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Ramana Ashtottaram

95. ओ हार्दविद्याप्रकाशकाय नमः

om hārdavidyāprakāśakāya namah

Prostration to the One who is the Revealer of the Light of the Heart, Revealer of Inner Awareness.

From very ancient times, the inner light, *Purusha* or Person, the ‘I-I’ shining in and as the Heart, had been identified as *Sat-Chit-Ananda*, Being-Awareness-Bliss. But the teaching was not precisely understood, nor was it widely taught or applied in practice. In *Ramana Gita*, *Supplement to the Forty Verses*, and many sections in *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Bhagavan has clarified, simplified and driven home the teaching that the Heart, Being-Awareness-Bliss and the ‘I’ are three concepts standing for one sole Reality. Bhagavan is the supremely direct and successful Teacher of this *Vidya* (knowledge), the identity of the *sphurti* of ‘I’ and the Heart as the seat of Being-Awareness-Bliss.

EDITORIAL

Aksharamanamalai

The Marital Garland of Letters

The conventional wisdom is that Bhagavan was the supreme jnani who existed in a rarefied world of uncompromising advaitic truths and our world of desires, fears and confusion was ignored as unreal and not worth any consideration. This is not so.

Bhagavan was a great lover of Arunachala. The sacred hill called him from an early age and after the death experience in Madurai he was not just drawn but was compelled by the power of Arunachala to be in its presence. Bhagavan was not only a jnani but also a bhakta. He saw no contradiction between the highest truths of non-duality and the sense of oneness with that supreme mystery exemplified in the mountain called Arunachala. It is a paradox but it is not an anomaly to any who have tasted even for a second the uplifting joy felt in its sacred sight.

Bhagavan did care about those who came to him for wisdom and solace. He did not dismiss the world as irrelevant and he did listen carefully to all who came and gave them equal attention, be it a pundit with an erudite question, a simple villager who thought he

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was a god and just wanted to gaze at him in awe or a child with a doll who wanted Bhagavan's love and attention. Nothing was too banal, nothing too small for his consideration. From the quality of the food in the dining hall to the subtle mannerisms of visitors Bhagavan was very much aware. Nothing escaped his all-seeing eye.

We should keep all this in mind in this, the year when we celebrate the centenary of the composition of *Aksharamanamalai*, 'The Marital Garland of Letters'.

During the years at Virupaksha Cave, a group of renunciates had gathered around Bhagavan and it was their custom to descend to the town and beg for their food. To make their presence known they would sing a traditional song with the refrain "Samba SadaSiva, Samba SadaSiva, Samba SadaSiva Hara Hara." Because of the respect in the town for the young sage who lived on the hill, householders would gladly give alms to the sadhus led by Palaniswami as they walked the streets. So successful were they that other sadhus formed their own group, blew a conch and strolled down the streets singing traditional praises of the Lord Siva. They did so a little earlier than the usual time when the devotees of Bhagavan descended the hill. Since the waiting householders were not able to differentiate between Bhagavan's devotees and the new group of sadhus who also sang in praise of Lord Siva, they gave freely to whoever came first and as a result there was little left when Bhagavan's devotees walked the streets in search of alms.

One of the disciples, Perumal Swami, then asked Bhagavan to compose a unique hymn that the townspeople could recognise as sung by his devotees. At first Bhagavan pointed out that there were innumerable songs in praise of Lord Siva that they could sing. But after persistent entreaties Bhagavan acceded to the request and composed a few lines similar to what they had sung before but with the refrain "Arunachala". Perumal expressed his disappointment that there was not more.

According to Devaraja Mudaliar, Bhagavan composed the hymn at Virupakshi Cave and while on his walks round Arunachala. It has become part of the lore that Bhagavan went by himself on *giri pradakshina* (walking around the hill). By chance he had with him some paper and a pencil. While walking he would stop every so

often and write down a verse in praise of Arunachala that came to him spontaneously in waves of ecstasy as he circled the hill. It was said tears filled his eyes, at times blinding him from the sheer elation of Arunachala's grace that was flooding his heart. Written into the verses was all the pain of separation we all feel in our hearts when parting from a beloved.

The title of the hymn is indicative of the theme. It is the song of the bride in search of the bridegroom. Bhagavan is the bride and Arunachala is the groom. The title in English is 'The Marital Garland of Letters' because it is an acrostic since each of its 108 verses begins with the consecutive letters of the Tamil alphabet.

He brought forth the unutterable pining of the soul for union with something higher and greater. In the 108 verses Bhagavan reveals the many authentic attitudes of devotion that envelop us in our love for the holy. The symbolism of the poem is extraordinarily rich with implications; so much so that there are multiple meanings in the imagery Bhagavan employs and no translation into another language could do justice to the original Tamil with its long history of mystical literature. The crystal clear elements of advaitic knowledge are so woven into the fabric of personal devotion that it enriches one who listens to the abundant flow of inspiration in the chant. Bhagavan's compassion is such that he totally identifies with the yearning devotee who seeks complete fulfilment by the effacement of individuality in the presence of something far greater than our minds can conceive. Though Bhagavan has transcended the limitations of the body-mind complex his graciousness does not allow him to forget us who are lost in our doubts and confusion. His hymn is evidence that he understands all our joys and pains on the rocky path, for he too has travelled the path and won through.

Arthur Osborne wrote: "Some devotees asked Sri Bhagavan the interpretation of some of the verses and he replied: 'You think it out and I will too. I didn't think while I was composing it; I just wrote as it came.' The poem became the great devotional inspiration of the devotees."¹

¹ Osborne, Arthur, *Ramana Maharshi and the Path of Self-Knowledge*, 1970. p.162.

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This spontaneous outpouring of love makes it very different from the methodical, introspective search of *atma vichara*. It is an eager love driven by an unquenchable desire for union with the object of its undivided devotion. The hymn expresses the soul's deepest yearning that cannot be articulated in cool, measured words. If anyone thinks that Bhagavan's dedication is hard as a rock, they should read this paean and know that his heart beats with a mystical love totally dedicated in will, emotion and thought, with no other purpose than absorption with the Beloved. This approach of love is more direct and more accessible for many than the subtle workings of the intellect intent on piercing the veil of ignorance.

One of the paradoxes we encounter on the spiritual path is the truth that we already are That, *Tat Tvam Asi*. If we already are at one with the Supreme by whatever name one may call it, why do we struggle? Why do we suffer? Since Brahman is One and in all things, both transcendent and immanent, to conceive of oneself as separate is an error. Yet, it is only when we see ourselves as separate, isolated, bereft of harmonious understanding that we reach out in order to worship god according to our individual temperaments. In our case, as followers of Sri Ramana Maharshi, it is sacred Arunachala that magnetises us with its glory and power. Arunachala is our gateway.

There is an exchange recorded in *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi* which addresses this conundrum of the limited physical form and the transcendental:

Dr. Syed asked: "I have been reading the *Five Hymns*. I find that the hymns are addressed to Arunachala by you. You are an Advaitin. How do you then address God as a separate Being?"

M.: The devotee, God and the Hymns are all the Self.

D.: But you are addressing God. You are specifying this Arunachala Hill as God.

M.: You can identify the Self with the body. Should not the devotee identify the Self with Arunachala?

D.: If Arunachala be the Self why should it be specially picked out among so many other hills? God is everywhere. Why do you specify Him as Arunachala?

M.: What has attracted you from Allahabad to this place? What has attracted all these people around?

D.: Sri Bhagavan.

M.: How was I attracted here? By Arunachala. The Power cannot be denied. Again Arunachala is within and not without. The Self is Arunachala.”²

The question for us now is how do we identify with Arunachala which is according to Bhagavan a physical manifestation of the Self. Bhagavan has shown us the way with ‘The Marital Garland of Letters’ for here is an offering of one’s body, heart and mind to the Supreme. The invocatory verse says: “Oh gracious Ganesa! Stretch forth Thy supporting hand that I may offer and adorn (sing to) my Lord Arunachala, the best of all bridegrooms, with a befitting bridal garland made of flowers of letters.”³ All we can offer to God are our prayers; nothing else is ours to give.

Bhagavan once humorously said in regard to ‘The Marital Garland of Letters’ that it “fed us for many years.”⁴ The never-fading garland can feed us too and with its repetition its meaning will become clear. From being a single halting moment this prayer becomes a continuous flow of heart-felt devotion. It not only becomes natural but revivifying. It is a joy and one becomes alive by obeying its voice. It reaches that place where no thought can enter for it is the heart, not the mind, that attains union with the Beloved. We realise in our gratitude that under the compassionate gaze of Arunachala Ramana our love cannot be denied. ▲

² Venkataramiah, M., (comp.), *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, 2009. Talk §273, p.239.

³ Kanakammal, T.R., *Commentary on Arunachala Stuti Panchakam and Upadesa Nun Malai*, 2009. p.31.

⁴ Mudaliar, Devaraja, *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, 2006. 9-12-45, p.67.

Old Hall in the 1930s

Gualtherus Mees

FROM THE ARCHIVES

Sri Ramana Maharshi

The Sage of Arunachala

GUALTHERUS MEES

This article was recently discovered in the Ashram Archives. It was written by Dutch scholar and was published in a Dutch journal Mensdenken Kosrnos, III No.3. in August 1939 at Deventer, Netherlands. Dr. Mees was a brilliant academic who had written a classic book on Hinduism, Dharma and Society. His magnum opus is The Revelation in the Wilderness, a three volume exposition on symbolism. He came to Bhagavan in 1936 at the age of thirty-three. He had taken many photographs of Bhagavan and the album is now in the Archives collection. We presume the English translation is by the author.

During the four years that I have been travelling in India, I have visited many Yogis and Sadhus, in villages and in jungles, sometimes even in towns, in all parts of this vast continent. When I heard of some man who was considered to be holy or wise, I always went to visit him, often to be disappointed, though occasionally to find what I had expected. Those that really mattered I always met by chance however, as the expression goes. To this rule Ramana Maharshi forms an exception. I suppose the Maharshi is the only one of the living Maharsis who does not mind leading a public life.

The sacrifice of this publicity must be enormous, though one has to remind oneself again and again that there is nothing which either troubles or disturbs him.

The life Maharshi leads would drive any other man mad within a short time. For, practically every moment of his existence he is a centre of public interest. Not a moment he is alone. It is the life of a sacred animal or a God.

After a sleep of some hours, which cannot be called sleep in the ordinary sense of the word, Maharshi gets up, goes to the simple kitchen of the Ashram and occupies himself for some hours in cutting and preparing the vegetables for the simple, of course purely vegetarian, meals of the community. In this work he is helped by others who happen to be awake at such an early hour. Half past six, after his bath, breakfast is taken, coffee with cakes made of rice flour. After that Maharshi sits practically all day on his couch in the hall of the Ashram, to leave it only for meals at eleven and at eight o'clock, and for the small walks he takes on the slopes of the sacred hill.

At sunrise and at sunset Brahmins of the orthodox Vedic school come to recite, while seated at the feet of the Sage, hymns from the Yajur-Veda. More correctly it may be described as a half-singing, half-reciting of the sacred hymns. It is a most impressive and solemn procedure.

All day visitors come and go, greeting Maharshi with divine honour by prostrating themselves on the floor at full length with hands folded above the head. These demonstrations of honour do not make any more impression on the Sage than ordinary greetings on any other person. It is the classical Indian tradition thus to honour sages, and the Maharshi leaves people complete freedom to express themselves as they please. The visitors sit for hours at the feet of the Maharshi in the hall, in which nothing else is found than the couch of the Sage and some book-cases. They meditate, sing religious songs, very often hymns in glory of Arunachala Shiva, and sometimes they ask Maharshi questions concerning religious or philosophical problems.

As a rule Maharshi is silent, but sometimes he may give long explanations, if he thinks that it can be of any use. And he is always

ready to speak some pleasant words to visitors, especially if children come to see him. Always he is normal and natural in his attitude and behaviour. I may say without the slightest hesitation that he is the most natural and unconstrained person I have had the benefit to know. Every pose is lacking completely. To use a conception of Analytic Psychology, he is a man without a persona. By the very fact that his attitude is not meant to impress, his personality makes such an overwhelming impression. Many Sadhus and Yogis want to convince their visitors and devotees of their wisdom, holiness or spiritual powers. The slightest attempt to impress, however, takes away for me at once the possibility of a true impression.

It is extremely difficult to describe the atmosphere which emanates from this extraordinary man. Extremes meet in him. One is struck at once by his childlike simplicity and noble wisdom, by the familiar and by something strikingly uncommon.

Though Maharshi spent a large part of his life in seclusion on the sacred hill of Arunachala, he has never said that seclusion is better than a life in the world, or that it is essential for obtaining enlightenment. He says that a man who comes to self-realisation can live anywhere without being disturbed or influenced in any way by his surroundings. One of his sayings runs: "Renunciation is not the discarding of externals, but the cancellation of the uprising of the ego. To true Sannyasins there is no difference between solitude and active life." In his own life, which is entirely public, he gives a demonstration of this. One feels, one knows, that there is nothing which can touch him. One feels also, especially during the time of a temple festival in Tiruvannamalai, when for several weeks thousands come to him daily and policemen have to regulate the traffic, that superhuman powers are necessary to enable a man to make such a sacrifice of public life.

There is much talk about Samadhi, a state of consciousness corresponding to Nirvana, or the Nibbana of the Buddhists, and I have seen in several Indian sages such a state of spiritual abstraction or absorption, trance – if one likes to call it so. There are several kinds of Samadhi, everyone with its own technical terms. Here it does not

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matter very much what those terms are. In Maharshi alone I feel I see the highest state, a trance which is no more a trance but a state of absolute Consciousness. The fascinating element in it is formed by the fact that one has to recognize that at one and the same time he is absorbed in a state of consciousness which defies description and is yet conscious of the very ordinary things of daily life around him. The 'highest and the lowest' are united for him and in him. Perhaps not only 'united', but realized as one in essence. God and the world and his deepest self are to him one.

His doctrine is that of Philosophical Idealism in its highest flights. It is Advaita Vedanta, the monistic philosophy of the Hindus, as embodied in a human being. In a few words it comes down to the following: The individual subject and the divine subject are one in essence. It is the only truth and reality. The world, as apart from this, is like a changing dream, a world of appearance from the point of view of that Reality. The process of creation which takes place within every man is Maya.

To the man who lives in the world (and that every man does) Maya is not an 'illusion', but a state of affairs which has to be taken into account and from which one cannot run away. The reproach of many Western thinkers, based on this Maya conception, is that Hinduism is averse to the world and negative; but this is unfounded. Hinduism has a large measure of 'practical sense', perhaps rather too large a measure! Maya is the Play of the Lord. Maya is necessary for self-realisation. One should accept it completely. In acceptance it becomes the spiritual path.

Maharshi sees through life. His message is that of all great Rishis of India, and is striking only by new comparisons. His presence, his being, form the liberating element. He is, as it were, a vast magnet for humanity, – One which attracts not to bind men but to liberate them from the burdens and problems which they carry along with them. Other teachers often bind their visitors or disciples with new bonds. Because people feel this intuitively, they tend to keep at a distance from such teachers. As regards Maharshi, however, they know

intuitively that he does not want ‘to do anything with them’. And therefore all get a sense of freedom in his presence. And more, they feel that the great experience of the presence of Maharshi does not consist in Maharshi entering into their own soul, but that in their soul their own Maharshi is awakening. Devotion, in the sentimental sense of the word, one should not expect to find in Maharshi’s presence, and not search for it.

Though Maharshi is a Sage, a Jnani, and not an ecstatic bhakta, like Sri Ramakrishna, yet he is full of warm human interest and recommends bhakti, love. His conception of religion and service in the world finds expression, for instance, in such lines as the following:-

“If we but recognize the Universe
Of eight-fold form as form of God, Himself,
And serve in adoration all the world,
This is of God most excellent worship.”

Upadesa Saram v.5

Meditation has been for Maharshi only a systematic striving towards Self-realisation. As he says, it is not a particular posture of the body, nor closing of the eyes, nor something for a particular time of the day (though, of course, all these things are of help in the system) – but it is an attitude of life for all hours of the day and night for all stages of activity and rest in life. “The best form of meditation is that, which continues not merely in the waking state but extends to the dream state and the deep sleep state of the aspirant. The meditation should be so intense that it leaves no room for the consciousness or idea, ‘I am meditating’.”

He counsels anyone who comes to him with an open heart seeking his advice. But he does not allow people to call themselves openly his disciples or set him up as their Guru. His relationship with other people is an inner one which is far too subtle and too sacred a subject for conversation. Very often the pith of his advice is to stimulate the visitors to search for their real I. Where is the basis of Consciousness?

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People have to discover that Jiva – the individual I, and Shiva – the world – are in essence one. It is not of much value to come to this conclusion through mere reasoning. If there is no realisation to that effect, it may even do harm.

Many Europeans have already been to visit Maharshi and have written about him. It is almost a pity that since the life-giving element in this remarkable man is not in the first place his words or deeds, but in the simple fact of his existence, of his presence, only a few people in the world can benefit from that! Some Europeans I spoke with after they had visited Maharshi, considered that it had been more than worthwhile to go all the way to India for this visit alone.

An officer of high rank in the English Army [Alan Chadwick] came to India some years ago, just to see Maharshi and has remained in the Asramam ever since, something which is quite an achievement for a European – and especially for an Englishman – in the rather strange South Indian surroundings.

In conclusion some verses selected from Maharshi's works, translated together with Maharshi by the Englishman referred to above:

No matter to what form or name you pray,
'Tis but a means of finding the Supreme
Who transcends name and form. Grow, then, aware
Of your true Self in Him, Immaculate,
And merge in That, the Beatific Peace!
For thus is perfect Realization found.

The pairs of opposites, the trinities,
All have their source in something that is real.
Seek out this basis in the depths of mind;
The basis found, then these will disappear.
To find it is to realize the Truth
And rest unmoved within the Ultimate.

For him who thinks the body is the Self
The thoughts 'I am not this' and 'I am That',
Are helpful in the search. But why should one
Be even dwelling on this, 'I am That'?
Is there a person thinks, 'I am a man'?
One's ever That alone without the thought....

Who else is there apart from one's true Self?
What matters it what other people say?
'Tis just as if, one praised or blamed oneself.
So never feel that thou art separate,
Nor swerve from That, thine own Reality,
But always stand thou steadfast in the 'I'.

Let me proclaim with no uncertain voice
The essence of Vedanta and the pith
Of all the other schools. Let ego die
And let thyself be That! There then is left
Pure Consciousness, the Self that is the "I",
And this is all that there remains of Truth.



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

31/03/2014



The Paramount Importance of Self Attention

Part Nine

SADHU OM
AS RECORDED BY MICHAEL JAMES

20th January 1978

Sadhu Om: During the waking state, whenever you do not feel love to attend to self, you cannot but attend to second and third persons [things that are other than oneself, the first person], so at such times it is best to resort to *sravana* (studying Bhagavan's teachings) and *manana* (reflecting on them).

Making intermittent attempts to attend to self is the most effective way to proceed. It is useless to struggle constantly to attend to self, because that would be like standing deep in mud and trying to lift something out: the more you try to do so, the deeper you sink. A firm foothold is necessary, and it is provided by *sravana* and *manana*.

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

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The foothold is *vairagya* [dispassion], which is freedom from desire to attend to any second or third person object, and *bhakti* [devotion], which is love to attend only to the first person.

Our whole life should go on in this way, with our mind kept occupied in sravana, manana and *nididhyasana* [contemplation on self]. Sravana and manana may take a long time, depending on the individual mind, but the correct *nididhyasana* takes just a split second. We may be able to turn 179° away from everything else towards self, but even that is not perfect *nididhyasana*: it is just an attempt at perfect *nididhyasana*, and is like jumping nine-and-a-half feet across a ten-foot well. To land safely on the other side, we must jump the full ten feet. Likewise, to experience ourself as we really are, we must turn the full 180°.

One must also know what type of sravana will be effective. To be most effective, sravana must be focused and directed unswervingly in just one direction, so reading this and that from numerous different gurus is not proper sravana. You must first find a guru with whose thought-current you can agree, then discover what his real teachings are, and then practise them alone. Though there are various books in which Bhagavan's answers to visitor's questions are recorded, and though they contain many useful ideas, reading them alone is not adequate sadhana, because many ideas in them are answers that Bhagavan gave to questions that various types of people asked him from a wide variety of perspectives, so such answers often do not represent his core writings, since he always tailored his answers to suit the needs, concerns and aspirations of each questioner and their ability or willingness to understand whatever he might say to them.

Therefore to understand such answers in a proper perspective, we need to view them in the clear light of his actual teachings, so anyone who does not already have a clear and thorough understanding of his essential teachings will be liable to misunderstand or be confused by some of the answers recorded in such books. Therefore if we wish to do sravana correctly and effectively, we must carefully and repeatedly study and reflect upon Bhagavan's own original writings such as *Nan-*

THE PARAMOUNT IMPORTANCE OF SELF ATTENTION

Yar? (Who am I?), Upadesa Undiyar, Ulladu Narpadu, Anma Viddai and Ekatma Panchakam.

Except these few short texts, no other books are really necessary to enable a sincere aspirant to understand Bhagavan's essential teachings correctly. *The Path of Sri Ramana* too should not be necessary, and it became necessary only because people made clear to me the extent to which they had failed to understand his teachings correctly, partly because they had not studied his original writings carefully enough, but also due to confusion caused either by other books that they had read or by their reliance on inadequate translations and interpretations of his teachings.

For example, some writers imagine *sphurana* to be some sort of 'pulsation', 'throbbing' or 'vibration' in the heart, so they have written that this is what we should hold on to. However, anything that pulsates, throbs or vibrates is obviously something other than the 'I' who experiences it, so it is only a second person. The experience of 'I', the first person, is such that it cannot be described in any way. When Bhagavan used the term *sphurana*, he meant only *aham-sphurana* (the clear shining of 'I'), which is not a new knowledge of anything other than 'I', but only a new knowledge of 'I', our own self. That is, it is a fresh clarity of our self-awareness. It is awareness of the same 'I' that we always experience, but it is experienced with a fresh degree of clarity. Because it is such a clarity, when it is experienced no doubts will rise about it, just as when you are fully satisfied after eating a sumptuous meal no doubt can rise in your mind about whether or not you are still hungry. Once experienced, the clarity called *sphurana* can never be forgotten, and if we hold on to it firmly, it will automatically lead us to our *sahaja sthiti* (natural state).

Though we need to make intermittent attempts to attend to self, between such attempts we must also be vigilant at all times to avoid attending to any unnecessary thoughts. Most of the thoughts that we think each day are not actually necessary, and they serve only to distract our attention away from self, so we must gradually cultivate the habit of taking interest only in self-attention instead

of in anything else that we may think about. If every moment that we spend attending to unnecessary thoughts were spent attending to self, most of our time each day would be spent in self-attention. Therefore indifference towards thoughts of anything other than self is a powerful aid in our practice of self-attention.

Bhagavan was so unconcerned about everything that he did not experience even the actions of his mind, speech or body as his own, so he never felt ‘I am thinking’, ‘I am talking’ or ‘I am doing’. Because of his complete lack of doership, on behalf of Perumal Swami he wrote a verse in praise of himself as Lord Subrahmanya but signed it ‘Perumal’,¹ and on behalf of Jagadiswara Sastri he wrote the verse *hridaya kuhara madhye ...* (in the centre of the heart-cave ...),² which he likewise signed ‘Jagadisa’.

In a quiet mind many truths about past and future events may be known, but this is not a *siddhi* (an attainment of a desired supernatural power) because it happens only in the absence of any volition or desire for such an experience. It is likewise only in a calm and quiet mind that Bhagavan’s silent teachings can be received. They are not received in words but only as an inner clarity of understanding, and they give us such a strong conviction that no one can ever shake our trust in what we discover through them. However much we may struggle to do so, we cannot find words to express the clarity we discover through the power of his silence.

21st January 1978

Sadhu Om: By allowing falsehood and injustice to thrive in this world, and truth and justice to be suppressed, Bhagavan is testing us. If we allow an ‘I’ to rise and object, he will laugh at us from within: ‘So you

¹ This verse is referred to towards the end of section 291 of *Talks*, in which it is recorded that Bhagavan said that the handwriting of the verse was his own whereas the ideas in it were Perumal Swami’s, and when asked whether he agreed with the statement made in it, he replied, ‘In the same way as an idol is praised as Subrahmanya’. (MJ)

² Bhagavan’s Tamil translation of this verse is included in *Ulladu Narpadu Anubandham* as verse 8. (MJ)

THE PARAMOUNT IMPORTANCE OF SELF ATTENTION

still believe this world to be real.' Therefore our duty is to keep quiet. If we are actually attacked, we must respond as if we were brushing away a wasp, but having taken whatever action is necessary, we should keep quiet, both inwardly and outwardly. We should not brood over the matter or bear a grudge towards anyone who does wrong to us.

26th January 1978

Sadhu Om: Like Bhagavan, Sri Ramakrishna also taught that we can know God only by trying to know who is this 'I' who wants to know God.³

What is important in surrender is that we should desire only what Bhagavan desires for us. If our desires are contrary to what he wants for us, how can he give us *moksha* (liberation)? What he wants is to give us moksha, but moksha entails freedom from desire, so unless we are willing to give up all our desires, he will not give us moksha, because he will not force us to accept what we do not want.

If we only want whatever he gives us, then from this very moment we can live free from all cares and worries, because nothing can ever happen that is not his will, so we will happily accept whatever may happen. Thus there is no difference between self-abidance and complete self-surrender. If we abide as self, we will experience nothing other than self and hence there will be no identification with a body, so how can we then desire or pray for the removal of pain or for anything else? Likewise, if we surrender to him, we will have no desires or concerns, so how can we then pray for anything?

If our will and desires are perfectly attuned with his will, what can our *vasanas* (inclinations or propensities) do to obstruct his work? A genuine willingness to surrender to his will will effectively neutralise the power of all our other *vasanas*.

Therefore without the least hesitation we should sign over to him a blank cheque – that is, we should completely surrender to him our

³ Near the end of chapter 7 of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* it is recorded that on Monday 1st January 1883, Sri Ramakrishna said: "One ultimately discovers God by trying to know who this 'I' is." (1942 American edition, p.180). (MJ)

original freedom to will and act – because there is no one who loves us or cares for us more than he does. He loves us as his own self, so his love for us is even greater than our love for ourself, because he loves us as we really are, whereas we love ourself as a person, which is not what we really are.

The stronger our faith in his love and power is, the quieter our mind will be, and hence the more peaceful and pleasant our life will be. To save us from the bondage created by our own ego, he is working equally hard and effectively in each and every one of us. I am so confident about this that I do not worry myself about anyone. As our essential self, he is working in all of us, and he knows what is the best way to save each of us.

30th January 1978

Sadhu Om: Bhagavan has a peculiar way of leading his devotees: he will never let us know how advanced we are in our practice of self-abidance. He is such a masterful guru that he will never allow any ‘I’ to rise in pride within us by knowing ‘I am making progress in this path’. Though we may be very advanced, we will feel ourself to be the most worthless of all, as Bhagavan expresses in verse 39 of *Sri Arunachala Aksharamanamalai*: ‘O Arunachala, by what power can I, who am worse than a dog, seek and reach you?’

Though we may often succeed in turning 130° or 140° away from all other things towards self, we will still feel that our attempts are woefully inadequate. We are like small children, whose growth seems imperceptible to themselves or even to their parents, who see them daily, but we are growing nonetheless. Though we do not know what is best for us, Bhagavan does, and he is therefore maturing us in whatever way is best suited to our present stage of development.

When we first come to the path of Sri Ramana, a certain amount of reasoning is necessary to give us firm faith in the truth of what he has taught us, but once our faith is firmly established, we can entrust ourself blindly to him. Once we know that we are on a broad trunk road with strong barriers on either side preventing us from going astray, we can close our eyes and run blindly ahead! This is

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why I emphasise in the second part of *The Path of Sri Ramana* that one cannot become a *yoga-bhrasta* (a person fallen from the path of yoga) after entering the third (b) or fourth standards in the school of bhakti [the stages at which one has acquired one-pointed devotion to God or guru respectively]. We are now prey in the jaws of a powerful tiger, so we will never be forsaken.

Though we cannot by any means gauge our progress in the practice of self-abidance, by considering our own desires in an unbiased manner we can gauge in which standard we are in the school of bhakti. Relatively few people are actually in the third (b) or fourth standards, because to qualify to be in them one must be wholly devoted to either God or guru for their own sake and not for the sake of any personal benefit that one may gain from them. Even among the devotees of Bhagavan, many are at best in the third (a) standard, because though their devotion to him may be one-pointed (which is the basic requirement for the third standard), they still expect him to grant the fulfilment of their personal desires and pray to him accordingly. Thus their love for Bhagavan is not pure, because it is mixed with their love for whatever they desire to gain from him.

Even though many of our vasanas may be hidden from our view, so long as our greatest desire is only for the annihilation of 'I', we are in the fourth standard. Then only have we been truly caught in the guru's glance of grace. Having thus been caught by him, we need not worry about our hidden vasanas, because if hidden desires rise in our mind, his hidden grace will certainly come to protect us.

Sravana, manana and nididhyasana (study, reflection and self-contemplation) should all go on hand-in-hand. Only by practising an art do you experience whatever difficulties it entails, and such experience enables you to understand more clearly and deeply the instructions you have been given. Therefore each time you slip down from an attempt at *nididhyasana*, having failed to turn the full 180°, you can return to your *sravana* and *manana*, and then you will find that you are able to grasp more clearly what Bhagavan has taught us.

To emphasise the importance of sravana and manana, in some ancient advaitic texts it is said that even after the disciple has finally realised the truth, when he asks the guru how he should spend the rest of his life, the guru replies that he should continue in the same way as before, studying and reflecting upon the guru's teachings. Because the guru tells us not to think, some people wrongly conclude that sravana and manana are unnecessary, but this is like someone who tries to eat without using his hands because he has been told that we cannot eat except with our mouth. If you can keep quiet without thinking for twenty-four hours every day, that is good, but if you cannot always avoid thinking, it is best to think only of Bhagavan's teachings. ▲

(To be continued)

The Names of Lalitha

Ramesh Menon

Long as the inked/blind wind,
Darandolitadirghakshi,
your restless eyes;
and they never blink tonight,
as she scans the sky for him.

You, the primordial
power from which time blazed down,
and the stars kindled;
Adisakti, you are the
mother of darkness and light.

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

Introduction to Sadhana

M.R. KODHANDRAM

Many people who are doing their meditation feel they are not progressing or they are unable to do it properly. They are looking at some others who are able to do it properly and wonder why they are unable to succeed. What is sadhana? Sadhana means practice. It also means an instrument or tool or means used to achieve something. Thus sadhana which we are referring to here refers to the practices we have to undertake or the means through which we can achieve the supreme goal of life which is Liberation so as to end the cycle of births which we are caught in. Such a glorious thought comes in the mind of a person only when he or she has done many punya karmas or meritorious deeds in their past births. This makes them think about

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the purpose of their life and strive to find an answer to it through the study of scriptures and also by seeking a guru. Thus they get a proper understanding of the goal of life and then set themselves this goal for attainment. Thereafter, he or she strives to attain it through the practice of the teachings of the guru and scriptures. In essence, we have to realise our true nature and abide in it, which is known as Self-realisation. This Self-realisation is the supreme goal of life and in attaining it we regain our true nature from which we had separated long, long ago due to maya and ignorance. For this, we have to first acquire Self-knowledge from the guru and practise the teachings so as to make the knowledge an actual experience as Realisation.

The practice or sadhana that would help us to achieve this great and glorious goal involves several stages and the first and foremost is to change one's mode of living so that it will be conducive for the attainment of the purpose of life. How can we attain any goal without fulfilling the conditions required for it? How can we join college without passing the twelfth class?

We have to reorder our life and plan it properly so that we will be able to fulfil the conditions required for reaching God or realising our true Self. We have to destroy all the impurities or vasanas blocking our path to God. This is the whole purpose of sadhana. The impurities in us can be removed by correcting all our faults and overcoming the ego which rises as negative thoughts, negative emotions and reactions in our day to day life. We also have to get rid of all our bad qualities, bad habits and mental conditionings which take us on the wrong path leading to sins. We also have to overcome our desires and attachments which bind us more and more to the world. When we are ripe and ready, a guru will walk into our life and guide us out of the woods of samsara.

For this to happen, we have to develop devotion to God and pray regularly to him and also do many punya karmas so as to make ourselves deserving of his grace. The sadhana one needs to do involves not only making corrections to life but also practice of seva, puja, japa, sankirtana, visiting holy places, etc., which will help in the purification

of the mind so as to make it fit for receiving Knowledge which is so vital for taking us to our ultimate destination. All these stages are important and preparatory to the final performance of meditation and atma vichara or self-enquiry which is the ultimate sadhana one has to do in order to reach the Self. We have to ultimately find the answer to the question ‘Who am I?’, not intellectually, but as an actual experience which is the goal of atma vichara. When we realise our true Self, we become one with God who resides in us as the Self. It is like the river merging in the ocean and regaining its original state.

Proper performance of duties and seva is very important to generate punya karmas that will help us on our spiritual journey. The bad karmas of the past will make our soul heavy and will not allow us to go inside and reach the Self. When the soul is heavy, it will not be able to rise high in the atmosphere and reach the Kingdom of God after it leaves the body upon death. It is like a balloon that is filled with water. Such a balloon will not be able to rise up in the atmosphere because it is heavy. So we need to remove the water in the balloon and fill it with air so that it will become light and fly high. In the above metaphor, the balloon stands for the soul and the water in it refers to the bad karmas we have accumulated that have made the soul heavy and earth-bound. The air in the balloon refers to the good karmas we have to do which will elevate our soul. Thus we have to get rid of these bad karmas and also create good karmas in life.

This is what a guru does when he enters our life. He helps us to see through the bad karmas of the past and also encourages us to do many good karmas to lighten our soul. However, even to get a good guru we should have done many good karmas in our previous lives and developed devotion to God. This is how we become ripe and ready for evolution. Our good karmas make God come in the guise of the guru to guide us so that we may return to him and end the wheel of life and death. Even if a guru is obtained, you will be able to connect to him only if you have done many punya karmas. Otherwise, you will not be able to surrender to him and practise his teachings as the mind will resist whatever he says. Only when you have devotion and

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reverence for the teacher you will be able to practise his teachings. You will be able to value his teachings only when you give him value.

The guru will ask you to control your desires and reduce your attachments progressively because only then your mind will be able to internalise. If you are having a lot of desires and attachments in the world, your mind will be pulled more into the outside world. If your mind is externalised, how will you be able to internalise it and do your meditation in a sustained manner like the flow of river or ghee as Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi says?

Suppose you like to watch TV serials and you have a show daily in the evening from 6 to 6.30 pm and thereafter you sit for your meditation, what will come in your mind when you meditate? You will be only thinking of the suspense in the show and wonder what will happen in the next day's episode. You will thus be lost in your thoughts and your meditation will only be a farce. Thus even with one such distraction, you will not be able to meditate properly. Supposing you have many desires and attachments in life, how much more will they distract you from your sadhana?

If we have not overcome our desires and attachments, we will probably be thinking of our children or grandchildren or on some unfulfilled desires like visiting the USA when we sit for meditation. That is why one has to conquer all one's worldly desires and attachments in a gradual manner with understanding and not through suppression. You will have to leave your worldly desires in favour of the higher desire for Liberation. When the worldly desires are more, we will easily get lost in the world and the spiritual pursuit will be lost. You also have to give up your attachments gradually over the years for the same reason. The greater our attachments, the greater will be our involvement in others' affairs. When we get involved with others, we will take on all their problems into our head and thus our mind will lose its peace often and this is not good for pursuing our sadhana which requires a peaceful mind. Giving up attachments does not mean giving up love. In fact, love will become purer when it is rid of the impurity called attachment.

In order to give up our desires and attachments, Bhagavan has said that the paths of enquiry and surrender are the easiest and quickest. Bhagavan says, "Either do it yourself or surrender to me and I will strike it down." If we try to do it by ourselves without surrender, we will find that it is a long-drawn process because the mind will easily fall a prey to temptations and will not allow us to give up our desires which would have become habits. The ego will trick us by telling us that we can leave them slowly over the years. Therefore, we will keep indulging in those desires and in the process the desires will not die. Desires when gratified will only grow in strength like a fire that is fed more and more with fuel. In fact, the ego will even make us give advice to others not to give up desires by telling them that without desires life will be a waste and we can attain mukti even in the next janma (birth). In the next janma, you will find it difficult to get a guru to whom you will be able to surrender.

But those who have renounced their desires in trust and surrender to their guru, even without a proper understanding of his teaching, are fortunate because they will be not be watering their plant of desires and thus in course of time the desires will die totally. The time taken for the desires to die will depend on the strength of the desires. Some of the desires may take even several years to be fully rooted out of the system. Thus one must hold on to the guru strongly. In fact, whenever devotees get tempted, especially in the company of their friends, they should immediately think of their guru and pray to him to give them strength to hold on to their resolve. If they pray, then the grace of the guru and that of the Lord too, will CERTAINLY come to them and give them strength of mind to withstand the pressures of temptation. This is the benefit of holding on to the guru. In fact, God is very pleased with anyone who wants to give up bad things for the purpose of progress in life and who is obedient to his guru. Thus he would rush to help the person whenever he prays to him for support. For example: We would have been playing cards with friends for a long period and would have got habituated to it. After meeting your guru, you would think that this habit could be given

up and instead you could utilise that time for a better purpose. But whenever we meet our friends, they would encourage us to continue playing the game and may even flatter us about our great skills in the game. We would be able to hold on to our resolve so long as the mind is strong. But sometimes, the mind may be weak and we may be tempted to succumb to the pressures of our friends. But at that weak moment, if we pray to our guru to give us strength, we will surely get his grace and also that of the Lord to hold on. This timely prayer is the self-effort required. Thus, whenever we want to give up our bad qualities and bad habits, if we surrender to our guru and Lord, they would certainly help us to achieve our objective. Similarly, even in atma vichara, those who surrender to their Satguru will be able to progress faster than those who do it on their own. That is why devotion, trust and surrender are very important for speedy progress on the spiritual path.

Thus we see that so many correctives are required in life for us to succeed on the spiritual path. This calls for years of sustained preparation and dedication to our goal. We need to hold on to our guru strongly if we are to succeed in our efforts. If we have not prepared ourselves properly in life over the years, we will find that we are unable to do meditation even towards the evening of life when our worldly duties would have ended, which will give us more time at our disposal for our spiritual pursuits. When we sit for meditation then, there will be so many vasanas rising in us blocking our path. The purpose of sadhana is only to destroy these vasanas and reach the Self in the Heart. But if the path is totally blocked, we cannot do any sadhana.

Thus a proper way of life wherein our ego is conquered to some extent due to regular practice of discriminative enquiry will help us in our inner journey because all the obstructing vasanas would have weakened considerably. We will then be able to destroy all the vasanas blocking our path through the power of concentration and reach the Self and thus fulfil the purpose of life. May our Satguru Bhagavan bless our efforts and help us to progress on the path so that we may reach Him and never come back to this world of impermanence and misery!

KEYWORD

Sankalpa and Vikalpa

JOHN GRIMES

Bhagavan Ramana was asked: “What is the mind?” He replied: “See what it is.” The questioner replied: “It is *sankalpa vikalpa atmaka* (made up of thoughts, intentions [*sankalpas*] and their changes springing from desires [*vikalpas*]”. Bhagavan said, “Whose *sankalpa* (thought)?... Of what is the *sankalpa*?” The reply: “Of the externalities.” Bhagavan said, “Quite so. Is that your nature?” The questioner: “It is of the mind.” Bhagavan said, “What is your nature?” The reply, “*Suddha Chaitanya* (Pure Conscious Light).” Bhagavan: “Then why do you worry about *sankalpa* and the rest?”¹

In almost everyone’s life, thought succeeds thought, each leading to the next in a seemingly endless procession. Even though not all one’s imaginations, desires, and dreams are fulfilled as one had hoped, each thought of every person reading this inexorably led to Sri Ramana

¹ Venkataramiah, M., (comp.), *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, 2009. Talk§382.

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as well as the wisdom that reveals that all imaginations, thoughts, and dreams are not what they claim to be. The great Self *is*, without the need or impulse for imaginations, thoughts, fantasies, dreams, delusions, mirages. Despite that, how can one not be grateful for every thought; those that seemingly were fulfilled and those that were not.

Imagination. Ponder deeply about the word imagination and what it means, conveys, and how it deludes us. A person walking in the desert imagines that he perceives ‘water.’ There is nothing there but sand; now, in the past, in the future, nothing but sand. A mirage some call it. Or a person may have imagined that not many people read this ashram magazine, only to discover that lots of people do. Watching a movie, one imagines. At night one dreams, imagining all sorts of things and events. One imagines that one is reading this article right now. Every thought is an imagination. Some are wonderful. Some are hurtful. Some are happy and some are sad. But every thought is nothing but an imagination, prompted and driven by desire.

According to Sri Ramana, at the worldly level any and all imaginations are but thoughts, mirages, fantasies, delusions. When a person imagines, that is, thinks a thought, he or she is mistaking something for something else. Always, all-inclusive, a mistake is being made. Imagination is a thought, an intellectual process that leads to the formation of concepts, judgments, views, and opinions. Reality, the Self is not nor can be thought.

Sankalpa (thoughts, ideas, desire, intention) and *vikalpa* (imagination). There can be no karma without effort or without intentions, desire (*sankalpas*). Therefore *sankalpas* are the basis for action. They are said to be of two kinds (i) binding – *bandha-hetu* and the other (ii) *mukti-hetu* – not binding.² The former must be given up and the latter must be cultivated. There is no karma without a previous sankalpa. Even *mukti* (liberation) must be viewed as the result of effort so long as the sense of doership persists.

So what does *chitta* (consciousness) do, what are its *vrittis* (activities)? Basically the *chitta* through the *vrittis* gives a person

² Ibid., Talk§116.

experiences of varied types. It projects different images within its confines – in its own space, mental space, even though the projections appear to be in the outside real space.

When Somasundara Swami, a long-standing devotee, asked Bhagavan about reflections in a mirror or in a pot of water, Bhagavan said that space does not contain reflections. Reflections appear only in the water in a pot or on glass with an opaque lining on its backside. Similarly pure Knowledge neither contains objects in it nor reflects them. It is only the limiting adjunct, the mind, which reflects the world. Further, objects do not appear in bright light or in total darkness. It is only in dim light that a rope seemingly appears as a snake. Similarly, it is only in a dim, reflected light that this world, with all its myriad objects, appears as this world.

Pure Consciousness is ever only Light. The mind, rising and reflecting, is deluded that objects remain apart from their source. The mind is nothing but a mixture of *chit* (Intelligence) and sankalpas (thoughts). Therefore it forms all these – the mirror, the water in the pot, light, darkness and all reflections. Knowledge (pure Consciousness) does not consist in knowing objects. That is only relative knowledge. Chit is Knowledge pure and simple. The mind proceeds from it; the mind is made up of thoughts. Pure Knowledge seems different from what It really is. How to realize it? Bhagavan said, “Remain free from thoughts,” and “It is realized only in the mind drawn within. Therefore, the mind made free from thoughts, and merged in the Heart, is Chit Itself.”³

Bhagavan accepted the Advaita doctrine that divides functionally the *antahkarana* into *manas* (mind), *buddhi* (intellect), *citta/smrti* (memory), and *ahankara* (ego). I receive information from the outside world through my senses, eyes, ears, etc., due to the *vrittis* of the sense organs. This the mind collates and presents to another faculty of the antahkarana called buddhi. Buddhi analyses all the information and makes a judgment and then the ego or ahankara aspect of the antahkarana comes into play. If it likes the presentation, it is happy

³ Ibid., Talk§589.

but if not it shows its unhappiness. Moment after moment I have movements of the mind that include images not only of the outside objects but also of me as the subject of the entire experience. However, there may be a moment in one's life when the mind is without any movement. Normally, there is never a moment when the mind stops its activities, its projections in the mental space, its vrittis. Though vrittis are always fluctuating, there is a state in which the chitta transcends all vrittis. That state Ramana called one's true nature or *sahaja samadhi*. With direct experience, one realizes the nature of the Self in its *svarupa jnana* (true form). When there is realisation that none of the vrittis changes the essential nature of the pure Self, the mind becomes quiet – completely quiet. Do reflections in a pot of water or images on a mirror change the essential nature of the water or the mirror? No. Neither do pictures on a movie screen affect the screen.

“As one mistakenly considers a flower garland to be a snake or experiences happiness and distress in a dream, so, in the material world, by a lack of careful consideration, one differentiates between happiness and distress, considering one good and the other bad.”⁴

Any distinction between happiness and unhappiness in the material world of duality is simply a mental concoction, for the so-called happiness and unhappiness are actually one and the same. They are like the happiness and unhappiness experienced in dreams. A sleeping person creates their own happiness and unhappiness in dreams, even though the experience is illusory.

In dreams people may enjoy eating sweets or suffer as if a family member had died. Because the same mind and body exist in the same material world of duality when we are awake, the so-called happiness and unhappiness of this world are no better than the false, superficial happiness of dreams. The mind is the via medium in both dreams and wakefulness, and everything created by the mind in terms of sankalpa and vikalpa acceptance and rejection, is called a mental concoction.

⁴ *Srimad Bhagavatam* 6.17.30.

Ulladu Narpadu Anubandham

Based on Lakshmana Sarma's
Commentary

Verses One and Two

S. RAM MOHAN

Introduction

The word *Sat* in Sanskrit means Reality or Being. It can also refer to those holy ones or sadhus who are merged with *Sat*. Thus while primarily referring to the supreme Reality, *Sat* also refers to the jnani, who is one with the Absolute, by virtue of his right Awareness. Many might find that the most potent manifestation of the divine in this world is the *jivan mukta* (one who is liberated). He is *Sat*. As a result of the good deeds (*punya*) done by the aspirant, and due to the guru's Grace, the *jivan mukta* appears in the world in the corporeal frame. By approaching him with humility, reverence and the thirst to know, the aspirant can be elevated above the chain of cause and effect. This is the import of the first five verses in the supplement.

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Verse One

By association with the jnani, the aspirant attains non-attachment; by non-attachment, he is delivered from ignorance, (which is due to internal attachment to the phenomenal world, including the wrong identification ‘I am the body-mind-intellect complex’). When he is freed from the tentacles of the mind, he is lost in the Non-moving One. Thus, he/she attains *jeevanmukti* (liberated while living). Associate with the *jeevan mukta* [for your spiritual enrichment].

Commentary

This verse has been adapted by Bhagavan from AdiSankara’s *Moha Mudgara*, verse nine. Association with the sage purifies the mind and leads the sadhaka to mukti (through the practice of Self-enquiry we have seen in *Ulladu Narpadu*). Therefore, one who earnestly seeks liberation should associate himself with the jeevan mukta. Due to the powerful spiritual vibrations present in such an environment, he will soon become ripe for Self-enquiry and will quickly reach the goal.

Bhagavan avers that the most potent of all aids to sadhana is association with the jnani. Satsang literally means ‘fellowship with Being’. Bhagavan, while maintaining that the real ‘Being’ is the Self, often discusses the benefits of satsang as seen in his *upadesa* (instruction). Association with the jeevan muktas, who have realised the Self, sets in motion a series of progressive steps in the ladder of spiritual evolution. The association with saints removes the attachment to the phenomenal world. When these attachments are surrendered, the inner attachment of the mind gets destroyed. Those whose attachment to the mind is thus destroyed become one with the One, which is Non-moving and attain liberation while living.

This verse adapted by Bhagavan says: *Satsangatve nissangatvam/ Nissangatve nirmohatvam/Nirmohatve nischalatvatvam/Nischalatvatve jeevan mukthihi.*

AdiSankara advises the sadhaka that through association with the *Sat* (sages), the power of discrimination between what is eternal and what is impermanent(*nitya anitya vastu vivekam*) is kindled in the

mind. The aspirant gains this through the power of the words of the sages, by observing their conduct and being in their very presence. By these actions one's attachment and desires are removed and the mind cleaned. With a pure mind it is easy to turn the mind inwards and remain in the changeless state of abidance in the Self. Therefore, Bhagavan adds to the verse the words, 'cherish their company'.

Bhagavan said that satsanga means association with the Reality. The Reality is the Self. The sage who knows and abides in the Self is also the same Reality. Satsanga means either to launch the Self-enquiry and abide in the Self or to associate with the jeevan mukta who has realised the Self, and therefore is the living manifestation of the Reality (*Sat*).

To a question of a devotee about the effect of being in the company of a Mahatma, Bhagavan answered:

"The look [of a Mahatma] has a purifying effect. Purification cannot be visualised. Just as a piece of coal takes long to be ignited, a piece of charcoal takes a short time, and a mass of gunpowder is instantaneously ignited, so it is with grades of men coming in contact with Mahatmas."¹ "The fire of wisdom consumes all actions. Wisdom is acquired by association with the wise (satsanga) or rather its mental atmosphere."² Again, "...in the proximity of a great master, the vasanas will cease to be active, the mind becomes still and samadhi results, similar to fire not scorching because of other devices. Thus the disciple gains true knowledge and right experience in the presence of the master. To remain unshaken in it further efforts are necessary. He will know it to be his real Being and thus be liberated even while alive."³

Verse Two

The Supreme State, held aloft by all scriptures, is reached here and now, by close association with the sage; because the close association with the sage (*satsanga*) facilitates the state of atma-vichara (Self-enquiry). This cannot be won by listening to lectures, by textual knowledge of this (by studying the

¹ Venkataramiah, M., (comp.), *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharishi*, 2009. Talk §155.

² Ibid., Talk §209.

³ Ibid., Talk §141.

scriptures), by performing virtuous deeds, or through any other means.

Commentary

Here the term Sadhu is used as an equivalent to *Sat*. Of all the aids to spiritual progress, *sadhu sangam* (association with the Sadhus) is the most efficacious one. By such association, the power dwelling in the Heart spontaneously comes forth, takes full control of the mind, engages it in the quest and causes it to dive into the Heart. Devotion to the jeevan mukta is prescribed to the sadhak. By the relationship thus set up by devotion to the guru, the divine power of the guru, who resides in the aspirant's heart as the Self, will become active and bring about the desired results. The disciple must not only become a mere devotee of the jeevan mukta but also regard Him as the Supreme Self shining effulgently in his Heart. It will be a grievous error for him to think of the guru as an individual confined within a corporeal frame. It must not be supposed that in order to practise devotion to Him, it is necessary to dwell in the same place as His physical body appears to be, because the sadguru is not a spatio-temporal entity. He must be adored as the self-transcending space and time though it will help the sadhak to reside in the proximity of the place where the physical form of sadguru is directly perceivable.

Bhagavan's reply to a question emphatically stresses this point “Contact with them [*jnanis*] is good. They will work through silence. By speaking, their power is reduced. Silence is the most powerful communication. Speech is always less powerful than silence. So mental contact is the best.”

“Bhagavan then continues, ‘Guru is not the physical form. So the contact with him remains even after the physical form of the Guru vanishes.’ He says, ‘As already explained, Guru not being physical form, his contact will continue after his form vanishes. If one *jnani* exists in the world, his influence will be felt by or benefit all people in the world and not simply his immediate disciples.’”⁴ ▲

⁴ Mudaliar, Devaraja, *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, 2006. 9.3.46. pp.168-170.

HOW I CAME TO BHAGAVAN

Verses that Revealed the ‘Me’

V.S. KRISHNAN

My parents being ardent devotees of Lord Muruga, I had grown up in a devotional environment. Attending bhajans and accompanying my parents to Muruga shrines formed part of my early life. When I was six, I had visited all the six abodes of Muruga (*Aru Padai Veedu*). Once, in the course of his visit to Palani, my father discovered a guru by name Thiruppugazh Mani Iyer, who came all the way to our house in Kerala and initiated us into the Thiruppugazh form of worship. In such a context, I did not get the opportunity to have the darshan of Bhagavan Sri Ramana. When Bhagavan shed his mortal frame, I was ten years old, but sadly even afterwards, I got no opportunity to experience the divine grace that flowed from him. After my formal education, I established myself in my career in Calcutta and later on at Patna.

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In the course of my struggle for establishing myself, certain good things had to be sacrificed like the care of my parents, the serenity of living in one's native place, but now, many years later, I realize that the most precious thing I missed in the early and middle part of my life was an occasion to walk through the serene Ramanasramam and experience the divine grace of Bhagavan. However, my life boat managed to move forward despite some occasional disturbance. When it steadied and settled down, I understood that everything in life, the happiness and the sorrows change in quick succession, like images on a screen. Everything around me was changing. Gradually, I started pondering what it was that did not change and remained real for all time. I remembered the lines of Arunagirinathar, the author of *Thiruppugazh*: "Should I remain under the illusion that this transient world, my wife and relatives, my dear and near ones, the mansion I own, the prosperous town I live in, the glitter and affluence I see around me, will endure forever? Should I allow my mind to hover around these unreal objects? Oh Muruga! Grant me the vocation of singing your glory and ever remaining immersed in your thought." (*Aruthi Vazhvodu thanakiya Manaviyum, Uravorum, Adutha Perkalum Idhamuru makavodu Valanadum*).

Retirement was a welcome relief to me because it provided me much needed time for introspection. Having spent a large part of my life in material pursuits, I realised it was time for spiritual pursuit and to seek that which is real and ever-lasting. The light of devotion which my parents had kindled in my heart right from my childhood gave me the impetus to pursue my devotion further. I kept asking myself: "Where do I proceed from here? Should I continue to remain attached to this world and keep visiting it through frequent births? What is it that would lead to my liberation?" These are questions which surely arise at some point in everyone's life and they arose, a bit late, in my life.

It was during one of these periods of pondering, that I happened to attend a satsang led by a brilliant, young, spiritual scholar who is a great Ramana devotee. He said: "The power within each one of

us, that is, the seer behind our eyes, the listener behind our ears, the smeller behind the nose, the feeler in the skin is the Self, the Atman. The Atman is immaculate, not contaminated by the layers of body, mind or intellect enveloping it. If you identify yourself with your body and your mind, you will assume yourself to be the body, mind and intellect. Know that these are mere equipment you possess, but you are not them. The equipment is distinct and separate from your real Self, the Atman. You are the Atman, the reflection of Brahman, the ever existing, pure, blessed reality, (*Nitya, Suddha, Siddha Chaitanya*). You are the ever existing Self that causes your mind and senses to function and gives you the consciousness of your existence, the Atman that is self-effulgent and ever existing.”

Hearing these words of truth, the entire audience was spell-bound. He continued: “You may be at different levels of understanding. Some of you may not be able to comprehend the full import of my words but still I would urge you to listen. The words I utter may not make an immediate impact on you but they have the potential to make an impact later. They will reach a corner of your heart and stay there alive. Like seeds lying in a fertile field they will look for the right moment to germinate. The words that lie within you will acquire meaning when you engage in similar satsangs later and will manifest when the right kind of stimulus is received.” These words spoken by Acharya Nochur Sri Venkataraman at one of his satsangs in Coimbatore were ringing in my ears long after I departed the hall.

I made a visit to Sri Ramanasramam as part of a larger pilgrimage. Sitting silently in the Main Hall, facing the image of Bhagavan, for the first time in my life, I felt a spiritual experience which I cannot express in words. I marvelled at the portrait of Bhagavan, wearing a loin cloth and holding a *dhanda* (walking stick). His beautiful benign eyes made a profound impression on me. Being the member of a party of pilgrimage, I departed but the Ramanasramam experience lingered. It created an urge to know more about Bhagavan and his teachings.

Thiruppugazh has undoubtedly guided me through the path of devotion and knowledge but still I felt a kind of incompleteness or

insufficiency. I felt I was not being what I truly am and so I continued to look for an avenue by which I could progress and find my identity. The Ramanasramam experience had silently created an urge to know more about Sri Ramana Maharshi and his teachings.

Then I discovered the way, the Ramana way. The Ramana-experience comes by various means to various people. Some experience it by his invisible divine presence, some others by the grace that flows from the Ashram and yet others by following his teachings. I experienced the grace of Bhagavan after many years of waiting, in a quiet, simple and almost casual way. After worshipping at the Vinayaka temple in my locality in Coimbatore, I visited the Variyar Library nearby. The first book that caught my attention was *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi* by Sri Munagala Venkataramiah. I casually leafed through the pages. It was an old edition published in 1958. Though there were many other shining new books nearby, I opted for this rusty, torn and old one, for no reason in particular. The next day when I opened the book, I realised that here lay the answers to the questions that had been brewing within me for so many years. It was my first real contact with Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi. Reading this book I felt that I was in direct communication with Bhagavan and that I had re-established a primordial link that I had lost somewhere down the line. I felt that Guru Sri Dakshinamurthi had incarnated again as Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi radiating his brilliant rays to lift us from darkness. Every word that the Maharshi spoke revealed the eternal truth.

People from different places across the globe came and put questions to Maharshi according to their own understanding and Maharshi answered them all with his characteristic brevity and clarity. He had the answer to every question that bothered humanity and that is why he is called Bhagavan. Perhaps, never before had a saint fielded questions of such a wide-ranging and complex nature with so much ease, clarity and conviction as Sri Ramana Maharshi. He used few words and sometimes he never used words at all. The seemingly complex questions that were posed to him looked utterly simple



John Maynard

the moment he answered them. Invariably, the Maharshi put all the questions in their right perspective. “He first met every questioner on his own ground and then slowly steered the questioner round to the source of all problems – the Self – the realisation of which he held to be the universal panacea.”¹ Sometimes, he prompted the questioner to find the answer for himself by saying: “Ask yourself who raises this question. A devotee asked: ‘What is that one thing, knowing which all doubts are solved?’ ‘Know the doubter,’ Bhagavan replied: ‘When the doubter ceases to exist, there will be no more doubts.’”²

The day I opened this book happened to be a memorable day. This day marked the end of my long search to find my true identity. I realised that I had laid my hands on a treasure that compensated all that I lost or missed in the earlier part of my life. I realized that what I needed to know was my own Self and what I needed to do was to look within. Ever since, I have been studying the works connected with Maharshi’s teachings and contemplating them.

Another book which made a profound impact on me was Bhagavan’s *Ulladu Narpadu* (Forty Verses on Reality). The very opening verse (*Ulladhala dullavunar*) revealed in four pithy lines the eternal truth which the Vedas and Upanishads revealed in eloquent and elaborate verses. “Can there be anything more real apart from the consciousness of being?” Referring to Self as *Ulladu*, Bhagavan says that which ‘is’ and that which exists as the sole reality and that which shines in the heart is the Self. In Verse 14 (*Tanmaiyunden*), Bhagavan says: “When the sense of ‘I’ is present, then concepts like ‘you’ and ‘he’ will arise. When the truth is realised, the ‘I-sense’ becomes extinct and notions like ‘you’ and ‘he’ also cease. All will shine as one. This state of being, the one without a second, is one’s true nature – the pure Self.”

Reading those verses, I felt as if my heart was opening up, just as the lotus springs open when the radiant rays of the sun reach it. These verses revealed the real ‘me’. I felt that the seeds which Nochur

¹ Cohen, S.S., *Guru Ramana*, Chapter III.

² Venkataramiah, M., (comp.), *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, 2009. Talk §41.

Sri Venkataraman had planted in me were sprouting up. What appeared as mere words then had now bloomed in splendour in the lotus of my heart. I now feel a sense of fulfilment that I have come to Bhagavan to imbibe the nectar of his grace that invisibly permeates the Ashram and his teachings.

When devotees expressed concern about his imminent death, Bhagavan is reported to have said: "Where can I go?" How true those words are! We experience Bhagavan's overwhelming presence all over the Ashram and his teachings given to us in the form of *Ulladu Narpadu*, *Upadesa Undhiyar*, *Naan Yar* and *Guru Vachaka Kovai*.

When I first visited Ramanasramam, I felt I was visiting a temple but now, when I enter Ramanasramam after studying works like *Ulladu Narpadu* and *Upadesa Undhiyar*, I feel an exhilarating experience. Now, I feel as if I am coming to a spiritual home where I belonged. Everything, the Old Hall, the Samadhi Shrine, the Mother's temple, the kitchen hold a special meaning for me. It is a rejuvenating experience to come to the place that had been frequented by Bhagavan; the same ground that had once been in live contact with the lotus feet of Bhagavan. It is a divine experience to sit in the Old Hall and meditate. I sat in the New Hall adorned by the stone statue of Sri Bhagavan. The invisible presence of Bhagavan pervaded the entire atmosphere. Looking at the portraits of Bhagavan, I felt that the Dandayuthapani (Murugan as the Ascetic) whom I had worshipped at Palani, when young, had manifested as Ramana Maharshi. Standing before Matrubhuteswarar temple, I recalled having read about its consecration ceremony, held in the divine presence of Bhagavan, with the Sri Chakra personally installed by Bhagavan. The kitchen reminded me of Bhagavan's active participation in cooking that I had read about in the letters of Suri Nagamma. It was in the dining hall that Bhagavan had eaten with all the devotees and had insisted on being treated equally with others. If the walls of the meditation hall could speak, they would speak volumes about the truth of Advaita which Bhagavan revealed in words, silence and by his presence there. When I entered Virupaksha Cave, I visualised the scene of Bhagavan creating

wonderful works of devotion like *Aksharamana Malai*, *Arunachala Padikam*, *Arunachala Ashtakam*, and *Song of the Pappadam*. I bowed to Skandasramam which remained the seat of Bhagavan; the seat from where he composed *Arunachala Pancharatnam*. Today Ramanasramam serves as a living testimony to Bhagavan's visit to this earth to remind us of the importance of realising one's own Self.

It was clear that Bhagavan lived beyond his body or mind. He was a *jivan mukta*, liberated while yet living in the body. Always abiding as the Self, he had overcome time and space. Though the world saw him as a towering spiritual leader he was gentleness personified. He was unmoving (*achala*), still and yet compassionate, full of love. He embodied the grace of Arunachala. Once, when he was looking at Arunachala, a devotee asked him: "What are you looking at?" Bhagavan replied: "I am looking at my Self."³ Arunachala Hill represents the body of Siva. Maharshi's reply revealed that Arunachala, Bhagavan Ramana and Self are all the same.

As I went on studying the sacred verses and works published by Ramanasramam and participating in satsang, I experienced a new kind of clarity of vision. I came to know from Bhagavan's teachings all that I needed to know about myself. I was glad I had finally found the right path, the path of self-enquiry, though sixty years late. I was glad that I had found the living Guru who, I wrongly thought, had passed when I was young. Though the sun sets in the west, it does not abandon us; it only withdraws from our vision. Similarly, though Bhagavan Ramana left his physical form in 1950 he continues to manifest every moment in this world, radiating his brilliant rays to every corner of the world. ▲

³ *Mountain Path*, October –December 2012, 'Ashram' p.40.

Food for the Health of the Body and Mind

VIDYA SRIDHAR

Today we see people getting sick often and new health problems and conditions arising that were unknown before. Animals and birds have not changed their modes of acquiring the food that they consume but human beings have changed their ways of acquiring and preparing the food they eat over the centuries, mostly from bad to worse. In the name of industrialisation, there are fast food centres and machines to roll out dough and mechanical systems that parcel and sell food. While there is a proliferation of hotels and restaurants, there is also an increase in doctors' offices and laboratories.

Bhagavan Ramana gave a lot of importance to the food we consume. He said that with control of diet one can achieve control of the mind. Moderation in food and similar restraints are helpful in maintaining the inner poise, he said. Our scriptures state that the

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gross part of the food we eat goes to the body and the subtle part to the mind. That is why our ancestors gave so much importance to the preparation and distribution of food. In fact, food should never be sold for money, as we see now in hotels, restaurants and fast food centres. Food should be given away free and with love. Also, today the vegetables sold in the market have large amounts of pesticides that cause us health problems. The great Saivite saints never ate their daily meal without offering food to somebody whom they worshipped as Lord Siva's devotee. They worshipped one person every day as a *Sivanadiyar*, offered the food they had prepared themselves to him or her and only then partook of it. Traditionally, if they could not find anybody, they would go without food that day. Also, the food was prepared with the utmost love and devotion in the house with vegetables grown in their own backyard. These saints lived happy and healthy lives. We cannot expect to have that happiness and health by getting our food from people who sell it for money. Three persons subtly influence the food that one consumes. They are: the person from whom we buy the food, the person who prepares it and the person who serves it. *Swayampaakam* or self-preparation of food is the best. Not all of us can do this, however. The next best is to accept food from the mother or the wife who have love and affection for us. That is why we call the divine mother Annapoorna. Food taken from these sources is *poorna* or 'full' and satisfies the body and mind. The preparers' and servers' mental tendencies go into the food and affect the consumer. Hence, we ought to serve our food ourselves or take it from the hands of someone who loves us and cares for our good, like a mother.

We know that Bhagavan Ramana meticulously prepared the ingredients of the food he cooked and that the Ashram served it to all visitors. The food touched by his hand was the holiest and the animals and birds relished it and were uplifted by it. The Vedas and Upanisads give great value to food. The gross body is called the *annamayakosa* or the sheath made of food. This is the sheath that is visible to the eye and is the first of the five sheaths that cover the

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Self or Atma. The *Taittiriya Upanisad* speaks elaborately of *annam* (food) and describes the food eaten in different planes of existence. The *Bhagavad Gita* says “*annatbhavanti bhutaani parjanyaat anna sambhavaah...*”, namely, that all living beings emanate from food. The food that is ‘home made’ and offered to the Divine enhances physical and mental health. There are many mantras and chants that purify the food that we eat. We can just say “*Brahmarpanam*” that is, ‘Offered to the supreme *Brahman*’ and then eat the food. When offered to the Divine, it purifies and enhances the vitality in the food. And when it is eaten after offering it to someone whom we consider as a form of God, its benefits are even higher.

Also, the company that we have while consuming our food influences our mind. Food should be eaten quietly and peacefully without much talk or chatter, as eating is a form of worship. Should not that which gives our body energy and life be eaten respectfully, slowly and mindfully? But what we see now is ‘fast food!’ which causes the rapid deterioration of our health. Today children want to watch TV while they consume their food. People pick up their lunch and hurriedly eat it on the move. Only older people seem to have the time to sit down and calmly eat their food. Children have to hurry to school and parents to work so that they hardly have the time to relish their food. It is important to allocate at least ten minutes to mealtimes.

Another aspect is the quality of the food. Simple food with the correct spices or herbs is the healthiest. But nowadays people want all kinds of tastes. The stomach has to work harder to digest these different kinds of foods, and hence it is prone to collapse due to hyper-acidity and other abnormal conditions. A person who eats three meals a day is called a *rogi* (sick person), one who eats twice a day is a *bhogi* (enjoyer) and one who eats just one meal a day is a *yogi* (a saint). Although Bhagavan gave much attention to food, he ate little. We need energy to work, hence food is essential. But it has to be simple and easy to digest. Like any machine, giving the stomach a break makes it more efficient. Hence our ancestors gave importance to *upavaasam* (fasting). They considered several days of a month as

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auspicious days that required one to go without food, in order to acquire the full benefits of any spiritual practice done on these days. The most significant of these are the *Ekadasi* (eleventh day of the moon), the *Pournami* (the full moon days) and the days on which we fast for particular purposes. Fasting is very good for us as it gives the stomach a break and makes it lighter. A lighter stomach allows the mind to lighten up and soar higher in meditation. We all know that eating a heavy full meal makes one sleepy and unfit for meditation or any concentrated work. Water, fruit and fresh juice can be consumed on these days to clean the stomach of all toxins. Just as we need rest, the stomach needs its rest. Bhagavan said jokingly in a Tamil verse that the stomach complained thus: “How can I live with this person who does not give me any break!”

In temples on *Vaikunta Ekadasi* devotees do *Vaikunta dwara pravesam* (enter the inner temple through a door which is like entering *Vaikuntam*, that is, the abode of the Self). I think this really signifies one entering the spiritual heart. It says that if we don't fast on *Ekadasi* during the year, it is enough to fast only on *Vaikunta Ekadasi* day, as the door to *Vaikuntam* (entrance to the heart, in other words) is open to all, even to the ones who don't fast. Imagine the benefit when one fasts.

Bhagavan never wasted any food and so would leave his leaf-plate very clean, as if it was not used. The way he ate was beautiful to watch as we read from the writings of devotees. But today people pile their plates with more than they can eat and then throw it away after they have eaten only a portion. If only we kept in mind how many people are starving in this country and in the world we would not throw away food. The importance of not wasting food has to be especially taught to children.

In olden days, when guests arrived at the home, the woman of the house prepared food immediately and offered it to the guests. Simple food offered with love satisfies guests. But what can one say of the freshness of the food served in big hotels and restaurants? It could have been cooked many days or hours ago, and is likely to be very unhealthy. We say “*Athiti devo bhava*”, namely that we should

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treat our guests as God. But these days it is common that guests and even children are given processed and packeted food, they just need a microwave oven to warm it up. There are ready-made processed foods, sold in cartons, which have a lot of preservatives and are injurious to health. They come marked with an expiry date that is months or even years after the preparation time. Complicated recipes are time consuming to prepare and hence have to be prepared in advance. They don't strengthen the body or mind and only satisfy the tongue and appetite. They are even called 'appetizers'! Since the advent of the refrigerator, people now cook and store their food even for weeks. Indeed many foods lose their strength four hours or so after preparation. Food prepared should be eaten within this time. If we have simple tastes, we can quickly prepare our food and eat it and also serve it to guests, avoiding the use of the refrigerator.

Another aspect of Bhagavan's care of others is that he always shared any food with everyone present. If there wasn't enough to feed all present, he would not accept the food. He also did not like anyone showing preference to him in offering him food. If we develop the same attitude of sharing at least one meal with a needy person every day, there would not be hungry people at all in the world. Bhagavan would consume the food given by a person with love even if it was poorly cooked. We are indebted to anyone who feeds us with love, caring for our good. We know that such a person is just like a mother. People spend a lot of time at their jobs in order to live well and have no shortage of food in their homes for their children, so it is imperative that they also pay more attention to preparing their food to lead healthy and fulfilled lives.

The food we eat enhances not only our body and mind but also gives us spiritual knowledge. As we pray to the Mother Annapoorna in the words of Sankaracharya: "*Bhikshaam dehi krupavalambanakari maataa Annapoorneswari*", let us prepare our food, offer it to the Divine, take it with respect considering it as a *prasad* (gift) coming to us from the divine Mother who is no other than Bhagavan Ramana Himself, who fed everyone who came to Him equally, and enhanced our lives immeasurably.





D. Thiagarajan

The Ship of Theseus

The Illusion of the Self

A. SRINIVAS RAO

“Since every other thought can occur only after the rise of the ‘I'-thought and since the mind is nothing but a bundle of thoughts, it is only through the enquiry ‘Who am I?’ that the mind subsides.” – Sri Ramana Maharshi, *Who Am I?*

*C*ontemporary studies on the nature of the self, find significant convergence about the illusory nature of the self, yet surprisingly they are a divided house on the nature of consciousness. Despite the materialist underpinnings of these studies, often clubbed under the rubric of ‘consciousness studies’ that are cross disciplinary and span the neurosciences, psychology and philosophy, they offer fresh insights into the ancient question ‘Who am I?’. Please note that the term ‘self’ used here refers solely to the individual ego and not the transcendent ‘ground of being’.

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‘No man ever steps into the same river twice’ declared the Greek philosopher Heraclitus (c535 – c475 BCE), indicating, like the Buddha, the constant nature of change. Plutarch (c 46 – c 120 CE), another Greek, in response to this formulated a paradox called ‘The Ship of Theseus’.

“The ship wherein Theseus and the youth of Athens returned from Crete had thirty oars, and was preserved by the Athenians down even to the time of Demetrius Phalereus, for they took away the old planks as they decayed, putting in new and stronger timber in their place...”.¹

Plutarch’s question, which divides philosophers up to this day is whether a ship that is totally reconstructed is still the same ship. Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), the British philosopher, added his own twist to the paradox of Theseus. What would happen if the original planks were gathered up after they were replaced and a second ship constructed?

Let us look at a modern thought experiment that is a variant of the same issue. If we have a machine which is a teletransporter that, at the press of a button scans your body and cell by cell, memory by memory, all your neural information including your predispositions, and then translates and recreates you at the speed of light at your chosen destination, with a 100% guarantee of return, would you opt for the journey? The answer to this question describes our concept of the self. If we decide not to go based on the idea that the replicated ‘you’ is not yourself and that something essential is lost, you possibly believe in some notion of a real immaterial inner self. If, on the contrary, you wish to travel, you possibly believe that the self is an illusory construct and that there is no essential self apart from its material, including its memories. Modern theorists of the self are divided on the same question and fall into two camps based on their allegiance, namely ‘ego’ theorists and ‘bundle’ theorists. According to ego theorists there is an experiencing self relating to memory, personality or other brain functions. Ego theories originally come from religion and concepts of an immaterial soul. The bundle theorist claims that there is no continuous experiencing self and no

¹ Plutarch, *Theseus*, Tr John Dryden, The Internet Classics Archive.

'real me'; just a bundle of perceptions, sensations, feelings. Bundle theorists are not new; the Buddha was the first known proponent of this view and David Hume (1711-76) the Scottish philosopher, its first modern proponent. There is now increasing support for the idea that though an independent self is an illusion, the notion of an independent self is useful and also necessary.

Our experiencing self seems to be the centre of the private world of which we are aware at every point of time. The notion of a self is the basis on which we construct our personal identity, our social self as well as our sense of moral responsibility, and it is the 'seat' of desire, fear, agency and free will. We believe that the self has diverse parts that are appetitive, emotional and rational and yet it is seemingly unitary and indivisible. Three beliefs characterize our conception of our self, namely i) the belief that we are continuous and unchanging, despite weathering the 'seven ages' of man; ii) the belief that the self is the unifier of all experience, making coherent a unified subject; and iii) the belief in the agency of the self as the thinker and doer, who acts upon the world, and exercises control on it.² We shall examine each of these three beliefs below. Finally we shall look at self as an identity.

The Self as Continuity

The first belief, the seemingly continuous nature of the self is what separates the ego and bundle theorists. Ego theories are easier to understand with a belief in the continuity of the self. Most people believe that they are more than their bodies and that they reside within their bodies, i.e. that their self possesses a body. Such a belief is usually associated with the duality of matter and mind (or soul) as two different substances, though monist positions of some kind of idealism or materialism are also possible. To use the metaphor of pearls on a string; if the self is assumed to be a single continuous thread that underlies all experiences like a string that unites all the pearls, it provides unity, continuity and an apparent changelessness to each of our very varied and transient pearls of experience.

² Jan Westerhoff, "What are You?" (2013). The Self, *New Scientist*, Volume 217 No. 2905.

Bundle theorists on the contrary assume that there is no continuous self that exists but that the self gets contingently generated. This position is counter intuitive and, to some people, rather disorienting. To use the metaphor of a rope; if the self is assumed to be discontinuous, yet providing coherence, it is more like a rope which consists of overlapping fibres with no single continuous element other than itself. William James (1842-1910), the father of psychology, declared that ‘thought is itself the thinker’. He proposed that a passing thought remembers some of the previous thoughts, appropriates some of them, in a stream of consciousness, and disowns others, with no permanent ‘herdsman’ to chaperone the herd of thoughts. In other words, the ‘I’ itself is merely a thought, and hands over the baton in the relay race to another thought on its expiry. James also makes a distinction between a ‘me’, that is, an empirical self and an ‘I’ that is seen as the pure ego or the felt central nucleus of experience.

The neurosciences now describe the self as not a central agency but as myriad parallel neural processes, which give rise to behaviours, memories and perceptions but no persisting self. Evidence comes from mental disorders, such as Dissociative Identity Disorder, where the patient seemingly has more than one identity; Depersonalization Disorder where the patient experiences estrangement from their body or mental processes and behaves like a zombie; Body Integrity Identity disorder where a patient renounces ownership of a limb and feels an intense urge to amputate the ‘foreign limb’; Alzheimer’s disease/Dementia where the patient experiences a loss of memory of the autobiographical self, or has an outdated idea of a ‘petrified self’; and Cotard’s disease where the patient thinks that he or she is dead or has ceased to exist. All of which suggests that the self is more fragmentary than we would like to believe.

Discursive psychology suggests that the self is a continuous production and that it is generated by the discourses it is involved in, namely that the self is a product of the way the first person ‘I’ is used in the web of discourses. Daniel Dennet (1942-) an American philosopher claims that the self is a centre of narrative gravity, embedded in a world of words: “Our tales are spun, but for the most

part we don't spin them; they spin us. Our human consciousness and our narrative selfhood is their product, not their source.”³

Thus the ‘centre of narrative gravity’ gives rise to an illusion of a self as a single source. Is the self then a mere label, a linguistic convention and are all our complex functions and behaviours merely products of distributed neural processes?

Self as Integrator

David Hume wrote, “The mind is a theatre where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, repass, glide away and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations.”⁴

The multiple sensory information that we receive at varying speeds and distinctiveness is evaluated and coordinated by the mind to give us a unified picture of the state of the world at any point of time. Our intuitive view of the self is therefore like a cinema theatre where somewhere inside my head there is a cinema screen where images, ideas and feelings are presented to my ‘mind’s eye’: the show is my stream of consciousness and ‘I’ am the audience. This view of consciousness was called pejoratively the ‘Cartesian Theatre’ by Daniel Dennet after Rene Descartes’ (1596-1650) influential dualistic view of mind and matter. The key element in this theatre is the audience of one, the homunculus or little man, which in turn would presume another little man ad infinitum who sits at the centre as the self unto whom the cinema show of the material world is displayed. While the metaphor is highly intuitive, there is no centre in the brain and no single process which corresponds to such a central HQ as the brain is a radically parallel processing system. There is no central place in which ‘I’ can sit and watch a display of sensory inputs, thoughts, mark the moment of their arrival or issue decisions. The different parts of the brain just get on with their job of communicating with others when necessary with no central control.⁵

³ Quoted in Blackmore, Susan, *Consciousness: An Introduction*. (2004). New York: OUP. p.120.

⁴ Ibid., p.96.

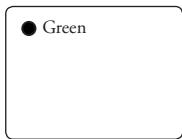
⁵ Dennet, Daniel, *Consciousness Explained*, 1991. Little Brown & Co, p.39.

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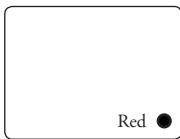
Continuity is persistence in time; however the existence of the self as located in the ‘now’ can be thrown into doubt. Information from different senses does not arrive at the same instant but at varying speeds, needing time for transmission and processing. Consider the following experiment where subjects were shown a bright spot of light at the corner of a screen immediately followed by another bright spot of light at the opposite corner. Most people reported that the bright spot travelled down the diagonal. Stranger yet, if the colour of the light was changed from green to red at each end, they reported having seen the shift in colour to red midway down the screen, that is, even before the red light was flashed at the opposite end. The mind, it seems, interpolated the data before presenting its result, rather than representing things as they really were.

Spotted Trick

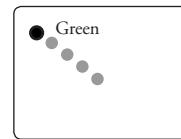
If two dots are flashed on a screen in quick succession, the brain creates the illusion of a phantom dot moving between. And if the colours of the dots are different, the result is even stranger.



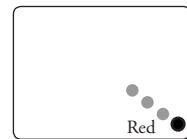
When two coloured dots are flashed in quick succession



Red



...some people report a ghost dot moving between them that changes colour abruptly along the way.



The weird thing is people report seeing the colour change to red BEFORE the red dot has even appeared.

In another experiment a rotating disc on a screen had an arrow pointed outward. Beside the disc was a flash of light timed to flash exactly when the arrow aligned with it. Most people reported seeing the light flash after a lag, that is, after the arrow had passed the point. Even when the arrow became stationary at the flash, the flash still appeared with a lag. The brain, instead of extrapolating into the future, was interpolating events into the past to create a retrospective coherent narrative.⁶

The self as geographically ‘within’ may be contested by an interesting experiment. A mannequin was fitted with cameras for eyes

⁶ For a diagrammatic representation see Jan Westerhoff, “What are You?” (2013). The Self, *New Scientist*, Volume 217, No. 2905., p.37.

and what it was ‘seeing’ was connected to a head mounted display, fitted on a volunteer. When the mannequin’s camera pointed to its abdomen and the researchers stroked both the abdomens of the mannequin and the volunteer, many volunteers identified the mannequin’s body as their own. The boundaries of the self are drawn by the brain by integrating the senses of touch, vision and proprioception (the internal sense of a map of body parts) into a coherent whole. Given conflicting information, the brain resolves it by taking ownership of the foreign body. In the same way one could also simulate an ‘out of body experience’ by manipulating the sense of touch while the subject is made to watch a volunteer similarly stroked on a video feed.⁷

Finally in much of our visual perception we often extrapolate into gaps, such as objects lying partly behind other objects, assuming identical content in similar but not the same images, assuming continuity despite blinking our eyes, and ‘filling in’ details covered by blind spots. Ramachandran VS (1951-), the eminent neuroscientist, demonstrates separate mechanisms that ‘fill in’ for colour, texture, and movement. If parts of a picture are changed while the subject blinks or is shown a flash of grey, the changes are not visually registered and this is called change blindness. Vision therefore is not a process of building up a rich detailed representation that we use to compare objects from one moment to another; it is discontinuous, tentative and contingent.⁸

The Self as Agent

The most important belief however is a central control by a sovereign self. We believe the ego/ self is free to make its decisions and choices, a free agent unconstrained by external forces or fate. The subjective experience of control that we have on a daily basis in relation to our actions is also accompanied by an ignorance of the causes of our decisions. Wegner and Wheatley⁹ in 1999 conducted an experiment

⁷ For a diagrammatic representation see Anil Ananthaswamy “Where Are You?” (2013). The Self, *New Scientist* Volume 217 No 2905., p.40.

⁸ op.cit., Susan Blackmore, p.84.

⁹ op.cit., Susan Blackmore, p.134.

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where two volunteers sat in front of a planchette computer screen with 50 different images on it. A small cardboard covered a mouse that controlled a cursor that both could move and point to the objects in the picture. One of the participants, unknown to the other, acted as a confederate of the researcher and using their respective private headphones each participant received words that indicated the objects. The subject was given to understand that the confederate was given different words than himself even though the confederate was given the same words. However the confederate participant was given the word before the true subject received the word suggesting the object.

They were both to move the cursor and stop every thirty seconds at the object indicated by a privately announced word. The subject was given words that were timed at thirty seconds, five seconds or one second before stopping at an object, as well as one second after the stopping at an object. It was found in the trials that the subject had the highest proficiency for 'I intended to make a stop' when the words were given one or five seconds before the stop and lowest for those when the word was given thirty seconds prior to or one second after the stop. Wegner calls this the 'priority principle': that effects are experienced as willed when the relevant thoughts occur just before them.

The mind does not reveal its operation but produces a post hoc narrative 'I intended to make a stop' thereby rationalising its choice. Our actions may not be based on conscious thought but on an illusory experience of will.

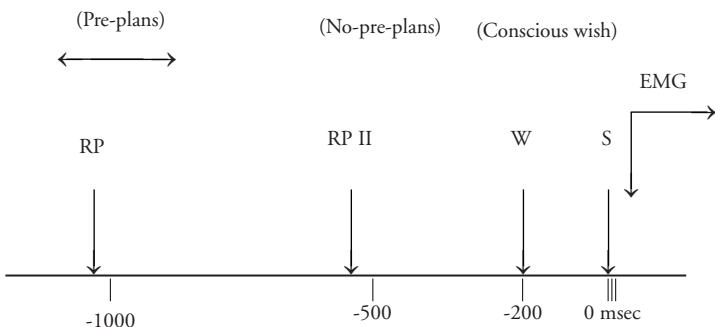
In the 1980s a Californian neuroscientist, Benjamin Libet was working on neural impulses in the brain that generate the motor action of the limbs. Libet reasoned that if a conscious intention or decision must initiate action, then the intending, which is a subjective act, must precede or at least be timed at the commencement of neural activity that initiates motor activity. Libet formulated a simple experiment – the pressing of a button by a volunteer's finger. Libet formulated three measures.

Prior to most voluntary motor acts such as pushing a button with a finger there is the conscious urge or 'will' to push the button by

the subject which precedes the actual activity. This conscious urge is perceived as a spike in neural activity in the brain's motor cortex region which is called 'readiness potential' (RP). This spike in activity precedes the actual finger pushing by a few seconds.

Libet measured: i) the readiness potential (RP) of the commencement of neural activity that triggered the motor action; ii) the timing of the conscious will or urge to push the button (W); and iii) the timing of the act of pushing the button (M). He demonstrated that adults felt the urge to push the button several milliseconds after the ‘readiness potential’(PR) was already triggered. Further, this interval was at least twice the duration between the conscious ‘will’(W) and the actual finger movement (M).

Self-initiated act: sequence



According to Liber the sequence of events in a self-inflicted voluntary act is as shown. Preplanning (RPI) occurs as much as a second before the movement. For spontaneous actions without preplanning, activity (RPII) begins about half a second before the movement. Subjective awareness of the will to move appears about 200ms before the movement. Subjective findings of a randomly delivered skin stimulus (S) averaged about -50ms from the actual time.

On an average W was triggered 200 milliseconds before the action M, but RP started surprisingly 550 ms before the action M. This prompts the following question: if the brain could initiate voluntary action before the conscious will, is there a role for the conscious intention? Conscious volition is either superfluous or is merely a check post or verification in case the person wishes to terminate the triggers initiated by the unconscious.

This is what kindles the debate on free will. If the unconscious determines or is causally related to motor action, what then is the role of conscious volition or free will? Is this sufficient evidence to dismiss the idea of free will? Even if a middle path is chosen, what is the role of conscious volition; is it to provide the option of a veto? Libet himself has been very cautious and does not claim that it is proof of the absence of free will.¹⁰ He simply maintains that though a volitional process may be unconscious, the subject does have a choice of vetoing the fulfilment of action. As someone cheekily said, “There may be no such thing as ‘free will’ but there is a ‘free won’t’” that does not absolve us from moral responsibility.

Conscious intention will always precede action but is that really proof of free will? One of the ways to examine this is to explore whether the opposite of free will is determinism. Determinism indicates either a mechanical or a divine predestination both of which seem inadequate responses to the modern mind. Things are merely contingent. Contingency merely assumes that the factors leading to our actions are myriad and unpredictable, namely, genetic inheritance, planned goals, life experiences, acquired/innate tendencies, psychological biases and environment. Free will presupposes that there is a deliberate choice between plausible alternatives. It presupposes that there is a self which is in control. It asserts the notion of a self that is autonomous and exercises agency. If the notion of the self is viewed as illusory, then the notions of autonomy and agency and a self who is in control all collapse.

The Self as Identity

Finally our notions of ourselves are socially constructed like our names. The self is thus relational, a reflection of what other people believe. “I am not what I think I am and I am not what you think I am; I am what I think that you think I am,” said Charles Cooley an American sociologist in 1902 using the phrase ‘the looking glass self’.¹¹ Gordon Gallup measured self recognition in animals by applying a red dot on a chimpanzee’s forehead while they slept and found that

¹⁰ op.cit., Blackmore, p.130.

apes and animals that lived in social groups tried to remove the dot when they noticed it in a mirror.¹² Human infants cannot pass this test until they are two years old.

Memory is central to our sense of an autobiographical self. Injury to the delicate structures of the hippocampus would place us in the terrible predicament of severe amnesia, leaving us ‘forever in today’ with no memories. In 1932 the British psychologist Fredric Bartlett demonstrated that memories are not exact copies of past events, like a film, but are reconstructed and change over time. Elizabeth Loftus the world’s greatest authority on false memories herself, was not immune. On her fourteenth birthday Loftus’s mother had drowned in a pool. Thirty years later her uncle reminded her of how she had found her mother’s body in the pool. Over the next few days lucid and horrifying memories of her mother in the pool flooded her; except that these were false memories. It was later revealed to Loftus that it was not she but her aunt who had found the body. Memory is not a library of facts but like a compost heap constantly reorganized and revised. In fact, completely false memories can be constructed by asking leading questions or believing in a false story that is retold often enough.

Identities are also cultural by-products and construct a ‘geography of self’. A. K. Ramanujam, the Indian folklorist, pondered on whether some societies have overall tendencies to generate rules that are context free while others formulate rules that are context sensitive.¹³ The West has always tended to formulate context free rules and generalisations that tend to universals(for example, the ten commandments). India, by contrast, has favoured rules that are context sensitive and based on social relations and structures (for example, valour is a virtue of the Kshatriya). Identity formation thus varies, based on how the self, embedded in its culture, apprehends the world.

This brings us back to the ship of Theseus where we started. If each of our body organs is transplanted, and if the brain can also be

¹¹ Hood, Bruce, *The Self Illusion – Who Do You Think You Are?* 2011. p.51.

¹² Ibid., p.53.

¹³ Ramanujam, A. K. ‘Is there an Indian Way of Thinking?: An Informal Essay’, *The Collected Essays of AK Ramanujam* (1999) OUP, New Delhi. p.34.

transplanted, is the resulting ‘I’ the same or different? Is there something that we can still call an inner essence of identity, the ‘real me’? Are we subscribing to an essentialist position? Essentialism is the view that there exists a universal truth beyond particulars that is instantiated in particulars (e.g. the ‘dogginess’ of a pet poodle, or the ‘squareness’ of a square). However it begs the question, whether the ‘essence’ is real, or a mere concept existing only in the mind or is a mere linguistic convention, or a convenient and useful abstraction like the self.

Conclusion

The self seems like the proverbial elephant and the six, blind men of Hindustan, with each person grasping only one aspect of it and none having a comprehensive view, except that here we are persuaded to believe that there is no elephant either. Our self is comparable to an illusion but without any one to experience that illusion; the self is not just a useful illusion but a necessary one. The paradox of the self making an effort to ‘liberate itself’ is not represented by the image of ‘Ouroboros’, the snake that eats its own tail, because there was no snake to start with. Two and a half thousand years ago, the Buddha dismissed the existence of a self as a superfluous hypothesis later called *anattavada* and choosing to remain largely silent on what lay beyond the self.

“When one turns within, and searches for wherefrom this ‘I’ thought arises, the shamed ‘I’ vanishes and wisdom’s quest begins.”¹⁴

¹⁴ *Upadesa Saram*, v.19.

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A Conversation I Have with Pain

SHRUTI RAMAKRISHNAN

I: Hi, how are you?

Pain: I am fine, as always.

I: It hasn't been too long since we met. You keep cropping up every now and then.

Pain: Yes, that's true. I have to remind you that I exist, otherwise you forget me.

I: Yes. When you are there you are so intrusive that I feel I am in Hell, but, strangely, when you are gone I simply cannot remember you or what your presence felt like. All of that vanishes. I guess that is why I need reminders. I have to say that I have not met anyone as creative as you. Each time you come, there is a different element in the experience; no two experiences are the same. How do you do that? It would be great to have that kind of creativity.

Shruti Ramakrishnan is in the final year of her M.A. Psychology degree at Delhi University.

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Pain: Yes, that's true too. But, you see, it is my true nature to be different every time I visit you. My life span is as short as the shortest lived insect's – a few days at most. I die and am reborn with great frequency, so I was given a boon that I could recreate myself differently in each lifetime. I try to be as creative as possible.

I: Wow, that's great. How can we human beings become creative?

Pain: Oh, it's not that difficult. Think in a certain way and act upon it, then let that idea die and try a different one, acting as though the previous thought never existed.

I: That's something to think about. Tell me about your amazing agility. You are almost like a circus contortionist, insinuating yourself into parts of me that I never thought existed.

Pain: It's pure meditation, and born of hard work and sacrifice. It has taken me years and years of hard work to make me this flexible.

When you were a child, I, too, was in my infancy, and so even I couldn't enter everywhere in your body. There were innumerable barriers inside you. I found that the only way to enter restricted areas was by meditation. I had to wait till you were a bit older because, when you were a baby, you were carefree with no worries. Those years were difficult for me, because I was given entry to very few places in you. However, I persisted in my efforts, and as you grew older my perseverance bore fruit. You began to worry about things; you started complaining; you cried more and more. The barriers broke or opened and I succeeded in going everywhere, exploring uncharted territories inside you. I have a detailed map of your body now and can navigate quite easily.

I: That is very interesting. Are you received as a friend? Is there anywhere you are not welcomed?

Pain: Ah! Every part of your body, top to bottom and right to left, is a friend and welcomes me. I have visited all the parts, and I know them all well though the duration of my stay has differed.

I: How is that so?

Pain: On days when you did a lot of physical work I stayed for a short duration in those places that you had exercised. On days

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when you were stressed, emotionally or mentally, I could stay for days on end. However, these periods of your stress were not easy for me because every part of you desired my presence simultaneously. It was tough for me to be in so many places at the same time, even with the prospect of being treated like a VIP! I used to flit between many places, choosing one or two long-stay vacation spots, where you would have experienced me for a long time. Your body parts love me so much sometimes that they just will not let me go. So, even if you tried to make me go away, nothing happened.

Sometimes you neglect your body and overwork yourself uncaringly, which makes my friends think you are neglecting them. That is when I come to their aid. I stay at their place with my entire luggage so that you feel extreme pain and think about my distressed friends for a few moments. They do so much for you; and how selfish you are that you don't pay them back. I can't bear to see injustice done to my friends.

I: I am really sorry for that. I will try not to do that again. You have still not told me about your enemies.

Pain: I didn't tell you because I don't have many. In fact, your intellect is my biggest enemy. You always react very negatively towards me, which I don't like. Have you ever tried talking to me or working on my positive side? No.

I: No, no, I have. I love the pain I used to have when I did physical exercise, like yoga. I always appreciated you then.

Pain: Oh yes? What about the other times? You know this is what I truly hate about you – your ignorance. You treat me very badly. I have never been insulted like this. You think you are great and superior. You don't respect me and imagine that you can function just as well with as without me. That is the time for a reality check, to make you aware of the world that exists inside you. That is when I create such agony that you cry. If you ignore me, I'll make you go through hell.

I: This might seem rather personal to you, but I have to ask: what is your connection with menstruation? Why do you make me suffer so much sometimes, and leave me alone at other times?

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Pain: Oh that! That constitutes my official break. I tend to go for a three to five day vacation every month. On the days that my hotel is full, I have to turn back and hence you don't experience pain. The days when I get a room, I check in for a couple of days. Sometimes it depends on my mood. I have hardly ever stayed the whole time. It can be very boring, and the temperature becomes uncomfortable. Besides, there are other members of your body I can visit at that time.

I: That's awesome. This means that you have friends all over my body. You don't even need Facebook to connect to them. You can meet any of them whenever you want to.

Pain: Yes! That's true.

I: So how do you move between places? Do you have some special services operating for you?

Pain: Oh yes. There are many services available to me. On days when you travel a lot, my journey is long because I have to wait until you come home and rest before I can settle down. I start when you start and reach my destination when you come and lie down. The days when you get hurt and develop a bruise are the most tiring for me, because I have so little time to prepare.

I: But what about the immediate pain? What services do you use for that? You seem pretty quick.

Pain: Oh, that's a secret that I can't share. Sorry. Those services are not available to anyone else or to all aspects of me. This is one secret I cannot disclose.

I: It's OK. You have told me many things, so if you don't want to share this one piece of information, that's fine with me. I hope one day you will.

Pain: Let us see.

I: What about your relationship with the heart? You seem to share a very different bond with it. Can you explain it to me?

Pain: It is difficult to put into words. Try to remember how you feel when someone leaves you, or hurts you, or doesn't care about you, or speaks rudely to you. Sometimes you do the same things to me. Your heart puts up barriers, thinking that it is very strong, that it

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doesn't need help and can handle everything alone. But I know that it needs me, and that is when I step in. I don't directly get involved but support it from a distance. That is the reason you don't experience me directly in your heart but still know that I am there.

I: Wow, you have been through a lot, sometimes as much as me, sometimes more than me. Do you feel 'pain'?

Pain: I do, especially when you think I am your enemy and crib about me all the time. I feel very bad then. Why don't you see me as a friend? I have been with you since you were born, and I will be there till your last breath. I have never abandoned you; I have been your most loyal friend. Yeah, I have hurt you but only when you have ignored me. Otherwise I have always supported you. You kept looking for comfort and support from outside you, which is why you never experienced me completely.

I: I will try to keep this in mind. One last question, where do you live, actually?

Pain: I live everywhere; you can call me a nomad. If you make me your friend, I fear that your body parts will stop inviting me to their homes. What will I do then?

I: Oh! Don't worry about that. You will always find a place for yourself. I can assure you that you are a permanent resident and, unfortunately, do not have a retirement age. I can assure you that, from now on, whenever you travel, you will have a more comfortable journey than you used to before this conversation. I will try to make better arrangements for you this time. I hope to meet you soon. You have given me a lot to think about.

Pain: Thank you. I enjoyed our conversation and, especially, telling you about myself. ▲



Brahma in Mother's Temple

Concepts of Intermediate Reality

Part One: The Layout of the ‘I’ Domain

N. A. MOHAN RAO

As Bhagavan puts it, “Reality is that which is”.¹ The capitalised term, as we know, stands for ‘absolute reality’. It is what *exists*, unconditioned by time or space or our states of waking, dream and sleep. Admittedly, there can be nothing higher than that.

Our present experience of the world arises from our senses operating outwards of the ego. Here, we hold the ego as sentient² as it is aware of itself, and the world as insentient. Bhagavan has said, only those things that are sentient can be held as ‘real’.³ So, we take the ego

¹ Venkataramiah, M., (comp.), *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, 1994. Talk§140 of 19.01.1936, p.123.

² The ego appears sentient because of the presence of, conventionally speaking, the Self in it.

³ “Unselfconscious [i.e., insentient] existence is a contradiction in terms. It is no existence at all.” *Maharshi’s Gospel*, 2007. Book II, Ch. III, p.51.

N. A. Mohan Rao is a septuagenarian with a long stint in engineering teaching. Since younger days, he took interest in the study of traditional Vedanta. He turned to Bhagavan’s teachings in early nineties.

as real and the world as unreal. By ‘real’, we mean in the category of relative reality. We refer to this ego-level reality as the ‘datum level’, as it is the lowest that we can experience.

The term ‘intermediate reality’ would naturally apply to whatever levels of reality occur between the ego and the absolute Reality. We expect to encounter them during our *sadhana* (spiritual discipline) when we pass beyond the ego inwardly. We shall examine here the relevant teachings with a view to obtaining a deeper insight into our *sadhana* than is otherwise possible. It may, for instance, allow us to beware and stay clear of sundry unrelated experiences like visions etc. that might arise if we stray off course during enquiry.

Preliminary Testimony for Intermediate Reality

Bhagavan tailors his teachings to the capacity of the listener. So, in his simpler teachings on Self-enquiry,⁴ he leaves no inkling of any intermediate reality. For any such testimony, we shall have to turn to his more detailed teachings, which are given much less often.

In one of such talks, Bhagavan observes, “The Self is pure consciousness in sleep; it evolves as *aham* ('I') without the *idam* ('this') in the transition stage; and manifests as *aham* ('I') and *idam* ('this') in the waking state.”⁵

The passage is highly instructive. Firstly, we note that the Self is said to evolve as ‘I’ (without the *idam*, i.e., a separate objective universe). It shows that this ‘I’ is different from the Self. At the same time, it cannot be the ego, because it is said to evolve further into a different ‘I’ and *idam* (world), whereas the ego, the ‘datum’ of our experience, cannot be said to evolve any further.⁶ Bhagavan apparently takes the

⁴ Notable examples are *Who am I?* and *Upadesa Saram*. In such cases, Bhagavan usually takes ‘I’ to be synonymous with the ‘I-thought or ego, and calls it the false ‘I’. The true ‘I’ is then taken to be the Self.

⁵ Venkataramiah, M., (comp.), *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, §314 dated 03.01.1937, p.275. See also §177, p.149.

⁶ “It is the one irreducible datum of your experience.” *Maharshi’s Gospel*, Book II, Ch.VI, p.64.

second ‘I’ to be the ego.⁷ This shows that there is an intermediate, sentient entity called ‘I’ in between the ego and the Self, and find here an irrefutable testimony for ‘intermediate reality’, which is not indicated in Bhagavan’s simpler teachings.

Intrinsic Meaning of ‘I’

We are in general aware that there is within us a sense of ‘I’ which appears to be inherent in us, and allows us to know that ‘we are’, without our having to invoke our senses. When we say ‘I’ in our daily life, we intend it to mean this inhering ‘I’, but due to force of habit, we mistake it with our ego, which generally manifests as the idea ‘I-am-the-body’.⁸ For instance, when we say ‘I went there yesterday’, what it implies is ‘I, identified with my body, went there’. It means the ego in the form of ‘I-am-the-body’ takes on the role of our ‘I’ even without our being particularly aware of it.

In Self-enquiry, we ask ourselves ‘wherefrom does the sense of ‘I’ arise in me?’ It makes us seek the sentient part ‘I’ in the ego’s form, ‘I-am-the-body’. If we strike the right stance, we can feel this inner ‘I’ of ours distinctly: we become directly aware that ‘we are’. Devotion, *japa* (mantra repetition) and meditation lead us to the same feeling of ‘I’ (awareness of our *be-ing*),⁹ but we mostly fail to recognize it due to lack of anticipation and proper acquaintance. Outside of sadhana of any kind, we come across this ‘I’ in instances such as great fear or excitement.¹⁰ The ‘I’ so experienced in all such cases is its real (or intrinsic) meaning.

Interpretation of ‘I’ in Vedanta

Traditional Vedanta admits of the aforesaid intrinsic meaning of ‘I’, but proceeds to examine it further through a scrutiny of *avastha-traya* – the

⁷ In so doing, Bhagavan simplifies the teaching partially here. The formation of the ego actually involves an additional step, as explained later under ‘Evolution in Terms of the I-Domain’. This, however, does not in any way affect the conclusion drawn here. See also *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, 22.03.1946 Afternoon, p.157.

⁸ The ego may have varied forms, but the form ‘I-am-the-body’ is the most fundamental of them all.

⁹ *Talks*, §413 dated 21.05.1937, p.385.

¹⁰ *Talks*, §62 dated 06.07.1935, p.68. *Sphurana* is the same as ‘I-feeling’.

three states of waking, dream and sleep. Since these three states together comprise our entire life,¹¹ we may think this approach provides the most comprehensive interpretation of ‘I’.

According to Vedanta, all travails of our life are due to our being ignorant of our true nature as the Self. This ignorance manifests in us in the form of the three bodies, which veil the Self from us. In waking state, it primarily manifests as the gross body. We falsely identify ourselves with this ‘gross’ body, and our ego assumes the form ‘I-am-the-(gross)-body’. The ‘I’ so embedded in it is called *Vaisvanara* – from *visva* (cosmic) and *nara* (being).¹² When the consciousness as *Vaisvanara* is projected outwards, it dons the role of the gross ego and experiences the external (or gross) world.

In dream, we identify ourselves with a ‘subtle’ body and by its means experience a subtle world. We say ‘subtle’ because the world we see in dream, and our body in there, are projected by our mind alone. The ego is now of the form ‘I-am-the-(subtle)-body’. The ‘I’ included in it is called *Taijasa*,¹³ meaning ‘luminous being’ (*tejas* is ‘light’).

In sleep, the ego takes the form ‘I-am-the-(causal)-body’. The ‘I’ here is named *Prajna*, meaning ‘the supreme knower’.¹⁴ The reason is that every object that we come to ‘know’ external to ourselves belongs either to the waking state or dream; and both these states have sleep as their source or cause.¹⁵ So, sleep is said to contain all objects in their causal form, and thus be in the ‘know’ of them. It is like a city under black-out on a dark, cloudy night, when all objects (houses, roads, people etc.), though present, lie undifferentiated in the shroud

¹¹ Exceptional cases like coma, swoon, trance, intoxication etc. need not concern us here.

¹² *Mandukya Upanishad*, 3, Sankara’s commentary, p.11; (transl.) Swami Gambhirananda, Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata; (2/ed., 1989). The term *Vaisvanara* is to be understood in a futuristic sense.

¹³ *Mandukya*, 4, p.14.

¹⁴ ‘conscious *par excellence*’, ‘the knower of all’, *Mandukya*, 5, 6; Sankara’s commentary, pp.17, 18.

¹⁵ “This one is the Source of all.” *Mandukya*, 6, p.18.

of darkness. Since there is no object to witness, *Prajna* revels in its own nature as supreme joy (and not Bliss).¹⁶

Vaisvanara, *Taijasa* and *Prajna* thus refer to aspects of ‘I’ on the gross, subtle and causal planes respectively. All through, its ‘intrinsic’ significance as outlined earlier remains the same. It is like the same person ascending to different levels of a skyscraper, and obtaining different views of the surroundings. Vedanta primarily looks upon ‘I’ as this ‘unchanging’ witness of the three states of waking, dream and sleep.¹⁷

Vedanta observes that the three states are exclusive of each other: when one of the states occurs, the other two do not. A thing that exists at one time and does not exist at another cannot be real in the absolute sense.¹⁸ So, we are to look beyond these states for Reality.

Unfoldment of the three Levels of ‘I’ in Sadhana

The *Mandukya-upanishad*, along with Gaudapada’s *Karika*¹⁹ on it, embodies the quintessence of Vedanta. It describes a method of stepwise meditation on *Om*²⁰ for realisation of the Self. *Om*, the single letter in Sanskrit, is looked upon as a composite of three letters a, u and m coming in that order. They are viewed as the aspects of ‘I’ at the gross, subtle and causal levels (*Vaisvanara* etc.) respectively. By meditating on them in successive stages, the ignorance manifested as the three bodies is overcome. The sounds represented by the three letters are used as *pratikas* (‘objects’) for these meditations.²¹

¹⁶ *Mandukya*, 5; Sankara’s commentary, p.17.

¹⁷ *Maha Yoga*, K. Lakshmana Sarma (“WHO”), 1996, Ch.8, footnote on p.89. “It is the same ‘I’ that was asleep and dreamt [as] is now awake.” Sankara’s Commentary, *Mem. Edn.*, Vol. 5, p.97, sourced from *Gaudapada*, IV.2, T.M.P. Mahadevan, University of Madras, p.100, (1975).

¹⁸ *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, 1989. 06.03.1946 Afternoon, p.147.

¹⁹ A *karika* is an expository treatise on a spiritual text, in which the author takes liberty to include some of his own thinking and experiential knowledge.

²⁰ Because, “*Om* is *Brahman*”. *Taittiriya*, I.viii.1. See also *Prasna*, V.2; *Mandukya*, 1 & 2 taken together.

²¹ *Om* is often regarded as *sabda-brahman*, where *sabda* is taken to mean ‘sound’.

In the first stage, the *pratika* could be either the right eye or the sound ‘a’ (as ‘u’ in ‘cut’).²² As the meditation on it progresses, the flood of thoughts that initially crowd the mind steadily decrease. The mind becomes correspondingly more *sattvic*, since the energy that was being dissipated in the many thoughts (*rajas*) is now conserved. It brings in a transparency of inner vision, due to which the ‘I’ internal to the gross ego becomes of itself revealed to the mind. The mind at once finds its oneness with this ‘I’, called *Vaisvanara*. Meditation thus leads us to our individual ‘I’ (*vyaṣhti* ‘I’), which is the same as what we come across at first in Self-enquiry.²³

Further sadhana would now consist in continued retention of this ‘I’-awareness.²⁴ It causes steady erosion of our gross level *vasanas* (tendencies, predispositions). When they are totally eliminated, we attain the corresponding cosmic state (*samashhti* ‘I’), called *Virat*.²⁵ The first stage sadhana concludes here.

The second and third stage ‘meditations’ follow similar patterns. For the second stage, the *pratika* could be the mind or the sound ‘u’ (as ‘u’ in ‘full’).²⁶ It leads us firstly to our individual ‘I’ at the subtle level, called *Taijasa*. When we hold it long enough, we attain the

²² *Karika*, 1.2; *Mandukya* 9, respectively. Bhagavan makes a slight departure here, which will be seen later.

²³ “If that [meditation or japa] is pursued in all sincerity with due perseverance, it will automatically lead to the investigation of the Self.” *Talks*, §374 of 13.03.1937, p.341.

²⁴ “The *sadhaka* ... must ascertain the true [or intrinsic] meaning of the ‘I’ and constantly revert to it whenever other thoughts arise. That is the practice.” *Talks*, §647 of 15.03.1939, p.608.

²⁵ *Vaisvanara*, *Taijasa* and *Prajna* are often spoken of as the respective egos, ‘enjoying’ the respective worlds. Such statements are to be taken in a secondary sense, since as noted by Swami Krishnananda, “these names are not of the bodies but of the consciousness which knows them and experiences them.” Cf. *The Philosophy of the Panchadasi*, The Divine Life Society, 1992. p.11.

²⁶ *Karika*, 1.2; *Mandukya*, 10, respectively. Bhagavan however takes the *pratikas* for the first two stages to be ‘both eyes’ and ‘throat’ (as it is the seat of the mind, vide ‘Self-enquiry’, §7, *Collected Works*, 2002, p.9.) respectively. They seem more logical. Cf. *Talks*, §617 of 23 to 28.01.1939, p.579.

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subtle-level cosmic ‘I’, called *Hiranyagarbha*. With it ends our second stage sadhana.

The *pratika* for the third stage could be the space ('ether') within the heart, or the sound 'm' (as 'm' in *Om*).²⁷ Meditation on it leads at first to our individual 'I' at the causal level, called *Prajna*. By holding it long enough, we attain the corresponding cosmic 'I', called *Isvara*. It marks the conclusion of the third stage.²⁸

The Dawning of Jnana

The state of *Isvara* is attained after the causal vasanas are overcome at the individual level. The causal vasana at the cosmic level, identified as *Maya*,²⁹ remains to be overcome. Logically, therefore, sadhana is to continue beyond the third stage for realisation of the Self.

The *pratika* for the fourth-stage meditation is the partless *Om*.³⁰ The meditation results in the realisation of the absolute Self (*Atman*). The *Mandukya-upanishad* declares ‘ayam atma brahma’, meaning ‘this *Atman* is *Brahman*.³¹ By ‘*Brahman*’ is meant the absolute Reality from the cosmic perspective. So, when *Atman* is realised through meditation, it is one and the same as realisation of *Brahman*. Sadhana concludes finally at this point.

We may now summarize the progression from the ego to the absolute Self as follows:

²⁷ *Karika*, 1.2; *Mandukya*, 11, respectively.

²⁸ We may suppose the conclusion of the three stages is indicated by the attainment of Omnipresence, Omniscience and Blissfulness respectively.

²⁹ See *Talks*, §579 (last) of 15.11.1938, p.536.

³⁰ “One should concentrate one’s mind on *Om*, (for) *Om* is *Brahman*.” *Karika*, 1.25.

³¹ *Mandukya*, 2. It is one of the four *maha-vakyas* ('great pronouncements') declared by the upanishads.

A Graphical View of the Stages of Reality and Sadhana

The four stages of ‘reality’ starting from *Vaisvanara* onwards may be compared to a coin and its subdivisions.³² If the Self is regarded as a rupee coin, *Prajna* is looked upon as half-rupee, *Taijasa* as quarter-rupee, and *Vaisvanara* as one-eighth-rupee.³³ Each lower denomination subsists in the higher. The analogy is meant only to illustrate this relation of subsistence, and is not to be taken in a strict quantitative sense.

The interrelation among the four stages may be brought out even more clearly with the help of the diagram ‘Reality Matrix’ on page 79. We may at first identify four principal regions in it. The first is the entire area covered by the large square. The white space in it, including the portion underlying the shaded areas is taken to represent the Self. The second region is the rectangle forming the right-half of this square, characterized by lines ascending from left to right, irrespective of the presence of other kinds of lines. It represents *Prajna*. The third region is the lower half of this rectangle, characterized by lines descending from left to right, irrespective of other lines. It is *Taijasa*. Lastly, there is the right-half of this square, characterized by horizontal lines, and having additionally two kinds of sloping lines. It is *Vaisvanara*. (See the Legend to the diagram.)

We can see the coin analogy above clearly reflected in the diagram. *Prajna* is formed of a part of the Self, *Taijasa* of *Prajna*, and *Vaisvanara* of *Taijasa*. It is hence that we find the *Taijasa* area having two kinds of lines, and *Vaisvanara* area three kinds.

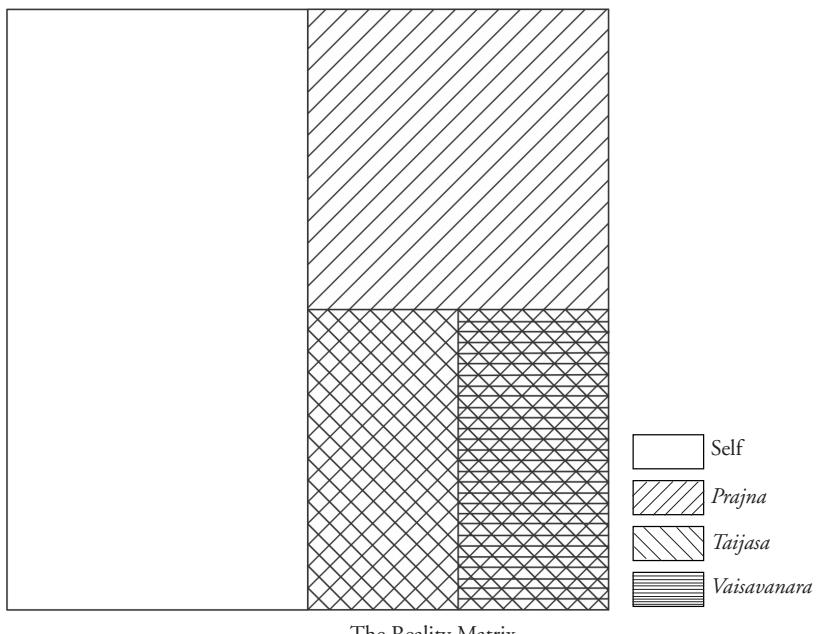
Vaisvanara, *Taijasa* and *Prajna*, as we know, stand for waking-‘I’, dream-‘I’, and sleep-‘I’ respectively. These are respectively associated with the gross, subtle and causal bodies (in the formation of the respective egos). Hence, the *Vaisvanara* area in the diagram may be taken to indirectly represent the gross body, the *Taijasa* area the subtle body and the *Prajna* area the causal body.

³² *Mandukya*, 2; Sankara’s commentary, p.9.

³³ The one-eighth-rupee coin was in currency prior to the decimalisation of the Indian rupee in 1957.

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We generally consider waking to be the state in which we are identified with our gross body. But we know that in this state, we are possessed also of the subtle and the causal bodies. The subtle body is inferred by the mind, and the causal body by the *vasanas* that control the mind from within. This presence of the three bodies in waking is seen indicated in the diagram by the three kinds of lines in the *Vaisvanara* area.



We consider dream to be the state in which we are identified with our subtle body to the exclusion of our gross body. Here also we have to admit of the presence of a causal body in the form of *vasanas* that govern the course of the dream. The presence of the two bodies thus in dream is indicated in the diagram by the two kinds of lines in the *Taijasa* area, not counting the horizontal lines to allow for absence of the gross body. In the same way, we take sleep as a state in which we are identified with the causal body to the exclusion of the gross and subtle

bodies. This is indicated by the single kind of lines (ascending) in the *Prajna* area, not counting the horizontal and the descending lines.

In the light of this analysis, we may now see how sadhana proceeds stage by stage, with the help of the diagram. In the first stage, the gross vasanas at the individual (or *vyashti*) level are removed. It is equivalent to erasing of the horizontal lines in the diagram. The *Vaisvanara* area then becomes indistinguishable from the rest of the *Taijasa* area. It means *Vaisvanara* is now resolved into its source, *Taijasa*.³⁴ The next two stages can be visualized similarly in terms of erasing of the descending lines and then the ascending lines. At the end only the white space remains, representing the Self.³⁵

Evolution in Terms of the ‘I’ Domain

The arrow diagrams that appear in the section ‘The Dawning of Jnana’ accord with the approach of the *Mandukya-upanishad*, as generally endorsed by Bhagavan. Since the way to Realisation, as Bhagavan said, is the exact opposite of the way of our evolution,³⁶ the same arrow diagrams taken in reverse can reveal the way of our evolution, for instance thus:

Brahman (or Self) → *Samashti* ‘I’ {*Isvara* → *Hiranyagarbha* → *Virat*} → Ego

We see thus that *Isvara* is the first ‘I’ that is evolved from the Self (See Talk §314 cited under ‘Preliminary Testimony ...’). It explains Bhagavan’s frequent assertion that ‘I’ is the first name of God (or *Isvara*), and that it is the greatest mantra of all.³⁷ His teaching that mere japa of ‘I’ is a sure means to Realisation³⁸ may be seen in this context, and we may not need to feel diffident about following it as the next best option to Self-enquiry.

³⁴ “... the Fourth (Turiya) is realized by successively merging the earlier three”, *Mandukya*, 2, Sankara’s commentary, p.9.

³⁵ The fourth stage sadhana is not indicated here as it relates to the causal body at the *samashti* level.

³⁶ “This is the only way [for Realization], to go back by the same way by which you came.” *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, 06.03.1946 Afternoon, p.147.

³⁷ *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, 28.06.1946, p.229.

³⁸ *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, 08.05.1946 & 28.06.1946, pp.193 & 229 respectively.

The next ‘I’ that is evolved from the Self is *Hiranyagarbha*. While *Isvara* is said to be undifferentiated,³⁹ the evolution of *Hiranyagarbha* marks the start of differentiation. Along with *Hiranyagarbha*, the principle of sentience,⁴⁰ is evolved the *idam* ('this'), the principle of insentience. The next stage of evolution (vide footnote 7) consists in the coming together of this sentient principle with different bodies of the insentient *idam*, giving rise to the respective egos. The rest of the *idam* takes on the role of the world. The ‘I’ so embedded in all the egos, taken together, is known as *Virat*. The ego may then be looked upon as a further evolution from *Virat*.

Looking beyond the *Mandukya* for Intermediate Reality

Intermediate reality is entirely concerned with the manifestations of ‘I’. For the most comprehensive understanding of ‘I’, we look upon it as the unchanging witness of the three states of waking, dream and sleep. The *Mandukya-upanishad*, together with Gaudapada’s *Karika* and Sankara’s commentary, allows us to get deep insights into these three-fold manifestations of ‘I’. The *Mandukya* takes an unambiguous stand on sleep as a state of *ajnana*, unlike the older and larger Upanishads, the *Brihadaranyaka* and the *Chandogya*, which tend to be ambivalent.⁴¹

Yet, the *Mandukya* treatment does not seem entirely without inadequacies. For instance, it does not provide a clear picture of the transition from the first-stage meditation on *Om* to the second-stage, and so on. We shall see in Part Two how Bhagavan’s teachings resolve this question, along with a few others, in a comprehensive way, in what may perhaps be considered as Bhagavan’s unique contribution to the system of Advaitic thought.

▲

(*To be concluded*)

³⁹ *Mandukya*, 5, p.15.

⁴⁰ Conventionally, *Hiranyagarbha* is looked upon as the collective consciousness of all beings (or, ‘cosmic consciousness’). See for example, http://www.swami-krishnananda.org/glossary/glossary_degh.html

⁴¹ *Gaudapada*, IV.2, T.M.P. Mahadevan, pp.100-1.



Thank you, Zen Master Soen Sa Nim

SOL SANDPERL

A young Dutch man upon ending some years of training in a Zen Monastery in Japan, came to the Master to bid him farewell. The Master gave him an ornamental Zen sword with the following words.... “You have been forged here just like this sword. The entire planet is a school where the sleeping are awakened. You have been woken up here, enough so that you will never fall asleep again.”

This is what happened to me too at the Providence Zen Center in Cumberland, Rhode Island. I was forged, never to fall asleep again, and my training continues unbroken in other ‘training centres’ of life. Soen Sa Nim’s teachings and his words continue to resonate in my mind and Heart and his work is not lost.

I first met Soen Sa Nim in the New York City Zen Center in 1976 where he came to give a talk. Posters placed in the Village coffee shops sparked my curiosity, and I decided to go. I remember a very dynamic

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figure – concentrated and focused. I spoke with him afterwards, and asked him for spiritual guidance. “Who are you?” he asked me with a twinkle in his eye. “My name is Sol,” I replied. “That’s your body’s name. Who are you?” I stammered and said, “I don’t know.” He laughed and said, “That’s very good. That’s your path.” I had no idea what was coming a few years later.

It was a few years later in early June 1980 that I arrived at the Providence Zen Center, from Montreal, with a small suitcase and a lot of mental baggage. In fact, I found myself in dire straits, battling for my sanity. This was Soen Sa Nim’s main Temple, and I knew that I was going to see him sooner or later, but he was travelling and gone for the first month of my stay. In the meantime, I tried following the Zen centre schedule (work, meditation, chanting, etc.), but it was not relieving my sickness. I was in bad shape. I even called him on the phone on several occasions to ask for his help.

Finally, when Soen Sa Nim arrived, I went to see him accompanied by other Zen center teachers – being in such a bad state and needing an immediate directive from him. They said to him, “This man (me) likes people and is social – let him continue working with the schedule here.” They felt that by working with the center’s routine, I would eventually come around. Soen Sa Nim, Zen Master, looked at me with a penetrating glance and said, “This man needs to go to war with his demons full time. His weapons should be bowing and mantra – all day.” I agreed immediately. I welcomed a chance to fight.

The battle began the very next morning, when I gave myself to the practice full force and did upwards of 1500 bows per day. In between bows, I walked around the Dharma meditation room doing 10,000 repetitions or more, every day, of the mantra he gave me, Kwanseum Bosal, the Korean name for the Bodhisattva of Compassion. The actual mantra did not matter so much, Soen Sa Nim would tell me. It was the concentration on it that counted. You could repeat Coca Cola with total concentration and it could be effective. Yet the closer I got to focusing on the mantra, the more panic stricken I became. “Soen Sa Nim,” I asked, “can I do away with the mantra and just do bowing?” He answered in his inimitable way with a smile, “No,

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no, you have to do the mantra also, it is very necessary. You now experience resistance! Your back seat driver does not want to give up control! Keep try mind! You will soon success!”

With that, he gave me a pat on the back and I was back at it with renewed vigour.

And it happened that, after a few weeks of bowing and repeating the mantra all day, till my jaw ached, finally, I landed on it square on. The nightmare that I was in dropped for an instant and I realized that all those thoughts weren't me. That was all I needed to realise: that there was a way out. I was still filled with anxiety and still afraid, but I also had an increased desire to go on. I had found a path, a technique that would save me. My addictive, obsessive personality worked in my favour, being directed in a positive direction – the one that Soen Sa Nim laid out very clearly.

But my demons were very strong and I became afraid. What if I lost the mantra? I felt like I was falling...what if I fell into hell? So I went to Soen Sa Nim again. I spoke with him often during this time. Whether it was catching him in the hallway or during formal meetings, he always stopped to listen. When I told him about my fear of falling into hell because I couldn't focus on my mantra, he smiled and said, “Don't worry about focusing on the mantra! Imagine that you have fallen into hell already, and a demon is beating you. Then – just try Kwanseum Bosal. Don't worry about focusing on it, just try it.”

This advice was a panacea for me. The fear practically disappeared. I knew of course that I could always try Kwanseum Bosal and that nothing could prevent me from doing that. The lesson was very liberating and helped me along. Soen Sa Nim wanted me to go right into the heart of my imagined fears. It reminded of the Roman and Greek stoics, like Seneca, who taught that allowing oneself to feel, in sober detail, the worst-case scenario, would sap the anxiety of its power. Soen Sa Nim would say, “See what your fears are. Go into them. They have no self-nature and are entirely mental creations occurring to an imaginary 'I'.”

A month or so later, Soen Sa Nim was giving a talk in the Dharma Room during the Buddha's birthday celebration. He told us that the

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fear of death was a necessary prerequisite for those bodhisattvas who were embarking on the journey to enlightenment. He said that a bodhisattva's fear of death was intense and immediate and very real. Then to my surprise he said, "Sol experience this and was very afraid of death – now strong – no problem." I was very grateful to hear Soen Sa Nim say that. I knew that by strong, he meant strong enough to stay on the path and not get swallowed up by mental demons.

During the time spent in close proximity with Soen Sa Nim, there were a number of times that great teaching came from him directly to me. One hot summer afternoon, a number of us were sitting outside having a picnic lunch with Soen Sa Nim near the Zen Center garden. Although I was recovering, there were times when I still felt unsteady. Soen Sa Nim looked across at me and said, "Your consciousness jumping around." He then imitated a little bag of consciousness, like a little bird, swooshing around above my head. I laughed. That was exactly what was happening. It was such a relief to see that, and Soen Sa Nim helped me to understand it. While it did not immediately cure the problem, he had showed it to me clearly. I began to know the difference between the state of presence, in which my consciousness was grounded and I felt strong and down to earth, versus the state of unsteadiness in which my thinking was so intense that I literally left my body and was outside of it. I have since learned that the origin of the phrase, "He was beside himself with rage or fear," refers to this phenomenon.

I continued living at the Providence Zen Center for another four and a half years, gaining strength and equanimity. As I grew stronger, my dependence on Soen Sa Nim and the need to live at a Zen Center lessened. I was now 34 years old and I desired to make a life for myself in the outside world. I eventually moved to Boston and entered the business world. I found my soulmate, and we later married and had a child together. Today, I am continuing my practice, and am fortunate to have my wife practising alongside with me. I remain in great gratitude to Zen Master Soen Sa Nim, who pulled me out of the fire, forged me, and pointed me to the right way. Thank you, Soen Sa Nim.



The Many Mysterious Ways of Bhagavan

Or, How I Received His Grace

S. V. R. SOMAYAJULU

Devotees of Sri Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi have always known that He bestows His grace on His sincere followers in many different ways.

The experiences and occurrences described below have fallen to my lot over the years and I have been humbled by them and my surrender to Him has become unconditional and total. I have no doubt in my mind that, but for His grace, none of them would have been possible. My faith in Him has been reaffirmed over and over again as I enjoyed each instance of His kindness. I may be an equal-opportunity worshipper but my strength lies in my trust in Bhagavan.

What is special about these events is that they involved other sages and holy personages who are well known throughout the country and for whom I have had regard, along with Bhagavan, on some level.

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Didn't Bhagavan encourage us to follow our individual predilections when it comes to our sadhana? The illiterate peasant could achieve his salvation by standing outside chanting the Rama nama just as certainly as the scholars engaged in lofty spiritual discussions inside an asramam.

These occurrences are disparate in nature taken individually, but the common thread running through them all is my faith primarily in Bhagavan and my conviction that good things happen to those whose minds are attracted to holy personages. It may be my weakness but it's not a lack of full faith in Bhagavan that makes my mind wander thus. After all, it is Bhagavan who makes these things happen in whichever way is suitable for a given devotee. The passages below from *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi* lend support to my convictions. When asked if it was an advantage to have visions, Bhagavan replied, "It is an advantage," in no uncertain terms.¹

"Visions and thought-currents are had according to the state of mind. It depends on the individuals and not upon the Universal Presence. Moreover, they are immaterial. What matters is Peace of Mind."²

"The vision implies the seer. The seer cannot deny the existence of the Self. There is no moment when the self as Consciousness does not exist; nor can the seer remain apart from Consciousness. This Consciousness is the eternal Being and the only Being. The seer cannot see himself. Does he deny his existence because he cannot see himself with the eyes as pratyaksha (in vision)? No! So, pratyaksha does not mean seeing, but BE-ing."³

Bhagavan was asked whether a seeker could have multiple gurus, he replied: "Who is a Master? He is the Self after all. According to the stages of development of the mind the Self manifests as the Master externally. The famous ancient saint Avadhuta said that he had more than 24 Masters. The Master is one from whom one learns anything... God, guru and the Self are identical."⁴

¹ Venkataramiah, M., (comp.), *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, 2009. Talk §304.

² Ibid., Talk §371.

³ Ibid., Talk 450.

⁴ Ibid., Talk §23.

So, before I launch my narrative, let me emphasise that the following dreams and visions symbolise the way my sadhana has proceeded, based on my own previous samskaras. I do not at all mean in any way, shape, or form imply that others should follow the same path or that I am in some way special, because I am not. In spiritual practice as in life, it is ‘to each his own’, based on their individual spiritual backgrounds and tendencies.

From my childhood, I was given to many visions of sages and deities. I am recounting some of the more recent experiences in a rough chronological order.

Back in 1974, for a spell, I was performing rigorous gayatri japa. I slept fitfully at night, very tired. Around midnight one day, I felt someone was trying to awaken me persistently. When I reluctantly opened my eyes, to my pleasant surprise, there lay a large idol of Gayatri in front of me as if granting me a boon. I knew that Gayatri was the deity embodying the ultimate knowledge. A few weeks later, as the intensity of my japa increased, I felt a small shaft of energy slowly rise and move up my spine and rest in the back of my head. I experienced this uncanny feeling on the two following days as well. Sweat was pouring down my body as the experience overwhelmed me. I had a vision of Gayatri Herself a few years later. It was just unbelievable that I could be so lucky.

Around November that year a neighbour in the village called me and handed me a small box containing the idols of Rama, Lakshmana, Sita, and Hanuman, besides a *salagrama* (ammonite rock, symbol of Visnu) and some flowers. He had always been fond of me and knew that they were my favourite deities for daily worship. He was dressed in the traditional garb of a Sanskrit scholar and exuded much grace. I did not realise it at the time, but he was actually handing over his personal treasury of idols and placing me in charge of their continued worship, realising his end was near. I felt I was blessed by his trust in me to take care of his beloved idols. I also felt that it was Bhagavan’s way of nurturing my struggling attempts at sadhana.

Around this time, a little after my experiences with kundalini, I saw in a dream the saint Raghavendraswami, for whom I had great

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admiration and devotion. He was in a meditative pose and I was reverently massaging his feet. When he opened his eyes, he instructed his disciples to give me some prasadam. I ate it with much respect and relish, and woke up with my eyes welling with tears, touched by the Swami's famed compassion. In the dream, I also saw the Swami's gold chain, and found a silver idol of him next to the banana leaf off which I was eating. I never knew how that idol got there, but I was very happy to see it there, as if blessing me and promising to take care of me.

On another occasion, on the Sivaratri day in 1977, I was walking with a group of several tall sadhus, ash smeared all over their bodies, in the Himalayas. They were devoutly chanting '*Sivo'ham*' as they headed to a high perch with Lord Siva's statue atop it. The Ganga was flowing from its head in which I bathed myself with much joy. The message to me, I thought, was that I was on the right track in my worship of Siva, with whom I identified Bhagavan though I am aware that Bhagavan has been considered an avatar of Skanda and not Siva.

My wife has long suffered from chronic illness of an incurable kind and, during an especially bad episode, she and I were repeating Sri Sai Baba's name earnestly praying for relief. I had a dream that night in which Sai Baba sprinkled holy water on us saying, "Don't worry, all will be well," and disappeared behind a flash of bright light. Given that her illness is beyond cure, she now continues to take care of herself to the best of her ability.

And, when my son was ill, Sri Sai Baba pressed a copper penny to the right side of my chest and assured me that all would be well. He also placed his hand on my son's forehead, and indeed everything turned out right in no time.

Not to belabour the point that I tend to have visions of the activities that I pursue, I once read Paramahansa Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi* and was hoping as I read the book to be able to see the yogi. Lo and behold, I had a vision of him that night.

When I was making plans to visit Tiruvannamalai some years ago, I got to repeating Bhagavan's name in my dreams. Then my attention

THE MANY MYSTERIOUS WAYS OF BHAGAVAN

was drawn to a little boy eating lunch from a banana leaf at a street corner. I asked the boy what he was doing and he showed me his leaf plate, in which I saw Bhagavan's smiling face instead of food.

In December 1996, I vowed to perform 108 Satyanarayana pujas at the Annavaram temple. As I traveled on the train, I began to doubt my physical ability to withstand the strain. But to my surprise I could muster enough strength to go through with my vow and even perform an additional kalyanam ceremony at the end.

Soon after, when I visited the Dattatreya Peetham in Mysore, and chanted the uttara mantra for three days in a row and did a milk abhisheka, I was blessed with a vision of Goddess Lalitha on the third night right there at the asramam.

I can be exact about the date of another one of my visions: November 24th 2004. In the wee hours of the night, I dreamt that I was in the presence of Mahaswami Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswati of Kanchi along with his disciples. I began to narrate to the pontiff that I had met Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi and I happened to record my conversations with him (Bhagavan). But I was sorry that I had forgotten to bring the transcript which I had left at home, and offered to bring it. The pontiff said that there was no need for that and blessed me by placing his right hand on my head.

My relative Dr. I. S. Madugula and I visited our village in 2012 and were invited to lunch at another relative's house. When we were at the table, I could clearly see Bhagavan standing by the table and looking kindly on us and smiling in His bewitching way.

Though now I refer to these experiences as dreams and visions, at the time of their occurrence, they were vivid and real to all intents and purposes. I experienced genuine happiness after each episode. The gratuitous appearance of Bhagavan in a few of them indicates to me that He approves of my visions as stepping stones in the path of spiritual progress. At a minimum, I am convinced that Bhagavan has blessed my efforts and the fact that I dream of other gods and saints will not be held against me, because all effort has the same goal. Common sense and basic science tell us that both our conscious efforts and latent impressions appear as dreams, though not exactly

as we remember them. But it is still possible – and I am convinced that it is so – that it is my full faith in Bhagavan that is responsible for my experiences whether or not they directly involved Bhagavan at the time. After all, is there any event or happening or occurrence in which He is not involved?

I surrendered myself to Bhagavan long ago and I let things take their own course. From experience I know that His grace manifests itself in manifold ways.



Thief

Upahar

Your eyes seem to say:
What if this very moment
 the boundless love,
 the formless radiance I am
were always and already the whole truth,
 and no-one there to doubt it?

Your smile is like a rose
unfolding endlessly from within,
 and seems to say:

What if this steady and absolute bliss
were now and forever just what perfectly is,
 and nothing there to hide it?

What though ghosts linger, and the clinging to fool's gold?
 You enter at Your will this house of dreams
 to steal these phantom treasures.

Your silence seems to say:
Don't try to trace Me, nothing real is missing.
 But, ah, beloved Thief,
Did You think You would get away with this?
 You left Your Heartprints everywhere.

René Guénon and Sri Ramana Maharshi

Two Remarkable Sages in Modern Times

Part One

SAMUEL BENDECK SOTILLOS

Since that time [of the Kali-Yuga or ‘dark age’], the truths which were formerly within reach of all men have become more and more hidden and inaccessible; those who possess them grow gradually less and less numerous, and although the treasure of ‘non-human’ wisdom that was before the ages can never be lost, it becomes enveloped in ever more impenetrable veils, which hide it from men’s sight and make it extremely

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difficult to discover.... [T]hose who aspire to true knowledge must find [it] again; but it is also stated that what is thus hidden will become visible once more at the end of the cycle.

– René Guénon¹

Sri Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950) stands as one of the consummate spiritual pillars of the 20th century, yet in contrast one might ask who was René Guénon (1886-1951), the man that the Maharshi regarded as “the Great Sufi”?² We can safely assume given the stature of such a personage that this recognition was not made frivolously and without substantial cause. While no praises are necessary to validate his stature we recall that it was the great Hindu saint Sri Anandamayi Ma (1896-1982) who prostrated herself before the Maharshi’s tomb and pronounced: “He is the ocean and we are the rivers that run into it.”³ One of the twentieth-century’s most venerated exponents of Advaita Vedanta, Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj (1897-1981), said the following regarding the Maharshi: “It may have either rain or sun, either joy or sorrow, your faith must stay ever in Ramana.”⁴ Guénon’s own reverence for the Maharshi is documented in the several book reviews that he wrote on the Maharshi’s work, including his written correspondence with others.⁵ One relevant

¹ René Guénon, ‘The Dark Age’, in *The Crisis of the Modern World*, trans. Arthur Osborne (London: Luzac and Company, 1942), pp.10-11.

² Roger Maridot, ‘Forward’, to René Guénon, *Miscellanea*, trans. Henry D. Fohr, Cecil Bethell, Patrick Moore and Hubert Schiff (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001), p. xviii. Xavier Accart in his book *Guénon ou le renversement des clartés: influence d’un métaphysicien sur la vie littéraire et intellectuelle française* (1920-1970) (Guénon or the Reversal of the Light: Influence of a Metaphysician on French Literary and Intellectual Life) indicates that it was Henri Hartung who asserted that Sri Ramana Maharshi declared that Guénon was ‘the Great Sufi’.

³ Anandamayi Ma, quoted in Arthur Osborne, ‘Retirement’, in *My Life and Quest* (2005), p.145.

⁴ Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj, quoted in Henri Hartung, ‘The Path of Realization’, *The Mountain Path*, Vol. 22, No. 2. (April 1985), p.81.

⁵ René Guénon, ‘Reviews of Books: Other Authors’, in *Studies in Hinduism*, trans. Henry D. Fohr, ed. Samuel D. Fohr (Ghent, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001), pp. 147-153.

example is Guénon's lament for the loss of the Maharshi and that he: "understood the emotion only too well as the news of the death of Sri Ramana had also affected him likewise." And that he was: "very sad [...] for all those who would have still had a great need of his presence."⁶ When we inquire further into the relationship between these two remarkable figures that influenced and continue to influence seekers both of the East and the West, a vast and rich tapestry of interconnected personages converge and events unfold from within the narrative in an extraordinary manner. In fact, what emerges is not only a thread that weaves a web of interesting connections, significant as they may be, but a tour de force of the highest intellectual and spiritual rigour that has questionably appeared in the modern and postmodern world.

It is necessary to clarify from the start that we are not placing Guénon on equal footing with Sri Ramana Maharshi, for this would be an egregious error, including a fundamental distortion of Guénon's function, for unlike the Maharshi, he was not a spiritual master.⁷ Guénon on the other hand was a preeminent expositor of the integral metaphysics of the perennial philosophy, who diagnosed the bankruptcy of the modern West that was due to its forgetfulness of the Absolute and in this sense, he could however be considered a pandit, someone who transmits spiritual doctrine but does not function as a spiritual master. There are certain nuances that must not be overlooked with regard to their distinct roles while the Maharshi was equally universalist in his outlook, as he acknowledged the "transcendent unity of religions", he arguably did not have the same intellectual rigour as did Guénon with regard to the diverse revelations of the world nor did he perceive the fullness of the modern

⁶ Xavier Accart, 'Ramana Maharshi and René Guénon', *The Mountain Path* (July 2007), p.103.

⁷ "There is no misfortune worse than having disciples", Guénon wrote to Martin Lings, 'I would never have wanted to have any [disciples], not for anything in the world!' (letter to Martin Lings, July 26, 1950)" (Michael Oren Fitzgerald, 'Notes', in *Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy* [Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2010], p.185).

malaise. In contradistinction, the Maharshi was a spiritual master who attained Deliverance (*moksha* or *mukti*) and applied this transcendent knowledge into practice, while Guénon's inner state we do not know and would be reluctant to speculate upon, for who knows how far his 'pure connaissance' took him?

Guénon is the founder of what later became known as the Traditionalist or Perennialist school comprised of eminent figures such as Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (1877-1947), Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998) and Titus Burckhardt (1908-1984) to name a few. Guénon humbly summarises his role: "I have no other merit than to have expressed to the best of my ability some traditional ideas."⁸ He additionally made it clear that the articulation of the traditional teachings of all-times and places was not a reflection of his own personal or subjective ideas: "[S]uch disposition becomes a homage rendered to the doctrine expressed by us in a way that is totally independent of any individualistic consideration."⁹ Similar to the Maharshi, Guénon was a jnanic type as he was born with a gift from above, yet his function was not that of a spiritual teacher:

"The pneumatic is in a way the 'incarnation' of a spiritual archetype, which means that he is born with a state of knowledge which, for others, would be precisely the end and not the point of departure; the pneumatic does not 'progress' to something 'other than himself,' he remains in place so as to become fully himself – namely his archetype – by progressively eliminating veils or husks, impediments contracted from the ambiance and possibly also from heredity."¹⁰

In the case of Schuon, he was also a jnanic type, yet he had a rare intellectual qualification that allowed him to plumb the depths of the spiritual heritage of all times and places and simultaneously the

⁸ René Guénon, quoted in Frithjof Schuon, 'René Guénon: Definitions', in *René Guénon: Some Observations* (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2004), p.5.

⁹ Marco Bastriocchi, 'The Last Pillars of Wisdom', in S. Durai Raja Singam, *Ananda Coomaraswamy: Remembering and Remembering Again and Again* (Kuala Lumpur: Khee Ment, 1974), p.356.

¹⁰ Frithjof Schuon, 'René Guénon: A Note', in *René Guénon: Some Observations* (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2004), p.6.



René Guénon

ability to apply this knowledge as a spiritual master, which Guénon himself confirmed.¹¹ Schuon's relationship with the Maharshi has also been explored¹² and it is important to note Schuon's high regard for the Sage of Arunachala:

"In Sri Ramana Maharshi one meets again ancient and eternal India. The Vedantic truth – the truth of the Upanishads – is brought back to its simplest expression but without any kind of betrayal.... That spiritual function which can be described as 'action of presence' found in the Maharshi its most rigorous expression. Sri Ramana was as it were the incarnation, in these latter days and in the face of the modern activist fever, of what is primordial and incorruptible in India.... The whole Vedanta is contained in the Maharshi's question 'Who am I? The answer is: the Inexpressible.'"¹³

It is useful to also recall that Ananda K. Coomaraswamy had also confirmed the remarkable stature of the Sage of Arunachala: "Sri Ramana Maharshi – probably the greatest living Indian teacher".¹⁴ Whitall N. Perry (1920-2005), one of the few individuals acquainted with all four leading figures of the Traditionalist or Perennialist school, Guénon, Schuon, Coomaraswamy and Burckhardt, regarded the Maharshi as a "Hindu sage, noted for method of intellectual

¹¹ See Michael Oren Fitzgerald, 'Descent of Responsibility', in *Frithjof Schuon: The Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2010), pp.36-41.

¹² See Mateus Soares de Azevedo, 'Frithjof Schuon and Sri Ramana Maharshi: A Survey of the Spiritual Masters of the 20th Century', *Sacred Web: A Journal of Tradition and Modernity*, Vol. 10 (Winter 2002), pp.185-195.

¹³ Frithjof Schuon, 'The Vedanta', in *Language of the Self* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Books, 1999), pp.40-41.

¹⁴ Alvin Moore, Jr. and Rama P. Coomaraswamy (eds.), 'Letter to Father Columba Carey-Elwes, OSB – June 14, 1947', in *Selected Letters of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1988), p.87; "I have the highest respect for Ramana Maharshi and I think he ranks with Sri Ramakrishna. I should think it a great privilege to take the dust of his feet." (S. Durai Raja Singam and Joseph A. Fitzgerald (eds.), 'Sri Ramana Maharshi', in *The Wisdom of Ananda Coomaraswamy: Reflections on Indian Art, Life, and Religion* [Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2011], p.128).

penetration.”¹⁵ A widely renowned contemporary representative of the Traditionalist school, Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933), said this of the Maharshi: “Sri Ramana Maharshi, one of the greatest recent spiritual figures of Hinduism.”¹⁶

Due to the widespread interest in the teachings of non-duality, not limited to Advaita Vedanta, but found at the heart of all of the religions, as it speaks most directly to the universal and uncoloured light underlying them all, we must emphasize the crucial role that both René Guénon and Sri Ramana Maharshi have in providing seekers of truth with discernment and reliable knowledge about the spiritual path. Regarding the authenticity of Guénon’s approach to the *sanatana dharma* or Hinduism, we must not overlook the following:

René Guénon was the first European who dared to affirm in the West the superiority of the Hindu spirit over the modern Western spirit, and, in the name of Eastern spirituality and that of the ancient West, dared mercilessly to criticize modern civilization as it has developed for about the last four centuries. It is absurd to claim that an author of European and Christian origin, who has studied, in Sanskrit, the sacred Scriptures of India and the commentaries of Sri Sankara and other sages, and who alone in the West places Hindu wisdom above all philosophies, has understood nothing of this wisdom. Guénon wrote much in his life. He expounded all the fundamental data that it is necessary to know in the West in order to understand India.¹⁷

While we could cite many sources that speak to the authenticity of Guénon’s comprehension of the Hindu *dharma*, including the other plenary traditions, we recall that:

¹⁵ Whitall N. Perry (ed.), ‘Index of Sources’, in *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), p.1105.

¹⁶ Seyyed Hossein Nasr with Ramin Jahanbegloo, ‘What Is Spirituality?’ in *In Search of the Sacred: A Conversation with Seyyed Hossein Nasr on His Life and Thought* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010), pp.168-169.

¹⁷ Frithjof Schuon, quoted from a letter to Atmananda Krishna Menon, Jean-Baptiste Aymard and Patrick Laude, ‘Notes’, in *Frithjof Schuon: Life and Teachings* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004), p.142.

It was not until 1949, while staying in Benares, that I came to read Guénon's work. It had been recommended to me by Alain Daniélou (1907-1994), who had shown Guénon books to the orthodox Pandits [of India]. Their verdict was unequivocal: of all the Westerners who have studied Hindu doctrines, only Guénon, they said, has really understood their meaning.¹⁸

Given the radically compromised era of the present time and the diminishing of certain spiritual possibilities for seekers, it is not surprising that the teachings of non-duality have been appropriated by many pseudo-teachers of neo-advaita, including the New Age movement. For example many teachers within the contemporary spiritual milieu attempt to trace their lineage back to Sri Ramana Maharshi to establish their legitimacy, yet this is highly questionable to say the least.¹⁹ In this upside-down era, the fact that numerous individuals, who have neither a traditional religious and spiritual affiliation nor authorisation, are endeavouring to guide others, it is a sure sign of a decadent spiritual milieu. The Maharshi, emphasised not unlike other sages that: “[T]he Guru is always within you.”²⁰ While this is undoubtedly true and orthodox according to the different ways that immanence is expressed in the sapiential traditions, without prior transcendence there is no immanence. The less credulous have

¹⁸ Roger du Pasquier, quoted in Paul Chacornac, ‘The Call of the East’, in *The Simple Life of René Guénon*, trans. Cecil Bethell (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2004), p.59. “One may cite in this regard the high regard in which the late and much revered Shaykh of Al-Azhar, ‘Abd al-‘alim Ma’mud [1910-1978], held the person and the writings of René Guénon, one of the founders of the school of sophia perennis, to which Nasr belongs. This paragon of Muslim ‘orthodoxy’ went so far as to say that Guénon was one of those personalities who have rightfully taken up their place in history, and that ‘Muslims place him close to al-Ghazali and his like.

¹⁹ See Christopher Quilkey, ‘Editorial: Lineage’, *The Mountain Path* (April 2004), pp.3-7; Phillip Charles Lucas, ‘When a Movement Is Not a Movement: Ramana Maharshi and Neo-Advaita in North America’, *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2011), pp.93-114.

²⁰ Ramana Maharshi, ‘The Guru’, in *The Teachings of Ramana Maharshi in His Own Words*, ed. Arthur Osborne (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1978), p.102.

taken this traditional adage and subverted it.²¹ Additionally, Sri Ramana also clarified that: “I have never said that there is no need for a Guru.”²² Many of these alleged teachers are antagonistic to the idea of spiritual authority, considering it as hierachal and therefore authoritarian. Moreover, many of these so-called spiritual teachings appear to be an amalgamation of popular psychology or self-help with some traditional spirituality mixed in with it, underscoring its inclination to be working more on the level of psychology rather than that of spirituality.²³ The line that blurs the role of the therapist or psychologist from the traditional spiritual teacher is dangerous in that it gives the mistaken impression that modern psychology and its therapies can remedy what traditional religion and spirituality cannot or it attempts to place them on equal ground, which could not be farther from the truth.²⁴

Despite the fact that Guénon and Ramana Maharshi never met in person, they did however have vital and interesting points of contact through two individuals, Arthur Osborne (1906-1970) and Henri Hartung (1921-1988).²⁵ And while Ramana Maharshi’s role was dominant in the lives of both Osborne and Hartung, a lesser known fact is the principal influence of the work of the French metaphysician René Guénon upon both of these writers.

▲

(*To be continued*)

²¹ See René Guénon, ‘True and False Spiritual Teachers’, in *Initiation and Spiritual Realization*, trans. Henry D. Fohr, ed. Samuel D. Fohr (Ghent, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001), p.110.

²² Ramana Maharshi, ‘The Guru’, in *The Teachings of Ramana Maharshi in His Own Words*, ed. Arthur Osborne (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1978), p.95.

²³ Arthur Osborne, ‘Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi’, in *My Life and Quest*. p.105.

²⁴ René Guénon, ‘The Confusion of the Psychic and the Spiritual’, in *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, trans. Lord Northbourne (Ghent, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001), pp. 235-240; Arthur Osborne, ‘Modern Idolatries’, in *Be Still, It Is The Wind That Sings*. (2003), p.378.

²⁵ Xavier Accart, ‘Ramana Maharshi and René Guénon’, *The Mountain Path* (July 2007), pp. 98-103. [Book Excerpt translated by Cecil Bethell].



South gopuram Sri Arunachaleswara Temple

D.Thiyagarajan

Maha Bhakta Vijayam

Chapter Eight

Tulasidas Obtains the Darshan of Lord Rama

Part Two

NABAJI SIDDHA

In Part One of this chapter Lord Rama granted Tulasidas darshan and awakened him to his true nature. Tulasidas gained jnana as well as knowledge of his previous births. In wonder he asked Lord Rama how he came under the spell of delusion. Lord Rama in turn related how he too was under the spell of Maya until his guru Vasistha opened his eye of wisdom and extinguished his worldly attachments. He then tells Tulasidas the story of Narada and how he suffered from the primal ignorance.

“Take, for example, the case of sage Narada. In the first epoch, this lute-player had to give up living in the celestial world and come down to this earth to practise rigorous penance in a secluded forest for fourteen years. His extraordinary tapas developed in him an enormous pride. On his return to the heavenly realm, he went around bragging about the pre-eminence of tapas. He went to Satyaloka and advised Brahma to give up his active life of creation and retire to the forest for penance. Bowing to Lord Siva in Kailash, he suggested that He

who had burnt the god of love to ashes would find the forest more appropriate.

Thereafter, he came to Me singing hymns in My praise. He said, 'O Lord of Illusion! Master of Vaikunta! What can Your Maya do to those tapaswis who are firmly established in penance?'

I asked, 'O Narada! Does the peace that these ascetics enjoy, in the sleep-like unconscious state, nirvikalpa samadhi, equal the tranquillity that transcends the triune states of waking, deep sleep and dream?'

He said, 'O Lord! The ascetics abide in the superconscious state akin to deep sleep, even while being awake. Being detached, they are not agitated by passions that prevail in waking and dream states.'

I persisted, 'Is it not rare to remain always in the transcendental state, beyond waking and sleep?'

'These tapaswis abide constantly in the natural state of sahaja samadhi and remain peaceful always,' answered Narada smugly.

In order to test him further, I praised him for being steadfast in jnana and tapas, having conquered lust and other base desires. This bloated his ego further. He left for the seclusion of the forest for further tapas.

On the way to the forest, I created an attractive city by the power of My Maya and in it there was a king with a beautiful daughter whose *swayamvaram* was being arranged for her to choose a husband. More than fifty suitors including princes, chieftains and demi-gods had arrived.

However, the king was eager to know whom she would choose. While searching for an oracle, he came upon Narada who was on his way to resume his ascetic life. The king took him forcibly to the palace and, bringing his daughter to him, asked, 'O great tapaswi, please tell me whom she will choose for her husband?'

When Narada looked at the girl, he stood mesmerized by her beauty. He thought that a great fortune had waylaid him. His eyes welling with loving adoration, his heart beating fast and amorous thoughts playing havoc with his mind, Narada thought, 'She cannot be an earthly mortal. She must be surely from the celestial world.'

He addressed the king warmly, ‘O great king! The suitor to whom she rightfully belongs will be here in an hour. You must give this girl to him in marriage.’

Turning to the bride, he asked, ‘O noble girl! What kind of a man do you desire for a husband?’

The girl replied bashfully, ‘O revered Swami! I would like to marry a person who is equal to Mahavishnu in beauty and charm.’

Narada left, obsessed with the girl’s beauty. He wondered how he could win her hand.

Forgetting all about the glory of ascetic life, overwhelmed by his fascination for the girl and tossed by the hand of destiny, he appealed to Me pathetically, ‘O Lover of devotees! Dispeller of sorrow! O Hari! If You don’t bestow on me this instant a beautiful form like Yours, You will see me reduced to ashes in the flame of passion. In the annals of Narada, You will hear about the disgraceful account of Narada having died of unrequited love of a girl!’

I chose to deliberately misinterpret the term ‘Hari’, which also means monkey, in order to test Narada further. Knowing that if I appeared in person before him, it would cool down his ardour, I remained invisible and spoke to him, ‘O supreme tapaswi! May you attain a form like Hari as per your wish! Now, hasten to the pavilion and have your desire fulfilled.’

Narada was transformed – dressed in green and yellow silk and adorned with the *Kaustuba* and other ornaments. Elated with the change, but unaware that he had the face of a monkey, he wished to have the Sun and Moon to accompany him as best men. The moment he wished it, they manifested beside him in the role of gatekeepers of Vaikunta. Narada hurried to the palace. As he entered the pavilion, he saw the bride walking towards the suitors with a garland in her hand.

Driven by infatuation, he pleaded with her, ‘O beauty incarnate! Please lavish your love liberally on me and save me from affliction. Bestow on me a gracious look at least from the corner of your eye.’

Looking at his monkey face, the princess burst into laughter and moved away towards other suitors who were vying for her attention.

This great ascetic caught in the grip of powerful Maya and ignorant of the fact that he appeared monkey-faced to others, accosted her and said, ‘O lovely damsel! O desirable woman! Who can be more worthy of your hand than me? Please put the garland around my neck and become mine.’

The princess distanced herself from him and spoke sharp words of rebuke. The more she got away from him, the worse became his obsession with her. He pursued her, begging, pleading and cajoling. He even tried to physically force her attention on him. The poor girl got frightened and started to run away from the venue. As she went out into the garden, Narada chased her. In her desperation to get rid of him, she jumped into a nearby pond. Narada also jumped in after her and saw his reflection in the water. Frozen with shock, he realized why the girl had run away.

He became upset with Indra and the other celestials who had assembled there but had not revealed to him the truth about his appearance. On the contrary, they had joined the others in making fun of him. As soon as he felt humiliated and furious over this affair, all the illusory forms, the city, king, bride, assembly hall and royal suitors, vanished. He found himself alone in a dense forest.

Then it dawned on him that I had enacted this play to test his dispassion. He lamented, ‘Alas! Ignorant of this fact, I became a prey to His Maya. I have fallen upside down from the state of my tapas and become a laughing stock before human beings and celestials.’

Recalling with humiliation the scene of Surya Deva and Indra roaring with laughter when they saw Narada making a fool of himself, he cursed them, ‘O Surya and Indra! You both will attain the birth of monkeys, becoming the mates of the same female monkey and remain sworn enemies till the end of your monkey-life.’

Frightened at the curse, Surya and Indra bowed down to the sage and said pathetically, ‘O great ascetic! You have put our lives in jeopardy, by cursing us for no fault of ours. Please be kind and point out a remedy.’

At once Narada's heart melted and he said, 'You will be redeemed of the curse when you get the darshan of Sri Hari's incarnation as Rama in your monkey birth.'

Narada cursed Me also to incarnate as a human being on earth and suffer similar pangs of separation from My beloved. When I came into the world as Rama, I had to experience the result of his curse."

Then the Lord said to Tulasidas, "Since then, My beloved Narada remains inseparable from Me. O darling among devotees! It is not easy to resist Maya's hold. It is by this very delusion that you were awakened from your obsession through your wife's wise words, just as you did to your wife in your previous life. Maya has no other function but to make things topsy-turvy. Even the Trinity are not beyond the grasp of Maya. However, even this Maya dissolves in the great void when Self-knowledge dawns."

Tulasidas said, "O Lord, nothing has real existence, even Maya, except You. You alone exist, there is no 'other'. You alone cause all the worlds to manifest and makes Maya entrap all creation in her merry-go-round. You are the sole Cause of creation of senses and sense-objects, and it is You who makes the sense-desires enter into the hearts of created beings. You delude mortals into mistaking transient pleasures for eternal bliss. You lock the gateway to liberation for worldly people. You make people groan under the burdens of merits and sin. You set people in opposition to each other like rams which kill each other. You put Your devotees through fire ordeals, delaying their rescue until they realize that You are the ultimate Refuge. You appear in frightening forms to strike terror in the hearts of evildoers who torment your devotees. You protect from harm those devotees who have taken complete refuge in You. You bestow the bliss of Brahman on jnanis who have eliminated the pride of 'I'."

Tulasidas delighted the Lord by singing His glories, and the Lord embraced him fondly and said, "Crowning glory of devotion! Highly learned that you are, can there be any mystery beyond your comprehension? Is there any Maya apart from Me? By simply uttering

‘Rama, Rama, you raised yourself to the most exalted state! May you always revel in the bliss of the Absolute!’

As the Lord was taking leave, Tulasidas pleaded with Him, “O Lord, scriptures say that one has to be initiated into the knowledge of Brahman by a Teacher; no one can attain it on one’s own efforts. Will You be gracious enough to initiate me into the great mystery, O Lord?”

“O Tulasidas, please get initiated by the immortal Hanuman, whose glory illuminates all the realms, who is supreme among sadhus, grounded in spirituality and fixed in the state of Brahman and a great scholar,” replied the Lord.

Tulasidas said, “O Lord, please be gracious enough to tell me how a mortal can attain bhakti and mukti easily.”

The Lord replied, “For jivas inclined towards bhakti, service as a dasa, servant, of the Lord, is the way. Those tending towards jnana should set their mind on union with the Supreme. Bhaktas take delight in listening to my story, the Ramayana. In your previous life, you rendered the Ramayana in Sanskrit. Compose the same now in the local dialect of Hindustani under the title, “Tulasi Ramayana”, and make it accessible to even lay people, thus taking them on the divine path.” Then the Lord showered blessings on all and disappeared.

And all the celestials hailed the victory of Tulasidas. ▲

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Sri Ramanarsamam is building an online digital library where visitors can read books which are no longer in print. (Click here) http://www.sriramanamaharshi.org/resource_centre/digital-library/. Many foreign language books will be added to the library over time when the scanning is completed. Devotees can help by donating books related to Sri Ramana Maharshi in digital form (pdf) in any language. Accepted books will become part of the digital library.

TRANSLATION

Ozhivil Odukkam

KANNUDAIYA VALLALAR
TRANSLATED BY ROBERT BUTLER
COMMENTARY BY S. RAM MOHAN
AND ROBERT BUTLER

To know oneself through grace, to experience the all-embracing reality in the state of *parai* as one becomes merged with that grace, [to become bliss itself] as the state of *parai* disappears, and finally to attain the transcendent state which is beyond even bliss, is the [state of] divine silence of the non-dual Siddhanta. Know that this is also the final goal of Vedanta. (41)

*A*rul – grace is the power by which Sivam, the Real, confers upon the soul enlightenment as to its true nature. Through this power of grace, the jiva develops discrimination and realizes that it is not the

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

non-Self, the ephemeral world of the thirty-six tattvas with which it previously identified itself.

Vallalar goes on to say that when the work of grace is complete, the state of *parai* supervenes. *Parai* is a Siddhanta term which describes the state which supervenes as the culmination of the work of grace; in this state everything is now of the form of grace itself, and the *jiva* is no longer aware of itself as a separate entity, just as the flame of a lamp is no longer visible in the full light of the sun. This state is synonymous with *paripuranam* – *the all-embracing fullness [of Reality]*, since there is no longer a personality to experience it as other than oneness. The state of *parai* appears comparable to the state which Sri Ramana Maharshi refers to as the *atma sphurana*, the ‘I-I’ state:

“Again, *sphurana* is the foretaste of Realisation. It is pure. The subject and object proceed from it. If the man mistakes himself for the subject, objects must necessarily appear different from him. They are periodically withdrawn and projected, creating the world and the subject’s enjoyment of the same. If, on the other hand, the man feels himself to be the screen on which the subject and object are projected there can be no confusion and he can remain watching their appearance and disappearance without any perturbation to the Self.”¹

Although a state of bliss is not specifically mentioned, it is clearly implied in the verse that the state of *parai* is followed by one of *anantam* – *bliss*, since it is said that the final state of realisation is *anantatitam* – *that which is beyond bliss*. These successive states which precede full realisation, grace, *parai* and bliss, are a feature of the Siddhanta doctrine. Such concepts are problematic of course for Advaita Vedantists and others who will argue that, since none of these states are the final realisation of the Self, it is fruitless to divide and classify them in this way, and that to do so will only cause confusion and misunderstanding. However, we should not lose sight of the main thrust of this verse, which is to say that there is only one state of realisation, and that it is the goal equally of Vedanta and Siddhanta. The fact that this final state is beyond the ability of any religion, sect

¹ Venkataramiah, M., (comp.), *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk §62.

or school of thought to convey is emphasised in the phrase *the divine silence of the non-dual Siddhanta*.

'The conclusion of the Vedanta, (in which the first, second and third persons merge as oneself), [is that] one experiences the bliss that ensues upon the extinction of that self, and [finally] there is no one to say, "This is bliss", is the deathless state of liberation.' Thus spoke [Jnanasambandhar], he who, untaught, knew the Vedas.

(42)

When the 'I' arises and grasps the objects of sense, the external world appears along with the second and third persons, 'you', 'she', 'it', etc. However, when the 'I' is turned in upon itself, and shines as itself alone, as 'I—I', *tanay – as oneself*, there exists a state of pure objectless self-identity, in which the first person, 'I', of the mind and ego does not arise. In such a state there is of course no possibility that the second and third persons will arise either.

The freedom from the objectivising 'I' of the ego engenders in the sage a feeling of bliss, which is the natural consequence of the removal of the feelings of loss, suffering, incompleteness, etc. which are the features of discriminating consciousness. However, the true *jnani* perceives a residue of egoity in such bliss and transcends it to remain in the natural state *which does not say (i.e. in which there is no one to say) 'This is bliss'*.

Tiruporur Chidambara Swamigal (TCS) again identifies the speaker in the verse as his guru, Jnanasambandhar, who as a small child grasped the inner meaning of the Vedas without any tuition through the grace of Lord Siva.

Stripping away *kalai* and all the rest (the *adhvan – paths to liberation* in Saivism), and revealing [to me my true nature], he annihilated my former vision so that it receded and vanished in the distance, just as, for those who climb a mountain, their new perspective replaces the one they experienced at ground level. Free of all *vasanas*, he shrouds me [in his infinite bliss] and never leaves me. Should I attempt to speak of his glorious might, only silence will result.

(43)

TCS takes *kalai* to refer to *kala attuva – the path of kala*. In the Siddhanta system there are six paths to liberation, called the *attuva*, Sanskrit *adhvan*, each of which, in initiation, is shown to be absorbed by the next one, till the last is absorbed by the *tirodhana shakti – veiling power*, and this in turn by Siva. These six paths are *kala – power or attribute*, *tattva – principle or category*, *bhuvana – region, world*, *varna – letters*, *pada – words and mantra*. The implication, again, is that such aids to spiritual advancement must in the end be transcended and left behind before the disciple can obtain final realisation.

As in many other verses the author uses a powerful image which plays upon the imagination, to suggest a state which cannot be described in words. He compares the heightened spiritual experience to that of someone climbing a mountain. As he climbs higher and higher, the ground and surroundings that he has left behind appear smaller and smaller, less and less significant, until they are no longer visible. The reality for our climber now is the mountain landscape, with peaks extending range upon range over vast distances against the open skies. In a similar way, to the enlightened sage, the phenomenal world, so real and present to normal consciousness, fades into insignificance against the ever-present, unchanging background of the Self. The background is for him the foreground, the immutable Reality; eventually the former landscape of the phenomenal world disappears completely, because in the continuum of pure consciousness, there are no longer any discrete, separate objects, any self-existent phenomena existing independently of the Self.

The guru, being established in the state in which he is free of *vasanas – inherited dispositions* is able to hold the disciple in that same state through the power of his mere presence. *Vasanas* are the inherited dispositions which the *jiva* carries from birth to birth due to its identification with its actions and their fruits. The words “in his infinite bliss” have been suggested by the commentary of TCS who glosses: ...*the glorious might of my guru who, shrouding me in his infinite, all-pervading bliss, in grace manifested within me, within as without.*

He said, ‘All that you refer to [objectively] as “this” is false.’ And now, for me, there remains no dwelling place other than the all-embracing expanse of the Self. ‘Know that we are that,’ he said. Shall we call it the sun that turns night into day, or shall we call it [the ocean of] supreme bliss? I know not. (44)

The guru teaches the disciple that anything that appears in his field of perception is not himself. The disciple realises that there is no place for him in the world picture, other than as the witness of all that appears as the world. This background is here referred to as *potu* – general, common, referring to the Self as the common screen upon which all the world picture appears. Accordingly the guru teaches him that he is not other than that Self, *athu nam* – We are that.

‘Unless it is revealed to you, you cannot know [the Self],’ he said. Should you attempt to know that which endures as the cure for the forgetfulness [of your true identity], that would be like an arrow aimed at the sky as its target. Though we speak of knowledge, [the voice that communicated that knowledge] will be as a voice from the heavens. (45)

In this and the preceding three verses the author refers directly to his master’s teaching. There is not the suggestion here of the transmission of some kind of objective knowledge; all that is required for the disciple to realise the Self is to discover that he is not, and never has been, other than that Self. This truth is communicated through the guru’s mere presence, which constitutes the *marunthu* – cure for the disciple’s *maravai* – forgetfulness of his true identity. In the Vedanta text, *Sanatsujaatiyam Sanatsujata*, to the question ‘What is death?’, replies, ‘Forgetfulness of One’s true identity as Self is death.’

Vallalar uses another vivid metaphor to indicate the futility of the attempt to objectively grasp the nature of reality. It is futile to try to strike the sky by aiming an arrow at it, since the sky is everywhere, including the arrow’s point of departure itself. In the same way, like that arrow, thoughts that arise in the Self will run their course and

disappear back into the Self; any idea that at some point in their course they have hit their target, i.e. grasped the nature of the Self, is clearly false. Such is the nature of all philosophy and metaphysics, here dismissed by the author in a few terse syllables.

The transmission of knowledge from guru to disciple occurs only from the perspective of the disciple. The guru remains in the immutable state of the Self. Hence his voice is compared to a disembodied voice from the heavens, a common device in Hindu literature for expressing divine communication between the gods and men.

[The three defilements], *anava*, *kanma* and *maya*, produce the illusion of multiplicity, but as these disappear, their foundation destroyed, can the state of *nishta* which then remains possess duality? Apart from consciousness there is nothing. You should remain just as the ether remains, untouched by the shadow of any object. (46)

Nittai, Sanskrit *nishta*, has a number of possible meanings, related to religious and spiritual practices. See v. 26 for example, where it is used in the plural to mean *meditation practices*. Here it refers to the state of dwelling as the Self, Sivam, upon the elimination of the obscuring factors, which are constituted in Siddhanta by the three *malams* mentioned previously. TCS glosses: ‘Since there is no other *nishta* beyond the *nishta* in which the states of waking and sleep have departed and the personal consciousness has been eliminated, he [the author] says, ‘Can it be many?’ The point is that the state of realisation, abidance as Self or Sivam, is only one and not many.

On the elimination of the three *malams*, consciousness stands alone, with nothing it might make its object: *arivukku ethir illai* – there exists no object for consciousness to grasp. To illustrate the point Vallalar invites us to imagine how the space of the heavens might react to the presence of the phenomena that occur within it. Of course we will not be able to imagine any way in which pure space might be affected by those things. In the same way, we are advised to remain as the Self, untouched by the illusory world of the mind and senses.

When consciousness is without movement, that is the all-embracing fullness of Reality. Inasmuch as there is movement in consciousness, that Reality appears false. This is like the opening and closing of the eye. As an illustration of this, observe the manner in which there is wind when the air moves, and when it is still, there is not.

(47)

Mind is nothing other than the arising of movement in consciousness. The importance of stilling such movement within consciousness is underlined in Sri Ramana's translation of *Devikalottaram* v. 10: "When the mind moves even a little, that is samsara. When the mind abides firmly and motionlessly (in the state of the Self), that is *mukti*. This is certain. Therefore know that the wise man must hold his mind firm by supreme Self-Awareness."

The word *puranam*, Sanskrit *purna*, means fullness; it is used here to indicate the absolute Reality, that which embraces all that is or ever could be, the source of the infinite potential of creation. Later, in v. 90, the Self will be characterised a *verum pazh – a pure void*. The Self subsumes equally the all-embracing fullness of manifestation, as in the waking state, and the pure void of the unmanifest, as in deep sleep, yet is beyond both. This Reality appears false to the extent that the mind-based personal consciousness convinces us that it is itself the Reality. The 'Real' thus becomes just another mental construct which the mind perceives as exterior to itself, something to be sought after and gained.

When the eye closes the world picture ceases to appear in a person's field of vision. In a similar way, when the personal consciousness subsides into the universal consciousness of the Self, the entire world of names and forms no longer appears in the *jnani*'s consciousness.

For those who have transcended even the consciousness that is experienced as the *nada tattvam*, Siddhanta, which is itself the final conclusion of the Vedas, will not be different from Vedanta. Between the state in which the practice of saying 'Not this, not this' has been transcended and personal consciousness and the attachment [which gives rise to it] have been destroyed,

[and the final state, beyond bliss], consciousness-bliss will arise
in you. (48)

In the first part of this verse the author appears to be making two main points: firstly, that Siddhanta is not different from Vedanta, in that it expresses the final conclusion, the sum and inner meaning, of the Vedas themselves. Secondly, that the jnani, who has transcended the mind and its world of mental constructs, will not be confused by the apparent differences between the two systems of thought; he will realise that both are different means to the same end, and that, in any case, both will need to be left behind once the edifice of personal consciousness which supports them is dismantled.

In the second part of the verse the author talks about the state of *arivananda* or *jnanananda* – *consciousness-bliss*, which arises on the elimination of the personal consciousness, with the implication that this blissful state is not to be confused with the final state, *anandatita* – *the state beyond bliss*, which is the state of union with the Self.

As long as the disciple is unable to free his consciousness from its tendency to identify itself with the world-illusion of *maya*, he must continually remind himself of its fundamental unreality, rejecting those unreal phenomena, saying *neti, neti – not this, not this*.

In the pure state of the Self, there is no movement, either in terms of the *jiva* merging with the Self upon the subsidence of the ego, which lies even beyond the thirty-six *tattvas*, or of the Self coming [to manifest upon the subsidence of the ego]. If you describe that state as ‘oneness’, there will still remain some residual trace of ‘you’. Know, therefore, that nothing whatsoever can be said of it. (49)

Before realisation, that state is thought of in dualistic terms, such as ‘I merged with the Self’ or ‘The Self merged with me.’ In the pure state of the Self upon the elimination of the ego, no such concepts can arise. In this verse the author uses the word *timirppu* – *numbness, paralysis* to mean *the ego*. TCS gives the following explanation: ‘He (the author) uses the word *timirppu* for *anavam* because *anavam* arises

in the *jiva* without being part of its nature, just as paralysis arises in the body without being part of its nature.'

Anavam is described as *tattuva-atita* – beyond the *tattvas* because according to Siddhanta it is an eternal potential of the soul, different yet inseparable from it. The implication is that even when the thirty-six *tattvas* have been transcended, there can still remain some trace of *anavam* – egoity in the soul. It is just such a subtle trace of egoity which, even after the elimination of the *tattvas*, will prevent the unwary disciple from progressing beyond the state of *jnanananda*, mentioned in the previous verse, into that of *anandatitam*, oneness with the Self.

This verse warns those who may have had some experience of the Self not to attempt to characterise it any way, such as saying, 'It is only One,' and so on. Should they find themselves doing so, they may take it as a sure indication that the state of the Self has not been attained.

The unalloyed state of overflowing bliss is comparable to the state of total unconsciousness. Those who have transcended even that state will be like the rays of the silvery moon [of the Self], moving in the ambrosial essence which lies beyond the sphere of consciousness. (50)

The word *unalloyed* is an attempt to translate the Tamil word *verruverum*, which means *totally empty*, here in the sense that the state of bliss is totally empty of any content other than itself, hence the translation *pure* or *unalloyed bliss*. This verse assumes that the subsiding of the ego, or *anava malam* in Siddhanta, has already occurred.

The state of *anantam* – bliss upon the subsiding of the ego is similar to *kevalam* – unconsciousness, as in deep sleep, firstly in the sense that in this state also the mind and the world picture that arises with it are not present, and secondly, in the sense that the experience of neither state can be described, as there is no objectifying consciousness to witness it. Fundamentally of course the two states are entirely opposed, the first being one of bliss and pure consciousness upon the removal of *anava malam*, and the second, one of total veiling of consciousness by the same *anava malam*. The perceived separation of god and soul,

Sivam and *jiva*, is only an illusion; both are fundamentally one, like the moon and its rays.

Rather than removing the states of remembering and forgetting, [showing you the means for] the destruction of your personal self, and thus destroying it, to babble on about using this method or that method to dissolve away that personal self is quite useless; it is akin to playing games with *mantras* or performing magic tricks; it is like throwing a gourd into the ocean; it is the imprisonment of true knowledge. (51)

The Self is compared to the ocean, and the mind, ego, or personal self, to a gourd floating in it. The disciple's mind, continually stimulated into activity by the instructions of a false guru, is compared to a gourd, which rather than sinking into the ocean of the Self, floats on the surface continually driven hither and thither by the movements of the mind. Realisation is only possible when the mind is in abeyance. Therefore the manifold prescriptions of the false guru can only serve to imprison it further, preventing it from freeing itself and subsiding into the reality of the Self. These prescriptions are therefore characterised as *jnana cirai – the imprisonment of jnana*.

Upon the elimination of sound and the rest of the *tattvas*, when 'self' and 'other' cease to be, the question of the merits of Siddhanta and Vedanta will be meaningless. My son, the state of liberation is indescribable; it is beyond bliss itself. To define it in dualistic terms is merely the play of the mind. (52)

The words 'the merits of both Siddhanta and Vedanta cease to be' have a double meaning: firstly, they assert that both Siddhanta and Vedanta are equal in having the lofty goal of teaching the path of liberation, *mukti*, and secondly, that both of these philosophical systems are transcended in the final state of *mukti* itself. Vedanta speaks of the one Self, the Atman or Brahman, whilst Siddhanta speaks of the two, Sivam and the soul. However, once the distinction between the knower and the known is eliminated, these distinctions also will cease to have any meaning, and both will be seen merely as equally

valid means to gain the same end, the state of liberation. This state is described as *anirvacanam*, Sanskrit *anirvacaniya – unutterable, indescribable*, not simply because it is impossible to describe, but because in that state there exists no objectifying, conceptualising, dualistic consciousness, no ‘person’ to attempt to describe it.

Sri Ramana brings out the same idea in v. 34 of *Ulladu Narpadu*: “Without knowing within the Heart, wherein [the mind] merges, the Reality that exists eternally as the nature of everyone, and remaining established there, to engage in disputes, arguing, ‘It exists; it does not exist,’ ‘It has form; it is formless,’ ‘It is One; it is Two; it is neither,’ is ignorance born of illusion (*maya*).”

The great drum of the lofty Vedas beats, declaring that these eight paths are not for the *Siva yogi*: mental anxiety, fear, disgrace, piety, revulsion, rites performed for removing the sins of the ego, and the observances of caste and religion. (53)

Those who have not become one with the supreme reality are [ever-changeful] like the moon reflected in water. Know that the austerities and other actions performed by those who have attained that supreme reality are like the actions of washing the heavens with rainwater, or setting fire to the wind. (54)

The consciousness of those who have not attained oneness with the supreme reality is unstable and ever-changing, like the image of the moon, changing with every movement of the water in which it is reflected.

In the second part of the verse two fanciful images are given to indicate that the actions of the *jnani* are only the play of the divine. Neither actions nor the fruits of them can be ascribed to him, and any action he may appear to perform will have no karmic consequences for him. To the unenlightened observer his actions may appear as irrational as those of attempting to wash the atmosphere with rain, or burn the wind with fire.

To impute wrongdoing to a *Siva yogi* is like censuring the god of death [for killing] or accusing the wind or the sun of

impropriety [for associating with that which is unclean or improper]. It is caused by the bondage of the three defilements, that powerful bewilderment which, whirling along [those who make such accusations], ceaselessly drives them before it. (55)

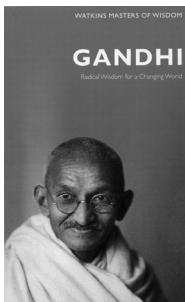
TCS expands the words ‘whirling along’ as ‘whirling [them] through each of the *avasthas*.’ One who has not reached the unmoving state of the Self will be caught up in the cycles of waking, dreaming and sleep, which constantly alternate with each other, not allowing him to perceive the unmoving background of the Self.

If it is only a dog that one is riding, what does it matter if one falls off, or succeeds in riding it? Similarly, what does it matter to the *jnani* if the world, which to him is a ghost-like appearance, blames him or praises him? He is not touched by it. For him there is neither honour nor disgrace, neither past nor future. Free of all limitation, he does what is required. (56)

If a man were attempting to ride a horse or an elephant, his failure might be of some consequence to himself or others. However, if it were a dog he was attempting to ride, a creature generally despised and regarded as unclean, success or failure would be of no consequence whatsoever. Similarly, to the *jnani* his body is a thing to be despised as the cause of all ills, and it is of no consequence to him whether it is praised or reviled. When it was reported to Sri Ramakrishna that some people were abusing him as a charlatan or madman, Sri Ramakrishna laughed and said, ‘Do not bother! They are doing me a great service by accusing me falsely, they are taking away a part of my *prarabdha*!’

In the second part of the verse the *jnani* is said to be not touched – *toyyaar* by the world. Here the word ‘touch’ translates, somewhat inadequately, the Tamil verb *toy* which has the meanings *to become soaked, steeped, to mix, blend, mingle, unite with*. The *jnani* exists in the world, but it does not permeate or penetrate him in any way, since he is one with the Self, which is like a cinema screen, untouched by the picture of the world which appears upon it. ▲

BOOK REVIEWS



GANDHI Radical Wisdom for a Changing World. Watkins Masters of Wisdom Series. 2012. Watkins Publishing, 6th Fl., Castle House, 75-6 Wells St, London. W1T 3QH. pp.225, US\$12.95. ISBN: 978-1-78028-126-1. www.watkinspublishing.co.uk

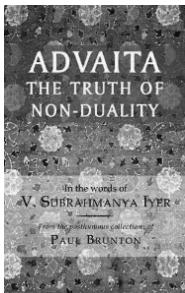
One more book on Mahatma Gandhi on whom several thousand books exist? One more Reader added to those already available? The *raison d'être* for a new Reader was articulated by Dr Ramachandra Guha's to

Sri Gopalkrishna Gandhi: "There is always room for another Gandhi anthology and if you follow an approach to the selection that is new, you will be assisting the student of modern history." This remark led to Alan Jacobs coming out with a unique, the most comprehensive Gandhi anthology distilling the quintessence of Gandhi, the man and his message.

Alan Jacobs, an able anthologist, has also followed a new approach and has produced a Reader which, while it may not be as complete as Sri Gopalkrishna Gandhi's nor as sumptuous as Homer Jack's and may not bring much grist to the mill of students of modern history, it will certainly help the western readers to acquire a clear picture of a holistic person whom it is easy to misunderstand.

The Reader begins with a brief biography of Gandhi extracted from his Autobiography, followed by a concise editorial note which completes the story of the Mahatma's life. Then come very judiciously selected extracts running into 102 pages from the 100 volume *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. The extracts, arranged chronologically, succeed in achieving the compiler's 'aim of giving the reader an impressive overview of the life and struggle of the Mahatma in an easily accessible form.' The book finally offers us an uplifting fare of memorable quotes from Gandhi the saint rather than Gandhi the politician. The delightful anthology concludes with an Epilogue consisting of a tribute to the man of God from Sri Ramana Maharshi which is the final word on him.

— Jijnaasu



ADVAITA: THE TRUTH OF NON-DUALITY by V. Subrahmanyam Iyer. From notes taken by Paul Brunton. Editors: Andre Van Den Brink and Mark Scorelle. Epigraph Publishing 2009. ₹ 703/-, pp.106 ISBN: 978-0982525548

Advaita is a philosophy which has enlightened and mystified generations. Some have found solutions to their problems and attained eternal bliss through its tenets. Others have found it confusing and have given it up half-way through. Though innumerable books are written on this topic, it has still an element of surprise and the last word, apparently, is not said.

V. Subrahmanyam Iyer (1869 -1949) was a great scholar of Vedanta in Mysore who taught Swamis Siddeshwarananda and Nikhilananda of the Ramakrishna Math. This book, based on the notes taken by Paul Brunton (1898 –1981) who regularly visited the classes of the author, is derived from the posthumous collections of the former. The illustrious guru-sishya combination is, by itself, an elegant introduction to the depth of this work. This is a small book consisting of less than 100 pages is the summation of some 1,200 pages of closely typed notes on the lectures and builds on the consolidated wisdom of Indian philosophers from time immemorial on the tenets of Advaita. A unique feature of the book is the total absence of quotations (including the original Sanskrit texts) which aids in an even flow of the admittedly difficult subject for beginners. The style is simple, devoid of jargons and is well-suited to the purpose. It carries the readers effortlessly through the intellectual panorama of philosophical ideals and greatly succeeds in helping them assimilate the philosophy of Advaita without too many tears.

Truth is considered as the corner-stone of the Vedanta philosophy. The Indian spiritual ideas are woven around the twin concepts of *satya* and *rta*. This fusion of truth and eternal order makes Vedanta, a philosophy of contemporary relevance with a spiritual – continuum spanning five millenniums, for the world to treasure and preserve. It is wholesome in nature and represents unified knowledge. This

knowledge is not just a learning process where the pupil imbibes the teachings without inquiry. It is a process of self-purification. It starts with doubts and a thirst for learning the truth. Hence it is free of assumptions, and is a process for thinking for looking deep within oneself. It is a continuous activity and is not cultivated merely by reading texts and completing a programmed syllabus.

The author derides the term 'systems of Advaita'. Systems are man-made and hence the more appropriate way would be the endless search for truth. It is not the product of any one philosopher and cannot be labelled. The original finder of this philosophy is not known, and it can be safely presumed to be the product of the collective wisdom of the ancient Indian seers.

The author emphasizes that the term Advaita should be properly understood. It means that there is no second thing – hence the term Advaita. In fact the emphasis is more on proving the absence of a second thing, rather than establishing that there is only one thing. The above two terms may look similar to the untutored mind but an experienced thinker could locate huge differences between the two. It does not need a great intellect to arrive at the truth, but requires sincere commitment supported by dialogues with the preceptor. No truth is accepted without verification. It is not by linguistic talents but by inquiry that the truth is proved. In this process one should not confuse reality with appearance. Realisation of truth is the purpose of this journey. Vedanta defines truth as non-duality.

Even a brief reading of this philosophy, induces a yearning to practise what is preached, not necessarily for the attaining the avowed goal of spiritual enlightenment, but for leading a more fulfilling life amidst the pains and strains of the modern day world of globalised commercialism. The mind unfettered by bondages can better handle the pulls and pushes of the materialistic world. From this point of view, Advaita is to be viewed not only an idealistic retreat for a select few with a desire, but also for individuals who are actively engaged in the day to day world as a mechanism to exist in a dynamic state of attached detachment. That is the power of Advaita. This book has travelled some distance in satisfying this need for a generation

which is deeply troubled and clueless in a world of material prosperity shrouded in inner darkness.

Advaita, however, is a holistic philosophy which takes the serious, sincere student to the pinnacle of the spiritual search, and at the peak reveals the whole Truth. This book would have served its purpose better if it had looked into related areas, with some more attention devoted to Sankara's views, without compromising on its basic emphasis on simplicity. The arguments often advocated against Advaita, either on principle or out of half-knowledge, could have been addressed thus enlightening the minds of the intelligent readers. This additional effort would have put the intrinsic tenets of Advaita in a more intelligible form. A new entrant into the Indian philosophy often confronts these divergence of views and it would have served him better, if some more attention was paid to these details. These arguments by themselves answer the plethora of questions that arise in the minds of curious readers and a section or chapter could have been allotted in the form of question–answers to enlighten the minds of readers saddled with bemusing ideologies.

This does not in any way reduce the importance of this valuable work. One is tempted to add these only because of the laudable approach adopted by this text while treading a complicated arena where many a work has erred on the side of details. It is only out of a desire to get more out of this excellent author, who has handled this admittedly difficult topic with consummate skill, that this suggestion is made. The notes of the disciple are likely to contain further details of his preceptor, and these could be suitably added for a better understanding of the subject.

The reading community is indebted to the author for the erudition with which this difficult, yet inspiring, subject has been dealt with. V. Subrahmanya Iyer was a great scholar of Vedanta and was the tutor for the then Maharaja of Mysore in this subject. This book is recommended for persons who have a sincere appetite for a good understanding of Advaita.

— S. Ram Mohan

ASHRAM CALENDAR 2014

Pongal	Tuesday	14th January
Chinna Swamigal Aradhana	Wednesday	15th January
Sundaram Iyer Day	Wednesday	19th February
Maha Sivaratri	Thursday	27th February
Sri Vidya Havan	Friday	21st March
Telugu New Year Day	Monday	31st March
Sri Rama Navami	Tuesday	8th April
Tamil New Year Day	Monday	14th April
Sri Bhagavan's 64th Aradhana	Sunday	27th April
Maha Puja	Thursday	22nd June
Cow Lakshmi Day	Wednesday	9th July
Guru Poornima (Vyasa Puja)	Friday	11th July
Sri Bhagavan's Advent Day	Monday	1st September
Navaratri Festival Commences	Thursday	25th September
Saraswati Puja	Thursday	2nd October
Vijayadasami	Saturday	4th October
Deepavali	Thursday	23rd October
Karthigai Festival Commences	Thursday	27th November
Karthigai Deepam	Friday	5th December
Sri Bhagavan's 135th Jayanti	Tuesday	6th January 2015

ASHRAM BULLETIN

Aksharamanamalai

2014 is the centenary year of the composition of *Aksharamanamalai*. Each morning at 6 am in the New Hall and each evening at 5.45 pm in the Samadhi Hall, devotees recite the 108 verses. As a result of this addition to the ashram schedule, the time of the evening *Vedaparayana* has been moved to 4.45 pm for the duration of the year.

Special *parayanas* are being planned for 2014 to commemorate the composition of these verses by Bhagavan. The first one happened on the 31st December 2013 on the cusp of the New Year.

Ramana devotees have long known the blessings that chanting *Aksharamanamalai* confers on those seeking Bhagavan's spiritual blessing. For those not familiar with Tamil prosody or the chanting of *Aksharamanamalai*, the Ashram website provides free downloads of the original text and its English translation and commentary, as well as audio recordings of its recitation. There is also a section on the website titled "Learn to Chant *Aksharamanamalai*" which may interest devotees not familiar with Tamil.

It is said that *Panchakshari* mantra, *Sivayanamah*, requires initiation by a qualified guru. But for those without initiation in any mantra but with faith in Sri Ramana Maharshi, the mystic poem *Sri Arunachala Aksharamanamalai* is a divine refuge, shedding grace and guidance on all those who engage in proper recitation.

Lectures on *Aksharamanamalai*

In the third week of January, Nochur Sri Venkataraman gave a 7-day discourse on the origins and meaning of *Aksharamanamalai*. The seven-day programme (20th - 26th January) was among the first complete series of discourses given by him in English at the Ashram, allowing for all who are unfamiliar with Tamil the opportunity to benefit from the deep insights of this speaker. Venkataraman focused on the essence of Bhagavan's teaching as contained in *Aksharamanamalai* while drawing also from Bhagavan's other compositions and traditional *sastras* and

puranas and words of the masters. Those who missed the talks may hear them by downloading the audio recordings in mp3 format from the Ashram website.

Mahasivaratri

Mahasivaratri was celebrated on Thursday, the 27th February. In the ashram there was repeated recitation of *Sri Arunachala Aksharamanamalai* as an addition to the normal *Mahasivaratri* pujas performed at specific intervals throughout the night.

Mahasivaratri is regarded as the holiest of the days sacred to Lord Siva. Many devotees fast the whole day and continue worshipping Him during the four quarters of the whole night while the pujas to Siva Linga are performed at temples and homes. There was a vibrant atmosphere building up on the days prior to the great night.

According to *sutra*, Lord Siva said, “By doing worship to Me on this holiest day one gets the result of (doing) worship for a whole year. Even as the moon causes the rising of the sea, this sacred hour (time) enhances the power of My manifestations.”

Obituary

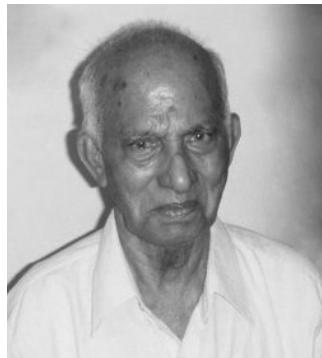
Sri P.V. Somasundaram, fondly known as ‘Somu Mama’, merged with Arunachala on 4th February 2014 at the age of 95. For several days prior to his demise, he called upon Arunachala, and this refrain was kept up right till the very end.

Sri P.V. Somasundaram’s (PVS) seventy-five year old association with Bhagavan began in 1939 when he set out on foot from Manamadurai in search of employment. Traversing small towns and villages on foot begging for food, he met Vishwanatha Swami at a temple in Trichy. The latter encouraged him to go to Ramanasramam where “at least you will get food and place to sleep”. With great trepidation, PVS continued his trek to the Ashram. On reaching the Ashram, he prostrated before Bhagavan. PVS realised not only were his hunger pangs assuaged, but the calmness that now pervaded in him assured him that he had finally reached his true home.

During the 1996 *Padayatra* which followed the same route from Thiruchuzhi to Tiruvannamalai which Bhagavan had taken, PVS fondly

recalled how blessed he was to be able to trudge some of the same roads in 1939 and then in 1996, which Bhagavan had taken in 1896.

PVS was related to Bhagavan's family. PVS father's sister was married to Chinnaswami. PVS was also similarly related to Nelliappa Iyer, Bhagavan's uncle. PVS's father travelled with Nelliappa Iyer when he first visited Bhagavan at Gurumurtam.



PVS enlisted for a brief period in the Indian Army and after the World War Two he took up employment in Glaxo Laboratories, Bombay. His infrequent visits to his hometown always meant a visit also to the Ashram.

His true purpose of life became clear to him after Bhagavan attained *mahanirvana*. In the 1950s Ramanasramam was in grave financial distress and Chinnaswami appealed to PVS for financial support from Bombay. Slowly and steadily funds trickled in. The old timers' recall how eagerly the Ashram would await news from Bombay. Soon the trickle became a substantial amount which helped maintain the Ashram.

Was the mission over for PVS? No! He continued serving Bhagavan in whatever ways he could till 2010 when his physical well-being would not permit him to do so. Year after year he conducted satsangs, celebrated Jayanthis and Aradhana with zeal and fervour. His hand-written postcard invitations are still cherished by some devotees. He also organised and led visits to the Ashram for devotees.

PVS, who dedicated his whole life in serving Bhagavan's devotees, was a loving husband, an attentive father and a cherished friend and a human being of great humility and simplicity. His kindness and compassion touched many lives. His spirit will live on through the memory of his devotion to Bhagavan and his selfless service.

He will be truly missed. His great granddaughter Aishwarya made an appeal: "When you will be born again Thatha? Don't be so serious! I love you so much I want you back!"

