
Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharishi

Sri Ramana Maharishi, the Sage of Arunachala is one of India's most cherished spiritual icons whose life and teachings continue to inspire people all over the world. His followers and devotees reverently called him 'Bhagavan'. Sri Ramana Maharishi avoided religious orthodoxy and dogmas, and instead encouraged the seeker to look into himself or herself. Rigorous Self-enquiry should be the personal journey towards Self-realisation. Ramana Maharishi's teachings stressed on Vichara or Self enquiry, such as 'Who Am I?', expressed in Tamil as 'Naan Yaar?' This was appealing to all as it transcended all denominations of religion, caste, gender, or region allowing the individual to access his or her true freedom of Self. Sri Ramana Maharishi approved a number of paths and practises, but recommended Self-enquiry as the principal means to remove ignorance and abide in Self-awareness, together with Bhakti (devotion) or surrender to the Self.

My interest in Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharishi

As a young girl I was not really aware of Tiruvannamalai or Sri Ramana Maharishi. My spiritual awakening began with attending classes at Chinmaya Mission where I was introduced to the Bhagavad Gita and the Narayaneeyam. Later, I became interested in the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. In 2007, I was introduced to a Spiritual Guru at my daughter's wedding by my son-in-law's family. Seshadri Swamigal of Bangalore said several times that my husband and I should visit Tiruvannamalai. Unfortunately, my husband couldn't make it to Tiruvannamalai as he passed away in 2008. Later, I made my first visit in 2011 December. After that, I have gone there every year, walked the Giripradakshina, experienced the peace and bliss at Ramanashram and the divinity at Annamalaiyar Temple. In 2019 December, I was blessed to witness the Kartigai Deepam on Arunachala Hill.

On every visit, I bought books at the bookstore at Ramanashram written on Sri Bhagavan's teachings and read them with great interest. I found the same core principles underlying the teachings of Sri Bhagavan, Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. They all said 'Look inwardly and you will find your true Self. The Self is not defined by gender, caste, race, wealth, knowledge or even state of physical body. Self-enquiry and understanding will lead to inner peace and stability'. Sri Ramana Maharishi stressed on giving attention to the inner awareness of 'I' or 'I am' and considered it to be the direct way of realizing Self-awareness. The 'I thought' is the sense of individuality: (Aham Aham) 'I-I' is the Self; (Aham Aham) "I am this" or "I am that" is the ego. By paying attention to the 'I' thought and inquiring where it comes from, the 'I' thought will disappear, and Self-awareness will appear. This effortless awareness of being, destroys the vasanas and calms the mind. The 'I' thought never arises again which is Self-realization or liberation.

Biography (1879 - 1896)

Arudra Darshan, the day of the "Sight of Shiva", is observed with great devotion by the Shaivites. On this day, in 1879, on December 30th., in the little town of Tiruchuzhi near Aruppukottai, Virudhunagar District in Tamil Nadu, South India was born Venkataraman Iyer. He was the second of four children in an orthodox Hindu Brahmin family. His father was Sundaram Iyer and his mother was Azhagammal. His father was a court pleader. Venkataraman grew up to be a normal, healthy boy. His older brother Nagaswami was two years his senior, his younger brother Nagasundaram was six years his junior and he had a sister Alemelu who was younger to him by eight years. Unfortunately, his father Sundaram Iyer died when he was twelve. The boys moved to Madurai, to their paternal uncle's home.

Venkataraman was not scholarly but had an amazingly retentive memory which helped him repeat a lesson from hearing it once read out. The only unusual thing about his boyhood years was his abnormally deep sleep and Sri Bhagavan attributed no significance to this except sound health. Sometimes also he would lie in a half - sleep at night. It may be that both states were foreshadowing of the spiritual awakening: the deep sleep as the ability, albeit still dark and negative, to abandon the mind and plunge deep beyond thought, and the half sleep as the ability to observe oneself objectively as a witness.

The young boy had no religious learning. He knew that there was a hill called Arunachala. One day he met a relative who told him that Arunachala was at Tiruvannamalai and this information surprised and brought bewildering joy to the young boy. At the age of sixteen, he read a copy of the Periapuranam, the life stories of sixty-three Tamil saints. The tales of renunciation leading to Divine Union inspired him with awe and emulation.

It was July 1896. A sudden fear of death seized Venkatraman in his room upstairs at his uncle's house. At first, he was afraid of it and later ecstatic about it. The experience of death transformed a schoolboy into a sage in a single act, which was spontaneous, swift, complete and absolutely permanent. This question 'Naan Yaar' (Who am I) occurred to him spontaneously. It occurred in a flash and completely destroyed Venkatraman. The experience lasted about twenty minutes. First, he was afraid of the experience. Later, he was in a state of bliss. He never told his mother, brothers and uncle about his experience. He realised that death can only overwhelm the body but cannot touch the spirits. His fear of death was completely gone. Lots of changes could be seen in him. He became quiet and meditative. He lost interest in sports and in his lessons. The question "Who am I" haunted him.

On Saturday, August 29th, 1896, he searched for trains running from Madurai to Tiruvannamalai in an old atlas. He told his elder brother that he had special classes at school and left home. His brother asked him to take rupees five from his box and pay his college fees. Out of that, Venkatraman took rupees three as he felt that amount would be enough to reach Tiruvannamalai. He left a letter saying he was going in search of his Father and no one needed to feel bad. He was on a virtuous journey. He also reminded his brother that his college fees were not paid. The letter was written in an impersonal manner indicating his state of mind. He bought a ticket to Tindivanam and sat in his compartment with his eyes closed. A Muslim Moulvi sitting in the opposite seat observed this young brahmin boy, with no luggage and eyes closed. After further conversation, he advised him to get down at Villupuram and take a train to Tiruvannamalai. The train entered Villupuram at 3 am and Venkatraman got down. He didn't have enough money to buy a ticket to Tiruvannamalai and instead bought a ticket to Mambazhapattu. He decided to walk the remaining 30 kms by foot. After 10 kms, he stopped to rest at Atulya Nadheswara temple at Arayaninnalur. He sat in the front pillared mantapa. He soon had a vision of a great jyoti (dazzling light) flooding the dark mantapa. ThirugnanaSambandar, the boy poet saint, who is one of the 63 Saivite Nayanmars, had such a jyoti darshan when he entered the same temple in circa eighth century CE. He soon realised that the divine light did not come from the Shiva Lingam here. The priest closed the temple. The priest walked to Viratteswara Temple at Kilur, half a mile away to perform the evening puja. Venkatraman was hungry and asked for the naivedyam rice. With a plate of rice he walked to a nearby Sastri's house and asked for water.

The next morning, Monday, August 31st, 1896, was Gokulashtami, Krishna Jayanthi day. At the house where he asked for water was residing Muthukrishna Bhagavathar. He told him that he was on a pilgrimage and had lost his money and luggage. Venkatraman was wearing ruby studs in his ears as per the custom of the times. He gave his ruby studs to the Bhagavathar and asked for Rs.4, although they were worth Rs.20. The Bhagavathar insisted on taking the young man's address and gave him a receipt. He tore up the receipt a little later as an act of renunciation. The next morning, on September 1st, 1896, he took a train to Tiruvannamalai and got down two hours later, three days after leaving home.

Act of Renunciation (1896 - 1897)

Venkatraman walked into the town and sighted the Arunachala hill and was overcome with emotions. It was around 11am on September 1st., 1896. He hastened to the great Temple of Arunachaleswara. The gates were open all the way to the inner shrine. He entered the garbha griha and tightly embraced the Shivalingam there and declared with ecstasy: "Father, I have arrived in obedience to your command. From now on, your wish is my wish." His body, which had felt aflame ever since his death experience, cooled down considerably. There, in the bliss of Union, was the quest achieved and the journey ended.

Venkatraman left the temple complex and wandered about till he reached Ayyankulam. This is a large tank with the backdrop of the majestic Arunachala hill and a view of the temple towers (gopuras). In front of the tank is a shrine for saint Arunagirinathar, who was born in Tiruvannamalai. Venkatraman

bathed in the Ayyankulam tank. Many barbers were plying their trade there. Venkatraman tonsured his head and got rid of his curly hair. Then something overcame him. He removed the sacred thread, the yagnopaveetham, from his body and discarded it. He threw away the little money he had with him and the packet of sweets Muthukrishna Bhagavathar's sister had given him to eat on the way to Tiruvannamalai. He said to himself "Why feed this block?" (kattai in Tamil). He tore a piece from his white dhoti and wore it as a koupinam (loin cloth). He threw away the remaining portion of the dhoti. It was customary to take a bath after a tonsure. "Why give this body the luxury of a bath?" he told himself. Immediately, there was a short, sharp shower and he was fully bathed by the heavens. He had made up his mind not to return home ever. His act of renunciation was complete.

Venkatraman took up his abode in the thousand pillared hall, a raised stone platform open on all sides, and sat there immersed in the Bliss of Being. Day after day, day and night he sat absorbed in the Real. So began the second phase of his life after Self-realisation. He was completely turned inwards, ignoring the outer world, slowly merging into the third phase, where his radiance shone on all who approached him. All this was apparent to the outside world. Personally, there was no change in his state of consciousness or spiritual experiences.

On some days he would go out on the streets to beg for his food. He would receive the food in his bare hands. After eating the food, would rub his palms on his bare head. Since he received his food in his cupped palms, people started calling him Kara Paathira Swamy, that is, the sadhu who used his palms as a vessel to receive his food. He would never go to the same house to beg. There was not a street in Tiruvannamalai town where he had not begged. He used to say, "You cannot conceive of the majesty and dignity, I felt while begging...". In the thousand pillared hall, Venkatraman remained in Nishtai and in silence. Temple devotees were impressed with his radiant face and the vairagya behind his silence. They paid obeisance to him and called him 'Brahmana Swamy'.

Intense Penance

A sadhu known as Seshadri Swamigal, who had arrived at Tiruvannamalai a few years earlier, took it upon himself to protect the young boy from the raining of stones and taunts of street urchins almost the same age as Brahmana Swamy. The boys were intrigued to see a young man just like them sit like a stone for hours together and in complete silence. To stop further persecution, Brahmana Swamy, who also got the nickname Chinna Seshadri (younger Seshadri), moved into the Patala Lingam, an underground vault in the thousand pillar hall which was dark and damp as sunlight never entered there. The Shiva Lingam was inside an underground vault and the shrine was in ruins. Termite hills, wasps, ants, scorpions etc. had made their homes there. Brahmana Swamy went into a Nishtai, sitting behind the Lingam. He was unaware of the world, completely absorbed in himself and the ecstasy of Being. Pious people left food and clothing near him. Everything remained untouched. His nails had grown long and curled. His hair was long and matted. His thighs were a feast to the termites, scorpions and wasps. Such was the intensity of his trance that he did not notice the pests.

One day, a Venkatachala Mudaliar, while chasing away the troublesome urchins, saw Seshadri Swamigal emerging from the darkness of the underground vault. Swamigal requested him to take care of the Chinna Seshadri. Venkatachala Mudaliar was shocked at the condition of Brahmana Swamy. He quickly got a few sadhus to bring out the skeleton like Brahmana Swamy full of bleeding sores from the bites of termites, ants, scorpions etc. in a seated position. He was still in a trance. The sadhus took him to the Subrahmanya shrine and after a long time he became aware of his surroundings. He was force fed with milk and fruits. He was looked after by a Mouna Swami (silent sadhu) who made sure he had some nourishment and wore his loin-cloth. It was Seshadri Swamigal who brought him to the attention of the world. Till then people thought he was a strange young boy who was lost.

The First Disciple

Large crowds of people enter the Annamalaiyar Temple, every year on Kartigai Deepam Day, which falls between mid-November to mid-December. A beacon is lit on Arunachala hill symbolizing Shiva's appearance as a pillar of light. This year, the devotees were drawn to the young, silent Swami and came in large numbers to prostrate before him. Here, the first regular devotee became attached to him. Uddandi Nayinar saw the young boy immersed in perpetual samadhi and felt that this was real realization and he could learn from the Swami. He kept away the crowds and protected the Swami. He

hoped to get spiritual instructions from the Swami, but the Swami never spoke. He read out from spiritual books like Vaasishtam, Kaivalyanavaneetham etc. which the young Swami absorbed. Soon Annamalai Tambiran of Tiruvannamalai Aadheenam joined Nayinar in caring for the young Swami. He suggested moving the Swami to Gurumurttham, the samadhi of Deivasigamani Desigar, two kilometres away from Tiruvannamalai. Here, the Swami meditated undisturbed and partook the naivedyam offered at the shrine. Tambiran would constantly sing from the Thevaram which contains the collection of poems sung by the three Saivite poet saints, Thirunavukkarasar, Thirugnana Sambandar and Sundarar. Now, he came to be known as 'Gurumurtham Swamy'. Here too, very soon, pilgrims and sightseers came and prostrated before him, overcome with his divine radiance. Both Nayinar and Tambiran had to leave after a while. A sadhu Palaniswami, who lived in austerity and worshipped Lord Vinayaka, was told by a friend about this young Dhruva, steeped in Tapas. He was stirred to the depths at the sight of the young Swami and decided that it would be a blessing to serve him all his life. He remained his attendant for twenty-one years.

Discovery of the silent Swamy's knowledge of Tamil and English languages

One of his regular devotees was a taluq head accountant called Venkatrama Iyer. He was always very curious about Swamy's real name and place of origin. Swamy wrote in English his name and his home town on a piece of paper. For further clarification, he pointed to a page in the Periya Puranam, where one of the 63 saints Sundarar had sung a Pathigam (a collection of ten verses) about the Bhoominathar temple at Tiruchuzhi. It is felt that maybe Sri Ramana Maharishi wanted his family to know about his whereabouts, especially his mother. He allowed himself to be discovered.

In May 1898, almost a year after being at Gurumurtham, the Swamy moved to a nearby mango orchard belonging to Venkatarama Naicker to provide more privacy. He stayed there for six months and here he read all the books that Palaniswamy brought to him. The different works of spiritual philosophy were in Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu and Sanskrit. He rapidly absorbed the books and imparted the gist to his friend. He also composed poems in all languages and wrote them in his own hand.

The end of Part I. Part II is about Venkatraman's family meeting him at Tiruvannamalai.

Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi Part II

Family discovers Venkatraman's whereabouts

At Madurai, the uncle with whom Venkatraman had been staying, died. At his funeral someone mentioned a young Swamy at Tiruvannamalai who was revered and was being talked about. His Uncle's brother, Nelliappier and his friend arrived at Tiruvannamalai in search of Swamy. They reached the mango grove but Naicker refused to let them in. Then he relented and allowed them to send a note to the Swamy. On receiving the note, Venkatraman examined the handwriting and the notepaper. He recognised the paper to have come from the Registration Department as it had a stamp on it and also his brother's handwriting at the back. With this he concluded his brother was also employed in the Registration Department and the visitor was a pleader there. This keen sense of observation, though totally detached, was observed by many later. He allowed his relatives inside and sat completely silent and unaffected. They were shocked by his unkempt looks and his weak and emaciated body. Nelliappier expressed his admiration for Swamy's achievements and pleaded with him to return to a place near his mother and continue with his spiritual quests. The Swamy sat in silence. Defeated, they returned home and conveyed the same to his mother.

Very soon, the Swamy moved away from the mango orchard to the pillared mantapa of the Arunagirinather temple situated opposite to the Ayyankulam Tank. The Swami would beg in the agharam streets by clapping loudly. When he received food, he would eat it there and wipe his hands on his head. Palaniswamy would beg in another street and return to Swamy at night. After a few months, they moved to Pavazhakkunru on the Arunachala hill. He would sit in the temple immersed in samadhi (the Bliss of Being). Often, the temple priest would lock up the temple at night without checking whether he was there inside. The cavern was cramped and airless.

Pavazhakkunru - 1898 to 1899

Pavazhakkunru on the Arunachala hill is an old Shiva temple built on a low slung bed rock. Inside the built up temple, there is a naturally formed tiny cavern. In the sanctum sanctorum is a Shivalingam. Behind it is a carved image of Ardhanariswara. The belief is that after Parvati left the ashram of sage Gautama and undertook tapas on the Arunachala hill, Shiva appeared before her in the form of Ardhanariswara to imply that he had given equal importance to Parvati. Pavazhakkunru temple offers a dramatic view of the town below and the Arunachaleswara Temple. One can see the spectacular views of the spurs and valleys. During heavy rains, waterfalls would form overnight in the spurs. People would climb the spurs and bathe in the waterfalls to their hearts' content.

Azhagammal and Nagaswami arrived at Pavazhakkunru temple in December 1898. They found Brahmana Swamy lying with his back on a rock, in ekantham. His mother and elder brother were shocked to see him emaciated, with matted hair, long nails and in a kuppinam. His mother lamented and begged him to return home with her. He appeared unmoved, not even showing that he heard. She kept entreating him day after day and finally burst into tears. He was afraid that his compassion would give her high hopes. On another day, she asked the villagers to intercede on her behalf. One of them, Pachaiyappa Pillai asked the Swami to give a definitive answer and offered him a paper and pencil to write the answer. In an impersonal language, this 18 year old boy wrote, "The Ordainer controls the fate of souls in accordance with their prarabdhakarma (destiny to be worked out in this life, resulting from the balance sheet of actions in past lives). Whatever is destined not to happen will not happen, try as you may. Whatever is destined to happen will happen, do what you may to prevent it. This is certain. The best course, therefore, is to remain silent." This was the first upadesa, given in writing to his mother. The upadesa, in both Tamil and in its English translation, are displayed boldly at the Pavazhakkunru temple. His mother and brother left for home, very dejected.

Swamy stayed at Pavazhakkunru temple till 1899. Disturbed by the unending stream of devotees, the twenty year old Swamy moved with Palaniswamy to Virupaksha cave. He stayed at Virupaksha cave for 17 years up to 1916. These years were marked with momentous events.

Who am I?

It was here that he revealed his central teaching, "Who am I" to Sivaprakasam Pillai in 1902. Swamy gave his replies in Tamil in writing to 13 questions from Sivaprakasam Pillai bearing on 'Who am I?', the nature of awareness and the path of inquiry for understanding the nature of mind. As Sivaprakasam rapidly asked the questions, the Swamy wrote the answers quickly on a paper or slate. The replies were expanded to 28 questions later. The 23 year old Swamy's replies shook the spiritual world. Serious minded devotees engaged in Self-realisation and Self enquiry started coming in large numbers to seek help in reaching their goal. He taught that whatever happens is due to prarabdha karma and encouraged people to find out who it is, who is predestined or has a free will. He said very clearly, "All the actions that the body is to perform are already decided upon at the time it comes into existence: the only freedom you have is whether or not to identify yourself with your body." In conclusion he said, "the best course therefore is to remain silent" applying this statement to his mother as she was asking what could not be granted. The man who says, "Everything is predestined, therefore I will make no effort", is intruding on the false assumption that, "I know what is predestined", it may be that he is cast in a part in which effort has to be made. As Sri Krishna told Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita, his own nature will compel him to make an effort.

It was at the Virupaksha cave that the Swamy gave his first oral upadesa on the nature of tapas to the great scholar, Kavyakanta Ganapati Muni in 1907. He thus broke his 11 years of silence, speaking occasionally to Palaniswamy. He admired Ganapati Muni for his mastery of the Vedas and Upanishads, Sanskrit literature and his ability to compose poems in Sanskrit and Telugu. Ganapati Muni understood and connected with the Swamy so very well at all levels. He was always ecstatic in the presence of the Swamy. It was Ganapati Muni who shortened the Swamy's name from Venkatraman to 'Ramana'. Ganapati Muni considered the Swami to be a Jagath Guru and a Maharishi (a great sage). He also considered him to be very divine and called him Bhagavan. Ganapati Muni declared that everyone should call him "Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharishi". From the age of 28, the Swamy received this title, and everyone even today call him, "Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharishi" "or simply Bhagavan.

Signs of outward return to normal life

After more than two years of living in temples and shrines, Bhagavan started to eat regularly and went out to beg for his food. He responded to the devotees, read books and gave the essence of the scriptural teachings to them. Earlier, when he arrived at Tiruvannamalai, he practised severe austerities and penance and ignored the world and his body. This is called *tapas* meaning striving for Realisation. But, Bhagavan said, as he had ceased to identify with his body and the 'I', there was no austerity from his point of view. He did not eat and did not talk, so people said he was fasting and was *mouni*. The seeming austerity was not in quest of Realisation, but as a result of Realisation. After the spiritual Awakening at his Uncle's house at Madurai, there was no *sadhana* or striving. Having no worldly needs, he simply had no need to speak. Not speaking was also a good defence against disturbance.

Complete absorption in the Self, with the resultant oblivion to the manifested world is termed *nirvikalpa samadhi*. Bhagavan has compared this state to a bucket of water lowered into a well. In the bucket is water (the mind) which is merged with that in the well (Self). But the rope and bucket (the ego) still exist to draw it out again. The highest state, complete and final, is *sahaja samadhi*. This is pure uninterrupted Consciousness, transcending the mental and physical plane and yet with full awareness with the manifested world and full use of the mental and physical faculties, a state of perfect equilibrium, perfect harmony, beyond even bliss. This he has compared with the waters of a river merged in those of the ocean. In this state, the ego with all its limitations is dissolved completely in the Self. This is absolute freedom, pure consciousness, pure I-am-ness no longer limited to the body or individuality.

Arunachala Hill

Shri Bhagavan declared Arunachala to be the heart of the earth, the spiritual centre of the world. Shri Shankara spoke of it as Mount Meru. Many saints have lived here. To this day, *siddhas* (sages with supernatural powers) are believed to dwell in its caves, whether with physical bodies or not, appearing as lights moving about at night on the hill. Though only 2,682 ft high, the Arunachala Hill dominates the countryside. As one treads the 14km.road around it, walking from south to the west with one's right side to the hill, one can see the eight directions of space and *mantapams* standing at various significant points. Pre-eminent among these is the *Dakshinamurti Mantapam* at the southern point. *Dakshinamurti* is Shiva teaching in silence that is Arunachala. Bhagavan always encouraged *pradakshina* (circuit) of the hill. Even in the case of the old or the infirm he would encourage them to go slowly. Indeed, the *pradakshina* is supposed to be made slowly, "like a pregnant queen in her ninth month." It is to be made on foot, if possible barefoot.

Virupaksha Cave

Bhagavan stayed in the Virupaksha cave for a very long time and the cave is so named after a saint who lived there in the 16th century and is buried there. It is curiously shaped to resemble the monosyllable OM. In the hot summer months, Bhagavan moved to a cave near Mulaipal Tirtha tank nearby. The cave has a mango tree giving cool shade and a natural spring giving water supply all year round. In the year 1900, shortly after Bhagavan went to live on the hill, a devotee named Nalla Pillai from Kumbhakonam came to Tiruvannamalai and took a photograph of him, the earliest portrait, of a beautiful youth, almost a child, yet with the strength and profundity of the Bhagavan. During the early years on the hill, he still maintained silence. His radiance had already drawn a group of devotees around him and an Ashram had come into being. Simple people, children and animals were drawn to him along with the seekers of Truth. Young children would play around him and return home feeling happy. Monkeys and squirrels would eat out of his hand. His not speaking was not an obstacle in giving instructions to his disciples and devotees. His real teaching was through silence, in the tradition of *Dakshinamurti*. This tradition was exemplified also in China by Lao Tsu and the early Taoist Sages. "That Tao which can be named is not Tao" - the knowledge which can be formulated is not the true Knowledge. This silent teaching was a direct spiritual influence which the mind absorbed and later interpreted according to its ability.

The first European visitor expressed his experience of sitting before the silent Maharishi. ' I could feel only that his body was not that of the man: it was the instrument of God, merely a sitting motionless

corpse from which God was radiating.' Another, Paul Brunton, who arrived more sceptical than a believer says, "It's an ancient theory of mine that one can take the inventory of a man's soul from his eyes. In the second hour of being in his presence, I become aware of a silent resistless change which is taking place in my mind. One by one all the questions drop away. It doesn't matter if the problems which troubled me are solved or not. I know only that a steady river of quietness seems to be flowing near me, that a great peace is penetrating the inner reaches of my being, and that my thought tortured brain is beginning to arrive at some rest."

Grief stricken hearts also got solace from Bhagavan's presence. Echammal, as she was called at the Ashram, was Lakshmiammal, a happy wife and mother from the nearby village of Mandakolathur. Before the age of twenty five, she lost her husband and later her son and then her daughter. She was told about the young swami. She climbed the hill and stood before Bhagavan completely silent in grief. The compassion in his eyes was healing and her sorrow felt reduced. She spent the rest of her life at Tiruvannamalai making food for Bhagavan and everyone who was with him at that time. Bhagavan would wait patiently every day for her to arrive with the food.

In 1914, mother Azhagammal came to live with Bhagavan at the Virupaksha cave. Her eldest son Nagaswami had died. Nagasundaram and his wife had a baby boy who was named Venkatraman. Later, Nagasundaram became Swami Niranjanananda and became the chief administrator of the Ashram. His son, Venkatraman became Swami Ramanananda and later became the president of the Ashram.

Seshadri Swamigal

Seshadri Swamigal, who had protected Bhagavan, when he came to Tiruvannamalai as a boy lived on a hill lower to Virupaksha cave. He often visited Bhagavan and encouraged people to go to Ramanaswami as he called him. Seshadri Swamigal had left home at the age of seventeen and had received initiation into mantras and japa that develop occult powers. He told the devotees to receive guidance from the silence of Bhagavan as it was the supreme upadesa. Once Seshadri Swamigal sat in the Mango tree cave, across Bhagavan, and tried to read his calm mind. Finally he said "If one worships the Lord Arunachala he will grant salvation." Bhagavan replied, "Who is it that worships and who is worshipped."

Seshadri Swamigal laughed and said that this point was not clear to him. Then Bhagavan explained the Advaita philosophy of the One Self manifested in all forms of the universe and yet unmanifested and unchanged by manifestation, the one Reality and Self of him who worships. Seshadri Swamigal just prostrated to the Arunachala Hill again and again and said that all he understood was worship and departed with a wry smile.

Seshadri Swamigal died in 1929. As is the accepted practise in the case of a Saint, his body was buried and not cremated. He is still revered in Tiruvannamalai and on the anniversary of his death, his portrait is taken in a procession through the town. There is an Ashram to his name just adjacent to the Ramanashram. There is a shrine there where daily pujas are conducted. There are rooms available for devotees and there is a simple restaurant catering good food. In fact I stay there whenever I visit Tiruvannamalai. It is convenient for visiting Ramanashram and participating in the prayers.

Part III is about Sri Bhagavan's mother settling down at Skandashramam and attaining Jnana with Sri Bhagavan's help and getting mukti. It is finally about Sri Ramana Maharishi attaining videha mukti after spending 54 yrs. at Thiruvannamalai.

Bhagavan Ramana Maharishi Part III

Skandashramam

With devotees increasing in number every day, Virupaksha cave did not provide enough space. So, Bhagavan, his mother and his devotees moved to Skandashramam, 100 mts. above. Kandaswamy, an earlier devotee, created this place single-handedly. He removed boulders, cleared thorny bushes,

levelled the ground and created a garden. Even a fresh water spring was discovered and there was perennial water for the Ashram. As a tribute, Bhagavan named the place Skandashramam. Azhagammal, Bhagavan's mother, cooked food for devotees with the help of other women devotees such as Echammal, Ratnammal, 'keerai' Patti, Mudaliar Patti and others. During the six years that Azhagammal spent at Skandashramam (1916 - 1922), she absorbed the teachings of Bhagavan which he imparted to others. Soon, she began to see things in a new light.

Renunciation

It was almost as though Bhagavan had resumed a family life with his devotees. Seshadri Swamigal observed amusingly to a visitor, who after spending some time with him, wanted to visit Ramanaswami, that at Skandashramam was a householder who would offer him laddus. A sadhu focussed on his quest while a householder had his worldly preoccupations. A devotee asked Bhagavan whether feeding and caring for his devotees was renunciation. Bhagavan replied that renunciation is not a withdrawal but a widening of love.

(i) Renunciation is not giving up one's home and clothes. Renunciation is giving up of desires, attachments and passions.

(ii) One who truly renounces actually merges in the world and embraces the whole world with love. Great souls who have renounced the world, have done so not because of aversion to family life, but because they are large hearted and generous. They love the entire universe and everything in it.

(iii) Only when one is ready must one renounce as one may create new bonds.

(iv) When one feels equal love for all, one naturally will give up attachments. The whole world will feel like one's home and will drop off from secular life like a ripe fruit from a tree.

According to Bhagavan true renunciation is in your mind and is neither achieved by physical renunciation nor impeded by the lack of it. Whether you continue in the household or renounce it and go to the jungle, it is your mind that haunts you. The ego is the source of thought. Changing the environment does not help. The one obstacle is the mind and it must be overcome whether in the home or jungle. It is not the work alone that is the sadhana but the attitude of mind in which it is done. The feeling 'I work' is the obstacle. Ask yourself 'Who works'. Remember who you are. Then the work will not bind you. It is wrong to assume that if one is fixed in the Self, one's duties in life will not be performed well. Just as meditation does not affect the work done, so also work done does not affect meditation.

Bhagavan explained this further saying that the life of action need not be renounced. If you meditate in the right manner, then the current of mind induced will continue to flow even in the midst of work. As you go on your attitude towards people, events and objects will gradually change. Since there is no conflict between work and wisdom, one can attain enlightenment even while working as a professional. Working with detachment would in no way affect one's professional efficiency. Bhagavan himself was an example. Whatever he did was meticulously accurate, whether correcting proofs or binding a book, whether cutting vegetables or working in the kitchen, his aloof attitude enhanced his efficiency. As there was no intrusion of ego, there was no friction. There was rightly directed effort and coordination. A doctor works more efficiently when he is unemotional and hence prefers not to treat his family members. A financier works more relaxedly when his own interests are not at stake.

When someone pointed out that Bhagavan had left home, he said that everyone acted according to his prarabdha or destiny. It is a fact that Bhagavan participated in the Ashram activities and daily routine there in the later years, but this was not possible for him immediately after the Awakening at his Uncle's house in Madurai. What he had made possible for himself, he made it possible for others by His Grace.

The Mother

Azhagammal received severe training from Bhagavan before she let go of her ego that she was his mother. She understood that Bhagavan considered all women as his mothers and she devoted her time

in service of the devotees. He would make fun of her orthodox ways. He mocked her when she got stressed about someone coming very close to her and would touch her accidentally, fearing she would become impure. The Ashram food was strictly vegetarian. Still, like some devout Brahmins considered some vegetables as unsattvic or impure. Bhagavan would say mockingly, "Mind that onion! It is a great obstacle to Moksha (Deliverance)." Bhagavan disapproved of excessive attachment to forms of orthodoxy and laid stress on eating sattvic food. He never gave instructions as to what one should do. He just sowed the seeds of spirituality and left it to shape the outer life as it grew.

In many ways, Mother realized that he who had been born her son was Divine Incarnation. She had several visions of him telling her that the form she knew and loved as her son was as illusory as any other he might assume. In 1920, the health of the mother began to fail. Bhagavan attended on her day and night. In silence and meditation her understanding matured. In May 1922, her condition deteriorated and Bhagavan sat with her for hours together with his right hand on her chest and left hand on her head. People chanted Ramanamajapa, Tiruvagasam and portions from the Vedas. Azhagammal attained vimukti at 8pm on May 19th. 1922. Bhagavan said, his mother had attained moksha (liberation) and was absolved from rebirths. A Hindu death entails ritualistic pollution calling for purificatory rites. This had not been a death but a reabsorption. There was no disembodied soul but perfect Union with the Self and hence no purificatory rites were needed. Bhagavan confirmed this by saying, "She did not pass away, she was absorbed." Potent as was the support given by Bhagavan, it was the saintliness of Azhagammal, her previous renunciation of pride and attachment, that enabled her to benefit from it. The soul was passing through a series of experiences, thus avoiding the need for rebirth and making possible the Union with the Spirit.

The question arose of the disposal of the body. Some doubt was felt whether the body of a woman Saint should be given a burial instead of being cremated. Bhagavan said, "Since Jnana (Knowledge) and Mukti (Deliverance) do not differ with the difference of sex, the body of a woman Saint also need not be cremated. Her body is also the abode of God." The body of the mother was interred at the foot of the hill at the southern point, between the Palitirtham Tank and the Dakshinamurti Mantapam (shrine). Relatives and friends and devotees came for the ceremony. Sacred ashes, camphor, incense were thrown into the put around the body before it was filled up. A stone tomb was constructed and on it was installed a sacred lingam brought from Varanasi. Later a temple was raised on the spot, finally completed in 1949 and known as Matrubhuteshwara Temple, the Temple of God manifested as the Mother.

As the coming of the mother had marked an epoch in Ashram life, so also did her departure. The devotees felt the Shakti or Creative Energy and the Ashram activities increased and developed rapidly. For six months Bhagavan would come down every day from Skandashramam and spend a few hours every day at his mother's samadhi. One day, he didn't feel like returning to Skandashramam. He told his worried devotees that the Divine force that had brought him to Tiruvannamalai from Madurai had detained him near his mother's samadhi. From December 1922 onwards, Bhagavan made it his permanent abode.

The present day Ramanashramam developed with Azhagammal's samadhi as the nucleus. In front of the Matrubhuteshwara shrine built to honour the memory of Ramana's mother, a hall was built. Bhagavan stayed in the hall and his core disciples also stayed there. He would sit silently on the couch there. Many people would ask him questions on the Advaitic principle of non-duality, the nature of Reality, the method to be adopted for Self-Realisation or Self-enquiry. He would give answers in writing. Chanting of the Vedas and slokas would go on in his presence. People felt confident to ask him anything and he would answer in lightning speed. Devotees would come even at midnight or early hours of the morning to meet him and he was always available for them. The Ashram doors were always open. He would joke that people were coming from far and wide to see this kovanandi (fakir in a loincloth). He stayed there for 24 years. It is a Meditation Hall now. From there he could look at Arunachala Hill. There is a picture of Ramana on the cot on which he used to sit or sleep. On my every visit, I have sat there in meditation in complete bliss.

Ashram Routine

Ramana Maharishi had a set routine in the Ashram. He would get up at 3 or 3:30 a.m., finish his morning ablutions, have a bath and then go to the kitchen for cutting the vegetables. He would have breakfast at 7 a.m. with his devotees and return to the hall to read the newspapers. A large number of devotees would have gathered, and he would answer their questions on spiritual issues. He would then go for a walk on Arunachala Hill. Again he would go for a walk after lunch and then once more in the evening. In fact the free roaming spirit of Ramana felt chained by the Ashram regimen. Jokingly, he called the Ashram a 'jail' and the attendants his 'warders'.

The shrine for Azhagammal grew into a beautiful temple between 1939 and 1949. Bhagavan took a personal interest in its construction. As only voluntary donations were accepted, it took ten years for the construction to be finished. Even today, this is followed. On March 17th, 1949, was the Kumbhabhishekam, (the consecration ceremony) of the Matrubhuteshwarar temple to honour Ramana's mother. The architect, Vaidyanatha Sthapathi, designed the temple. The Shankaracharya of Puri performed the Kumbhabhishekam. Before the consecration, Bhagavan blessed the Sri Chakra installed in the temple.

Merging with the Infinite

Towards the end of 1948, a cancerous growth was seen on Maharshi's left arm. He wanted the tumour to take its course. He used to joke that 'a lingam has sprouted' on his arm. Doctors from Madras performed four surgeries at the Ashram. In spite of the surgeries, he would sit on an easy chair outside his room near the Matrubhuteshwarar Temple and devotees would pass by receiving clarifications on spiritual matters. He would look longingly at the Arunachala hill. His condition worsened after the fourth surgery and there was a gloom on the Ashram premises. On April 14th, 1950, about 1,500 people attended the evening darshan. At 8:47 pm, Bhagavan attained siddhi. S.S.Cohen, a long time devotee and an ashram resident describes the last moments of Bhagavan. "The situation was tense. Devotees, Ashram workers, and a few long time disciples went in solemnly to have a last glimpse of him. When the end was expected to come, the whole congregation sang in one voice the hymns he had composed on Lord Arunachala till the end came at 8:47." The formless sage of Arunachala had merged with the Infinite.

Ganesan, the grandnephew, who was 14 years old at that time, was standing near the entrance to the room where the Maharishi was lying. Ganesan has gone on record that when Sri Ramana attained Mahanirvana, he saw a brilliant flash of light, which later moved towards the top of the holy hill, Arunachala. A glowing meteor with a luminous tail made its appearance in the south and made its way slowly across to the north. Thousands of people across what was then Madras state, saw the meteor slowly travelling from the south on the horizon.

Sri Ramana Maharishi's body was buried at a spot near the temple built for his mother. A Shivalingam was installed over his samadhi. It is now a temple called Ramaneswara Mahalingam. Several hundreds of devotees come here every day and have darshan of the Shivalingam and meditate in the spacious hall in front of it to receive Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharishi's grace.

Part IV is about Sri Bhagavan's first set of spiritual instructions in his own words based on the inquiry, "Who Am I".

Bhagavan Ramana Maharishi IV

Who am I? Naan yaar?

Sri Bhagavan was not a philosopher and there was no development in his teaching. His earliest expositions, Self-Enquiry and Who Am I? are exactly what he said verbally in the last years to his devotees. As a lad of sixteen, he experienced Awakening and understood his identity with the formless, Absolute, Pure Being and later recognised the doctrinal implications of his knowledge. All modes and levels of doctrine are within Hinduism as needed by people of different temperament and

development. The recognition of Pure Being as one's Self and the Self of the universe and of all beings is the supreme and ultimate Truth, transcending all other doctrine without denying their truth on their plane. This is the doctrine of Advaita, Non-Duality taught by the ancient Rishis and by Adi Shankara. The Absolute is the Cosmos and of every being. Therefore, by seeking his Self, by the constant investigation 'Who Am I?' it is possible for a man to realize his identity with Universal Being. Sri Bhagavan often told his devotees, 'Chumma Yiru'. When they were confused and asked solutions to their problems, he asked them to be as they were. Chumma Yiru or Be As You Are was his advice as keeping a still mind free of clutter lead to clarity and solutions. Another advice he often told his devotees was Vanda Velaiya Paru or do what you have to do to realize the Supreme Being. Every human's goal, along with his duties on this earth, was to find a way among worldly matters, to reach God.

"All religions postulate the three fundamentals: individual, God and world. It is only as long as the ego endures that one says either, 'The One manifests Itself as the three' or 'The three are really three'. The supreme state is to inhere in the Self, the ego extinguished" (Forty Verses on Reality, v.2 / Ulladu Narpadu)

Some people also revolt against the conception of the world as unreal, even while admitting the reality of the Spirit, as they have not understood in what sense it is unreal. Sri Bhagavan explained this as recorded by S.S.Cohen:

"Shankaracharya has been criticized for his philosophy of Maya (illusion) without understanding his meaning. He made three statements: that Brahman is real, that the universe is unreal, and that Brahman is the universe. He did not stop with the second. The third statement explains the first two; it signifies that when the universe is perceived apart from Brahman that perception is false and illusory. What it amounts to is that phenomena are real when experienced as the Self and illusory when seen apart from the Self."

The teaching of Sri Bhagavan was intensely practical. He expounded theory only in answer to the specific needs and questions of devotees and as a necessary basis of practice. He supported Buddha's refusal to answer questions about God. He said, "In fact the Buddha was more concerned with directing the seeker to realize Bliss here and now than with academic discussions about God." Sri Bhagavan urged people to put in effort or sadhana. He would say, "Why do you want to know about God before you know yourself? First find out who you are."

His teaching was not 'philosophy' in the usual sense of the term as he encouraged devotees to eliminate thought. If the interference of the mind is still, the consciousness of the Self can, by the Grace of the Guru, awaken in the heart, thus preparing for this blissful Identity, for a radiant state of Knowledge, pure I-am-ness. In rapture or ecstasy, the mind is momentarily absorbed and stilled in a fragmentary experience of the bliss that is its true nature. The very words indicate the transcending of individuality. The words, 'it is breath-taking' really means 'it is thought taking', for the source of thought and breath is the same, as Sri Bhagavan explained when speaking of breath control. The truth is that the individuality is not lost but expanded to Infinity.

Elimination of thoughts is for the purpose of concentrating on the deeper awareness that is behind and beyond thought. Far from weakening the mind, it strengthens it, for it teaches concentration. Sri Bhagavan said that the weak and uncontrolled mind is constantly distracted by irrelevant thoughts and harassed by unhelpful worries. The mind that is strong enough to concentrate, no matter what, can turn its concentration to the elimination of thoughts in quest of the Self. Conversely the effort to eliminate thoughts in this manner gives strength and power of concentration. When the quest is achieved, the mind does not lose its faculties. Sri Bhagavan compared the mind of the Jnani to the moon in the sky at midday - it is illuminated but its light is not needed in the greater radiance of the sun which illuminates it.

The teachings of Sri Bhagavan Maharishi in the form of 28 questions and answers. Although the doctrine of Sri Bhagavan never varied, the way of teaching varies according to the character and understanding of the questioner. Sivakasam Pillai, a graduate in philosophy, was

employed in the Revenue Department of the South Arcot Collectorate. In 1902, he visited Thiruvannamalai and went up to Virupaksha cave to meet Maharishi. He sought from him spiritual guidance and answers relating to Self-Enquiry. As Sri Bhagavan did not have an inclination to talk, he answered questions put to him by written answers. As recorded by Sivakasam Pillai and published in 1923, there were thirteen questions and answers given by Bhagavan.

Who Am I? Naan Yaar?

Every human being wants to be happy and for this one needs to know oneself. To know this Path of Knowledge, the inquiry in the form of Who am I?, is the principle means.

1. Who am I?

The real I or Self is not the body, nor any of the five senses, nor the sense objects, nor the organs of action, nor the prana (breath or vital force), nor the mind, nor even the deep sleep state where there is no knowledge of these.

2. If I am none of these, then who am I?

After rejecting each of these, and saying this I am not, that which alone remains is the 'I' and that is Consciousness or Awareness.

3. What is the nature of this Consciousness or Awareness?

The Nature of Awareness is Sat-Chit-Ananda (Existence-Consciousness-Bliss) in which there is not even the slightest trace of the I-thought.

4. When will the realisation of the Self be gained?

When the world which is what-is-seen has been removed, then will be realization of the Self which is the seer.

5. Will there not be realization of the Self even while the world is there (taken as real)?

There will not be.

6. Why?

The seer and the object seen are like the rope and the snake. Just as the knowledge of the rope which is the substratum will not arise unless the false knowledge of the illusory serpent goes, so the realization of the Self which is the substratum will not be gained unless the belief that the world is real is removed.

7. When will the world which is the object seen be removed?

When the mind, which is the cause of all cognition and of all actions, becomes quiet or vanishes, then the world will disappear.

8. What is the nature of the mind?

What is called 'mind' is a wondrous power residing in the Self and is only thoughts. It is a form of energy. It manifests itself as the world. Apart from thoughts there is no independent entity called the world. When the mind sinks into the Self, then the Self is realized. When the world appears (to be real), the Self does not appear. When the Self appears (shines) the world does not appear. What is referred to as the Self is the Atman. The mind cannot stay alone and depends on something gross to exist. It is the mind that is called the subtle body or the soul (Jiva).

9. What is the path of inquiry to understand the nature of the mind?

If one inquires as to where in the body the thought 'I' rises first, one would discover it rises from the heart. This enquiry is a mental operation and it destroys all mental operations including itself. Only then comes Realization of the Self.

10. How will the mind become quiescent?

The thought 'Who am I' will destroy all other thoughts and will get destroyed in the end. The ego and the prana (breath or vital force) have a common source. Whatever you do, do without egoism, that is without the feeling, 'I am doing this'. True Bhakti is the surrender of the ego to the Self.

11. What is the means for constantly holding onto the thought 'Who am I?'

When other thoughts arise, one should not pursue them, but should inquire with diligence, "To whom has this thought arisen?" The answer that would emerge would be 'to me'. Thereupon if one inquires 'Who am I?', the mind will go back to its source; and the thought that arose will become quiescent. With repeated practise in this manner, the mind will develop the skill to stay in source. Not letting the mind out, but retaining it in the Heart is what is called 'inwardness' (antarmukha). Letting the mind go out of the Heart is known as 'externalisation' (bahirmukha). If one acts without ego or 'I', everything around will appear as God.

12. Are there no other means for making the mind quiescent?

Other than inquiry, there are no adequate means to control the mind. The mind may appear to be controlled by other means, but will go back and forth once the control is removed. Thought indeed is the nature of the mind. From the thought 'I' originates ego and from the ego originates breath. Therefore when the mind becomes quiet, the breath is controlled and when the breath is controlled the mind becomes quiet. But, in deep sleep, the mind is quiet and the breath continues due to God's will. In the waking state and samadhi, the breath is controlled when the mind is quiet. Exercise of breath control helps to quieten the mind as also meditation, chanting of mantras, diet restrictions etc. help to quieten the mind. Each time a thought comes, crush it with inquiry. To crush out all thoughts at their source is called vairagya (dispassion). So vichara or Self-enquiry is important to realize the Self and with continuous, uninterrupted remembrance of the Self, this can be achieved.

13. The residual impressions (thoughts) of objects appear unending like the waves of an ocean. When will all of them get destroyed?

As the meditation on the Self rises higher and higher, the thoughts will get destroyed.

14. Is it possible for the residual impressions of objects that come from beginningless time, as it were, to be resolved and for one to remain as the pure Self?

There is only one mind influenced by the residual impressions that could be good and not so good. The mind should not be allowed to wander towards worldly objects and what concerns other people. Both desire and hatred should be avoided. All that one gives to others one gives to oneself. To the extent we remain humble, to that extent we experience peace and goodness. If the mind is calm, one can live anywhere.

15. How long should inquiry be practised?

If one meditates on the Self continuously till the Self is gained, thoughts will be destroyed. And 'Who am I' will not be required.

16. What is the nature of the Self?

What exists in truth is the Self alone. The Self is that where there is absolutely no 'I' thought. That is called 'Silence'. The Self itself is the world, the Self itself is 'I', the Self itself is God, all is Siva, the Self.

17. Is not everything the work of God?

Without desire or resolve or effort the sun rises and in its presence the lotus blooms, water evaporates and people perform various activities. God has no purpose. He is not bound by any action. The world's activities cannot affect him. He is not bound by His acts of creation, maintenance, destruction, withdrawal and salvation to which beings are subjected. As the beings reap the fruit of their action in accordance with His laws, the responsibility is theirs and not God's. They are bound by their actions.

18. Of the devotees, who is the greatest?

One who surrenders completely to God and remains constantly in the Self without any thoughts of doership, is the best devotee. Throwing all our burdens on God and believing that God bears them, removes all worries and decision making from ourselves. When there are no thoughts, there is no mind. We are able to understand the Self within us.

19. What is non attachment?

As thoughts arise, destroying them utterly without any residue in the very place of their origin is non attachment.

20. Is it not possible for God and the Guru to affect the liberation of the soul?

God and Guru will only show the way to liberation. Each one of us should by his own effort pursue the path shown by God or Guru and gain liberation. We all have an inner knowledge of ourselves and we are the best judge of ourselves. We don't need to rely on others to take us to liberation.

21. Is it necessary for one who longs for liberation to inquire into the nature of categories (tattvas)?

The one who wants to know the Self, doesn't need to know anything more than to dive deep into the Self and find liberation from the world.

22. Is there no difference between waking and dreaming?

Waking is long and dreams are short. Waking happenings appear real when awake and so do dreams when we are asleep. Our mind takes on another body while dreaming. Thoughts, names and forms occur simultaneously both in waking and dreaming states.

23. Is it any use reading books for those who long for liberation?

In order to gain liberation, the mind should be quietened. Hence, there is no need for endless reading. In order to quieten the mind, one has to only inquire within oneself what one's Self is and this can be known only by one's own eye of wisdom. The Self is within the five sheaths and can be understood by discarding the five sheaths. It is futile to look for it in books. There will come a time when one has to discard all that one has learnt.

24. What is happiness?

Happiness is the very nature of the Self; happiness and the Self are the same. In our ignorance, we think that we get happiness from worldly objects. When we get what we like gives us happiness and when what we dislike is removed, we turn inwards and experience pure bliss of the Self. Thus the mind moves constantly and restlessly going out of the Self and returning to it. The mind of the person seeking the truth does not leave Brahman. The mind of the ignorant goes out and feels miserable after a while and returns to Brahman to experience happiness. When the mind experiences thought, it experiences misery and so the world is only a collection of our thoughts.

25. What is wisdom insight (jnana drishti)?

Remaining quiet is what is called wisdom insight. To remain quiet is to resolve the mind in itself

26. What is the relation between desirelessness and wisdom?

They both are the same. Not seeking what is other than the Self is desirelessness or detachment; not leaving the Self is wisdom.

27. What is the difference between inquiry and meditation?

Retaining the mind in the Self is inquiry. Meditation is thinking that one's self is Brahman, Existence-Consciousness-Bliss.

28. What is liberation?

Inquiring into the nature of one's self that is in bondage, and realising one's true nature is liberation. Part V is about Sri Bhagavan's unique connection with animals and the environment.

Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharishi Part V

When all Life is to be Loved - Sri Ramana Maharishi had a unique and special connection with animals and the environment around him.

Sri Bhagavan showed the same consideration to the animals whose destiny had brought into contact with him as to the people. He never referred to an animal in the normal Tamil style as 'it' but always as 'he' or 'she'. While referring to the Ashram dogs, he would say, "Have the lads been given their food?" It was the Ashram practise of feeding the dogs and then the beggars outside and finally the devotees. He would make sure Lakshmi was fed her rice. Lakshmi was the Ashram cow. Maharani of Baroda gifted the Ashram a white peacock. He once tasted a mango to make sure it was ripe enough to be fed to the white peacock. Squirrels used to hop through the window onto his couch and he would keep a tin of peanuts near him. The animals felt his Grace. If a wild animal is cared for by a human, its own kind boycotts it. But if he cared for them, they felt honoured. They could recognise the complete lack of fear and anger in him. He was sitting on the hillside and a snake crawled over his legs and he showed no alarm or movement. When asked how he felt, he laughed and said, "Cool and soft". Once his mother was frightened when a cobra approached her. Sri Bhagavan walked towards it and it uncoiled, feeling no more fear and slid away. Once when he was at Skandashramam with his devotees, a mongoose ran up to him and sat on his lap for a while. Kamala had come to the Ashram as a puppy and she raised several litters there. Sri Bhagavan would often depute to take a newcomer round the Hill. Kamala would guide the devotee on Bhagavan's instructions to every image, tank and shrine around the hill.

Monkeys would come to the window beside Sri Bhagavan's couch and look in through the bars. Monkey mothers would show off their new-borns clinging to them. From 1900 when Bhagavan first went to live on the Hill to 1922 when he came down to the Ashram at its foot, he was very close to the monkeys. He keenly observed their code of behaviour and understood their cries.

The most favoured of all the animal devotees of Sri Bhagavan was the cow Lakshmi. She was brought to the Ashram as a young calf and gifted to Bhagavan. But as there was no accommodation for cows at the Ashram then, someone in the town offered to care for her along with other cows. One day, along with the caretaker, Lakshmi visited the Ashram and after that kept coming daily all by herself. She would go straight up to Bhagavan and he would offer her bananas or other delicacies. She would accompany him to the dining hall at lunch time promptly every day. She bore a number of calves. She was uncommonly devoted to Sri Bhagavan and the Grace and kindness he showed her was quite exceptional. In later years, there were many cows and bulls at the Ashram but none formed such an attachment. On June 18th. 1948, Lakshmi was blessed by Sri Bhagavan when he placed his hand on her head and on her heart as he knew her end was near. Holding his cheek against hers, he caressed her. Her heart was pure and free from all vasanas. She was buried in the Ashram compound with full funeral rites besides the graves of a deer, a crow, and a dog. A square stone was raised on her grave with the epitaph saying she had attained Mukti or liberation. According to Dev Gogoi, a devotee of Bhagavan, other than his mother, Azhagammal, it was the cow Lakshmi to whom Bhagavan granted moksha.

When Sri Bhagavan picked a towel from a rack where a sparrow had built a nest, an egg fell down and developed cracks. He grieved over the incident, mended the cracks using various methods and when a chick emerged from the egg later, he was overjoyed. Once, a mother squirrel had made her home on the tree near Sri Bhagavan's room. A cat caught her and ate her. A new born squirrel fell off the nest and survived the fall. Bhagavan picked up the squirrel in a soft towel and brought it to his room. He was so glad to see it squirming in his palm. He dipped a piece of cotton in milk and brought it towards the baby squirrel. He didn't know where the mouth was as the squirrel was so tiny and looked like a piece of thin, soft, pink string. Amazingly, the baby squirrel found its way to the cotton piece soaked in milk and began to suckle. After a few days of care, it began moving slowly. Sri Bhagavan was thrilled that it wouldn't want to leave his palm. After a few weeks, it became brave enough to venture out. Still, it would come back to visit every day.

Thus Sri Bhagavan could forge a special bond with animals and birds, which added an interesting dimension to his fascinating personality. Ramana's ability to divine water came to light during a bad drought in the 1930s. Bhagavan picked up on a stick and drew a couple of lines on the barren ground near the Old Hall (now the Meditation Hall). He asked the Ashram officials to dig a well there. To this day the well has never dried up. It is a perennial source of water.

Part VI is about his Western devotees who found his spiritual teachings without sentiment and acceptable to reason.

Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharishi Part VI

The Devotees of Bhagavan

The devotees were normal people who were neither scholars nor intellectuals. Sincerity, understanding and humility attracted the Grace of Bhagavan. Naturally, Hindus were the most numerous among the devotees, but there were many from other parts of the world. It was Paul Brunton who spread the knowledge of Bhagavan's teachings through his book, *A Search in Secret India*. It was on the shelves of libraries in Universities in the West and made the teachings of Bhagavan popular all over the world.

As one enters the premises of Ramanashramam, Thiruvannamalai, one is struck by the number of foreigners present there. They come from England, the U.S., Russia, France, Germany, Japan, South Korea, Holland, Poland, Czechoslovakia and many other countries. Most of them are serious devotees of Sri Ramana Maharishi, who have immersed themselves in his teachings and have engaged themselves in Self-enquiry. They can be seen meditating in front of the samadhis of Ramana and his mother, in the Meditation Hall, the Virupaksha cave and the Skandashramam. Sri Bhagavan attained mahanirvana on April 14th. 1950 and still continues to attract thousands of seekers from the west .

Among the permanent residents in or around the Ashram in later years were Major Chadwick, S.S.Cohen from Iraq, Dr. Hafiz Syed a retired professor of Persian descent, Mrs. Taleyarkhan, a Parsi lady and many others came for longer or shorter periods from America, France, Germany, Holland, Czechoslovakia, Poland and from many other countries.

In 1911, Frank Humphreys, a policeman stationed in India, became the first westerner to discover Sri Ramana. He wrote articles about him which were first published in the *International Psychic Gazette* in 1913. The first English lady to visit Sri Ramana was Maud A. Piggot in 1932. Paramahansa Yogananda accompanied by his secretaries visited in 1935. Maurice Frydman, a Polish-Jewish devotee who was a research engineer working in Bangalore was a frequent visitor from 1935. English poet Lewis Thompson stayed for seven years from 1935. Oliver Lacombe, French Ambassador stationed at Calcutta was a French Doctor of Philosophy visited in May 1936. Somerset Maugh came in January 1938 for a few hours. His 1944 novel *The Razor's Edge* models its spiritual Guru after Sri Ramana. After travelling the world, Guy Hague arrived in Ramanashramam in 1938 and stayed for 2 ½ yrs. Renowned American painter Eliot C. Clark visited in 1938. Ella Maillart was a Swiss travel writer and photographer who remained in India from 1939 to 1944 and resided mostly in Thiruvannamalai. Lucia Osborne, a Polish-Jewish devotee, arrived with her children Catherine, Frania and Adam in 1941/42. Her husband Arthur arrived in 1945 as he had been taken POW at Bangkok by the Japanese. American Thelma Rappold spent three years from 1947 with Ramana Maharishi. Robert Adams also stayed for three years. Swedish Royal family member Peer Wertin (Swami Ramanagiri) was there in 1949 and 1950. There were so many more Westerners who visited, stayed for a short period or a few years with Bhagavan. A few of them also meditated in the caves of Arunachala.

Major A.W. Chadwick O.B.E. (1890 - 1962) was in the British army serving in South America. After getting captivated by Brunton's *A Search in Secret India* he resigned his post, came to Sri Ramanashramam in November 1935, and remained there. He became Sadhu Arunachala and lies buried in the Ashram campus. He translated into English all the original works of Sri Ramana which was approved by Maharishi himself. He wrote, *A Sadhu's Reminiscences of Ramana Maharishi* (1961). His first meeting with Bhagavan brought tremendous peace and he experienced the Grace of Bhagavan. Bhagavan was very interested to hear about Brunton who he had met in London. In spite of being new to India and its customs, nothing that happened in the first days of his stay at the Ashram seemed strange to him at all. He was one of the few who had a relaxed relationship with Bhagavan. He was able to mediate, for so many found at times the ways of the Ashram difficult. He helped to revive the Veda Patashala run by the Ashram after it was closed down. When asked why westerners were drawn

to Sri Bhagavan's teachings, Chadwick's reply was, "Sri Bhagavan's teachings are appreciated in the West as his teachings are purely rational and lack sentiments which are very appealing. He never preached or lay down the law. Instead he always concentrated on turning the seeker back to himself and pointing out to him that it was entirely up to him, since the guru could only indicate the way and guide him. For, no one can give Self-realization to another".

Paul Brunton is the pen name of Raphael Hurst (Oct.1898 to July 1981) and he was born in London and served in the First World War. In 1930, he embarked on a voyage to India, which brought him into contact with many Yogis and spiritual thinkers as he travelled from the North to the South of India. He popularized Neo-Hindu spiritualism in western society. His best-selling book *A Search into Secret India* (1934) has been translated into over 20 languages. When he visited the Paramacharya of Kanchi at Kancheepuram, the Paramacharya insisted he visit Ramana Maharishi at Thiruvannamalai. Hurst asked several questions, including the way to God-realization. Maharishi said, "Vichara, asking yourself 'Who am I'? Enquiry into the nature of your Self". One day sitting with Ramana Maharishi Brunton had an experience of genuine enlightenment which changed him forever. Brunton has been credited with introducing Ramana Maharishi to the West through his books *A Search in Secret India* and *The Secret Path*.

S.S.Cohen was an Iraqi Jew who came to India as a boy and after several spiritual disappointments, landed in Sri Ramanashramam in 1936. There his search ended. He applied himself earnestly to Maharishi's teachings and quietly slipped into eternity in 1980. He was buried in the Korangu Thottam compound of Ramanashramam. His writings on his experiences with Bhagavan are very crisp and precise. He also translated Maharishi's composition *Ulladu Narpadu* or *Forty Verses on Reality* into English with commentary. He authored, *Guru Ramana*, *Residual Reminiscences of Ramana*, and *Reflections on talks with Sri Ramana Maharishi*. He was a Self-realised Jnani.

Maurice Frydman who lived in India for five decades was also known as Bharatananda. He was a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi and lived in his Ashram where he made the spinning wheel that Gandhi used. He was close to Nehru and was associated with J.Krishnamurti. Towards his end he lamented the fact that he didn't fully appreciate Ramana Maharishi's teachings and presence while he was alive. He was also a long-time friend of Nisargadatta Maharaj who considered him a Jnani. He edited and translated Nisargadatta Maharaj's recorded conversations into the 1973 book *I Am That*.

Writer Arthur Osborne spent a summer holiday at Kashmir with his wife Lucia and children in 1942. Both Arthur and Lucia had read books on Maharishi and met people who had visited Maharishi and the Ashram. Lucia Osborne travelled to Bombay and with great difficulty arrived at Thiruvannamalai. Arthur Osborne was serving in the British Army and was posted at Bangkok. There he was taken as a POW by the Japanese. He joined his family at Thiruvannamalai in 1945.

Arthur's daughter, Catherine was the first to see Ramana Maharishi. A small beautiful child, with golden curly hair, she approached Bhagavan with a tray of fruits. Instead of keeping the tray on the low stool near Bhagavan, she sat down on the stool holding the tray and everyone burst out laughing. It was as if she was offering herself along with the fruits. Two days later, Lucia entered the hall and sat down near Bhagavan. She felt the luminous eyes of Sri Bhagavan on her and she looked into his eyes. She lost all sense of time and the silent initiation lasted for about 15 minutes. Normally, others experienced this for a minute or two. Arthur arrived in Ramanashramam in 1945 and met Sri Bhagavan in the ashram hall. Sri Bhagavan returned from his walk on the hill and sat down on the couch stiffly. Sri Bhagavan was having rheumatism and walked with a slight stoop. Sri Bhagavan spoke to Arthur's son Adam and said, "So your Daddy has come back safely and your prayers are answered". Arthur felt his kindness. Arthur had been tortured in the prison camp and was in a bad mental state. Every morning and evening he sat before Bhagavan under his gaze. Slowly, he could feel the changes in himself. He describes the experience, "Bhagavan sat up facing me and his luminous eyes pierced into me, penetrating intimately with an intensity which I cannot describe. Then arose from within, a quietness, a depth of peace and an indescribable lightness and happiness."

The British Government offered accommodation in Britain with comforts for all released prisoners of war. The Osbornes had no intention to leave Sri Bhagavan and India. They ignored the telegrams which alerted them about the last ship that was to leave for Britain. He made Thiruvannamalai his home and raised his children there. They were the first Western children at Ramanashramam. They built a bungalow there. Osborne authored many books about Ramana Maharishi. He also founded and published the Ashram journal The Mountain Path which still enjoys a global circulation. He died in 1970 as he was weakened by his stay in the enemy camp. Lucia and her children spoke fluent Tamil.

Author David Godman arrived in Thiruvannamalai in 1976 after reading Arthur Osborne's book, The Teachings of Ramana Maharishi in his own words. He was born in 1953 in England and won a place in Oxford University. Though he intended to spend six weeks in India, he has been at Thiruvannamalai continuously. He worked voluntarily at the library at the ashram, edited their magazines, and did research for many books from 1978-93. In 1993, he went to Lucknow and spent four years with Sri H.W.L.Poonja, a well-known devotee of Ramana Maharishi. From 1997, he has been at Thiruvannamalai, researching and writing new books. He married Miri, a philosophy lecturer who teaches at Perth, Australia and spends a lot of time there too. Asked whether people came to Sri Ramana in search of solace in his teachings, Godman said 'solace' was not the right word. The hunger for transcendence, a strong inner desire to find out the truth about what is real and permanent and how to become one with it brought people to Ramanashramam.

F.H.Humphreys had taken up a post in the Police service at Vellore in 1911. He met Sri Bhagavan in November 1911. He was immensely impressed with the terrific silence of Sri Bhagavan. "The most touching sight was the number of tiny children, up to about seven years of age, who climbed the hill all on their own to come and sit near the Maharishi, even though he may not speak a word nor even look at them for days together. They do not play but just sit there quietly, in perfect contentment."

Humphreys was eager to help the world and asked for Sri Bhagavan's advice. Sri Bhagavan said, "Help yourself and you help the world. You are in the world, you are the world. You are not different from the world, nor is the world different from you." Humphreys made several visits. Soon he realised that there was no truth in the general belief that it was possible to help mankind only by outer activity. He had been told that by helping oneself one helps the world, is true spiritually, since spiritual wealth of one does not detract from that of others but increases it. In his very first meeting, he understood the divinity radiating from a motionless Sri Bhagavan. Similarly, everyone according to his capacity was a broadcasting station of invisible influences. So far as anyone is in a state of harmony and free from egoism he is inevitably and involuntarily emitting harmony, whether he is outwardly active or not. If he is egoistic and his nature is turbulent, he is emitting disharmony even though outwardly he may be performing service. Humphreys imbibed the teachings of Sri Bhagavan in the several visits he made, never staying there and receiving Sri Bhagavan's Grace. Police service did not give him any satisfaction and he retired after some years. Being a Catholic and having understood the unanimity of all religions, he saw no need to change but returned to England where he entered a monastery.

Part VII is about Sri Bhagavan's strong connection with Mahan Sri Seshadri Swamigal and Kavya Kanta Ganapathi Muni. It's also about other devotees and freedom fighters who found strength in his presence.

Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharishi Part VII

This part is about the warm and endearing relationship between Sri Bhagavan and Mahan Seshadri Swamigal and Sri Bhagavan and Kavyakanta Ganapathi Muni. This part is also about other devotees and freedom fighters who found strength merely by sitting before Sri Bhagavan in silence.

Sri Bhagavan openly admired Both Seshadri Swamigal and Kavyakanta Ganapathi Muni for their spiritual attainments and their scholarship. Seshadri Swamigal was elder to Sri Bhagavan by nine years. It was he who discovered the 17 yr. old Venkatraman meditating in the dark, damp Patala Lingam shrine in Arunachaleshwara Temple in 1896. He would call him affectionately ' Ramana Swamy' and

quickly understood that this teenage ascetic was a realised soul. Ganapati Sastry was just a year older to Sri Bhagavan and bestowed the title of 'Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharishi'.

Seshadri Swamy was born at Vazhur, near Thiruvannamalai on January 2nd 1870. He lost his parents at a young age and was brought up by his uncle and aunt at Kanchipuram. He learnt the Vedas, Sanskrit grammar and could speak fluently in Sanskrit. He was a good singer and had knowledge about the theory of music. He was devoted to Goddess Kamakshi of Kanchipuram. He too felt the calling of Arunachala and at the age of twenty, reached Thiruvannamalai and made it his home for the next 40 yrs. Though his outer conduct was childlike and unpredictable, many people were aware of his spiritual attainments and called him, 'Mahan'. He kept in touch with Sri Bhagavan for a few months when he stayed at Pavazhakunnru. When the young swamy stayed in Virupaksha Cave from 1899 to 1916, Seshadri Swamy would send people to him for spiritual instructions. He could read the thoughts of people and often told them that it didn't matter whether they came to him or went to Ramana. Still, he was unable to read what went on in the young swamy's mind. One day after observing the young swamy in deep silence, asked, "What is THIS thinking?" "Paying Obeisance to Arunachala will result in salvation." Sri Bhagavan broke his silence and asked "Who is the one paying Obeisance? To whom is the Obeisance being paid?" He encouraged people to earn spiritual attainments rather than earn money. He said, "After one rejects all objects one after another as transient and unreal, that which remains is the Self."

Seshadri Swamy attained mahasamadhi on January 4th.1929 when he was 59 years old. All of Tiruvannamalai went into mourning. Adjacent to Ramanashramam is the mahan's samadhi, which is now a temple. He is revered in Thiruvannamalai as a divine spiritually realised person. On his death anniversary, every year, his picture is taken in a procession through the streets.

Kavyakanta Ganapati Sastry was an outstanding devotee of Sri Bhagavan and was given the honorific title of 'Kavyakanta'(one who has poetry in his throat). He was born in 1878. By the age of ten he had written Sanskrit and prepared an astrological almanac besides mastering several Kavyas (Sanskrit works) and grammars. By the time he was fourteen, he had mastered the Pancha Kavyas and read the Ramayana, Mahabharata and some of the Puranas. He could already speak and write fluent Sanskrit. Like Sri Bhagavan, he had a phenomenal memory. Again Like Sri Bhagavan, he had the ability of ashtavadhana, that is giving his attention to a number of different things at the same time.

When Ganapati Muni was 22 years old, he was at Benares to do tapas. The scholars there realised his talent in composing poems in Sanskrit extempore. So, they sent him to take part in a panditha sabha in Navadweepa Bengal. He proved his multifaceted talent there. He multiplied a six digit number by a six digit number correctly on the request of a mathematician. A musician hummed a rare raga and asked him to identify it and he did so correctly. A poet recited the last two lines of a Sanskrit verse and asked him to compose the first two in the same metre. There were questions on astronomy. What dazzled the scholars was Ganapati Muni's ability to compose Sanskrit poems anytime anybody wanted him to. They felt that he was next only to Kalidasa in this aspect. They conferred on him the title 'Kavyakanta', Kavya meaning an epic poem and kanta meaning throat from where he could produce poems at will.

Ganapati Muni reached Thiruvannamalai in 1903 after doing tapas in many places. Having heard about Brahmana Swamy's spiritual instructions on Who Am I?, Self-realisation and Self-enquiry, Ganapati Muni trekked up Arunachala Hill to Virupaksha Cave to get answers to many questions racing in his mind. He was disappointed to see Ramana sitting in silence and came back later to see the silent unmoving Ramana. Then, in 1907, he again returned to Virupaksha Cave tormented by doubts. He couldn't understand why he was unable to see God in spite of his tapas, chanting of mantras, mastery of the epics and puranas and many other spiritual pursuits. He felt that he had come to a dead end. This time Brahmana Swamy looked at the tormented Ganapati Muni when he fell at his feet and cried. Ganapati Muni said, "All that has to be read, I have read. Even the Vedanta Sastra I have fully understood. I have performed japa to my heart's content. Still I have not understood what tapas is. Enlighten me on the true nature of tapas." Swamy turned his gaze upon him and broke his eleven years of silence and gave his first oral upadesa to Ganapati Muni. He said, "If one watches from where this

notion of 'I' springs, the mind is absorbed into that. That is tapas. When a mantra is repeated, if attention is directed to the source where the mantra sound is produced, the mind is absorbed into that. That is tapas.

It was not so much the words spoken that filled him with joy as the Grace radiating from the Swami. He accepted Brahmana Swamy as his guru. He asked Palaniswami, the faithful attendant of the Swamy, for the Swamy's name. When Palaniswami replied, 'Venkatraman', Ganapati Muni shortened it to 'Ramana' and bestowed the title, "Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharishi." From that day onwards the world has addressed him simply as Bhagavan or Maharishi.

Ganapati Muni refers to Sri Bhagavan as a manifestation of Lord Subramanya. The other devotees did not agree. Bhagavan himself said, "What is an Avatar? An Avatar is only a manifestation of one aspect of God, whereas a Jnani is God Himself." Ganapati Muni slowly experienced a remarkable outflow of his Grace. Both Sri Bhagavan and Ganapati Muni enjoyed walking together on the Arunachala Hill and talking about spiritual matters. In 1917, Muni recorded the questions and answers under the title Ramana Gita in 18 chapters, in 300 verses. Characteristically, one of the questions that Muni asked was whether someone who attained Jnana (Self-realization), as it were, by the way while seeking some specific powers would find his original desires fulfilled. Swiftly and subtly, Sri Bhagavan replied, "If the Yogi, though starting up on Yoga for the fulfilment of his desires, gained Knowledge in the meantime he would not be unduly elated even though his desires were likewise fulfilled."

Ganapati Muni was a Gandhian, deeply interested in the freedom struggle and obsessed with building a resurgent Hindu religion. About 1934 Muni settled down in the village of Nimpura near Kharagpur with a group of followers and from then until death some two years later devoted himself solely to tapas (asceticism). He attained mahasamadhi on July 25th, 1936 in his ashram in Kaharagpur, Bengal. Sri Bhagavan mourned Muni's death. Later, someone asked him whether Muni would have attained Realization during this life, and Bhagavan replied, "How could he? His sankalpas (inherent tendencies) were too strong."

Not all understood the silent upadesa of Sri Bhagavan. It took a very, very long time for Natesa Mudaliar to understand the path to obtaining Sri Bhagavan's Grace. He was an elementary school teacher and after reading about Swami Vivekananda, became inspired to renounce the world and find a Guru. It was in 1918 that he first met Sri Bhagavan at Skandashramam and sought his guidance. Those with open hearts felt Sri Bhagavan's grace and received comfort as from a mother. Others who looked for outward signs would find none. Mudaliar made several visits over many years and still failed to receive the Upadesa he desired. He always returned disappointed. Finally, he couldn't endure the disappointment any longer and said, "I wish to learn and experience what your Grace is as people differ in their accounts of it." Sri Bhagavan replied, "I am always giving my Grace. If you cannot apprehend it what am I to do?" He still couldn't understand the silent upadesa or initiation of Sri Bhagavan.

He was one of those who thought giving up one's home life and wandering about and seeking initiation from a Guru was the only way to attain Self-realisation. Sri Bhagavan discouraged this, "Just as you avoid the cares of home life when you are here, go home and try to be equally unconcerned and unaffected there." Mudaliar still lacked the full reliance and conviction of a disciple towards his Guru. The difficulties in his path grew greater over the years. After a few years, he went back to his teaching profession and his family. He suddenly felt the Grace of Sri Bhagavan and his devotion deepened. The verbal instructions that he had longed for he received in plenty and he composed Tamil poems in praise of Sri Bhagavan. The doctrine of the Guru and his Grace is beautifully set forth in the book he wrote called Upadesha Manjari.

There was a blessed friendship between Kerala's noted social reformer Narayana Guru, which began with their meeting in 1917 at Skandashramam on Arunachala Hill. They developed a special relationship built on respect for each other. Narayana Guru composed a poem called Nivritti Panchakam in five stanzas in Sanskrit, praising the exalted status of Ramana's sahaja samadhi. Narayana Guru's Ashram at Varkala had several branches in Tamil Nadu. When Narayana Guru visited his ashram at

Kanchipuram, his disciple there suggested he should meet Ramana at Thiruvannamalai. Narayana Guru came to Thiruvannamalai and stayed at Sadhukkal Chatram where he met Palaniswami, the faithful attendant of Ramana. Palaniswami was from Kerala and invited him to meet Ramana who was at Skandashramam. Narayana Guru observed all the activities taking place around Sri Bhagavan. They had lunch together. As an offering, Narayana Guru composed Nivritti Panchakam and gave the paper to Sri Bhagavan. He took leave of Sri Bhagavan. On the way down the hill, he told his disciples, "The Maharishi is a raja sarpam, a king cobra." He understood that a single glance of Maharishi's is enough to liberate anyone. He told his disciples to spread Ramana's teachings. After returning to Kerala, he wrote Municharya Panchakam and sent the composition to Sri Bhagavan.

Yogi Ramsurat Kumar was an unusual yogi and a devotee of Ramana. He acknowledges three well known saints in his evolution to enlightenment. These individuals were Sri Aurobindo, the founder of Integral Yoga, Ramana Maharishi, one of the 'spiritual supermen' of his time and Swami Ramdas, Yogi's eventual Guru. He came to Thiruvannamalai in 1949. Everything about Sri Yogi Ramsurat Kumar attracted attention. He had a palm leaf fan, a sceptre-like staff, and a piece of rope in one hand, and a coconut shell bowl in the other. He wore a dhoti in the traditional style, a flowing jubba and a woollen shawl around his shoulders. His clothes were dirty and a turban sat on his head. When he raised both his hands high in blessing, his devotees were ecstatic. He performed miracles and cured the illnesses of his devotees. He visited Pondicherry and then arrived at Thiruvannamalai. The first welcoming sight of the holy hill filled him with happiness. He went to Ramanashramam and sat in front of Sri Bhagavan. Sri Bhagavan was seated on a platform and the whole atmosphere was filled with silence and peace. A direct look from Sri Bhagavan plunged him into a deep meditation. When both Sri Aurobindo and Sri Ramana Maharishi attained siddhi in 1950, Yogi went to Swami Ramdas of Kanhangad of Kerala for initiation. He returned to Thiruvannamalai on the request of Swamy Ramdas. In the 1990s he set up an ashram not far from Ramanashramam. He was a Ram Bhakt and would chant, 'Om Sri Ram Jai Ram Jai Jai Ram.' Yogi Ramsurat Kumar attained siddhi in 2001.

Industrialist V.Dwarakanath Reddy, who founded the Nutrine Confectionery Company with his father, is completely devoted to Sri Bhagavan and his teachings. He has been living in Thiruvannamalai for more than 30 yrs. He is 95 years old and has a clear and sharp memory. The Ramanarpanam Trust that he founded has helped the poorest of the poor with new homes, education for the children and livelihood for the needy. He began reading a lot of Ramana's teachings and stayed with them. He thought about them even while working in his factory. He faced tragedies in his personal life and found some truth and solace in Chinmayananda's discourses in Madras. His faith in God strengthened and he became a genuine seeker and a sincere devotee. Swami Chinmayananda recognised Dwarakanath's ability and appointed him as one of six all India trustees of his organisation. He said that he was always aware of Sri Bhagavan's greatness and his divinity. "I have no doubt that Sri Ramana was a realised soul. Ramana's Self-realisation was extraordinary." He has written several books including Diving Deep into Ramana Maharishi's Teachings, Death was Never Born, Life Never Died, Can God improve my Balance Sheet, The Physics of Karma etc.

B.V.Narasimha Swamiji, (1874-1956) penned the first biography of Sri Ramana Maharishi, reading which came from Paul Brunton and others. He was a very successful lawyer in Salem, Tamil Nadu. His peers included C.Rajagopalachari. His integrity and capability earned him a great reputation and he was elected as Member of Legislative council, Salem. He was an activist in the Home Rule Movement started by Annie Beasant. Then a personal tragedy jolted him to walk away from the material world and in 1928 he came to Thiruvannamalai and sought Sri Ramana Maharishi. He lived in a cave of sorts in a rock and did his sadhana. He lived a sadhu's life and helped other sadhus to dwell here, in the presence of Bhagavan. As part of his Vedanta learning he asked Sri Bhagavan to teach him Kaivalya Navaneeta. Bhagavan was impressed with his intelligence and grasp. He wrote the first biography of Sri Bhagavan, 'Self Realization' which was published in 1931. He took great pains to collect data from several sources and several places. This is perhaps the most widely read book on the great Sage. He stayed at Arunachala from 1928 to 1931. Then he left for Pandharpur and Shirdi .

While it is well known that Mahatma Gandhi never met Sri Ramana and there was no meeting between Sri Ramana and the Paramacharya of Kanchipuram, Sri Chandrasekhara Saraswati, it looks like the

poet Subramania Bharathi met Sri Ramana. In 1946, Bharathi sat in silence before Sri Ramana for nearly an hour and then left. Sri Bhagavan identified him from photographs shown to him. When asked if Holiness Kanchi Shankaracharya and Bhagavan ever met, Sri Bhagavan replied, "When were we separate that we should now meet? We were always together." Freedom fighter and the first President of India, Rajendra Prasad stayed quiet while industrialist and freedom fighter Jamnalal Bajaj, who came with him, did all the talking. Another freedom fighter S.Satyamurti spent time at the ashram without speaking at all.

There are a number of outstanding devotees of Sri Ramana Maharishi who never recorded their own stories. Ramanatha Brahmachari, Mastan, Echammal, Mudaliar Patti and Natesa Iyer, Krishna Bhikshu, Lakshmana Sarma, Ammamalai Swami, Sampuramma, Shantammal, Subbalakshmi Ammal and many others who exemplify the highest quality of devotion to their Guru. Bhagavan's power, grace and love transformed the people who were drawn to him.

The next part (VIII) is about the holy Arunachala Hill and Giripradakshina.

Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharishi Part VIII

This part is about the sacred hill Arunachala and Girivalam or Giripradakshina, prayer to the sacred hill.

The landscape is rugged with huge boulders scattered here and there. Small hills eroded into gaunt shapes. Vivid green paddy fields near small ponds and wells. Huge shady trees lining the dusty roads. Rising up from this rough beauty is the hill Arunachala. Though only 2,682 ft. high, it dominates the countryside. From the south side of the Ashram, it looks very simple. It is a symmetrical hill with two almost equal foothills, one on either side. Most mornings it wears a crown of white clouds. But, as one walks the 14 km. path around it, going from south to west, with one's right side to the hill, each aspect has its character and its symbol.

Sri Bhagavan had unalloyed attachment to the Arunachala Hill. The word 'Arunachala' means Red Mountain or fireball of a mountain which does not move. Geologically, the hill was a result of a violent volcanic eruption. Geologists estimate it to be 3.4 billion years old. It has five peaks, the tallest being 2,682 ft. high. It has many spurs. When it rains heavily for a few days, mini waterfalls are formed on the spurs and till three decades ago, people would climb up and bathe happily in the cascades. Sri Bhagavan would roam the hills every day when he began staying at the Virupaksha cave. He would set out for the summit any time he wanted to by any route or no route. He would insist that it formed the spiritual axis of the earth. Even after he started following a set routine at the Ashram after 1922, he would go for a walk on the hill at least three times a day. If emphasizing the importance of Self-enquiry was his first nature, his second nature was going around the hill and encouraging others to do so. He said, "This is Arunachala, the ocean of grace which confers the highest state of liberation at the mere thought of it." His devotees gifted him expensive articles but he would never touch them. But, he was very fond of the binoculars gifted to him and he would scan the hill often from the Ashram.

Sacred tanks mark the eight directions of space and mantapams (simple stone walls) stand at various significant points. Most prominent is the Dakshinamurti Temple at the southern point, for Dakshinamurti is Shiva teaching in silence, and that is Arunachala. In the eight stanza on Sri Arunachala (Arunachala Ashtakam), verse 2, by Sri Bhagavan, he says, "Who is the seer? When I sought within I watched the disappearance of the seer and what survived it. No thought of 'I saw' arose, so how could the thought 'I didn't see' arise? Who has the power to convey this in words when even Thou could do so in ancient days by silence only (appearing as Dakshinamurti)? Only to convey in silence Thy State Thou standest as a Hill shining from heaven to earth."

Sri Bhagavan always encouraged pradakshina (circuit) of the hill. He would ask even the old and the infirm to go slowly. The walk around the hill was not to exhibit one's ability to walk the 14 kms. in the shortest time but to exhibit one's devotion in utter humility. He would say that the pradakshina was to

be made like 'a pregnant queen in her ninth month'. The auspicious times are full moon days and on Shiva Ratri and on Kartigai Deepam day. On the 14km. circuit, there are several temples, shrines, ashrams, mantapas and sacred tanks. Starting from the Arunachaleshwara Temple, they include the Agni Teertham, Seshadri Swamigal Ashram, the Dakshinamurti Temple, Shri Ramanashramam, Draupadi Temple, Simha Teertham, Unnamulai Amman mantapa, Gautama ashram, Pachaiyamman Temple, Ezhuthu mantapa and so on. Pilgrims visit these temples and take rest near the mantapas. There are eight small shrines of lingams located in the 14 km. circumference of the hill each associated with the 12 moon signs. These are collectively termed as Ashta Lingams and are considered as one of the rituals of worship during the giripradakshina. They are Indra, Agni, Yama, Niruthi, Varuna, Vayu, Kubera and Eesaniya Lingams.

Arunachala is one of the oldest and most sacred of all India's places. Sri Bhagavan declared that it is the heart of the earth, the spiritual centre of the world. Sri Shankara spoke about it as Mount Meru. The Skanda Purana declares, "Of all, Arunachala is the most sacred. It is the heart of the world. Know it to be the secret and sacred Heart-centre of Shiva." It is said, and confirmed by Sri Bhagavan, that to this day Siddhas (Sages with supernatural powers) dwell in its caves, whether with physical bodies or not, and some are said to have seen them as lights moving about the hills. Giripradakshina manifests a double ordination of space. On the one hand it follows a course provided by a centre which is the vertical axis of the Arunachala Hill. On the other hand it is oriented by the relation to the cardinal points by the distribution (on its perimeter) of shrines consecrated to the Lingams of the eight directions.

Some people do the Giripradakshina praying for the good health of a family member, for having a child, for getting employment, for passing an examination or just because they are at Thiruvannamalai and have to circumambulate the sacred Arunachala Hill. The entire circuit, visiting the temples on the way, having a glass of steaming coffee while sitting down to rest briefly and admiring the view of the Arunachala hill with its spurs while on the move, takes about five to six hours. I have done the Giripradakshina several times in the last ten years. I like to start at 4 a.m. from the Ramanashramam gates. On the way, I visit all the Ashta Lingams and the temples. I stop briefly for hot coffee and later for lemon-soda. I enjoy the cool early morning breeze as I walk along with so many unknown pilgrims. The Arunachala Hill is crowned with white clouds till 6 a.m. Later, as the sun rises, the peaks reflect an orange glow and it's breath-taking. Birds sing sweetly from the trees. The rich, green paddy fields glisten with dew in the early morning sun. Occasionally, I see beautiful peacocks and peahens on the raised banks of the paddy fields looking for food. Each side of the hill resembles some significant aspect of the divine form. Chanting Lord Shiva's name and walking slowly, I enjoy the divinity emanating from the sacred hill and savour every moment of my experience. After the completion of my pradakshina, my legs are tired but my mind is so full of divine energy that when I sit down inside the prayer hall of Ramanashramam, tears just flow down in gratitude and my body vibrates with the divine energy that I have absorbed. I too have become attached to the sacred Arunachala Hill.

Sri Ramana loved the hill so much that he drew two beautiful ink sketches of the mountain, portraying its peaks and spurs, the Arunachaleshwara Temple with its gopuras and vimanas, the houses around the temple, the coconut trees and the paddy fields at the foot of the hill. The sketches reveal another dimension of his personality- that he was a good landscape painter too.

Part IX is about Sri Bhagavan's written compositions.

Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharishi Part IX

The Written Works of Sri Bhagavan

The entire writings of Sri Bhagavan were very small in bulk and most of them were written to meet the specific needs of devotees. Sri Bhagavan says that "Composing poems and songs is only activity of the mind and the more success you have in composing verses the less peace you have. What use is it to acquire such accomplishments if you don't acquire peace?". All the poems composed by him were on the request of others in connection with some particular event. Even Ulladu Narpadu (Forty verses on

Reality), of which so many commentaries and translations now exist, was not planned as a book. It consists of verses composed at different times and afterwards arranged as a book by Muruganar and others. Many poets composed songs to Sri Bhagavan in various languages, outstanding among them being Ganapati Sastri in Sanskrit and Muruganar in Tamil.

Although, Sri Bhagavan said that the energy used to compose poems could be turned inwards as sadhana, he listened graciously and with interest when poems were sung before him. Articles and prose written about him always interested him and he had them read out and translated so all could understand. Everyone was struck by the impersonality of his interest and the childlike innocence of it. During the early years at Virupaksha, when he was in silence, he wrote out instructions for Gambhiram Seshayyar and later they were published as a book under the title Self-enquiry. Similarly, his answers to questions put to him by Sivaprakasam Pillai were put together in a book form, Who Am I?

Sri Bhagavan's compositions approach through bhakti or through doctrines. The Five Hymns to Arunachala were written through devotion and love during his stay at the Virupaksha cave. They were written as a devotee already established in the Supreme Knowledge and in the Bliss of Union. Hence, they appeal so powerfully to the heart of a devotee. Aksharamanamalai (Marital Garland of Letters), Arunachala Navamanimalai (Necklace of Nine Gems), Arunachala Ashtakam (Eight stanzas on Arunachala), Arunachala Padikam (Ten stanzas on Arunachala), Arunachala Pancharatnam (Five stanzas on Arunachala). The history of the rarely quoted 'Sixth Hymn to Arunachala' or Arunachala Stuti is that Ganapati Muni inspired Sri Bhagavan by quoting a Sanskrit verse and asked him to compose an equivalent metre in Malayalam. Instantly, Sri Bhagavan composed three verses. These went into oblivion for quite some time. In 1980, they were published and later translated into Tamil in 1982.

Aksharamanamalai was written for the sadhus who would go from the hills into the town to beg for food. They requested Sri Bhagavan to compose a song for them to sing as they went about begging so that the householders would come out to offer food on hearing their song on Lord Shiva. Aksharamanamalai tells in glowing symbolism of the love and union between the human soul and God. This profound and moving poem was written for the aspiring souls of the devotees. This is the most moving and beloved of the Five Hymns, and commonly known by its refrain, 'Arunachala Shiva'. The perfection of Knowledge is combined with the ecstasy of devotion. It's hundred and eight verses begin with the successive letters of the Tamil alphabet. Arunachala Navamanimalai, Arunachala Padikam and Sri Arunachala Ashtakam also express devotion and aspiration. The later poems of Sri Bhagavan are more doctrinal.

There is an old legend that a group of Rishis once lived in the forest together, practising Vedic rituals by which they acquired supernatural powers. By the same means they hoped to attain Liberation. In this they were mistaken, for action can only result in action, rituals can produce powers, but not Liberation which is beyond rituals and powers and all forms of actions. It is not by action but by Renunciation of action that one is liberated. Sri Bhagavan wrote thirty verses in Tamil as instructions for Liberation. Later, Sri Ramana wrote the Sanskrit translation too. Even today, these verses, Upadesha Saram, in Sanskrit are chanted before his shrine, together with the Vedas, treating them as scriptures. In Upadesha Saram, Sri Bhagavan refers to the various paths to Liberation or Mukti, grading them in order of efficiency and excellence, and showing that the best is Self-enquiry.

In Ulladu Narpadu, (Forty Verses on Reality), is condensed universal wisdom of self-investigation expressed clearly and coherently. He clearly says that self-investigation (atma-vichara) is the only means to eradicate ego. It is the essence of his teachings which are based on the Vedanta philosophy and all that is metaphysically true in other philosophies.

Apart from these two groups, (devotional and doctrinal), Sri Bhagavan composed short poems with subtle humour. One is called Applalam Pattu, (Song of the Poppadum). He wrote this for his mother when she asked for his help in making it. It contains instructions for sadhana under the symbolism of making poppadum or appalam.

In 1947, Sri Bhagavan wrote his last poem, Ekatmapanchakam (Five verses on the Self). It was not in response to any request. He wrote it in Telugu and Tamil. There are also translations from Adi Shankara's works. Vivekachudamani and Atma Bodha were translated effortlessly by Sri Bhagavan. Also among the works of Sri Bhagavan is a compilation of forty-two verses from the Bhagavad Gita which, on the request of a devotee, he selected and rearranged to express his teaching. This has been translated into English under the name The Song Celestial.

Sri Bhagavan was the most silent among the gurus and the most non-dual. Bhagavan's silence was the most eloquent. Aristotle was an intellectual phenomenon. But Bhagavan's silence, language, life and teachings addressed the most learned, the least learned, the brightest and the dullest. Seekers needed gurus. A ball of cotton did not catch fire even when it was kept in the blazing sun. When a magnifying lens was placed above the cotton ball and exposed to the sun, it caught fire. Once the guru's rays pass through the lens, your vasanas get burnt. (Vasanas are latent tendencies, closely bound with karma, resulting from a person's actions in his previous life and governing those in this life, unless overcome by tapas or by the blessings of his guru.) When you go inward and find yourself, there are no others. The others are a shadow.

Part X is about Spiritual instructions or Upadesa of Sri Bhagavan.

Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharishi Part X

Upadesa or Spiritual Instructions

Sri Bhagavan was accessible to all alike and all questions were asked in public. Nevertheless, the guidance given to each disciple was intensely direct and adapted to his character. The spiritual instructions depended on the temperament and spiritual maturity of the individual. Sri Bhagavan believed that mass instructions never work. The four devotees, Echammal, the Mother, Sivaprakasam Pillai and Natesa Mudaliar lived different lives and had different problems. They received different instructions and spiritual guidance. Sri Bhagavan was intensely active and yet so concealed was his activity that casual visitors and those who failed to perceive, believed that he gave no Upadesa at all or that he was indifferent to the needs of his seekers.

Sri Bhagavan was as definite about the importance of a Guru as were other Masters. Realization was possible only through the Grace of a Guru. A sadhaka (aspirant) had to receive diksha (initiation) and upadesa (instruction). According to Sri Bhagavan, the Guru is he who has realized Oneness with the Spirit that is the Self of all. He said, "God, Guru and Self are the same." In Upadesa Saram (Spiritual Instructions) he says, "The Guru is one who at all times abides in the profound depth of the Self. He never sees any difference between himself and others and he is completely free from false notions of distinction - that he himself is the Enlightened or the Liberated while others around him are in bondage or the darkness of ignorance. His firmness or self-possession can never be shaken under any circumstances and he is never perturbed."

Submission to this Guru is not submission to any outside oneself but to the Self manifested outwardly in order to help one discover the Self within. "The Master is within; meditation is meant to remove the ignorant idea that he is only outside. If he were a stranger whom you were awaiting he would be bound to disappear also. What would be the use of a transient being like that? But as long as you think that you are separate or you are the body, so long is the outer Master also necessary and he will appear as if with a body. When the wrong identification of oneself with body ceases the Master is found to be none other than the Self." It is important that one who is a Guru in this supreme sense, does not say that he has realized his identity with the Absolute, for there should be no ego left in him to say so. He also does not have any disciples, as he has no relationships on earth other than his oneness with God. One devotee asked Sri Bhagavan whether Lord Arunachala had appeared before him. Sri Bhagavan immediately replied that he told Lord Arunachala, that he wasn't interested in appearances as what appears also disappears.

Some devotees who stayed with Sri Bhagavan for many years wondered whether Sri Bhagavan had given them initiation and whether they could call him their Guru. Sri Bhagavan asked them what brought them to him from so far and why were they with him for so many years? This way he cleared their doubts about being their Guru. From the Bhagavan's point of view there were no disciples. From the disciples point of view, it was entirely up to the disciple whether he wanted to carry a cup to fill with the Grace of the Guru or a big bucket. One must make oneself receptive to Guru's Grace just as one has to turn one's head to look at the sun to see the sunlight. Teachings, lectures, meditation etc. are only secondary to Realization which can happen only through the Guru's Grace. To the question whether one needed a human Guru, Sri Bhagavan said that people pray to God to fulfil their desires and then to God himself. Then God appears in a human or non-human form to guide them. So, first find the Guru outside yourself and then within.

To be a Guru is to give initiation and instruction. There are three modes of initiation, by touch, by look and by silence. Initiation by silence is the mouna diksha of Arunachala, of Dakshinamurti and is the mode of initiation particularly appropriate to the direct path of Self-enquiry which Sri Bhagavan taught. The initiation by look was a very real thing. When Sri Bhagavan turned his luminous gaze on a devotee, the devotee felt a vibration distinctly audible to him only. Then he felt completely absorbed by Bhagavan's Grace and as if Sri Bhagavan had completely taken charge of him. Initiation by silence was equally real. Those who were away from Thiruvannamalai but their hearts were turned to him at all times, felt his Grace in themselves.

Sri Bhagavan prescribed Self-enquiry not only as a technique of meditation but also as a technique of living also. Sri Bhagavan refused to sanction renunciation of worldly life, for the very circumstances which had been obstacles to sadhana were thus converted into instruments of sadhana. Ultimately, sadhana is simply an attack on the ego. No amount of ecstasy or meditation can carry it to success so long as the ego remains covered in hope and fear, ambition and resentment, in any sort of passion or desire. Self-enquiry when applied to an emotional thought has terrific potency and strikes at the very root of the passions. One who has been hurt and feels resentment - who is hurt or resentful? When we visualize possible triumphs, our ego is inflated as powerfully as meditation deflates it. At such moments, it requires strength and alertness to draw the sword of vichara and cut through the entanglement. In activities of life, Sri Bhagavan said that surrender and submission to the Divine Will went side by side with vichara (contemplation). Just as a person puts the luggage on the luggage rack, once he boards the train, so also one must surrender one's burdens to the Supreme Being and relax. The point was to reduce self-interest and destroy the idea of doership.

All activities should be done with no interest in the results. Doing what is right simply because it is right, benefits others apart from the results achieved. To the question, what attitude of mind could make social or political activity a valid sadhana, his answer was he discouraged his devotees from such activities. It was enough that they should perform their own functions in life with purity and selflessness, doing what was right. Even though the present state of the world seems inharmonious, it is part of a greater harmony. By developing Self-knowledge one can know both this harmony and exert a far greater harmonious influence than by attempts to change the course of events.

To sum it up, Paul Brunton's conversation with Sri Bhagavan gives a clear idea of what is our role in the affairs of the world. Sri Bhagavan asks us not to worry about the future at all. If we take care of the present, the future will take care of itself. Regarding the problems of war, chaos and human suffering existing in the world, he says the One who governs the world, will look after it and bear the burden of all disharmony and destruction. Sri Bhagavan says, as you are, so is the world. Without understanding yourself, what is the use of understanding the world? People waste their energies over such questions. First find out the Truth behind yourself (ego), then you will be in a better position to understand the Truth behind the world of which yourself is a part.

The use of Self-enquiry in our daily life is an extension of its traditional use as meditation and an adaptation to the needs of our time. The Sage Vasishta wrote: "This enquiry 'Who Am I?' is the quest of the Self and is said to be the fire that burns up the seed of the poisonous growth of conceptual thought." This had formerly existed as Jnana Marga (Path of knowledge) to be followed away from the

worldly distractions. Suited to the present times is this fusion of Jnana (Knowledge), Karma (Action) and Bhakti (Devotion) resulting in a path of knowledge, action and love of God. Sri Bhagavan says, "The eternal, unbroken, natural state of abiding in the Self is Jnana. To abide in the Self you must love the Self. Since, God is in fact the Self, love of the Self is love of God, and that is Bhakti. Jnana and Bhakti are thus one and the same."

With time, the ever increasing graciousness of Sri Bhagavan was binding the devotees to him more closely and thus preparing their hearts for the vichara through devotion. Not only was the use of the vichara not confined to those who could go to Tiruvannamalai, it was not confined to Hindus. The teachings of Sri Bhagavan is the essence of all religions, proclaiming openly that which was hidden. Advaita is the central postulate of Taoism and Buddhism, the doctrine of the Inner Guru is the doctrine of the 'Christ in you'. The vichara penetrates to the ultimate truth of the Islamic creed or shahada, that there is no god but God - that there is no self but the Self. Sri Bhagavan was beyond the differences between religions. The sadhana he put forth, was not dependent on any religion. Not only Hindus came to him, but also Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, Jews, Parsis and he wanted them to have more faith in their own religion and be better human beings. Devotion to the Guru and the flow of his Grace leads to the deeper reality of every religion, and Self-enquiry to the ultimate Truth behind all religions. It is not a new religion that Sri Bhagavan brought upon the earth, but a new hope, a new path, for those who understand and aspire from every land and religion in this age of spiritual darkness. It was not for his body's lifetime only. To those who feared that the guidance might end with death he replied curtly, "You attach too much importance to the body". Now, as then, he guides whoever approaches him and whoever submits to him he supports. To all who seek he is here.

Part XI is about the Annamalaiyar Temple.

Sri Bhagavan Ramana Maharishi Part XI

The Esoteric Significance of Darshan at the Annamalaiyar Temple at Thiruvannamalai

The Annamalaiyar Temple or Arunachaleshwara Temple in Thiruvannamalai is a significant pilgrimage destination for millions of Shiva devotees each year, including pilgrims to Sri Ramanashramam. Annamalaiyar is the Tamil name for Shiva and his consort Parvati is called Unnamalaiyar Ambal in Tamil. Built over a thousand year period between the 9th and the 19th centuries, it is a part of a circuit of five Shiva sthalas in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh known as the Pancha Bhutas (five elements). Each of these temples is associated with one of the five elements of Indian cosmology. These elements, including earth, water, fire, air and space are seen as the constituent building blocks - along with the three gunas, or modalities of energy - of the phenomenal universe. They also make up, in varying combinations, the subtle and gross bodies of human beings.

Pilgrims visit these sthalas - the earth as Ekambareshwarar Temple at Kanchipuram; the water as Jambukeshwarar Temple at Thiruvanaikaval; the fire at Annamalaiyar Temple; the air at Srikalahasthi Temple at Sri Kalahasthi; and the space at Nataraja temple at Chidambaram, in search of both material and spiritual blessings. The intense bhakti (devotion) expressed in the various pujas and other rites purifies the mind and heart while the darshans at the Lingam shrines balance and purify the five elements active in the pilgrims' physical and subtle bodies. Each of the Pancha Bhuta sthalas lies about 120kms. from the next temple in the circuit. Sri Kalahasthi, Kanchipuram and Chidambaram are located at 79°E longitude. Thiruvanaikaval and Thiruvannamalai are located on a longitudinal line that aligns with Kedarnath in the North and Rameshwaram in the South, two of the 12 Jyotirlingam Temples.

On my visit to Sri Ramanashramam, I regularly visit the Annamalaiyar or Arunachaleshwara temple and have been overwhelmed by its architectural grandeur and profound spiritual atmosphere. What is the spiritual significance of the Agni (fire) Lingam at the Annamalaiyar Temple?

According to various traditions, the Annamalaiyar Temple is a mukta sthala, a sacred precinct where one can gain moksha, or final liberation. A verse in the Skanda Purana states, "I truly abide on earth in the form of an effulgence named Arunachala for (bestowing) the attainment (of Liberation). Know that it is the heart of the world. It is truly Shiva himself. It is his heart abode, a secret holy region." In the Sri Arunachala Mahatmya Nandi declares, "what cannot be acquired without great pains - the true understanding of Vedanta (Self-realisation) - can be attained by anyone who looks at (this sacred hill) from where it is visible or even mentally thinks of it from afar." It has been the testimony of saints and sages, including Sri Bhagavan, that Arunachala is the distillation of Jnana, the fire of Self-knowledge that burns away avidya or ignorance of Reality. Sri Bhagavan also spoke of Arunachala as the spiritual centre of the world. Some traditions claim that Sri Adi Sankara spoke of Arunachala as Mount Meru, the birthplace of the created universe. Geological surveys attest to the fact that this part of Tamil Nadu contains some of the oldest rock formations on the planet. In 1896, on September 1st. Sri Bhagavan (then Venkatraman) entered the Arunachaleshwara Temple and sat inside the 1000 pillared mantapam and sank into a nishtai . The 1000 pillared mantapa is an architectural splendour, built of granite, by the Vijayanagara emperor Krishnadevaraya in the 1510s. The pillars have wonderful sculptures of prancing yalis, warriors on horses, carvings etc. Since the mantapa was open on all sides, cold winds from the nearby Arunachala hill blew through it. As Narasimha Swami says so poignantly in his book, Self-Realisation : "He sat there during his period of Samadhi, and its cold slabs were his bed, without so much as a cloth, much less a mat, a rug, or shawl to spread on them; his arm was his pillow; his palm was his plate; and any rag found by the wayside was his dress."

The Annamalaiyar Temple represents the element fire, and the tejo (fire) lingam in its sanctum sanctorum is a microcosmic replica of the Mahalingam behind it, the fire mountain, Arunachala. The temple's lingam like the mountain itself is swayambhu (or Self-born), meaning that it manifested without human agency. Tradition holds that the Tejolingam is a concentrated form of Arunachala situated within a sacred architecture designed to amplify the Mahalingam's all-consuming fire of jnana for serious sadhakas.

Temples in India are always connected to stories in the Puranas that explain why a particular place was chosen for a sacred enclosure. These sacred histories help us to understand the significance of the temples for the devotees. The Annamalaiyar Temple is located at the eastern base of Arunachala. In the distant past Brahma, the creator God and Vishnu, the preserver God, contended for supremacy. Their contest threatened the cosmic order. Out of compassion for all living beings, Shiva the God of destruction and regeneration, appeared as a pillar of fire before the two contending Gods.

Out of the blazing light Shiva's voice challenged Brahma and Vishnu to find the pillar's upper and lower limits. Whoever did so would be acknowledged as the supreme God. Vishnu took the form of a boar and began tunnelling into the ground to find the pillar's lower limit. Brahma took the shape of a swan and soared high into the heavens looking for the pillar's upper limit. After a thousand years, neither could find the limits. Humbled by his failure, Vishnu acknowledged Shiva as the Supreme God. Brahma lied and claimed he had seen the summit of the pillar. His lie was exposed and with humility he acknowledged Shiva as the Supreme God. Vishnu and Brahma then asked Shiva to remain visible as a tejo lingam (fire) in the place where he had appeared as the pillar of light. With this tangible sign, they and other devotees could worship him, overcome their negative tendencies, and attain final liberation from the cycle of rebirth. Shiva agreed to this request and remained visible as a pillar of fire, the Lingodbhava, is found in many carvings and statues throughout the Annamalaiyar Temple, emphasizing its significance for understanding the temple's deeper spiritual meaning.

In Advaitic teaching, the human jiva or individual self is comprised of five koshas, or sheaths, each made of progressively more refined grades of subtle matter. The sheaths are both vehicles of manifestation and veils that cover the Self (Atman), the jiva's true nature. As described in the Taittiriya Upanishad, they are:

1. The Annamaya kosha, or physical body composed of the food we eat - related to the earth element.

2. The Pranamaya kosha, or subtle energy body, which organises and directs the prana (life energy) to the mind and biological functions like breathing, digestion, and blood circulation - related to the water element
3. The Manomaya kosha, or mental body, which processes input from the five senses and governs our habitual responses, including desires, emotions, passions, ambitions, attachments and activities relative to this sensory input - related to the fire element.
4. The Vijnanamaya kosha or sheath of intellect, which empowers us to judge, discern, discriminate, and choose the best course of action based ideally on spiritual understanding and moral reasoning - related to the air element.
5. The Anandamaya kosha, or bliss sheath, which reflects the essential nature of the Self, which is pure enjoyment and beatitude - related to the akash or space element.

Temple complexes like Annamalaiyar reflect this understanding of the archetypal divine human. The temple is subdivided into five prakarams (courtyards), each embodying one of the five koshas. The progressive movement from the (outer) fifth courtyard to the (inner) first courtyard, where the Fire lingam resides, reflects attention turned gradually inward from the physical world to the very core of the jiva's being, the Atman or Divine Self that is one with Brahman.

Most pilgrims enter the temple complex through the great eastern tower, called Rajagopuram, which rises 217ft. and was built in 1516 by Emperor Krishnadevaraya. Its eleven tiers are a masterpiece of elegant sculptures rising like a mountain, a place of residence for divine beings. Entering through this grand tower clearly lets visitors know they are entering holy ground. In the outermost fifth courtyard - related to the annamaya kosha, there are shrines that focus on more ordinary needs. The first shrine, to the left of the entrance to the fifth prakaram, celebrates Murugan, the patron of Tamil literature, language and culture. As the son of Shiva and Parvati and the ideal of strength, courage, and wisdom in a young man, he is prayed to for assistance in finding a proper husband or wife.

Just behind this shrine is the Bangle mantapam (pillared hall), where women come to pray for the safe birth for their children. Every summer, Shiva's consort Ambal is adorned with bangles here on the final day of her ten day Aadi Puram festival (between July 15th and August 15th). The glass bangles offered to Ambal by the priests are then given to women devotees hoping for protection during their pregnancies.

Also in this outermost courtyard are two marriage halls, where couples are married at special times of the year. A final shrine in the fifth courtyard, the Kalyanasundarar temple is used for celebrating the fall rice harvest. During the rites at this time the Shivalingam is adorned with rice and flowers demonstrating the pilgrim's gratitude for the divine gift of fertility. The shrine also houses an inner wall that features naga stones which promise to grant fertility and protection from snakebite to devotees.

As pilgrims enter the fourth courtyard symbolising the pranamaya kosha or subtle energy body (connected to the water element), onto their left is the Brahma Tirtham or bathing tank. The Tirtham is used to conduct special rites during the solar and lunar eclipses and also is a home to an abundant fish population. Pilgrims can buy fish feed and the children enjoy seeing the fishes swirl around the tossed pellets. At the Bhairavar Temple, dedicated to the Lord of Time, and the protector of the temple precincts from evil spirits. Devotees ring a bell in this shrine asking for forgiveness for their errors. Thus they seek purification from the psychological states of guilt and regret. These states are believed to block the flow of prana through the body and could impair the function of breathing, digestion and blood circulation.

The temple goshala or cowshed is in the fourth courtyard. There is also the hundred pillared horse mantapam, where horses were stabled in those bygone days. Sometimes, the temple elephant would be tethered there during the day, blessing the pilgrims as they moved into the third prakaram. These animals are connected with the pranamaya kosha, since it is the sheath that governs the autonomic nervous system. These animals are all considered symbols of strength, vitality and dedicated service.

There are two other shrines in this prakaram. The Vidyadhareshwarar Shrine on the west of the Brahma Tirtham are believed to possess magical powers as they are demigods and benevolent spirits of air. The second is the Naleshwararar Shrine, named after King Nala. With the help of Shiva, the king was freed from the negative influences of Saturn or Shani. Devotees ask for the help of Shani to overcome karmic burdens and health problems.

Next is the Kili Mantapam or parakeet tower leading to the third courtyard. The third courtyard symbolises the manomaya kosha, the mental sheath that takes in sensory stimuli and responds with conditioned desires, aversions, passions, ambitions, attachments, and mental chatter. This conditioned mind very easily gets entangled with worldly objects. Related to the fire element, the manas consciously strives for liberation with the necessary sadhana.

Agni, the god of Fire, is very important in the Vedas. The Rig and Sama Veda Samhitas each begin with the word Agni. Agni symbolises the Supreme Being itself, omnipresent and perceptible in fire. In the Vedic vision, Agni is the messenger between the divine and human worlds, which is why it is present in homas and pujas. The fire of tapas burns away ignorance and attachment and leads to liberation and realization of self-awareness.

In the third courtyard are important shrines which symbolise sadhana and tapas. Walking around in a clockwise direction, the first shrine is the pannir (Rosewater) mantapam, a four pillared hall. During Vasantha Utsavam, the Spring Festival, a form of Shiva and Parvathi known as Lord Somaskanda is carried from his home shrine in a palanquin and installed at the hall. Then a celestial nymph descends from heaven to hover before Somaskanda. Shiva, aroused from a thousand year meditation by Kama, the God of Love is turned into ash as a punishment. Later, Shiva relents and brings him back to life. Romantic passion and attachment disturbs the mind's equilibrium. But with disciplined effort and the grace of Arunachala, the mind can turn inwards and reawaken Self-awareness. Romantic passion can become the passion for the Divine. Bhakti purifies the manomaya kosha and prepares the jiva for sustained sadhana and remaining in the Self.

Walking around the courtyard, one can see two shrines to Dakshinamurti. Shiva appears as a youth sitting under a banyan tree and facing south. Though his eyes are open, he is silently absorbed in Self-awareness with his hand in the chinmudra pose, symbolising the unity of the individual self and the Supreme Self. This shows us that both inner silence and the attention inwards is what is needed to realise the full potential of the Fire Lingam's darshan.

The next important shrine sits directly behind the Fire Lingam, and is dedicated to Yogeshwara, Shiva's form as Lord of Yoga, and the ideal monk, swami and sadhu. Here he is known as Arunagiri Yogeshwara, the master yogi who lives on Arunachala and sits under the banyan tree. The shrine's placement just behind the Fire Lingam shrine is a reminder that tapas, detachment and withdrawal of the mind's attention from the outer world is necessary precursor to union with the Supreme Self.

A unique aspect of the Annamalaiyar Temple is that it has shrines to each of the four other elements (besides fire) in this third courtyard. Each of these shrines has a lingam in its interior and tableaux above the entrance showing the central Puranic story regarding the lingams at the temples of Sri Kalahasthi (air), Kanchipuram (earth), Chidambaram (akash or space) and Thiruvanaikaval (water). As a mukti sthala (place of final liberation), it is appropriate that the four elements are represented here, so that the recalibration and purification of the five elements and koshas can take place during the pilgrims' movements into darshan in the inner sanctum.

Proceeding to the second and third courtyards, the pilgrims have darshan of many Shiva related murtis before they enter the Fire Lingam shrine. What did Sri Bhagavan experience when he arrived in Thiruvannamalai on September 1st 1896? He first went to the Annamalaiyar Temple. As the temple was nearly empty, the young Venkatraman moved easily through the five courtyards and entered Annamalaiyar shrine's interior, where he experienced a complete merging with the Supreme Reality. From that moment, the mind of duality was extinguished in the young sage. This is the power of Annamalaiyar Temple for the pilgrims who go for darshan and meditation at the Fire Lingam sanctum.

The devotees receive vibhuti (ash), symbolising Shiva's renunciation of the world, and the turning of attention toward the Divine Self.

The next two shrines, directly adjacent, deepen and reinforce this silencing of the roaming manomaya kosha, if the pilgrim remains in the introversion of awareness initiated there. The first is the shrine to the silent sage, Dakshinamurti. Here, the inner tranquillity and Self-awareness gets deeper. The devotee is brought to stillness and no words or thoughts are necessary. A small alcove, just behind the Fire Lingam is the Lingodbhava Shrine. The symbolism of the Fire Lingam and Lingodbhava refers to the vertical union of devotees with Nirguna Brahman, Reality beyond qualities. Lingodbhava, with Shiva's image in the midst, is the fully Self-realised jnani, the divine human, fully awake in the light of Self-knowledge.

As the pilgrims exit the second courtyard, they enter the shrine honouring Shiva's consort / wife, whose Tamil name is Unnamalaiyar Ambal. The Ambal murtis, with their birds, flowers, and other natural forms, refers to the devotees' horizontal union with Saguna Brahman, the Supreme Reality in its modes of manifestation. This is poetically expressed in the image of Ardhanareeshwara, Shiva as half male and half female. The final phase of Parvathi's tapas is coming to Arunachala, defeating a demon army that was terrorising sadhus and pilgrims, and walking around the holy mountain. Shiva is so pleased with her penance that he appears and grants her request to be eternally unified with his cosmic body. The main darshan for the Ardhanareeshwara murti occurs at the moment the flame is lit at the top of the mountain at the climax of the Deepam festival.

Between mid-November and mid-December, the Kartigai Deepam festival is held during the full moon. As the full moon rises, Ambal is brought out to the sixteen-pillared Kaatchi mantapam, which faces the entrance to the second courtyard. From there she can witness the annual commemoration of Shiva's fiery appearance at the fire mountain, Arunachala. The symbolism is now complete. For those who are mature, the mind can merge with the great stillness that is the Self, the dualities of the phenomenal world are both celebrated and transcended, and the mukti sthalam of Annamalaiyar has fulfilled its purpose.

Part XII is about Life with Sri Bhagavan and ashram activities in his later years. This part ends with Sri Bhagavan's Samadhi.

Sri Bhagavan Ramana Maharishi Part XII

Life With Sri Bhagavan

In 1947, it was more than fifty years since Sri Bhagavan arrived at Thiruvannamalai. Previously, Sri Bhagavan was accessible at all hours to his devotees. But, with age and failing health, certain restrictions had to be imposed. He slept on the couch, behind closed doors and gave darshan during the day from the same place. At five o'clock the doors were opened and the early morning devotees would come in and prostrate themselves before him, before sitting down on the floor near him. Although humanly he refused all privileges, he recognised that prostration was honouring the outwardly manifested Guru and this was helpful for spiritual progress (sadhana). He once said, "Men prostrate themselves before me but I know who is submitted in his heart." A small group of Brahmins, Ashram residents, sat near the head of the couch and chanted the Vedas. Sometimes, during cold weather, there would be a brazier of burning charcoal beside his couch on which he would warm his frail hands. All sat quietly with their eyes closed in meditation.

The chanting would end before six a.m. Everyone would get up and Sri Bhagavan would raise himself with an effort from the couch, walk out slowly holding the staff given to him by his attendant. Two attendants would follow him, stocky, short and dark, wearing white dhotis down to the ankles. Sri Bhagavan, tall, slim and golden-hued wearing only a loincloth would look up at an approaching devotee or smile upon a passing child. The radiance of his smile would create a lilt in the heart of even a hardened businessman. Simple people didn't understand his philosophy but felt safe as a child in its mother's arms, when he smiled at them.

Breakfast was at seven. By eight, Sri Bhagavan returned after having breakfast with his devotees and having a small walk in the Ashram grounds. By nine am the hall was full of devotees. Some were sitting with their eyes closed. Others sat relaxed and feasted their eyes on Sri Bhagavan. One visitor sang a song he had composed. Another offered fruits at Sri Bhagavan's feet. An attendant gave back a part of it as the grace or prasadam of Sri Bhagavan. The fruits were distributed among the children present in the hall, to the monkeys who peeped in through the window, to the peacocks, or to the cow Lakshmi if she came by. Sri Bhagavan never took anything for himself.

Sri Bhagavan looked tenderly and with sympathy at his devotees and at humanity. Yet, despite the tenderness, his face had a sternness of one who has conquered and never compromised. This aspect of hardness was covered by a soft growth of white hair. His face was like the face of water, always changing, yet always the same. Very swiftly, Sri Bhagavan's expressions would change from gentleness to rock-like elegance and from laughter to compassion. Everyone was comforted from these varying expressions, as it was the face of all mankind. Such reality was in his face that it remained in our memory forever. From his photograph, love, wisdom, deep understanding and a childlike innocence radiated and became a starting point for meditation, better than any words.

Some of the devotees, sitting near him, shared news about their families, friends, about absent devotees and asked doctrinal questions. It was like a family getting together. If someone had a private matter to discuss, he would go up to the couch and hand Sri Bhagavan a paper on which his problem had been written down. He may or may not want an answer. It was enough that he had informed Sri Bhagavan and he had faith that all would be well. A mother brought a child and he smiled at the child more beautifully than a mother. The child held a doll and made it prostrate before Sri Bhagavan and he took it and blessed it. A young monkey slipped in and grabbed a banana and ran out, chased by the attendant. Sri Bhagavan would whisper urgently, "Hurry! Hurry! He'll be back soon." A sadhu with matted locks and a sannyasin's garb stood near the couch with his hands upraised, in reverence. Near him, a prosperous businessman in a European suit, prostrated with some difficulty. A group of pandits sitting near the couch, translating a Sanskrit work, clarified their doubts from him.

One could see the skill and subtlety used by Sri Bhagavan in his guidance, which could not be seen most of the time. All were open books to him. His penetrating glance would evaluate the spiritual progress of a disciple. He would rest his eyes on some disciples and transmit his Grace upon them, as inconspicuous as possibly. Special attention would be given to a newcomer to inspire him on the spiritual path. At eight thirty am, the newspaper would arrive and he would glance through them remarking on any item of interest. Sometimes, a devotee would have ordered his own newspaper and would like Sri Bhagavan to go through it first. The devotee felt honoured to read the paper touched by Sri Bhagavan. Seeing it was a privately owned newspaper, Sri Bhagavan would deftly and carefully slip it out of its wrapper and back again after reading, to return it in the same condition received. From ten minutes to ten till ten past, he would take a walk on the Ashram grounds. Meanwhile, the local, friendly postman, Raja Iyer would deliver the mail and chat with those present in the hall as he knew most of them.

Sri Bhagavan would look at the postmark, the address and the contents very keenly. Many were simply addressed, 'The Maharshi, India'. The letters were from devotees from all over the world. If there was information from someone who had friends in the hall, he would share the news. Being a Jnani, he himself did not answer the letters as he did not have relationships or a name to sign. Answers were written in the Ashram office and later his approval was taken before sending the responses. People sat in silence, with eyes closed or open, and the silence was vibrant with peace. Words were not needed and his Grace stirred one's heart. Thus the outer Guru turned one inwards to awareness of the Guru within.

At eleven am, the Ashram gong rang for lunch . All would stand up and wait until Sri Bhagavan left the hall. Devotees would go home unless it was a festival or a bhiksha given by one of the devotees as an offering or a thanksgiving and all would proceed to the dining hall. Later, Sri Bhagavan rested till two pm. And the hall was closed to devotees. His failing health made this midday rest necessary.

Sri Bhagavan never spoke about doctrine except in answer to a question and that too in a conversational manner, often with wit and laughter. Never was a questioner forced to accept anything without dispute until convinced. A Theosophist wanted to know if Sri Bhagavan approved of the search for invisible Masters. He retorted with a swift wit, "If they were invisible how could you see them?" "In consciousness," the Theosophist replied, and then came the real answer, "In consciousness there were no others." If questions were put in English he replied through an interpreter. Though he did not speak English fluently he understood everything and pulled up the interpreter if there was the slightest inaccuracy. Although doctrinally uniform, the replies of Sri Bhagavan varied considerably with the questioner. A Christian missionary asked him, "Is God personal?" and without compromising with the doctrine of Advaita, Sri Bhagavan made the answer easy for him. He said, "Yes, He is always the First Person, the 'I' ever standing before you. If you give precedence to worldly things God seems to have receded into the background. If you give up all else and seek Him alone, He alone will remain as the I, the Self." The missionary may have recalled that this was the name God proclaimed through Moses. Sri Bhagavan sometimes remarked on the excellence of 'I Am' as a Divine Name. Usually the newcomers asked a lot of questions and the disciples seldom did. The explanations were only a signpost to the teaching.

At quarter to five, Sri Bhagavan would get up from the couch with great difficulty, rubbing his stiff knees. He would return after fifteen minutes and in his absence the hall would be swept and everything arranged neatly. The chanting of the Vedas would begin, followed by Upadesa Saram, the 'Instruction in Thirty Verses' of Sri Bhagavan. Everyone listened to the chanting as Sri Bhagavan said that the sound of the chanting stilled the mind. This was a practical illustration that it was not thought but turning the mind inwards to the awareness beyond thought. The chanting would last for thirty five minutes and he would sit still, his face eternal, motionless, majestic, as though carved in rock. By six thirty, most people would disperse and a few remaining would sit in silence or sing Tamil songs. The evening session combined the solemnity of the early morning chanting and the friendliness of the later hours.

Sri Bhagavan had a keen sense of humour. It was less the things he said than the way he said them. When he told a story he was a complete actor reproducing the part as though he lived it. It was fascinating to watch him even for those who did not understand the language. Real life was also a part he played and in real life the transitions could be as swift, from humour to deep sympathy. One of his stories was about his time at Pavazhakunru when his mother and others visited him there. They would bolt the door from outside when they went into town for food, fearing he might slip away. He knew that the door could be lifted off its hinges and opened without being unbolted. He would slip away after they were gone, to avoid the crowd and disturbance. On finding him missing and reappearing later outside, they thought he had magical powers (siddhi) and proudly told others about it. Years later, when he told this story in his own humorous way, the whole hall was shaking with laughter.

There were always large crowds for festivals like Kartigai, Deepavali, Mother's death anniversary (Mahapuja) and Jayanthi, Sri Bhagavan's birthday. Sri Bhagavan was most reluctant to celebrate his birthday. He composed the stanzas: "You who wish to celebrate the birthday, seek first whence was your birth. One's true birthday is when he enters that which transcends birth and death - the Eternal Being. At least on one's birthday one should mourn one's entry into this world (samsara). To glory in it and celebrate it is like delighting in and decorating a corpse. To seek one's self and merge in the Self: that is wisdom."

For the devotees, Sri Bhagavan's birthday was a reason to rejoice and he was forced to submit. But he refused to have puja (ritualistic worship) made to him. A large crowd gathered and took their meals with him. The large dining hall was not enough. A palm leaf roofing was erected on bamboo supports outside and all sat there. There was also poor feeding in many relays and was supervised by police and boy scouts managing the crowds and guarding the entrance. Sri Bhagavan would sit aloof, regal and yet look intimately at his old devotees..

In September 1946, a great celebration was held for the fiftieth anniversary of Sri Bhagavan's arrival at Thiruvannamalai. In 1949, the temple on Mother's samadhi was completed along with a new hall for Sri

Bhagavan and the devotees to sit in. They were two parts of one building constructed by traditional temple builders according to the scriptures. After the kumbhabhishekam of the temple and the hall, Sri Bhagavan was still reluctant to enter the new hall and preferred the simplicity and vibrancy of the old hall. When he entered the new hall finally, his body was already overcome with sickness.

Mahasamadhi

From 1947 onwards, Sri Bhagavan started to look frail and aged, though he wasn't even seventy years old. Why was it that one who had been vigorous and robust, who had known little sickness in life and no grief or care, should have aged so much beyond his years? He had taken upon himself the sins of the world by alleviating the karma of his devotees. Shiva could save the world from destruction by drinking the churned up poison himself. Sri Shankara wrote: "Oh! Shambhu, Lord of life! Thou bearest also the burden of Thy devotees' temporal life." Once a devotee sitting before him experienced a severe pain in his index finger all of a sudden. To his surprise he saw Sri Bhagavan hold and rub the same finger on his own hand. The devotee's pain subsided. For Sri Bhagavan life on earth was not important and it was indifferent to him how long it lasted.

Early in 1949 a small nodule appeared below the elbow of his left arm. It grew into a malignant tumour. Doctors came from Madras and operated on the tumour. But, it grew back and kept growing in other parts of the arm. Amputation of the arm was the only way to save his life, was the opinion of the doctors. There was a tradition that the body of a Jnani should not be mutilated. Even the surgery was a breach of tradition. Sri Bhagavan refused the amputation and said, "There is no cause for alarm. The body itself is a disease; let it have its natural end. Why mutilate it? Everything will come right in due course."

About this time he translated into Tamil verse a stanza from the Bhagavatham (Skanda XI, ch. 13, sloka 36). "Let the body, the result of fructifying karma, remain still or more about, live or die, the Sage who has the Self is not aware of it, just as one in a drunken stupor is not aware of his clothing." Later, he quoted from Yoga Vasistam: "The Jnani who has found himself as formless pure Awareness is unaffected though the body be cleft with a sword. Sugar candy does not lose its sweetness though it is broken or crushed." Did Sri Bhagavan really suffer? He said to one devotee, "They take this body for Bhagavan and attribute suffering to him. What a pity." To another he said, "Where is pain if there is no mind?" And yet he showed normal physical reactions and normal sensitivity to heat and cold. S.S.Cohen, a devotee recorded him as having said years earlier, "If the hand of the Jnani were cut with a knife there would be pain as with anyone else but because his mind is in bliss he does not feel the pain as acutely as others do." The doctors and some of the attendants were convinced that there was pain and that it was excruciating. Indeed, the doctors were amazed at Sri Bhagavan's indifference to pain, at his complete unconcern, even during an operation. From the point of Advaita, neither suffering or one's karma existed. So long as a devotee believed in the reality of his own body and its suffering, so long, for him, the body of the Master was real and suffered also.

The tumour, diagnosed as sarcoma, sapped his little remaining vitality but his face grew gentler, more gracious, more radiantly beautiful than ever. In spite of four operations, the tumour kept reappearing. The wound from this never healed. Medically nothing more could be done. Sri Bhagavan kept to his normal routine as much as possible, giving darshan to his devotees morning and evening. There was a narrow little veranda outside where his couch was put and devotees came in hundreds to have darshan. Later, when he had grown too weak for that, they would file past the open door of his room, morning and evening.

Speaking to the attendants and to T.N.Krishnaswami, doctor and devotee, he explained, "The body is like a banana leaf on which all kinds of delicious food have been served. After we have eaten the food from it, do we take the leaf and preserve it? Do we not throw it away now that it has served its purpose?" Then he corrected himself and further said, "The Jnani is not even anxious to shed his body, he is indifferent alike to the existence or non-existence of the body, being almost unaware of it." And to those who asked him simply to will his recovery, he said, "Who is there to will this?" The 'other', the individual that could oppose the course of destiny, no longer existed in him; it was the 'non-existent

misery' that he got rid of. Some of the devotees expressed their dependence on his Grace. He answered that the end of his body would not interrupt his Grace and guidance. He was not going away anywhere after death. He would always be there for his devotees.

On Friday, April 14th., the doctors and attendants knew it was the last day. Delicately expressing recognition of their long years of service, he said to the attendants, "the English have a word 'thanks' but we only say santosham (I am pleased). After darshan that evening the devotees did not disperse as apprehension held them there. At about sunset Sri Bhagavan told the attendants to sit him up. He sat with one of the attendants supporting his head. He waved away the doctors. Two of the attendants were fanning him and the devotees outside were focused at the windows waiting for a sign. Unexpectedly, a group of devotees sitting on the veranda outside the hall began singing 'Arunachala - Siva' (Aksharamanamalai). On hearing it, Sri Bhagavan's eyes opened and shone. He gave a brief smile of indescribable tenderness. Tears of bliss rolled down from the outer edges of his eyes. One more deep breath, and no more. There was no struggle, no spasm and he had taken his last breath. At that moment, at that very precise moment, an enormous star had trailed slowly across the sky. Many had seen it as far as Madras. It passed to the north-east towards the peak of Arunachala.

A reporter of a large American magazine moved about restlessly, uneasy at having been impressed despite himself and determined not to write his story till he got away from Thiruvannamalai to conditions that he considered normal. With him was a French press photographer. They had witnessed and experienced what they would remember all their lives. When Sri Bhagavan attained siddhi, everyone saw a luminous meteor on the horizon and its slow trajectory towards the north above the Arunachala hill. Reporters, photographers and thousands of people living across the then state of Madras, have testified to this occurrence. Some got into their cars and drove towards the Ashram.

After the first numbness there was a wild burst of grief. All night devotees sat in the large hall. Processions streamed from the town and back singing 'Arunachala Shiva'. The next day, by general agreement, a pit was dug and the body interred with divine honours in the space between the old hall and the temple. The crowd packed tight and looked on in silent grief. No more the beloved face, no more the sound of his voice, henceforth the lingam of polished black stone, the symbol of Shiva, over the samadhi was the outer sign, and inwardly his footprints in the heart. As Devotees felt the inner Presence of Bhagavan and as they felt the continued Divine Presence at Thiruvannamalai, they began to regard it as a promise full of love and solicitude.

Sri Bhagavan's life in all its simplicity and purity is a movement in Silence - the One Reality, transcending all duality. It offers the seeker an insight into the spontaneous living of a sage in whom the idea of separate identity or individual actor has died. People from all religions were attracted to Bhagavan. A well-educated foreigner, who is a Christian, stands before the sculpture of Bhagavan in the New Hall and is mentally asking him, "I am a staunch Roman Catholic. Why am I attracted to you? Mentally, he gets a reply, "So that you can get closer to Christ." That is the sort of guidance people get.

Unlike other foundations, Sri Ramanashramam does not propagate his teachings. Even when he was in his physical body, his main teaching was silence. There is a famous quote of his, "First there is abstract knowledge. From it there arises the Ego, which gives rise to thoughts and then words. Words are therefore the great grandson of the Original Source. If words can produce an effect, how powerful should the teaching through Silence be?" Bhagavan is communicating to his devotees in silence.

Rajivi Krishnan