

With Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi

SWAMI DAMODARANANDA

My Divine Call

In 1939, at the age of twenty, I left my home town of Gurpur in Karnataka and went to the nearby city of Mangalore on the west coast to pursue my higher education. There, in my hostel, I came across a pictorial biography of Sri Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi that was being circulated among the students. The book simply stunned me. My immediate reaction was to think, “A maharshi living in India now! I must go and offer myself at his feet.”

From that point onwards I became very restless of mind. I was continually planning to run away from Mangalore to Tiruvannamalai to stay with the holy and enlightened Maharshi and to be guided by him on the path of spiritual illumination. I was so gripped by this one thought that any other concerns about my further education, or the

Swami Damodarananda is the resident swami at the Ramakrishna Mission, Vedanta Centre of Perth, Western Australia.

need to take permission from my parents, did not even cross my mind. It just flashed from within that, by the grace of God, I had the opportunity to be with a sage of *atma-saksatkar* (self-realisation). I felt that at all costs I must go to him and be at his feet to be guided on the spiritual path, that being the only purpose of life.

The plan for every person's life is based on tendencies carried forward from previous lives. Generally, it starts getting fleshed out during late adolescence. The force of some past noble tendencies must have given my life this sudden turn.

Divine Guidance

I told the manager of my hostel that I was leaving, and booked a ticket to Tiruvannamalai. A few days later I was sitting in the corner of a compartment on the Madras Mail. It so happened that in that same compartment an elderly brahmin gentleman was travelling with his family. After sharing food among themselves, the head of the family turned to me and asked where I was going. He was surprised to learn that such a young student as myself was going to visit the great sage in Ramanasramam. During our conversation he kindly advised me to get down from the train at about midnight at Villupuram station, and then take the train from there to Tiruvannamalai. Being over-enthusiastic and inexperienced in travel, I had bought a ticket to Tiruvannamalai on the Madras Mail which goes all the way from the west to the east coast, without realising that I needed to change trains for Tiruvannamalai in the middle of the journey. His advice was a God-send. Being so preoccupied with my final objective, I would have missed the connecting train. I considered it to be the Lord's grace guiding me to my divine destination.

Arunachala and Arunachaleswara

About midnight I got down at the Villupuram station and walked across the platform to where the train for Tiruvannamalai was standing. After a while the train started moving. At dawn from a great distance I was able to see between high rising temple walls, the imposing *gopuram* towers of the temple of Arunachaleswara that faced outwards to the four directions. The temple was situated on the site where Lord

Shiva is said to have manifested himself in the form of a holy *lingam* nestling with *Shakti* at the foot of Mount Arunachala.

In most Hindu temples the Supreme Universal Divine Consciousness, *sat-chid-ananda*, is understood to be one with *para-shakti*, the inscrutable Divine Power. The Supreme Divine Consciousness co-exists eternally with this Supreme Power which projects beginningless and endless universal systems, again and again, through the processes of evolution and involution. In other temples, this same truth is represented as a pair of male and female deities, such as Mahakali dancing eternally on Mahakala; the latter understood to be ever-absorbed in divine *samadhi*.

Within the great Indian temple culture are hidden eternal spiritual truths. Unfortunately, most of these truths are buried deep under a thick age-old crust of ritualistic tradition. Once in a while, however, for the sake of thirsty, seeking souls, a great spiritual giant — a masterly acharya, a devoted Mira, a Tulsi Dasa, or a Ramakrishna — blossoms within society as an ideal model of spiritual life. Swami Vivekananda characterises the appearance of such ones thus: *nirgacchati jagajjalat pinjaradiva kesari* (He bursts forth from the meshes of worldly confinement like a lion out of its cage). Sri Ramana was clearly one such spiritual giant.

Darshan and Beaming Grace

After travelling throughout the night and all the following morning without eating any food, I reached Tiruvannamalai railway station about midday. Outside the railway station I found a tonga (horse carriage) and reached Sri Ramanasramam about 2 pm. Before going into the ashram I gave away my extra clothes and money to the tonga wallah. He then took me around the buildings and showed me the hall where Sri Ramana Maharshi could be found. I took my bath at the Mother's temple tank, and then went straight to the small hall where the sage was seated.

Having offered Sri Bhagavan my *pranams*, I sat myself down with my back against a wall as I was very tired after fasting and travelling since the previous day. However, as soon as I had done this, Maharshi

gazed directly at me with unblinking, wide open eyes. I also looked into his eyes with all humility and wonder. In this way, both of us continued to stare into each other's eyes for a considerable time. While this was happening I felt ecstatic: Sri Bhagavan was showering his grace upon me. By his mere gaze it seemed as if the Maharshi was establishing me once and for all in spiritual life, despite all its trials and tribulations. Perhaps he intuitively saw my spiritual destiny. About five minutes later his eyes half closed as he went into introspective communion with the Self. I later learnt that it was quite common for Maharshi to remain in such states of divine absorption throughout the day and night. When one abides naturally in tune with the peace and bliss of the Supreme, it is known as *sahaja samadhi*: "Strange, the disciples under the banyan tree were all aged people and the Guru was young; he taught them by keeping silence, and the doubts of the disciples were all cleared up." (Sankaracarya, *Daksinamurti Stotra* 12).

Staying in the Ashram

After a while, some ashramites began to distribute pieces of fruit in leaf cups to the devotees who were seated in the hall. I took my leave from Sri Ramana, and then with my share of fruit in hand, slowly entered the passageway between the hall and the kitchen. Near the kitchen Sri Ramana's brother, Swami Niranjananandaji, the *sarvadhikari* (manager) of the ashram, was standing with a few mothers (*ammās*) who were helping with the cooking. I told them of my desire to stay in the ashram and lead a spiritual life. After some discussion they agreed to let me stay.

I was told that there had been a young man like me in the ashram earlier, who had had a little spiritual inclination. Having stayed for a while it seems that doubts arose in his mind regarding whether he should remain in the ashram. So he approached Sri Ramana and asked him whether it was best for him to stay, or else go home so he could serve his parents. Sri Ramana told him that if he felt that staying in the ashram to pursue spiritual ideals was the right thing to do, then he should do that. Otherwise, if he felt that returning home to be with his family and serve his parents was better, then he should pursue that

course in life. Thus, Sri Ramana allowed the youth to follow his own preferences as dictated by his past *karma*, or tendencies inherited from previous births. The youth returned home, the pull towards family life evidently being the strongest.

That night I slept on a veranda, the weather being hot. Others were also spread out here and there in different areas of the ashram.

Sri Bhagavan Watching with a Smile

I was asked to help in the kitchen. My daily duties mostly consisted of bringing firewood to the kitchen from the storehouse, boiling the milk that had been brought from the *goshala* (dairy) and rinsing any remaining sand or mud off enormous kitchen vessels after they had been washed by the salaried helpers. At that time the ashram was slowly getting built as donations came in. The kitchen was made of mud walls with large openings for ventilation. The monkeys of the neighbourhood would peep in and, if they saw an opportunity, enter the kitchen through the openings to eat whatever food was available. So after lunch when the *sevika* mothers (that is, elderly ladies) who did the cooking, retired to rest, one of my duties was to guard the kitchen with a stick and drive the monkeys away.

Bhagavan Ramana used to mostly sit or recline on his sofa in a big hall throughout the day except when he had to go out to answer the call of nature. It so happened that the place where I did most of my work was in a passageway near the well, through which Bhagavan would walk to the bathroom. One day, I was busy washing the big vessels, unbeknown to me, Bhagavan — as usual, wearing his loin-cloth — was standing a short distance away with a small towel under his arm, holding a little waterpot in one hand and his walking stick in the other. Suddenly I looked up and had his smiling *darsan*. I quickly stepped aside and requested that he proceed through the passageway. Still beaming at me, he indicated that it was of no concern, and asked me to continue my *seva* (service). I quickly made way and again requested him to continue. It was only then that he approached a few steps closer and slowly went on his way. It struck me how humble, egoless and self-effacing the great sage was.

Grinding Chutney with Sri Bhagavan

One morning at about 4 am I was summoned to the kitchen. To my surprise, when I entered the kitchen veranda I saw Sri Bhagavan in his loin cloth sitting near the chutney grinding stone. A few other people were also sitting nearby. I began to grind the coconut scrapings and he helped me by pushing in the overflowing ingredients. At the same time, he was busy putting salt, chillies and other things in the chutney to make it tasty. When the grinding was over he placed all the contents in a vessel. Then he went into the kitchen and prepared the seasoning in a big spoon with oil, mustard and dry chillies. When it was boiling, he brought it from the kitchen to the veranda where the chutney was being prepared. Then he began pouring the seasoning over the chutney and mixed it well.

A Sweet Little Joke

When the chutney was ready, Bhagavan distributed a little among the four or five people who were sitting there. Then he lifted his face up and from above dropped a bit of the chutney into his mouth without his fingers touching his mouth. (This healthy principle of not contaminating food prepared in the kitchen with one's saliva is followed even now in India among Hindu families.) As the devotees were tasting the chutney, Sri Bhagavan asked them how they liked it. Out of reverence they all kept quiet to signify approval. Then Sri Bhagavan smiled and quipped in Tamil, "Is the chutney asking for idlies?" Everyone enjoyed the joke and smiled. The group of ashramites then dispersed and the chutney was taken to the kitchen to be served with idlies when the morning visitors arrived.

Service at the Vegetable Cutting Room

Bhagavan next entered the vegetable cutting room where a kitchen assistant was cutting vegetables for the lunch that was to be served to the ashramites and visiting devotees. Bhagavan began assisting there also. He sat cross-legged and cut up vegetables with the utmost attention. I noticed that almost all the vegetable pieces he cut were exactly of the same size. From this I learnt the lesson that whatever

action one performs should be done with attentiveness and energy, for every job is worship of the Lord.

General Routine of the Ashram

As I remember it, during those days the general routine was somewhat like this. Early in the morning at about 4:00 am a few devotees would gather in the hall for prayer and meditation. On one such occasion, a devotee, a Mrs Kamakshi, entered the hall, offered her *pranams* to Sri Bhagavan and then got up. Sri Bhagavan called her over and showed her a small strip of paper. On it he had written, "*Om namo bhagavate Sri Ramanaya.*" He told her to chant it always. (She reportedly did so throughout her life.) As dawn approached, the Veda Pathashala *acaryas* (teachers at the ashram's Vedic school) would bring their students to chant important Vedic mantras such as the *shanti* mantras, *Purusa Sukta* and *Narayana Sukta*. Then *bhajans* (devotional songs) would be sung by the devotees in Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and other languages. All the while, Sri Bhagavan would remain seated on his sofa with half-closed eyes absorbed in the Self. When the singing was over, all the devotees would sit quietly and meditate for a while. We would then disperse and attend to our morning duties. About 7:30 am of the ashramites, guests and others would all assemble in the courtyard outside the dining hall for the breakfast of idlies and chutney. After breakfast non-resident visitors would begin to arrive to offer their *pranams* to Sri Bhagavan in the hall where he would be sitting or reclining on his cot sofa.

Sometimes the hall would fill up. Mostly, the visitors would stay quiet, happy to just enjoy being in the presence of the great *brahmavit* (knower of Brahman) sitting before them ever attuned to the Divine Peace and Bliss within him. In that spiritually surcharged hall filled with holy vibrations many had their inner, personal doubts resolved without ever having to verbalise them.

Once when I was a little free from my kitchen duties, I went to sit near Bhagavan in the hall at about 11:00 am. Some ladies visiting from a university in the state of Karnataka were talking with him. While answering one of their questions on silence, I heard him say,

“*Maunam* [holy silence] is not just keeping quiet without talking. Holding one thought alone is considered to be the real *maunam*.” I would visit the holy hall at every opportunity to gather such pearls of wisdom.

On one occasion I witnessed a bare-chested brahmin standing for a long time before Bhagavan with folded hands. Perhaps Bhagavan knew him, for he seemed to ignore him. Then some other devotee entered the hall and began walking towards Bhagavan. As soon as Bhagavan saw this particular individual he began speaking to him with great joy. Thus, during these visiting hours we could see Sri Bhagavan’s various moods. No doubt he knew the devotees’ inner attitudes.

All guests were offered lunch with Bhagavan, then there was a period of rest. Later, *darshan* continued in the afternoon. From about 4:00 pm I had the *seva* duty of grinding soaked rice and dhal for the next morning’s idlies. One devoted old lady used to help me by pushing in the overflowing, semi-liquid dough with her right hand. As soon as I was free from this service, I would return to the hall to enjoy Bhagavan’s *darshan*. One afternoon I saw him talking to some devotees in the hall. While seated on his sofa, he slowly stretched his legs down until they touched the floor. He was holding his walking stick in his left hand, and massaging his knees with his right hand. As he did this, he slowly tried to stand up. Then, he remembered that he was not due to go out until 5:00 pm, and looked up at the clock. Just at that moment it began to strike five o’clock! He just smiled at this and got up to walk towards the Arunachala hill for his evening ablutions in the running stream and, as was his custom, do a little exercise. We followed him for a short distance, and then left him to walk on with his attendant.

Sadhu Arunachala (Major A. W. Chadwick) would meditate in the hall leaning against a library cupboard with a belt strapped around his back and legs. He was training himself to sit properly in a cross-legged position while meditating, like the other seekers. Devoted Echammal amma could also be seen sitting quietly and praying in the hall. Having lost her husband and her two children in quick succession, she had gone to Sri Bhagavan seeking consolation. By his grace, she regained

her calm and normality in due course. Many such spiritually-healed fortunates stayed in the ashram, when I was there, quietly communing with the Divine.

Around sunset, the evening prayer and meditation session started. It was accompanied by Vedic chanting, singing, prayers and meditation, as in the morning. The last item in the programme would be silent communion, when everyone would try to meditate in the presence of Bhagavan. He would be seated on his cot completely absorbed, like Sri Mahadeva, Lord Shiva.

Once, one of the Ashram administrative *sevaks* came near Bhagavan’s sofa at this time and began calling out, “Bhagavan, Bhagavan, Bhagavan!”— louder and louder and louder. At first Bhagavan was unaware of his calls, as he was totally immersed in that inner Divine Quiet of peace and bliss. However, as the *sevak*’s voice became ever louder, Bhagavan returned to everyday consciousness and responded in Tamil, “*Enna, enna*” (What, what)? We used to enjoy witnessing such incidents many times throughout the day. During his various moods and attitudes, even though he was dealing with all manner of people, there would never be any expression of fatigue on his face, and I never saw him yawning. He appeared to be unceasingly in the experience of *sat-chid-ananda*.

Sri Ramana Hands Me Over to Sri Ramakrishna

It seems to me that the events in my life occurred as the above subtitle suggests: I was enjoying my stay in Ramanasramam and having Sri Bhagavan’s *darshan* daily whenever I was free from my humble *seva* (service) in the kitchen. After lunch, when I guarded the kitchen with a stick from the monkeys who were always trying to enter it through one of the big openings in the mud wall, I usually had some free time to read holy books from the library. (A proper kitchen was later built as donations and offerings came in.) The book that made the biggest impression on me was the *Life of Sri Ramakrishna* (with a foreword by Mahatma Gandhi). This was my first opportunity to learn of the holy, inspiring and wonderful life of Sri Ramakrishna. The book also spoke of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, Swami

Vivekananda and the other monastic disciples and lay followers of Ramakrishna. Thus, I first came to learn about the Ramakrishna Mission and its headquarters at Belur Math, Kolkata while I was staying at Ramanasramam.

One day while I was reading this book in the kitchen, I was shocked to look up and see my uncle standing before me. He had come from Madras in his car to take me away. When I told him of my desire to stay in the ashram, he got angry and ordered me to get ready to leave.

At that moment I had a brain wave and decided to run away from the ashram and live independently on the hill of Arunachala. Going inside, I took my spare clothes and made off at about 2:00 pm towards Mount Arunachala. I did not want to be caught by any search party that might come looking for me, so I kept off the main track by going through the forest, avoiding Skandashram and the other places where Sri Bhagavan was known to have stayed. Sure enough — as I was to learn later — my uncle was taken to all these places to look for me. Since he did not find me, he informed the people in Ramanasramam that my mother was fasting, wailing and praying for me to come back to our house in Madras. He then returned home empty handed.

That evening I climbed down the hill and slept on the veranda of an old temple without having had anything to eat or drink. Next morning after bathing, I went to the Sri Arunachaleswara Temple where they gave lunch-*prasadam* to devotees. After lunch I talked to one of the priests who allowed me to stay in the temple for about three days rendering some *seva*. It consisted of grinding sandalwood paste for the *pujas* of the various deities. By this time the people at Sri Ramanasramam had come to know that I was staying at the Arunachaleswara Temple. They called me back to the ashram. When I returned, they told me about my mother's wailing and weeping and pressurised me to go back home to pay her a visit, and said that afterwards, I could return to Sri Ramanasramam again. Having accepted this proposal, I went back home to the family house in Madras where my mother was. However, as was to be expected, my

relatives prevailed on me not to take religion to the extreme but to continue my studies. Reluctantly, I agreed to be admitted to the Engineering Institute and enrolled in a five year course.

Fortunately, our house in Madras was very close to the Ramakrishna Math and Mission Centre in Mylapore. I began to visit the temple daily and started talking to the swamijis and brahmacharis. One day I was reading the works of Swami Vivekananda when a particular passage leapt out at me. Swamiji had written words to the effect, "You have devoted innumerable lives to family and material concerns. Can you not at least offer this one life to God?" Immediately the answer welled up from within me. "Yes, I can do that!" This idea inspired me so much that I then and there made a firm resolution to offer myself up to Sri Ramakrishna—instead of studying and earning for another 10, 20 or more years as my family wanted.

I informed Revered Swami Asheshanandaji, then the warden of the Ramakrishna Mission Students' Home in Madras, of my decision. I used to meet him regularly and he inspired me very much. He gave me a letter of introduction to Revered Swami Tyagishanandaji of the Bangalore Ramakrishna Mission Ashram. Thus in 1940, I again found myself running away — this time to join the Ramakrishna Mission's Bangalore Ashram.

My Last Visit to Sri Bhagavan Ramana

I stayed at the Bangalore ashram for about six years studying Sanskrit, the scriptures and the Mission disciplines of prayer, meditation and *seva*. In 1946 it was time for me to go to our headquarters at Belur Math, in Kolkata to be initiated. I was to receive a holy mantra from the President Maharaj, Revered Swami Virajanandaji Maharaj, a disciple of Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi. In a separate ceremony I was also to dedicate myself to the holy order of Brahmacharya.

On the way to the Mission headquarters, I thought it would be good to visit Sri Ramanasramam to have a second and, perhaps, last *darshan* of Sri Ramana before he gave up his body. I reached Sri Ramanasramam on the 17th February, 1946 along with two other devotees from Bangalore, and stayed there for three days. On the first

day I sat on the floor for lunch with the other visiting devotees. Sri Bhagavan sat at the head of the line. I think it was 'Kirai Patti' (the 'Spinach Granny') who came first to serve Sri Bhagavan with a few dishes she had prepared. As she was in her nineties, Sri Bhagavan, in a raised voice asked her in Tamil, "*Enna Kondu-vandirke*" (What have you brought)? She described her dishes. Then she slowly distributed the same simple food, little by little, to all of us devotees.

I observed Sri Ramana as he was eating. He took some pieces of chilli out of his curry and pushed them away to a corner of his banana leaf. A few grains of rice happened to get stuck to the chillies. He scrupulously returned these to the rest of the food on his leaf, so that even these few grains would not get wasted. When he had finished his lunch, his leaf plate was totally clean (except, of course, for the few chillies pieces).

After lunch Bhagavan left for the hall where he normally sat on his sofa and gave *darshan*. I immediately followed him. When he reached the sofa, I offered my *pranams* to him and asked him in English to let me know the easiest path. Although Sri Bhagavan knew English, he normally spoke only in Tamil. He just looked at me and gestured with his hand for me to sit down. I sat down on the floor in front of him. Bhagavan observed the other devotees as they arrived, sit down and filled up the hall. Disappointed that he had not answered my question, I closed my eyes and began doing mental *japa*. After a while I heard him say to some professor who was known to him, "This boy wants to know a shortcut!" Then Bhagavan continued, "A shortcut to where?"

One of my friends who had sat down next to me nudged my leg and indicated that Sri Bhagavan was talking to me. I opened my eyes and saw that he was smiling at me: he had only been waiting for the other devotees to arrive so that they too could benefit from his answer to my question! Of course, I told him that I wanted a shortcut to *atma-darshan* — the revelation of the Self. He asked me what method I was presently practising. I replied that in my own humble way I was practising *japa-sadhana*. Hearing this, Sri Bhagavan responded that *japa* was not only simple and direct, but the best method to use to

make progress in spiritual life. He quoted a phrase from the *Bhagavad Gita* 10.25: "*yajnanam japayajno'smi*" (Among sacrifices, I am the sacrifice of *japa*).

Further elaborating, he said that of all the ways to offer oneself to *paramatman* (the Supreme Being), the easiest and the best method was the repetition of the mantra of one's own chosen deity. *Japa* promoted a constant flow of loving prayer from within for inner illumination. This woke up a subtle thirst that steadily increased, leading to a strong current of continuous divine discontent known as *vyakulata*. When this holy attitude developed into deep absorption (*dhyaana*), the divinity revealed itself from within. This was *atma-darshan*.

Sri Bhagavan continued to explain about *japa sadhana* and Self-realisation. However, an anxious brahmin devotee with a thick sacred thread who was seated a short distance away loudly interrupted to ask him a question about creation and its cause. The brahmin said that some scriptures mentioned that creation was due to the *karma* of Brahma, the creator, while other scriptures stated that creation occurred due to the *karma* of *jivas* (souls). He wanted Sri Bhagavan to resolve this difference of opinion. Sri Ramana just gave him a kind look, and then continued to explain the subject of *japa* by quoting another verse from the *Gita*,

*yogayukto vishuddhatma vijitatma jitendriyaha.
sarvabhutatmabhutatma kurvannapi na lipyate.*

(*Bhagavad Gita* 5.7)

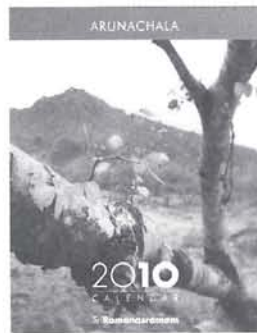
("With the mind purified, with devotion to performance of action, and the body conquered and the senses subdued, one who realises the self as the self in all beings, though engaged in action, is not tainted.")

Sri Bhagavan was evidently in a good mood and went on expounding spiritual thoughts based on this *Gita* verse for about twenty-five minutes. The devotees in the packed hall lapped up his sacred words of spiritual revelation. Bhagavan explained that the aspirant first repeats the mantra out loud with diligence and devotion. Then, as his or her loving attitude intensifies, the repetition gradually becomes internalised. As the body, senses and mind get purified and become free from their selfish nature, the whole being gets attuned to the

Divine. The power of the mantra enters every aspect of the individual. The aspirant becomes *mantramaya* (filled with the spiritual power of the mantra), in and through all activities. One's life gets transformed into a continuous offering to the Lord, without any attachment to the results of one's actions.

The impatient brahmin repeated his question about creation, however. This time Sri Bhagavan graciously told him that if he would only try to understand the method he had just explained, the answers to all his questions would spontaneously arise within him. As one dives deep within, the mind dissolves into the Self, and all distinctions between *bhakta* (devotee), *bhagavan* (the Lord) and *Bhagavata* (the sacred text) vanish in divine illumination.

Om Sri Bhagavan Ramanaya Namah! ▲



This year Ashram has made a special effort to design a 12 sheet calendar which is pleasing to devotees. The calendar contains twelve fine photographs of Bhagavan. There is also a desk calendar which contains photos of the Holy Hill Arunachala. The Ashram is also publishing a book diary with suitable quotations by Bhagavan.

For orders please contact the Ashram Bookstall at bookstall@sriramanamaharshi.org.

The prices of all three items is yet to be decided. They will be available probably in the first week of October.