), mind control (*yoga*), knowledge (*jnana*) and all other austerities. Thus state the sages.

— Sri Ramana Maharshi, *Self-Enquiry*, Section 12