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Ramana Ashtottaram

93. ओं संसारार्णवतारकाय नमः

om samsārārṇavatārakāya namaḥ
Prostration to the One who takes us across the sea of samsara.

To those who struggle in the deep stormy waters of phenomenal existence, Bhagavan comes as a boatman ready and able to rescue and carry us to the safety of the other shore.

94. ओं शोणांद्रीसुन्तित्रेत्रे नमः

om śoṇāndrīsastutidraṣṭre namaḥ
Prostration to the One who saw and revealed the Five Hymns in praise of Arunachala.

The Five Hymns (Stuti Panchakam) were not composed like ordinary poems; they were outpourings direct from the Heart. Like the Vedic mantras seen by the rishis, these Hymns were seen rather than composed. The Hymns came into being because Bhagavan loved his devotees and sought to express for them their longings. In these hymns some passages are autobiographical, but many are philosophical and convey Bhagavan’s teachings. The Hymns serve as a bridge between Bhagavan and his devotees. Words and events which are rooted in Eternity and flower in Time should not be analysed and pulled apart and attributed to either Bhagavan, the embodiment of pure transcendent Awareness, or to the good, simple human being living on terms of perfect equality with other creatures. The drashta or the True Seer of the unity of Time and Eternity, of ‘others’ and himself, of the natural and the supernatural. His words and actions reveal this unity. The Five Hymns should be studied and understood in this light, as mystical utterances comparable to the Vedic hymns.
The legendary Tamil saint and poetess Avvaiyar is said to have lived during the Sangam period (ca. 1st and 2nd century CE). As the well-known story goes the aged Avvaiyar, who had travelled throughout the Tamil land, took rest from the hot sun under a naaval pazham (jamun fruit) tree at Pazhamudircholai, the site of one of the six major Lord Murugan temples which is situated near Madurai. She was well pleased with herself believing that she had seen all the temples of her beloved Lord Siva and accomplished all that she could by the dissemination of her verses of wisdom and love for Lord Siva. Noticing she was hungry and thirsty, a small boy who happened to be sitting on the tree asked her if she would like some fruit from the tree to which Avvaiyar assented. The boy then with a mischievous glint in his eyes, asked her whether she wanted roasted fruit or unroasted fruit. Avvaiyar thought, “Is there any roasted fruit in the world?” and decided that he was a simple, ignorant boy but being tired she did not argue and humoured him by asking for roasted fruit. The boy shook the tree and some fruit fell onto the dusty ground.
Avvaiyar took the fruit and cleaned them by blowing off the dust. The boys’ eyes twinkled for Avvaiyar’s behaviour meant the fruit were ‘roasted’ and warm, since Avvaiyar had to puff on them to make them ‘cool’. The boy innocently enquired of Avvaiyar whether the fruit were warm enough. She was astonished that a small village boy had played a subtle ruse to amuse himself at her expense. She had mistakenly thought he was a village idiot who had no knowledge about the qualities of a fruit. With her deep comprehension of Tamil philosophy and poesy she immediately appreciated the striking comparison between cooked food (sutta pazham) and uncooked food (sudadha pazham). That is, between a mind that has been ripened by the removal of impurities in the fire of jnana, and the raw fruit of an ignorant mind.

Incredulous, she asked the small boy, “Who are you actually?” It is said in legend that the boy then disappeared and Lord Murugan appeared in his place. Avvaiyar realised the lila (play) was a lesson and saw that there was still more for her to learn. She prostrated to Lord Murugan and requested him to grant her jnana (wisdom).

It is relatively easy to acquire knowledge if one has a good memory. With time and patience we can acquire the ability to recall large chunks of information. As we all know it is entirely another matter to understand and apply what we may have learned. Intelligence and knowledge are not necessarily the same thing.

The development of devotion to an ideal or person who appears to be wise is also fairly easy if we have suffered and are looking for a sagacious person who seems to know the solution to our problems. Nevertheless devotion without knowledge can easily lead us astray and we can vainly devote our time and energy to a cause that is flawed. The stories of disillusioned disciples whose masters have been found wanting are common.

The two, knowledge and devotion, acting together in harmony are essential. We could say that knowledge is the vehicle to take us forward and devotion is the fuel that drives our quest.

Bhagavan came onto this earth to teach us how to live. The real purpose was not just to give us instructions but to show us how to
put them into practice in order to transcend our ignorance. He did not want us to memorise his teachings and parrot them. He wanted us to live in a dynamic and creative pursuit for the truth.

Bhagavan had a clear and direct knowledge of who he was and was unmoved by all the glamour and power his position as a guru entailed. He acted in accord with the divine will of Arunachala Siva and in this respect he was the servant of the servants as was Lord Siva towards all his devotees. If we are able to emulate this attitude our lives would radically alter for we would no longer put our own interests first but listen to what is best and act accordingly. However it is not an easy path; like the trail to the top of sacred Arunachala it looks deceptively simple but to walk it is hard. Nothing is given to us for free; we must earn it. Easy accomplishments are cheap and hollow. Bhagavan’s gift may be tough but it is unbreakable and precious. It is also expensive: it will cost us all our delusions and preconceptions.

If we can follow Bhagavan even in just one example of his behaviour or attitude it will lead us one step closer to true understanding. We must apply Bhagavan’s instructions and not just talk about them or argue a point of doctrine.

In the face of this journey up the steep mountain path we equip ourselves with as much knowledge as necessary for its success. But prior to this acquisition we must first want to make this journey and for this we require faith, determination and above all, humility. Our aspirations are only as deep as the conviction we have to fulfil them. Above all else that mysterious element, grace is indispensable. Without it we are lost. Swami Chetanananda wrote it beautifully in respect to Sri Ramakrishna’s teaching, “As both blades of a pair of scissors are needed to cut a piece of cloth, so both self-effort and grace are needed to realize God. The grace of God is always blowing, like wind over the sea. A sailor who unfurls the boat’s sail catches the wind and reaches the destination smoothly. Sri Ramakrishna’s grace was blowing...”

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The first step on our journey is to realise that we lack an essential ingredient that would make our life complete. That is why we are seeking something higher. This inner unease though it seems negative is actually positive, the feeling of being a misfit is what can drive one forward to find where we actually fit. This sense of inadequacy is the effect of the *sphurana* pulsing in our Heart. It is reminding us of why we are born and its purpose. Bhagavan felt it so keenly that as a young lad the very mention of Arunachala caused a shock and subtly realigned his attention like a magnet pointing slowly but inexorably towards that sacred lode, Arunachala.

With the conscious recognition that our personal resources are insufficient for the task, our attitude undergoes a change. We realise we cannot control our lives but we can elect to be free whatever the cost. The knowledge that Bhagavan has given us is specific to the school of Advaita. It would be a mistake to mix that knowledge with *bhavas* (attitudes) from other legitimate traditions thinking that they are all one and the same. They are not. Today knowledge is available as never before and it is a temptation to dabble in a whole range of paths. Knowledge in this sense can only create clutter and confusion for if we are merely inquisitive and do not apply the information, our curiosity is shallow.

For devotees of Bhagavan we have two tools at our disposal, his teachings and a love for what is true. This truth is revealed in the form of Arunachala Ramana, which if one stops to consider it, is knowledge and devotion unified in one. Bhagavan demonstrated by his *ekabhakti* how we should be devoted towards the sacred hill. Through devotion knowledge spontaneously blooms.

These are the two wings which in harmony can carry us above the endless squabble of confusion created in the mind and the ache of yearning in our hearts. And for all this to work, a tail is required to guide our efforts on the right path. This third factor is vital, it is grace.

And how is grace obtained? It is through prayer. Prayer is the mind and heart united in one direct act. Mahatma Gandhi wrote, “The meaning of prayer is that I want to invoke the Divinity in me. You may describe it as a continual longing to lose myself in the Divinity, which compels us all. It is an effort not of the intellect but of the

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heart. The communion may come soon or it may take years or even ages. It is enough if the effort is sincere and heart-felt. Prayer is the only means of bringing about orderliness and peace and repose in our daily acts....Take care of the vital thing and other things will take care of themselves. Rectify one angle of a square, and the other angles will be automatically right. The meaning of prayer is that I want to invoke the Divinity in me.”

If we are seeking wholeness within ourselves we should look to that which is whole in the world. Knowledge is the instrument to locate this wholeness both inner and outer. It is not an end in itself. If we truly use knowledge correctly it liberates us. For those of us who follow Bhagavan it is Arunachala which is the tangible entity and symbol of that wholeness, for Arunachala does not bind us but rather liberates us from our own ignorance. It pulls us inside by some mysterious action. Our job is to use our knowledge and devotion to facilitate this. It is irresistible because our mind cannot fathom its working and therefore cannot influence this divine power to its own conceited advantage. That is why half the time we wonder what is happening to us when we are in the vicinity of Arunachala. We know something is happening but we don’t know quite what it is.

Bhagavan has said that the splendid mystery we witness before our eyes is also within us, in our heart of hearts. In verse three of Akshara Mana Malai he sings in wonder how the limitless, unconditioned Arunachala is held captive in his own heart by Its own love for his love and devotion. We feel we are being pulled into our own hearts and yet whose heart is it, ours or that of Arunachala? In the end we are left with the question, ‘who am I?’.

This is the mystery and no amount of explanation will resolve the riddle. All we can do is remain with it as it pulses in our consciousness. By doing so all our knowledge, all our devotion will be burned up in this submission of our proud sense of separateness. The question is, do we have the courage to test our wings and fly by the grace of Bhagavan?

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2 A compilation of quotes taken from the magazines, Harijan and Young India.
January - March

MOUNTAIN PATH

Mahatma Gandhi
Mahatma Gandhi’s Quest for Self-Realisation

Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) is hailed world-wide as an apostle of truth and non-violence and a matchless leader who led India’s freedom movement to success on the path of ahimsa. The spiritual stature of such a person should be obvious. However, paradoxically, it has not been obvious to many, including even some admirers. The fact is that Gandhi’s personal and public career was marked by a supreme dedication to truth and non-violence, a passion for inward purity and self-realisation.

Gandhi was explicit in describing his life as “a journey to the eternal land of freedom.” As early in April 1924, soon after the end of his first imprisonment in British India, Gandhi unequivocally declared in his English weekly Young India (3.4.1924): “My national service is part of my training for freeing my soul from the bondage of flesh.

La.Su. Rengarajan is a writer, researcher and Gandhi-scholar who was closely associated with the Government of India’s 100 volume Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi project for over 25 years, first as Officer on Special Duty and later as Deputy Director when Professor K. Swaminathan was its Chief Editor.
I have no desire for the perishable kingdom of earth. I am striving for the Kingdom of Heaven, which is moksha.... My patriotism is for me a stage in my journey to the eternal land of freedom and peace.”¹

In the introduction to his Autobiography which he started writing in 1925, Gandhi declared:

“What I want to achieve – what I have been striving and pining to achieve these thirty years – is self-realization, to see God face to face, to attain moksha. I live and move and have my being in pursuit of the goal. All that I do by way of speaking and writing and all my ventures in the political field are directed to this same end.”

Years later, in his letter dated 28th March 1932 to one Tilakram, Gandhi wrote, “The phrase ‘seeing God face to face’ is not to be taken literally. It is a matter of decided feeling. God is formless. He can, therefore, only be seen by spiritual insight … vision.”² In fact, every detail of Gandhi’s life was, directly or indirectly, oriented towards the same aim of attaining Liberation. To him, real home-rule (Swaraj) is self-rule or self-control, as he puts it in his small but seminal book Hind Swaraj which he wrote during a return voyage to South Africa from England in November 1909. It was this aspect that Barrister Gandhi in his long letter dated 2nd April 1910, took pains to explain in simple terms to his favourite nephew Maganlal thus: “Please do not carry unnecessarily on your head the burden of emancipating India. Emancipate your own self. Even that burden is very great. Nobility of soul consists in realising that you are yourself India. In your emancipation is the emancipation of India. All else is make-believe.”³

As Gandhi was a man of deep introspection and integrity and utterly candid and truthful in his speech and writing, his own words

¹ Young India, 3.4.1924; reproduced in The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Volume 23, Page 343. The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi is a hundred-volume series carrying all that Gandhi wrote and spoke, brought out by the Government of India with Professor K. Swaminathan as the Chief Editor of the series. It is hereafter referred to as CWMG.
² CWMG Vol. 49, p.244.
are more reliable as a guide to the development of his mind and spirit than the subjective interpretation of others, however objective they may be. As Gandhi was thus himself his best interpreter, we will let Gandhi speak for himself in this article through relevant quotations from his speeches and writings. It would be good to remember here that Gandhi was not a mere theoretician and that he never spoke about a thing which he had not tested in the crucible of practice in everyday life.

Answering a question from a reader about whether he believed in *advaita* (non-dualism) or *dvaita* (dualism) or whether it would be proper to call him an *anekantavadi* or *syadvadi* (believer in the Jain doctrine of manyness of Reality), Gandhi answered as below in his *Young India* (17.1.1926): “I am an *advaitist* and yet I can support *dvaitism* (dualism). The world is changing every moment, and is therefore unreal; it has no permanent existence. But though it is constantly changing, it has something about it which persists and it is to that extent real. I have therefore no objection to calling it both real and unreal and thus being called an *anekantavadi* or *syadvadi*.

“But my *syadvada* is not the *syadvada* of the learned. It is peculiarly my own.... I very much like the doctrine of manyness of reality. It is this doctrine that had taught me to judge a Mussalman from his standpoint and Christian from his. Formerly I used to resent the ignorance of my opponents. Today I can love them because I am gifted with the eye to see myself as others see me and vice versa. I want to take the whole world in the embrace of my love. My *anekantavada* is the result of the twin doctrine of *Satya* (Truth) and *Ahimsa*.”

Strangely, during his early years, Mohan Gandhi, as he was then known, was somewhat inclined towards atheism. It was during his second year of Law-study in London (in 1889), that student Gandhi had his first-ever taste of the *Bhagavad Gita* through its English translation by Sir Edwin Arnold titled *The Song Celestial*, thanks to two Theosophical friends. He then read *The Light of Asia*, a book on the life and teachings of the Buddha, by the same author. He also went

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through the chapter on the Prophet of Islam in Carlyle’s *Heroes and Hero Worship*. He purchased a copy of the Bible and read through it.

Even so, the real Gandhi, the Mahatma of history, did not even hint at his existence in the years of his study in England and long thereafter, until public service, wider reading and experimentation tapped his enormous reservoir of intuition, perseverance and wider study during his stay and non-violent struggle against injustice as a barrister in South Africa from 1893 to 1914.

Within a year of his arrival in South Africa to render legal assistance to a business firm of Porbandar Muslims in Pretoria, 23 year-old Barrister Gandhi was weighed down with a feeling of ignorance about the tenets of Hinduism, his own faith. In his perplexity he wrote a number of letters to Shrimad Rajchandra, a young Jain poet-philosopher in Bombay whom he had met on arrival from England.

In his letter in mid-1894, Gandhi raised a series of questions relating to the nature of the self, of God, moksha or liberation, the authenticity of the Vedas and incarnations, etc. Rajchandra’s detailed reply in his letter dated 20th October 1894, Gandhi says in his *Autobiography*, “somewhat pacified me.” He read some of the books that Rajchandra had sent him which included *Maniratna Maala*, *Mumukshu Prakaran* of *Yogavasishta* and a few others. As advised by Rajchandra, Barrister Gandhi also took up the study of Hindu religious literature though he does not mention the names of the books he read. “I studied Hinduism to the best of my ability,” writes Gandhi in his *Autobiography*.

During 1902-3 Gandhi passed through a new phase of introspection. Around this period, he realised the necessity of diving deep into the *Bhagavad Gita*. “I had one or two translations (of *Gita*) by which I tried to understand the original in Sanskrit. I decided to get by heart one or two verses every day,” he writes in his *Autobiography* (Pt. IV;Ch-5).

During a period of over two years (June 1910 to 1912) at the Tolstoy Farm which he had set-up 20 miles from Johannesburg,
Barrister Gandhi led a disciplined life of manual labour and quiet reflection. Here he seems to have had his first faint glimpse of moksha, the tranquil state where one has intimations of immortality, a taste of eternal bliss in the ever-relishing present. Gandhi felt as if he had discovered the Philosopher's stone which could transform base metal into gold. “Just fancy how a pauper will dance for joy if he comes upon the Philosopher's stone!” exclaims Gandhi in his long Gujarati letter dated August 1, 1911 addressed to his nephew Chhaganlal.  

Returning to India in January 1915, Gandhi established an ashram on the outskirts of Ahmedabad in May the same year, wherein the inmates were to subject themselves to certain vows which included the five yamas (spiritual disciplines), namely, satya (truth), ahimsa (non-violence), brahmacharya (celibacy), asteya (non-stealing or non-coveting of other’s property) and aparigraha (non-possession). Gandhi added one more vow, asvad (control of palate).

In 1920, in the midst of the political storm of the Non-Cooperation movement led by him (by then widely known as ‘Mahatma’) against British rule in India, Gandhi could find time to read the Ashtavakra Gita.  He took pains to translate into English some of its most powerful Sanskrit verses and shared them with Sarla Devi Chowdharani, a niece of Rabindranath Tagore, in successive letters to her during May 1920.

During his first jail term in India in Yerawada prison in Poona during 1922-23, Gandhi fully utilised the enforced rest in prison for reading and satisfying his spiritual thirst. The diaries he maintained in jail contain a record of over 150 books, half of which were metaphysical and religious literature. They include, among others, the Ramayana of Tulsidas and Valmiki, Yoga-darshana of Patanjali Muni, the whole of Mahabharata and Bhagavata, most of the principal

5 CWMG Vol. 11, p.133-4
6 Ashtavakra Gita: A spiritual dialogue in Sanskrit between the legendary King Janaka (of Videha State) and Raika, a low-born, ugly-looking philosopher. In it, King Janaka learnt that the remedy for his deliverance lay with himself and that was to be free from the snare of the senses.
*Upanisads* (in English and / or Gujarati translation), the six *darsanas* of Hindu Philosophy, *Vedanta Brahman* by Rajam Iyer, and Swami Vivekananda's *Rajayoga*. He also read with absorbing interest the commentaries on the *Bhagavad Gita* by AdiSankara, Jnaneswar, Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Sri Aurobindo.

When he was released from jail on February 5, 1924, Gandhi was a changed personality, a transfigured Mahatma, metamorphosed by the metaphysics of the *Bhagavad Gita*. He understood better the meaning of self-effacement and renunciation of the fruits of work. Above all, in his struggle for self-purification, he turned for strength to Sri Rama, his chosen God, and to the *Bhagavad Gita* for spiritual inspiration and inner peace.

While conceding that his acquaintance with Leo Tolstoy's teachings had “considerable influence” on him to begin with, he would “as a general statement” claim that “My life is based upon the teachings of the Gita,” as he put it in a letter dated 7th September 1928. For Gandhi, the book of books was the *Bhagavad Gita*. It was his “eternal Mother,” nay, it is the “universal Mother,” a “Kamadhenu,” his “spiritual dictionary,” “open sesame.”

In his *Anasaktiyoga* (Yoga of non-attachment) which he wrote in Gujarati during his incarceration in Yerawada jail in 1931, Gandhi has commented in detail on select *Gita* verses (in Gujarati). Explaining sloka 23 of the *Gita*, Gandhi writes: “He who has extinguished the ‘self’ or the thought of ‘I’ and who acts as ever in the great Witness’s eye will never sin or err. The self-sense is at the root of all error and sin. When the ‘I’ has been extinguished, there is no sin.” (CWMG Vol.41, P. 148). Gandhi’s whole career was a living commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita* written not in words but

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7 CWMG Vol. 37, p.240
8 In his speech at Banaras Hindu University on 1.8.1934. CWMG Vol. 58, P.271-2
9 & 10 In Gandhi’s preface to *Gitapadaarta-kosa*, a concordance as well as glossary of *Gita* prepared by him when he was in Yerawada Jail during 1922-23; vide CWMG Vol. 63, p.310.
11 In his speech at Quilon on 16.1.1937. CWMG Vol. 64, p.258.
in deeds and flowing from the lessons that he learnt through his life-long sadhana amidst socio-political vortices.

Answering philosophical questions raised by one Santosh Maharaj, Gandhi wrote back to him on 2nd July 1927 thus: “The universal Soul in which all the souls exist is God. The living creature which does not know that universal Soul and looks upon itself as separate from other creatures is what we call jiva (individual soul). The universal Soul, though dwelling in all, is not directly experienced. That is the beauty of maya (Mystery). The true end of human effort consists in crossing maya and knowing that universal Soul, which is the one and only source of all. It is not a thing which can be experienced in a manner our reason can understand. How then can there be any means of experiencing it? But, anyone who has the strength to forget the ‘I’ in him and make himself a cipher can have a glimpse of this universal Soul, though he cannot help someone else to have it too. Such a person is dazzled by the mere glimpse and so utterly spell-bound that he merges in it. He feels no desire and no need to describe his supreme bliss to anyone.”

In Kausani where Gandhi went on 27 June 1929, looking at the row of snow-capped Himalayas, he writes with a poet’s delight: “In front of me are the Himalayan peaks wrapped in snow and shining brilliantly in sunlight. The solitude of the place is beyond description. Sankaracharya had roamed about in Almora centuries ago. Even today I can hear him say: ‘This indeed is a marvellous sight; but all there is an illusion created by God.’ The Himalayas do not really exist, I do not exist and you do not exist. Brahman alone is real.”

“The true Himalayas,” Gandhi concludes, “exist within our hearts. True pilgrimage... consists in taking shelter in that cave and having darshan of Siva there.” [Navajivan, 14.7.1929].

Answering questions posed by a co-worker, Gandhi wrote to him: “The greatest endeavour is endeavour for moksha. Moksha means

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12 CWMG Vol. 34, p.92-93.
13 CWMG Vol. 41, p.184.
elimination of ego, the ‘I’ that prevails into everybody...”14 “In self-effacement lies self-realization.”15

Again, in a discussion with his personal secretary Pyarelal in July 1940, Gandhi said: “I sometimes feel like taking shelter in flight, not to seek cloistered peace, but in the stillness of utter isolation to know myself, to see where I stand, to catch more effectively the faint whispering of the still small voice within. Then alone would my experiment in ahimsa be complete....”16

Speaking at the All-India Spinners’ meeting in Sevagram on 24th March 1945, Mahatma Gandhi said: “Freedom is bound to come; it is coming. But mere political freedom will not satisfy me. Independence of my conception means nothing less than the realization of the Kingdom of God within you and on this earth. The real freedom on earth is Ramarajya in every respect. I would rather work for and die in the pursuit of this dream though it may never be realised. If India is satisfied with the mere attainment of political independence and there is nothing better for me to do, you will find me retiring to the Himalayas, leaving those who wish to listen to me to seek me out there.”17

In his letter dated 17th May 1945 addressed to Narayan M. Desai, Gandhi told him that “knowledge has infinite forms; but only he who knows that, at the bottom, all knowledge is one, really knows!”18 In another letter (dated 30th May 1945) to one Amin, Gandhi said: “We should seek solitude among multitudes – Inaction in activity – but such activity should be without desire for fruits.” 19

Like the sages and philosophers of old, Mahatma Gandhi considered self-realisation as the supreme wisdom and prized Truth as the highest possession.

15 In an undated short letter. CWMG Vol. 95, p.184.
16 In another undated letter. CWMG Vol. 95, p.189.
17 Harijan Bandu 20.7.1940, CWMG Vol. 72, p.211.
18 CWMG Vol. 80, p.146.
19 CWMG Vol. 80, p.214.
During his 10-month tour, in 1934, of all the Provinces in India chiefly for collection for the Harijan fund, Gandhi was in Tiruvannamalai on 17th February 1934. He addressed a huge public meeting in Vandimedu maidan opposite Sri Ramanaasramam. It is rather strange that the planners of his itinerary did not include a visit to Sri Ramanaasramam. However, during the welcome address presented to Gandhi at the public meeting, someone passed on to him a book titled Ramana Sannidhi Murai, a publication of Sri Ramanaasramam. Gandhi, after returning to Wardha, wrote to one N. Sankaranarayanan asking him to go to Sri Ramanaasramam, to stay there and study the Ashram’s literature on Sri Ramana Maharshi and then send him (Gandhi) a confidential and factual report about the Maharshi and the Ashram’s activities. Accordingly, Sankaranarayanan went to Sri Ramanaasramam along with Dr. Gurupadam, stayed there for three days and sent a long report to Gandhi.

The contents of the report have not been divulged. But, one can guess that the confidential report, including a few select books in English on the ‘Who Am I?’ philosophy of Sri Ramana Maharshi sent therewith, created a highly favourable opinion about the Maharshi. But, still, Gandhi admitted in a letter dated 26th February 1937 to Krishnamacharya that “I hardly know anything about Ramana Maharishi.” and that “Whatever I know is only at second hand.”

Even so, Gandhi advised Jamnalal Bajaj (in his letter dated 30th July 1938) “to visit Ramana Maharishi as early as possible.” In a letter dated 27th August 1939 to Munna Lal, an inmate of Sevagram, he asked him to go to Ramana Maharshi “which shall give you peace of mind.”

Thus, Gandhi’s attitude to Sri Ramana Maharshi can be judged from the fact that whenever any of his associates (for example, Shankarlal Banker, Rajendra Prasad, Jamnalal Bajaj, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, and Amthu Salaam) felt depressed or confused, Gandhi used

20 CWMG Vol. 64, p. 403
21 CWMG Vol. 67, p. 214
22 CWMG Vol. 69, p. 179.
to say, “go to Ramanasramam and come back after a month’s stay there.”

Usually they came back within a week, fully recovered in spirit. On August 18, 1938, when Babu Rajendra Prasad (who later became the first President of India) was taking leave of the Maharshi after a few days’ stay in Ramanasramam and requested a message from Sri Ramana Maharshi to be conveyed to Gandhi, Maharshi’s answer was: “Adhyatma sakti [Power of the Self] is working within him Gandhi and leading him on. That is enough. What more is necessary?”

Replying to Brijkrishna Chandiwala’s remark that Ramana Maharshi and Aurobindo were ‘one-sided’ while Gandhi was ‘all-sided’, Gandhi in his letter dated 22nd / 23rd October 1938 said, “It would not do simply to assert that Ramana Maharshi and Aurobindo are one-sided while I am all-sided. One who is one-sided but understands his mission and pursues it has merit. One who claims to be all-sided but is only experimenting has even less worth than broken almond shells. Only God knows where I stand. I am an aspirant while Ramana Maharshi and Aurobindo are known to be, and perhaps are, realised souls.”

It would be purely conjectural to speculate how Mahatma Gandhi would have reacted if he had met the magnetic eyes of the Maharshi. But, even from second-hand knowledge about Ramana Maharshi, Gandhi could confidently advise his close associates ‘to visit Ramana Maharshi’ for getting ‘peace of mind’ and to recharge their spirit, as mentioned earlier.

A staunch Vaishnava and orthodox Hindu as Gandhi claimed himself to be, he unquestionably believed in karma and re-birth. Even so, perhaps influenced by his ‘second-hand knowledge’ about Sri Ramana Maharshi’s philosophy which he gathered from the literature on Sri Ramanasramam as mentioned earlier, Gandhi in his

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23 CWMG Vol. 67, p.214 (Letter dated 30.7.1938), Vol. 69 p.179. (Letter dated 27.4.1939) and Vol. 70, p.43 (Letter dated 29.6.1939)
25 CWMG Vol. 68, p.46.
letter dated 1st February 1935, to one Jainendra Kumar expressed his re-thinking on re-birth with these words: “For a belief in re-birth it is necessary to believe in the existence of ‘I’. If I do not exist and God alone exists, then who is to be reborn and how? The realization itself is the end of re-birth, isn’t it? The possibility of re-birth is there only as long as the ‘I’ exists. When you truly believe – merely saying it is not enough – that ‘God alone exists’, then there is no re-birth for you. The man who becomes one with God is liberated. This much your reason will certainly accept. But, it will not be realised in experience. Realization may take even thousands of years. Realization comes through the heart. The head can provide logic. But, what is the worth of logic?”

If karma-yogi Mahatma Gandhi, with his ardent aspiration for attaining the moksha that is Self-realisation, had met jnana-yogi Sri Ramana Maharshi, an ‘already realised soul,’ his spiritual experiments perhaps could have touched the pinnacle of perfect peace “in the midst of the bellowing political storm howling round him.”

26 CWMG Vol. 60, p.159.

27 Our Sarojini Naidu, Gandhiji’s doughty follower was perhaps right when she said, “Ramana Maharshi who gave us all peace and Mahatma Gandhi who did not let us sit in peace for a moment, were both two aspects of the same reality.”
The Paramount Importance of Self Attention

Part Eight

Sadhu Om
as recorded by Michael James

13th January 1978

Sadhu Om: There are no outward signs distinguishing someone in the fifth standard [the state of non-dual self-love (svatma-bhakti), which is the highest stage in the school of bhakti described in chapter 2 of the second part of The Path of Sri Ramana]. They will usually appear to behave like pukka devotees in the fourth standard [the stage of guru-bhakti].

The four gurus of Saiva Siddhanta, Appar, Jnanasambandhar, Manickavachagar and Sundaramurthi, were all jnani from the time they started composing verses, but they spent all their lives like second

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standard students [devotees who worship or pray to many different names and forms of God], visiting so many temples and writing verses in praise of the temple deities.

Even Bhagavan behaved like a good devotee of Arunachala. He did *giri-pradakshina* (circumambulation around the hill) and encouraged others to do so. He never allowed anyone to walk round him, garland him, or do puja to him. Instead, he always pointed to Arunachala as the form of the guru, saying that it is the true ‘Ramana Sadguru’, and he was often moved to tears on reading or hearing stotras [devotional songs]. On his last evening he hadn’t opened his eyes for two hours, but at about 8 pm when we started to sing *Aksharamanamalai* with its refrain, ‘Arunachala Siva’, he opened his eyes for a few moments, and from then till 8.47 tears of devotion were pouring down his cheeks. He left his body as we were singing verse 72:

> Protect me, Arunachala, being the support for me to cling to, so that I may not droop down like a tender creeper without anything to cling to.

Once, while walking round the hill, Bhagavan did pradakshina of Durvasa’s shrine as an example to others, saying jokingly, ‘Even if we ignore other shrines, we should not ignore Durvasa’ [because Durvasa was an ancient sage who was noted for his hot temper]. However he never prostrated to any deity or person.

Muruganar also exemplified fourth standard bhakti. He always showed great reverence for Bhagavan in every possible way, such as keeping his picture at a high level, and never wearing shoes near any picture of him. At the mere mention of Bhagavan’s name he would shed tears. In doing so, he exemplified the teaching that Bhagavan gave in verse 39 of *Ulladu Narpadu Anubandham*:

> Always experience advaita [non-duality] in [your] heart, [but] do not ever put advaita in action. O son, advaita is appropriate in the three worlds, but know that with the guru advaita is not appropriate [that is, even if one can claim a non-dual status in the presence of any of the three Gods, Brahma, Vishnu and Siva, one should never claim a non-dual status with the guru].
THE PARAMOUNT IMPORTANCE OF SELF ATTENTION

When people ask me why I do pradakshina and prostrate to Arunachala, I reply: ‘If you see me as an ego, then it is right that I do so, or if you see me as self, then it is not I but only this body that does so.’ Advaita cannot be put into action, because it is the state that is completely devoid of action, since any action implies duality. However, no action can alter the fact that non-duality is the truth.

Someone once said to Bhagavan, “Bhagavan, this self-enquiry is very difficult. Can I instead practise such-and-such a yoga or meditation?” to which he nodded in assent. After that person left, some of the devotees were wondering why Bhagavan seemed to give his consent to such practices, so he explained:

“He says, ‘Self-enquiry is difficult’, which means that he does not want to practise it, so what can I do? Even if I tell him not to practise this other yoga or meditation, he still won’t practise self-enquiry. In a few months he will return and say that meditation is difficult, and ask whether he can do japa instead. And after practising japa for some time, he will find his mind still wanders, so he will then come and ask if he can sing stotras. All this will mean that he is unfit to do anything. If one is able to make even a little effort to sing stotras or do japa or any other sadhana, one can make the same amount of effort to attend to the feeling ‘I am’.”

On another occasion, someone told Bhagavan that they were afraid that they would be wasting their time if they practised self-enquiry, because though they had tried to practise it, they found that they always became inattentive, and so asked whether it would not therefore be better if they practised some japa instead. Bhagavan replied, “You have nothing to fear. You are like a person who is afraid to let go of a branch even though he is standing on the ground. Do you suppose that even when you lose your hold on self, self can ever lose its hold on you?”

14th January 1978

Sadhu Om: When Muruganar was once asked about other gurus, he replied, ‘I have been blinded by the sun, so I cannot see anything else’. 
As Bhagavan explains in verses 17 and 18 of *Ulladu Narpadu*, an ajnani limits ‘I’ to the extent (the form) of the body, and limits reality to the extent of the world. As a result, ajnanis do not take ‘I’ and the reality to be one and the same. The jnani, on the other hand, sees that ‘I’ shines as the limitless self and that reality shines as the formless substratum of the world, and therefore knows that the reality is ‘I’.

Because the jnani knows that self alone really exists,¹ he does not see anything as non-self, and hence he knows that even the body is ‘I’ and even the world is real. However, we should take care not to misunderstand the jnani’s statement that the world is real. What the jnani sees as real is just the ‘is’-ness of the world. Both a jnani and an ajnani will say, ‘This is a table’, but the ajnani sees only its form and therefore mistakes its ‘is’-ness to be a property of that form, whereas in the view of the jnani only ‘is’-ness [being or sat] is real, so the table is nothing other than that infinite, indivisible and hence formless ‘is’-ness.

Therefore, because the jnani experiences the body as ‘I’ and the world as real, he seems to behave just like ajnanis, but the difference between them lies in their understanding of ‘I’ and of reality. Though this difference in their perspectives is very subtle, it is actually vast, like the difference between a mountain top and a valley.

¹ Though in this context the word ‘self’ obviously denotes only what we actually are and not the ego that we now seem to be, as in all other contexts I deliberately avoid the prevalent custom of capitalising the initial ‘s’ in ‘self’, because there is something intrinsically dualistic about attempting to distinguish between a capitalised ‘Self’ and a lesser ‘self’ when Bhagavan has taught us that there are in fact no two selves. Whether we experience ourself as we really are or as something else (such as a body, mind or person), we are always the same one self. In some contexts ‘self’ may refer clearly to what we actually are and in other contexts it may refer clearly to what we now seem to be, but in many contexts drawing this distinction is not helpful and can in fact be an impediment. In Tamil, Bhagavan sometimes used the word *tan*, which means self, to denote our real self in one part of a sentence and to denote our false self (the ego) in another part of the same sentence, and since there are no capitals in Tamil he left it to us to understand from the context what he meant. (MJ).
THE PARAMOUNT IMPORTANCE OF SELF ATTENTION

During sadhana, we have to reject everything other than ‘I’ as anatma [non-self or ‘not myself’], but when we experience ‘I’ as it really is, we will discover that nothing is other than it. The practice of rejecting everything other than ‘I’ by not attending to any such thing is sometimes described as an ascending process, whereas the state of true self-knowledge, in which everything is experienced as not other than ‘I’ is sometimes described as a descending process, though it is not actually a ‘process’ but our natural state of being.

Therefore, what Bhagavan describes in verses 17 and 18 of Ulladu Narpadu is this ‘descending process’, the state of ‘sahaja samadhi’, in which everything is embraced as ‘I’. This state is what is indicated in sastras by statements such as ‘All this is brahman’, but since pandits think of brahman as if it were a third person, they fail to grasp the true meaning of such hints.

Brahman should always be regarded as the first person, ‘I’, because it is our natural state of pure non-dual self-awareness. Only when one thus understands brahman to be only ‘I’ can one have the correct outlook (dristi) that such scriptural statements were intended to inculcate, which is the outlook required for the practice of sahaja samadhi. This outlook is the attitude: ‘All this is only because I am’ – that is, the firm conviction that everything that I experience, namely the mind, body and world, and all that happens in them, could not exist if I did not exist to experience them, so they are entirely dependent upon my being-consciousness, ‘I am’. By clinging firmly to this attitude, one can practise self-attention even while engaged in outward activities.

18th January 1978

Sadhu Om: The self-attention we practise in the midst of other activities will not be very deep or intense, so we should also set aside time to practise it more intensely. When we do so, our aim should be to turn our attention 180° away from other things towards self. If we once succeed in turning our attention 180° towards self, we will experience perfect clarity of self-awareness, unsullied by even the slightest awareness of any other thing. This is the state of true
self-knowledge, which will completely destroy the illusion that we are this mind, so after this, the illusion of experiencing anything other than ‘I’ can never return.

While trying to turn your attention $180^\circ$ towards self, whenever you feel your self-attention is becoming slack, do not try to keep up the pressure. It is better to allow your attention to return to $0^\circ$ for a while, and then to make a fresh attempt. If you wish to punch something, it is best to draw your fist right back, because then your punch will have maximum impact. Likewise, if you start your attempt to turn your attention selfwards from $0^\circ$, your effort will have maximum force.

By incessantly repeating such fresh attempts, you will gradually be able to turn your attention further and further towards self: $40^\circ$, $60^\circ$, $75^\circ$ and more. In between each fresh attempt, you can usefully spend the time you are resting at $0^\circ$ (that is, attending to second and third persons) by doing manana (thinking about Bhagavan’s teachings) or sravana (reading his teachings). At all times between such attempts you should also take care to be indifferent to whatever experiences may come, because you can then build a strong foundation of vairagya (freedom from desire to attend to anything other than ‘I’) and bhakti (love to attend only to ‘I’), from which you will sooner or later be able to make your final leap, turning the full $180^\circ$ towards self.

Some ripe aspirants do not need even to make such incessant efforts to turn selfwards, because they always remain vigilantly aware of self, waiting for the moment when they can take their final leap, the complete $180^\circ$ turn towards self. Their practice is like the swinging of a shot-putter preparing to throw his shot.

When I was first taught by Janaki Matha to practise dualistic forms of meditation such as murti-dhyana [meditation upon a form of God], I found that continuous practice of such meditation caused me to have visions and other such divine experiences, but I soon understood that that was not the way to experience self. Only svarupa-dhyana [meditation upon self, which is another term Bhagavan used to describe the practice of atma-vichara] can enable one to experience self as it really is.
Sadhu Om: It is difficult for us to mix with sadhakas who have other thought-currents. Hearing their ideas and their views about other gurus, we naturally feel lonely, since we love Bhagavan and like to think only of him and his teachings. But we should be careful not to preach. We should not express Bhagavan’s view to anyone unless we are asked.

Other gurus like Buddha and Sankara went to the world to teach their ideas, but Bhagavan has shown us that that is not necessary. The world is like your shadow, so if you go out towards it to teach it, it will recede from your grasp, but if you withdraw within yourself, it will follow you and subside there. If you quietly keep the fire of devotion to ‘I’, which Bhagavan has kindled within you, burning within your own heart by repeated sravana, manana and nidhidhyasana (studying, reflecting upon and practising his teachings), that is the best way to teach the world to follow him.

‘Act without desire for the fruit,’ says the Bhagavad Gita. Self-attention is not actually an action or karma, because it is a state of just being, not doing anything, but so long as we consider it to be something that we must do, it is the only ‘doing’ that will give no fruit or karma-phala. Therefore self-attention is the only true karma-yoga.

This is why Bhagavan says in verse ten of Upadesa Undiyar and verse fourteen of Ulladu Narpadu Anubandham:

Being, having subsided in the place from which [we] rose – that is karma and bhakti, that is yoga and jnana. Investigating to whom are these, karma, vibhakti, viyoga and ajnana, alone is karma, bhakti, yoga and jnana. When one investigates, without ‘I’ those [defects] do not ever exist. Remaining permanently as self is the reality.

If we rise as ‘I’, we will feel that we are entangled in action (karma) and in a state of vibhakti (non-devotion) or lack of true love for God, viyoga (separation) from God, and ajnana (ignorance) of our real nature. Therefore, subsiding back in self, the source from which we
rose, by investigating who am I who experience such karma, vibhakti, viyoga and ajnana, is the correct practice of the four yogas or means of reunion: nishkamya karma (desireless action), bhakti (devotion), raja yoga and jnana (self-knowledge). When we investigate thus, the false ‘I’ will subside and disappear, and in its absence there will be no one to experience any karma, vibhakti, viyoga or ajnana. What will then remain is only the reality, which is the state in which we abide permanently as self without ever rising to be or to experience anything else.

Kunju Swami: In his later years, after all the court cases that he brought against the ashram, Perumal Swami came to Bhagavan and complained, ‘When I was a young man I came to you for moksha [liberation], but you allowed me to be led astray by my weak buddhi [mind or intellect]. Now I shall surely go to hell,’ to which Bhagavan replied, ‘Do you think I am not there also?’

On another occasion, having read Bhagavan’s biography, a new devotee angrily asked him, ‘Who is this fellow Perumal Swami?’ but Bhagavan replied affectionately, ‘That is namma [our] Perumal,’ and continued to praise him, describing all the good service he had done. Not only did Bhagavan not feel any enmity towards anyone, but he also did not allow us to feel enmity towards anyone.

(To be continued)

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2 On another occasion Kunju Swami told me a similar story: After the ashram had won a case that Perumal Swami had brought against it and Bhagavan in a local court, he came to Bhagavan and declared angrily, ‘Though you won this case, I will not leave you. I will take it to a higher court, and continue fighting until I win. If you are God, as they claim, you can put me in hell, but even then I will not leave you,’ to which Bhagavan gently replied, ‘Even if you go to hell, I will not leave you.’ Whether or not Perumal Swami understood what Bhagavan meant, these words of his were a gracious assurance that he would never forsake him but would certainly save him. I heard this story from other sources also, so I believe it is reliable. (MJ)
I confessed to a friend recently that since I am perhaps satisfied that the overarching theory of Advaita explains the riddle of life, I have of late been having trouble remembering fully other ideas and concepts I have been reading about. Whatever pieces of information I cannot weld to Advaita theory or that seem unnecessary to it I seem to be unconsciously preventing from getting entrenched in my mind (a classic case of ‘confirmatory bias’,¹ said my friend). So I wonder if I should at all indulge in my intellectual pursuits for greater and ever

¹ Confirmatory bias is “a type of selective thinking whereby one tends to notice and look for what confirms one’s beliefs, and to ignore, not look for, or undervalue the relevance of what contradicts one’s beliefs.”

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greater understanding of life in its various manifestations. Why not instead chuck it all and concentrate on progressing on the spiritual path, more specifically the path of Self-enquiry advocated by Sri Ramana Maharshi?

My friend opined that if I believed in Ramana’s truth, then I would not be doing all this reading and intellection. He felt that my not being convinced fully was a good thing and that it was best to discover one’s own truth in life, because then one would truly believe in it. That was news to me. I thought I had been sold on Advaita and “Ramana’s truth.” But since my well-meaning friend would have me do some soul-searching, I did it and found that what I was not sold on was that there was a single and straight “path” to the Truth.

To be sure, Ramana Maharshi himself prescribed various paths depending on the situation of the spiritual seeker who approached him, though when the questioner persisted he would hold up Self-enquiry as the direct and final ‘path’. So maybe I was not yet prepared to sit for long spells without any thoughts in the mind. I seemed to prefer the waking-walking-reading-thinking-questioning-pondering path that leads to sudden flashes of intuition into how things are and what the truth is, like *satori* in the Zen Buddhist tradition. After all, the path to a particular place depends on where you are currently located.

I thought it was time to seek a second opinion on the matter. When I wrote to another friend about this dilemma, he gave this very perspicacious and sane advice: “Question yourself, What is important for you? What is the paramount thought/emotion that drives your life? Seek it, embrace it and trust the resultant response to guide you.”

I figured that while Self-realisation as enunciated by Ramana and other Advaitins was the paramount thought/emotion that drives my life, intellectual development also seemed important to me because of my *vasanas*, cultural conditioning and the fact that I derived simple enjoyment and fulfillment from it for whatever reason.

To confound matters, the Advaitic truth is that Self is the sole reality. The multiplicity of the world and one’s psychophysical entity in it are an illusion and superimposition on the Self, just as a snake
is superimposed on a rope in darkness. The Self knows itself by itself without the intermediation of mind and intellect, which are merely its illusory manifestations. With that much accepted, it becomes clear that whatever knowledge one acquires about the world and one’s psychophysical entity in it is like acquiring knowledge about the snake, and no amount of knowledge about the snake will reveal the nature of the rope. The only way to seek and embrace this seemingly paradoxical dichotomy is to see if the path to Self-realisation can be harmonised with one’s intellectual development. I would like to share with the reader some conclusions I have reached on just such a harmonization.

As I see it, we seek Self-realisation spurred by two different motives: (i) we may realise, like Buddha did, that all life is suffering because one is subject to disease, old age, and death; or (ii) even if we overestimate our chances of escaping such suffering or we are stoically disposed to accept such suffering should it come visiting, we might still find life to be unbearably meaningless – after all, the pursuit of wealth and pleasure, however righteously pursued, can quickly start to lose its appeal for the thoughtful individual. Perhaps, in most cases, it is some combination of those two motives that is at work.

Advaita and indeed all religions in general say that (i) Self-realisation or the ‘kingdom of heaven’ dawns when the soul is fulfilled or could one say, perfected; (ii) the way to perfect the soul is through overcoming the selfish egoistic impulses within ourselves; (iii) ego is transcended either through surrender to God or through intense meditation and contemplation in which our interest in and attention to the world starts getting attenuated, until finally the bond that ties us to the world is snapped and we become Self-realised. So, the final message of all religions seems to be this: overcome the ego to realise the truth.

The ones who accept the above bare bones model of religion often find themselves at odds, like I did, with other pursuits in life, particularly interest in intellectual knowledge, which one cannot avoid on account of the ego that continues to operate in the interim.
As Aristotle said, “By nature, all men long to know.” The dilemma then becomes how should one accommodate the demands of the intellect for more and more knowledge when religions would have you either surrender to God fully, as in ‘Let Thy will be done’, or resort solely to one’s own resources and meditation, much like what the Buddha advised.

Perhaps the problem needs to be recast to resolve the dilemma. We should instead ask, does the pursuit of intellectual knowledge, be it of the natural sciences (like physics, chemistry and biology) or social sciences and humanities (like sociology, political science, psychology, literature and philosophy) have anything to contribute toward Self-realisation? It would be a shame if they cannot help us in that regard because Nature has expended a great deal of effort in evolving the mind and intellect of man, which man has used to accumulate and refine a great body of knowledge. Perhaps therein lies also another trouble, that there is an ocean of knowledge out there in which one can get lost. What is the compass to guide us when we are sailing on it?

That compass, I would like to argue, is one that points always in the direction of that wise maxim inscribed on the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, in ancient Greece: ‘Know Thyself’. Since we at present accept our body and mind as our self, which constitutes the ego, we can rephrase it as “Know thy ego.” As pointed out above, the only thing standing between the truth and us is our own ego. So, ego is our enemy. And the more knowledge we have about the characteristics of our enemy, the closer we are to conquering it. The sciences deliver us just such knowledge. It is true that the paths of surrender/devotion and contemplation, too, have the ending of ego as their aim, and are quite efficacious in and of themselves, as testified by the saints and sages in all religions. But the sciences also can give a helping hand in that quest and can be used as auxiliary and adjunct tools. A few examples:

Abraham Maslow (1908–1970), an American psychologist, proposed a theory of human motivation called “the hierarchy of needs.” He says that there are five levels of needs, and roughly speaking, the
lower-level needs must be met before we can start to fulfill higher-level needs. The five needs are (i) physical needs – for food, water, clothing and shelter; ii) safety needs – for steady employment, for stability in nature and society. Typically these are the needs which make you take out insurance policies and live in safe neighbourhoods; (iii) social or love/belonging needs – these make you start a family, join societies and clubs, and participate in social, cultural and voluntary activities; (iv) esteem needs – these can be internal motivators like self-respect, self-esteem and accomplishment, or external motivators like respect and recognition; (v) self-actualisation needs – these deal with the quest to reach one’s full potential as a person. The motivators at this highest level tend to be truth, justice, wisdom, meaning, etc. Once we have a framework such as this, it is easy to see the pulls of our ego for the fulfillment of these needs more accurately in every situation and phase of life, to see how best we can fulfill or renounce those needs to move forward, and indeed, to what extent we should value each of those needs as worthy of pursuit. Otherwise, we might be blissfully unaware of what it is that is unconsciously driving us and wasting our time and energies.

John Rawls (1921–2002), a philosopher who taught at Harvard, wrote the seminal work *A Theory of Justice* (1971), in which he employed the famous thought experiment that he christened the ‘original position’, in which you operate behind a ‘veil of ignorance’ about your characteristics and position in society, when you set out to deliberate upon an ideal society. Rawls shows that under such conditions, one errs on the side of justice because one does not know what position one would occupy in that society and so would not want to disadvantage certain groups into which one might well fall once the arrangements are agreed upon and the ‘veil of ignorance’ is lifted. You might well ask what this has to do with Self-realisation or even with ego. Well, religions try to make us moral by exhorting us to “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” and reminding us that not only karma operates but also reincarnation, which, come to think of it, is a bit like the “veil of ignorance” because we do not
know to which group in society we will belong in the next life. That
should serve as a rational ground for being moral, though, of course,
it need not be the only motivation for being so.

Modern physics tells us we have to make do with uncertainty
(Heisenberg’s ‘uncertainty principle’\(^2\)) and probability (Schrodinger’s
equation\(^3\)) when it comes to our knowledge of the world, which
awakens us to the truth that there is more to this world than meets
our eye. The limitations on our knowledge seem to be written into
the laws of nature, appreciation of which can serve to make us realize
that certain truths could well transcend the human mind – “Reality
lies beyond the mind,” as Sri Ramana said.\(^4\)

Medical research is throwing up tons of data on how our immune
system is affected adversely and our hormonal balance is disturbed
when we experience and hold on to negative thoughts and emotions
either about life in general or toward specific individuals or groups. So
we harm ourselves also when we harbour ill will toward others. This
is one more case in point for the rationale of adhering to religious
maxims, such as ‘Love thy neighbour as thyself’, ‘Love thy enemy’,
‘Sarve jana sukhino bhavanthu’, (May all the people be happy) and
‘Vasudhaiva kutumbakam’, (The whole world is one family).

One could go on and on giving such examples from research in
the sciences that are throwing new light upon religious truths. Since
we are in a time in which any truth must pass muster before the
tribunal of our reason, we would do well to weld the sciences with
religion to satisfy ourselves from the standpoint of reason that the
truths propounded by the saints and sages of all religions are indeed
true and worthy of adherence, if only for our own welfare. In doing
so, we start to break down the walls of our ego that immure our souls
in bondage and prevent us from realizing the truth. It is said that
a chance remark or a stray statement could make us realize a great
truth and aid our progress toward Self-realisation. Who is to say we

\(^2\) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uncertainty_principle
\(^3\) http://hyperphysics.phy-astr.gsu.edu/hbase/quantum/schr.html
would not come across such a remark or statement in the course of our readings, be they of the sciences or humanities?

So I have decided to pursue, at least for the time being, both intellectual development and meditation/Self-enquiry, trusting my inner urge to seek intellectual knowledge\(^5\) (even if it be only about the snake). It is also the case that intellectual development can purify the mind, making it sattvic. And a sattvic mind is supposedly conducive for sadhana. But since sattva guna is supposed to bind by attachment to happiness and to knowledge, hopefully one will arrive at the final stage pointed at by my friend sooner rather than later:

“Perhaps you are coming to the end of your hunger for ideas and concepts, for they are basically empty without the experience that they point to or attempt to describe. The finger is not the moon. There is only so much one can cram into the brain. There are quantum jumps at certain stages of our life according to the ‘amount’ of consciousness we have built up. All yoga and meditation is for the development of consciousness. The deeper our consciousness is developed the more will we spontaneously understand.”

\(^5\) http://www.bhagavad-gita.org/Gita/verse-14-06.html.

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**Haikus**

Cheenu Srinivasan

Restlessness is mind
What folly to becalm it.
Elusive is peace

Our inner peace Is
Not the absence of disturbance.
Is this too troubling?
Vedapatasaala boys performing Sandhyavandhanam
Japa is defined as the recitation or repetition of a name of the Divine, or of a mantra. Bhagavan Ramana both accepted the traditional validity of japa and also redefined how and why a mantra should be recited. We have seen in January 2012 an examination of mantra. Here we will discuss the value of japa or recitation of a mantra.

We should understand that though the practice of *atma-vichara* and japa are different and ultimately they arrive at one and the same point as elucidated by Bhagavan when he gave *upadesa* to Ganapati Muni in 1907 at Virupaksha Cave. In answer to the Muni’s question about the value of *tapas* and mantra he said, “When the mind enquires from where the notion of ‘I’ arises, and dissolves right there at the origin of its birth, that is tapas. On the enquiry as to the exact origin from where the sound of mantra arises, the mind dissolves at the origin itself and that is *tapas*.”


John Grimes is a recognised academic authority on Advaita. He received his Ph.D. on Indian Philosophy from the University of Madras.
Why does one perform japa? Most people are looking for a vision or a miraculous power or a boon or blessing. According to Ramana, japa purifies the mind though its main purpose is to lead towards a realisation of the Self. First, Bhagavan would enjoin atma-vichara but if the devotee was not ready he would advise or assent to the devotee practising japa to purify the mind and heart. He said, “Mere performance of tapas is its progress also. Steadiness is what is required. Moreover they must entrust themselves to their mantra or their God and wait for its Grace. They don’t do so. Japa even once uttered has its own good effect, whether the individual is aware or not.”

Somehow the image of the Divine has to become visible both within and without. The sweetness of His/Her/Its presence should permeate one’s every waking moment. The Divine is the Self. The Self meets us wherever our limitations give It a foothold. The Self presents Itself to that which the heart adores and It will respond. The Self discloses Itself in a myriad of names and forms.

The name is sacred and repetition of the name bestows merit. Bhagavan Ramana said, “You bear a name to which you answer. But your body was not born with that name written on it, nor did it say to anyone that it bore such and such a name. And yet a name is given to you and you answer to that name, because you have identified yourself with the name. Therefore, the name signifies something and it is not a mere fiction. Similarly, God’s name is effective. Repetition of the name is remembrance of what it signifies. Hence its merit.”

Naming is a very serious business. It is an important and sacred act. Who are you? ‘Ramana’. ‘Ramana’ is the name that his parents gave to that particular physical body. Who is Ramana? Who are you? To give someone a name is an important rite. In Sanskrit texts, name giving is one of the sacred rituals. As a sacrament, giving a name signifies the outward expression of an inner refinement and grace. It is intended to give one a distinct aura. It stands guard against undesirable influences. It may also invoke grace through the propitiation of the deity – nama

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2 Venkataramiah, M.,(compl.) Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi, Talk§103.
3 Ibid., Talk§526.

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japa, for the repetition of a mantra (deity’s name) invokes the Divine. Bestowing a name is a laksana (defining mark). For example, a laksana of Krishna, besides his name, is his flute. The laksana of Ganesha is his elephant’s head. For Ramana, it is Arunachala. For those who know and adore these individuals, the laksana itself will be enough to invoke strong feelings of love. Similarly, their names evoke that which they represent.

When a person still believes that they have a name and form then Ramana said that japa is quite beneficial. He said, “So long as you think you are name and form, you can’t escape name and form in japa also. When you realize you are not name and form, then name and form will drop off of themselves. No other effort is necessary. Japa or dhyana will naturally and as a matter of course lead to it. What is now regarded as the means, japa, will then be found to be the goal. Name and God are not different.”

One’s name is the means whereby one is able to approach the named. It is a means to reach the goal, for the goal is contained in the means. Consciousness of the name leads to consciousness of the named. As one thinks, so one becomes. Like a piece of wood that has been placed in a fire, sooner or later the wood itself turns into fire. Likewise, a mind that is immersed in the Divine’s name will eventually become Divine. The individual (jiva) becomes the Divine (Shiva) through the Name. The Chandogya Upanisad says, “Meditate on the Name as Brahman.”

Ramana said, “The Self is called by different names – Atman, God, kundalini, mantra, etc. Hold any one of them and the Self becomes manifest...Mantra japa leads to elimination of other thoughts and to concentration on the mantra. The mantra finally merges into the Self and shines forth as the Self.”

Can you think of the word ‘tree’ without also thinking of its form? There is an intimate connection between the name and the form it represents. Further, it is said that the name is even sweeter than the

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4 Mudaliar, Devaraja, *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, 9-3-46 Morning.
5 *Chandogya Upanisad* 7.1.5.
form. If one thinks of a mango, one immediately becomes happy and one’s mouth begins to water. The word ‘mango’ conjures up an image of a large, sweet, perfect mango. But if one sees a physical mango, all sorts of doubts may arise: ‘Is it sweet? Will it be stringy? Will it taste oily? How much will it cost?’

When asked if Advaita can be realised by japa, Sri Ramana replied, “Yes.” When the enquirer then said that japa is of an inferior order, Ramana replied, “Have you been told to make japa or to discuss its order in the scheme of things?” Talk is cheap. The crux of the matter for Bhagavan is practice. Practice, practice and see what happens.

It was often asked if one was to do japa of ‘Who am I?’.

Ramana replied, “You say ‘Who am I?’ becomes a japa. It is not meant that you should go on asking ‘Who am I?’. In that case, thought will not so easily die. All japas are intended, by the use of one thought, the mantra, to exclude all other thoughts. This, japa eventually does for a person. All other thoughts, except the thought of the mantra, gradually die and then even that one thought dies. Our Self is of the nature of japa. Japa is always going on there. If we give up all thoughts, we shall find japa is always there without any effort on our part. In the direct method, as you call it, by saying ask yourself ‘Who am I?’ you are told to concentrate within yourself where the I-thought (the root of all other thoughts) arises. As the Self is not outside but inside you, you are asked to dive within, instead of going without, and what can be easier than going to yourself? But the fact remains that to some this method will seem difficult and will not appeal. That is why so many different methods have been taught. Each of them will appeal to some as the best and easiest. That is according to their fitness.”

Any means which enable one to abide in the silence of the heart it is good. If one cannot spontaneously and naturally do so, Bhagavan recommends japa or dhyana (meditation). Bhagavan compares japa to an elephant who is given a piece of chain to hold in its trunk because,

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7 Ibid., Talk §55
like the mind, the trunk of the elephant is normally fidgety. When it has a chain to carry the twitching is controlled. It is the same with the mind. Thus by engaging the mind with japa or dhyana, the restive thoughts are quietened after a struggle and the mind can focus on one thought. As a result it becomes peaceful.9

Sri Ramana himself rarely gave out mantras. But he spoke highly of the practice of japa and often advocated it as a useful aid in one’s spiritual practice. The question related to competency. Sri Ramana said, “Quite so. Tapas depends on the competency of the person. One requires a form to contemplate. But it is not enough. For can anyone keep looking at an image always? So the image must be implemented by japa. Japa helps fixing the mind on the image, in addition to the eyesight. The result of these efforts is concentration of mind, which ends in the goal. He becomes what he thinks. Some are satisfied with the name of the image. Every form must have a name. That name denotes all the qualities of God. Constant japa puts off all other thoughts and fixes the mind. That is tapas. One-pointedness is the tapas wanted.”10

10 Ibid., Talk §401.

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**Attention Readers in the Middle East**

The subscribers to the *Mountain Path* who live in the Middle East can receive the latest issue of the magazine online. To register please email the shipping address and the subscription number to ashram@sriramanamaharshi.org. A link to the pdf version of the latest issue will then be sent regularly to your email address.
Lord Pasupati in the Ashram Vimana

John Maynard
Ulladu Narpadu Anubandham

Based on Lakshmana Sarma’s Commentary

Benedictory Verse

S. Ram Mohan

Introduction

Ulladu Narpadu is the wonderful text, which explains the direct path of vichara marga (Self-enquiry) in forty verses; it epitomizes Bhagavan’s instructions to realize the Absolute in a direct, absolute way. It is the gift of Bhagavan to seekers who wish to understand the direct path in a lucid way, without confusion or the accretion of irrelevant ideas. It is complete in itself.

Ulladu Narpadu Anubandham, the Supplement to the Forty Verses on Reality, is a compendium of verses, which contains verses from Sanskrit translated into Tamil by Bhagavan and also some verses composed by Bhagavan directly in Tamil. These verses are powerful aids for the seeker to capture and internalize the idea of the Absolute. They give him or her practical guidance on how to lead a life in the world. Verses 13 to 17, 31 to 33, 35, 36 and 38 were composed by S. Ram Mohan is on the editorial board of this magazine. He is also the editor of the Tamil magazine Ramanodhayam, dedicated to Bhagavan.
Bhagavan directly as Tamil verses; verses 8 and 10 were composed by him first in Sanskrit and then were translated by him into Tamil; verse 11 was composed first in Sanskrit by Lakshmana Sarma after listening to Bhagavan on the topic and later was translated by Bhagavan into Tamil. The first two lines of verse 12 were composed directly in Tamil and the next two lines contain the Tamil translation of Verse 84 of Sankara’s Vivekachudamani. Verse 20 is an adaption of a Sanskrit verse in Prabhulinga Leelai in Tamil. The benedictory verses, verses 21 to 24, 26, 27, 29 and 30 are translations of slokas from Yoga Vasistham. Verses 1, 7 and 37 are adaptations from AdiSankara’s compositions. Verse 5 is from Srimad Bhagavatham; 9 and 25 are from Devi Kalottaram. Verses 18 & 19 are from the Malayalam Ashtanga Hridayam. And finally, verses 2 to 4, 6, 28, 34, 37 and 40 are translations from various Sanskrit works.

The import of the verses can be classified as below: verses 1 to 5: the efficacy and glory of satsanga (the company of the wise); verses 6 and 7: a description of the end or the Absolute; verses 8,9,10,20,24 and 25: the method of spiritual sadhana; verse 11: the glory of the realized jnani; verse 12: an admonition against holding the body-mind complex to be real; verses 13,14 and 40: the extinction of the ego; verses 15 and 16: the futility of siddhis (supernatural attainments); verse 17: laughter at the ignorance of the worldly person; verses 18 and 19: references to the spiritual heart in the corporeal body; verses 21 to 23: further expansion on the theme of Heart as Self; verses 26 to 27: the way to lead a spiritual life in the material world; verses 28,29,30, 31,33: the state of the jnani; verse 32: the three states of existence; verses 34 to 37: the futility of theoretical knowledge; verse 38: the unique grandeur of the one abiding in the Self; verse 39: non-duality and surrender to guru; verse 40: the conclusion that the Self alone is real.

Benedictory Verse
We meditate on that Reality, wherein alone the entire creation subsists, to which it all belongs, from which it came into existence, for which alone all these exist, by which it came into being, into which all these entities resolve, that is the Reality (sat).
Commentary
This benedictory verse from *Yoga Vasistham* says that the Reality which is the substratum of all perceived projections is beyond the speech. Its real nature, as ‘It is in Itself’, cannot be described in words. That is, Its *swaroopa lakshanam* or True Nature is not susceptible to being reduced to mere concepts. Hence, this attempt to describe It is made to indicate or point to It as the original Source from which the three primordial entities – *jiiva* (the individual soul), *Isvara* (personal God) and *jagat* (the world) – came into being. Thus Its *tatastha lakshana* or indicative characteristics are offered. It is worthwhile to remember that the first verse of *Arunachala Pancharatnam* gives the *swaroopa lakshana* and the second verse, the *tatastha lakshana*, thus Bhagavan describes the Reality, and gives the work an auspicious beginning (*edan kanne*), wherein the Real (*ulladu*) is the substratum on which the world-appearance is superimposed by *avidya* (ignorance), like the snake seen on a rope. The rope is the reality; it is the cause for the appearance of the snake. Likewise, the Reality (*ulladu* or That which exists) is the substratum and cause for the projection of the world-appearance. The Reality – literally ‘the real thing’ – is the reason for the perceived appearance of the world. The world has no existence of its own *edanelellam* (whereof is all this) – to which all these belongs because the world is a mere appearance or reflection of the Reality, the creation in its entirety belongs to that Reality. As waves, foam etc. being transient, belong to the ocean, likewise this apparent world also truly belongs to the Self.1

‘*Edanindru*’ – ‘from which’: That is, while the root of the world-appearance is the ego-sense, which is the identification of the body-mind complex with the Self, yet on enquiry we discover that the original source of this ego-sense is nothing but Reality. Waves, foam etc. being transient, belong to the ocean, likewise this apparent world also truly belongs to the Self.1

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1 We find in this verse an interesting grammatical construct. Here all the eight grammatical cases (except the vocative case) are used with reference to Reality – the locative case (in which), the genitive case (of which), the dative case (from which), the instrumental case (by which), the accusative case (that Self) and the nominative case (which it is).
etc. arise from the ocean. Similarly, the entire creation has risen from the Reality (Self) wearing different names and forms. They constitute the myriad lives and the world. Self is the true source. When ego due to nescience rises from the Self, along with it rises the world and jivas. In verse 26 of Ulladu Narpadu a similar idea is expressed.

‘Matrevai yaavum edan poruttaal’ – ‘All these for the sake of which’. The world serves as an instrument for the will of God. The usual tendency of the mind is to flow outwards (as Yama informs Nachiketas in Kathopanishad). Life in the world of phenomena makes the jiva experience an endless stream of misery, interspersed by occasional moments of happiness. At one stage, the frustrated jiva seeks uninterrupted joy. The agony of living creates dispassion in his mind and propels him to seek the source of infinite Bliss. The mind is turned inwards to the Reality which is all Bliss. Thus the mumukshu athirst for liberation turns inwards to abide in the Self.

‘Edanal ivvaiyam ellam ezhum’ – ‘By which all the [apparent] world arises’. Vedanta ascribes the arising of phenomena to the power of maya which, though not different from Reality, manifests itself as the manifold universe and myriad lives. Man deduces the existence of a supreme Power by perceiving the manifold world and assuming a creative Power. The very first line of Ulladu Narpadu ‘nam ulagam kandalaal nanavam sakti ula’ says that because we see the world we accept the fundamental principle (first cause) which has a manifold creative power. The names and forms, the seer, the screen on which the picture is painted, and the light which makes the portrait visible, all this is He, the Self.

This sentence can also be interpreted as ‘what this entire world is made of’. As waves and foam are all made of the water of the ocean, the entire world is made of the Self only. It reflects the statement of the very first verse of Isa Upanishad. “The entire creation is pervaded by the cosmic Consciousness.” The great Vaishnavite acharya Nammalvar says, “Without leaving even a small gap, even in the most concealed places, God pervades all.”

‘Ivvellam eduve aahum’ – ‘which becomes all these perceived phenomena’. As the rope is the basis for the appearance of the snake,
Reality (ulladu) is the basis for the world-appearance. The unreal world comes into apparent existence; it appears as real because its substratum, the Self, is real. Can the world be said to be the same as the Reality? Ulladu Narpadu verse 4 says, no. For the jnani, who is in the supreme state and has the ‘infinite eye [of awareness]’ the world-appearance has ceased and the Reality, the Self, alone remains. This has also been explained in verse 18. It is clear that the world did not truly come into being all by itself, it is only an unreal, transient appearance. The Reality remains unchanged as the sole Reality. This is the truth of non-becoming or ajata siddhanta.

‘Ahattul vaippaam’ – ‘Let us enshrine this in the Heart’. The benedictory verse by saying that the Reality never undergoes any change; it remains as pure non-dual Consciousness. Let us meditate upon this primordial Consciousness.

The word vaippu also means a ‘great treasure’. Hence the last sentence can have two meanings: (i) we all meditate on the Reality (ulladu) as the Self in the Heart; (ii) the Reality is the treasure in the Heart. It is the treasure in the heart because It is the locus of infinite bliss for the jnani. He is rich because he is want-less, as compared to the worldly man who wanders in samsara, with his mind turned outwards to the world, unaware of the limitless treasure in the Heart, and seeking for the small pleasure of baubles outside. The jnani having found this treasure has become One with it. He is free from all desires. There is nothing for him to aspire for in the phenomenal world. The verse indicates an aid to sadhana, known as the ‘vision of unity’ by dissolution or pravilaapa drishti. It refers to the direct insight in reality which causes the result to be resolved into the cause. This vision views the world as merged and dissolved in the Self. Just as the froth, bubbles and waves of the ocean are not different from the ocean, even as the dream-world is the same as the dreamer, the perceived world is no different from the perceiver or the Self. The verse instructs us to practise this view so that the vasanas or latencies become attenuated and finally lost so that the seeker becomes fit to take to the direct path of diving into the Heart through vichara (enquiry).
Encounters with Ramaswami Pillai

ROLAND OLSON

When I was at Ramanasramam this past January with my daughter, Katy, it was our custom to walk partway up the Mountain sometime after breakfast and sit quietly. Frequently, on the way up or back, we stopped to visit the Samadhis of Bhagavan’s great devotees just inside the back ashram wall.

One sunny day in mid-January we noticed activity around Ramaswami Pillai’s samadhi and were reminded that it was the anniversary of his death. I’d already seen the notice on the bulletin board outside the New Hall and had not intended to attend the ceremony, but that morning, as we sat quietly, something made me change my mind and hurry back down the Hill.

By the time we got there the ceremony had already started and we could smell the incense in the fresh morning air. There was some chanting and the usual offerings of bananas and coconuts. Not many people attended — most of those who did were old timers who had known Ramaswami Pillai personally.

Roland Olson lives in Wisconsin, USA, and regularly comes to the ashram.
Afterwards, instead of getting up and leaving immediately, the older devotees leaned back, relaxed, and began to talk and laugh in much the same way my family does when we discuss our departed relatives at big family dinners. It felt more like a conversation about a kind, somewhat eccentric, hard working, old farm uncle who was always willing to give you advice than, a commemoration of a Self-realised being. That was very fitting because Ramaswami Pillai never struck me as the kind of man who would fit in a niche in a church or temple wall with a burnished halo around his head. He was too plain and unpolished. The first time I saw him sitting on that old metal folding chair near the library in the Morvi Compound, staring up at Arunachala, I wondered if it was safe to leave my sandals outside. There was a fierceness and intensity about the old man that intimidated me. I certainly had no idea that he had spent most of his life at Ramanasramam levelling the ground, tending the garden and chipping out steps on the Mountain so Bhagavan wouldn’t slip. How was I to know that by then he had been a permanent resident of the Ashram for 65 years and had moved closely with Bhagavan for 28 of those years?

Perhaps it was my sense of shame at wondering whether he might steal my sandals that held me back from making his acquaintance that first visit in 1988. When I returned to Arunachala the next year a fellow devotee, Robin, introduced me to him and I overcame my shyness by asking him a question about Self Enquiry. He responded by glaring at me and shouting, “Forget about that! That is not for you! Look at Bhagavan’s picture! Just sit quietly and look into his eyes! He will do everything! Is it a mistake that God spelled backwards is dog? It is not! Where else will you find someone who returns only good for evil, who is always your friend, who has complete trust in you? Bhagavan will do everything. Just trust him.” I tried to ask another question but it was as if he hadn’t heard. “Just go back to the Source! Water comes from the ocean as vapour, rains down into the rivers and goes back to the ocean. God to God! That bliss is there right now. Meditate in front of Bhagavan, eyes open, eyes closed, it doesn’t matter. He will do everything for you.”
The ferocity and sheer volume of his voice overwhelmed me. I had expected him to answer my question with sophistication and surgical precision and instead it felt like he was hitting me over the head with a board, but I did take him seriously enough to write down what he said in my journal and think about it.

When I visited the Ashram again two years later with one of my daughters we walked over to the Morvi Compound so I could introduce her to him. Maria was a young woman in her early 20’s, a college graduate and rather reserved. She knew very little about Bhagavan and the Ashram. This visit to Ramanasramam was to be an exploration for her and not a deep sea dive. That did not deter Ramaswami Pillai from pushing her into the deep water! As soon as the introduction was over he began to shout. “Surrender! That’s the path for you. Nothing else is necessary. Life is full of trouble and challenges so put your cares on the Lord and surrender. Churches and temples are not necessary! He will take care of it all!” He stared at her as he went on in this vein and concluded by saying, “If you wish you may take this as initiation.”

As we walked away she looked at me and said, “Dad, can you tell me what that was all about?” How could I explain? I took care to write down what he said and sent it to her several years later when she asked me to.

I returned to Ramanasramam again in July of 1993 and brought my mother, my niece and my daughter with me. We stayed for about two weeks, did Pradakshina, visited the Arunachaleswar Temple and Skandashram, and I probably took them to meet Ramaswami Pillai but I don’t remember anymore.

I do remember making my way to his room by myself one afternoon during siesta time, when everyone was resting. I was disappointed that he wasn’t sitting in his usual spot gazing at the Mountain, but a devotee pointed out his room to me and said, “He’s probably napping, but you can go in and sit with him.” This seemed to be an unusually bold proposition to me, but I looked in and saw him asleep on his bed, and so slipped into the room. His room was plain and the afternoon was very warm. I sat down next to him and
breathed deeply and all at once my mind unreeled all its troubles. The pot boiled over.

These trips to Arunachala, that something compelled me to make, only seemed to make me more aware of my own inner difficulties and frustrations. The vasanas seemed stronger than ever and I felt completely powerless. Nothing seemed to help, and that afternoon as I sat there in the presence of that simple undistinguished old man who needed a shave, all I could do for the longest time was repeat over and over in my mind the words “Help me!”.

There was no miracle or sudden burst of light, nor did my misery abate, but at least I was able to let it all out, and that last visit is the one that is foremost in my mind when I think of Ramaswami Pillai. Years later it is somehow a great consolation that I was able to let everything out in his presence. My questions did eventually get answered. My misery abated. Life smoothed out.

When Ramaswami Pillai died on January 14th, 1995, he was a hundred years old. In the immediate hours preceding his death a group of devotees gathered around him in his room as he chanted Aksharamanamalai and other hymns from Nooltirattu. It is a matter of great personal happiness to me that a photo of him sitting on the old metal folding chair, staring up at Arunachala, hangs to the right side of the old dining room door as you enter. I’ve noticed when I have read stories about Siva in the Puranas that when he comes to earth he brings along a whole cast of characters, some tattered and torn and very unconventional. These aren’t the kind of people you read about in shiny American yoga magazines with their beautiful faces and lovely bodies. They don’t exhibit extraordinary powers nor do their chakras light up in various hues. They don’t teach secret yoga techniques at beautiful holiday resorts for a special package price. Should you meet one you might not realise it at all. You might wonder if he’s going to steal your sandals.
Swami Vivekananda and the Journey of the ‘Hero’

A. Srinivas Rao

This article draws its framework and argument from the work of Joseph Campbell (1904-1987) in his path-breaking book The Hero with a Thousand Faces. Published in 1949 this book became one of the most influential books of the twentieth century, influencing psychiatry, mythology, anthropology, literature, filmography and other fields.

The education of youth the world over has increasingly been skewed towards building skills and competencies to fulfilling their economic needs and less towards a synoptic and inward awareness. In other words while one of the first aims of education is to prepare a person for a livelihood, there are wider aims to make him appreciate his role in society, that he should consider himself a legatee of the range of human experience, as a part of nature and history; that he learns to enjoy the arts and creative pursuits in connecting himself to human culture and refinement; finally that he ponders on the meaning

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and purpose of his own life. It is these latter aims that are more enduring and don’t change with age or culture. It is such a synoptic education that develops self-worth, belonging, autonomy, security and self-awareness in the youth. The heroes whose narratives populate youthful imagination often provide a shorthand to this range of skills and capabilities, values and identities. The ideal of the Hero across cultures shows a remarkable consistency across time and cultures.

The Mahavira or great hero of the Indian imagination has, since the development of the shramanic traditions\(^1\) been more grounded in self conquest before he brings his light to the world. Do the lives of individuals born in modern times display similar patterns to those in the pantheon of heroes mythical or otherwise who bring light and a promise of redemption? This is the question one addresses in the life of one of India’s great modern sons, Swami Vivekananda.

Mythmaking is a continuous process couching in metaphor the contest of life’s great dualities, providing signposts in the journeying in their search of meaning and purpose. Inscribed in the hearts of men and women down the ages, the heroic firmament shines with Gilgamesh, Prometheus, Odysseus, the Buddha, Jesus Christ, Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr, or even Luke Skywalker, Superman and Harry Potter, embodying the virtues of fearlessness, honour, justice, perseverance, and most importantly service to others.

A hero may be described as one who has done something far beyond the ken of human experience, defining the limits of our aspiration and bringing a message of hope and redemption that lingers in our collective consciousness. Who we choose as a hero thus defines who we aspire to be and the ideals we espouse in our self-definition. Whom youth consider worthy of emulation as a hero is indicative of their cherished values and the health of that society. It is in the narrating of the tales of the heroes that we revisit and re-examine our lives like

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\(^1\) Shramama refers to the ascetic renunciante traditions that were in opposition to the Brahmanical traditions with their reliance on sacred text and rituals. It means ‘one who strives’. The term was applied to monks who devoted their lives to spiritual enlightenment. The tradition is best understood by the term parivrajaka, meaning a homeless wanderer.
those who ask questions such as ‘What would Jesus have done?’ and provide for the young an ideal to emulate. Paradoxically with the inexorable march of modernity, as our symbolic life as embodied in religion and spirituality, art and culture retreats into the margins, the need for such signposts is even more acute.

Thus each culture tells its tales, by the fireside or under neon lamps, though clouded by the mists of time and by our cynicism, of our longings and our metaphorical journeying of the spirit. These tales are our talismans against the pervasive cynicism of our times, as we stare vacantly at shards and clay feet around us. A poet puts it “these fragments I have shored against my ruins.” Our imagination hankers for the visage of the hero who soared like the mighty Garuda to the very heavens of our aspiration.

Yet this begs the important question of whether a hero comes into this world with a consciousness of his/her mission (which is akin to asking about the dual nature of Christ, both human and divine) or becomes the anointed one when he or she pushes at the boundaries of human experience. In modern times it is the latter interpretation that is more germane. Mythical heroes may not resonate with contemporary youth given the outmoded cosmologies they are embedded in and thus the quest for the Hero persists in the modern world.

We shall examine the archetype of the Hero and persuade the reader to examine the life of Swami Vivekananda as one who shares the same characteristics. The most pertinent and persuasive theorist of the Hero and his journey is the renowned American mythologist Joseph Campbell who, besides showing the commonalities that undergrid all myths, was a popular teacher whose ideas created a sensation in the decades following his 1949 book *The Hero With a Thousand Faces.*

Introduced to the Eastern traditions and the life of the Buddha by J. Krishnamurti in 1923, in a chance encounter on a ship sailing to London, he became a scholar of the Eastern traditions editing the works of Heinrich Zimmer on Indian philosophy and myth. Lesser known is the fact that he was familiar with the lives of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, and assisted Swami Nikhilananda in the translation of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* and *The Upanishads.*
Before we examine Campbell’s views on the myth of the Hero we need to mention a few presuppositions that his work assumes. The first is the notion of the archetype that exists in what Carl Jung called the collective unconscious. Jung maintained that there is an unconscious that is common to all human beings consisting of archetypes that seem invariant across cultures. The hero is one of these archetypes. Second is the notion of ‘threshold crossing’ which in anthropology is called ‘rites of passage’ which are rituals that punctuate important transitions in a person’s life according to his or her culture.

Campbell uses this idea to demonstrate an imaginary boundary permeable only to the hero whose threshold separates the mundane world from the numinous world into which the hero or heroine journeys. It is the breaking into the threshold and the triumphal return that the hero’s journey is all about. Campbell uses comparative mythology to make his point, maintaining that there is only one mythology that has its inflections based on historical circumstance and the specific cultures. He believes that in each us is the Hero whose trajectory for better or worse follows the same path. Myths are symbols that reconcile the challenge posed by the outside world to summon a deep response from an inner world that is numinous, and seeks a harmony with the order of nature.

Campbell points out that there are two types of heroes – the physical and the spiritual – and he gives primacy to the latter. In the first the hero battles or performs a courageous act and in the latter he expands the range of human experience and returns with a redemptive message. This journey is a series of rites of passage that hurtles the individual from conventional safety and psychological immaturity to self-reliance, a departure, death and resurrection. The journey is punctuated with trials and tribulations and involves losing one’s self or giving up one’s self for a higher end or greater goal that is morally embedded. This leads to transformations in their consciousness (which makes them larger than just leaders). Since the hero returns with a message of redemption he is also very socially grounded and compassionate, like a bodhisattva.
This journey is a search for the source of life and meaning, like the finding of one’s father or a life giving elixir or God. This journey is especially poignant in our times, as our environment is now mechanistic and doesn’t respond to spiritual needs. This inauthenticity and loss of the spiritual life is what heroic journeys are all about, including those which are physical and valorous.

The lives of the prophets Moses, Christ, Buddha and Muhammad show the same structure of an archetypal adventure. The Buddha’s struggle against desire and fear, represented by the daughters of Mara with the very Earth as his ally and witness; his triumphal return to a ministry marked by the turning of the Wheel of the Dharma, death and his return as the Maitreya is similar to Christ’s journey from baptism, wanderings in the desert, the three temptations of the Devil, his ministry, death and resurrection.

Similar also are Mohammed’s mountain meditations and fasting to his epiphany of Gabriel commanding him to ‘recite’ and commencing his ministry and his ascension. This is the high adventure of the soul, in the wasteland of materialism: the slaying of the dragon of the ego (the repository of wants and beliefs), and the experience of illumination with its radiance through all things good and evil.

The structure of this archetypal journey trod by Moses, Buddha and Christ is what Campbell calls the ‘Monomyth’. Campbell described 17 stages in this journey, the call to adventure, refusal of the call, supernatural help, crossing the threshold, belly of the whale, road of trials, meeting with the goddess, encountering the temptress, atonement with the Father, apotheosis, the boon, refusal to return, the magic flight, rescue from without, the return threshold, mastery of two worlds, and freedom. There are many ways that others have abbreviated this list including its basic tripartite structure of Departure, Initiation and Return. A simplified version of the journey is depicted in a popular guide for screenwriters The Writer’s Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers by Christopher Volger (2007). The tripartite division is where the idea of liminality or the crossing of the psychological threshold, the conquest and the return across the threshold becomes apparent.
SWAMI VIVEKANANDA AND THE JOURNEY OF THE HERO

THE HERO’S JOURNEY

1. Ordinary World
   2. Call to Adventure
   3. Refusal of the Call
   4. Meeting the Mentor
   5. Crossing the Threshold
   6. Tests, Allies, Enemies
   7. Approach
   8. Ordeal, Death & Rebirth
   9. Reward, Seizing the Sword
   10. The Road Back
   11. Resurrection
   12. Return with Elixir

ORDINARY WORLD

SPECIAL WORLD

THE HERO’S INNER JOURNEY

1. Limited awareness of problem
   2. Increased awareness of need for change
   3. Fear, Resistance to Change
   4. Overcoming Fear
   5. Committing to change
   6. Experimenting with new conditions
   7. Preparing for major change
   8. Big change with feeling of life and death
   9. Accepting consequences of new life
   10. New challenge and Rededication
   11. Final attempt(s) last-minute dangers
   12. Mastery
In examining the life of Swami Vivekananda along this structure one thing becomes apparent. It is the larger sense of destiny that his mentor Sri Ramakrishna foresaw and chaperoned with caution. He looked upon Naren’s self-realisation not as an end but saw the upliftment of his people as his principal mission. These twin ideals of \textit{atmano mokshartham jagadhitayacha} akin to the twin Buddhist ideals of \textit{prajna} (wisdom) and \textit{karuna} (compassion) became the bedrock of the mission.

It may also be debatable whether in the life of Swamiji there is a bimodal quest with his aspiration to \textit{nirvikalpa samadhi} (super consciousness) and service to man as two sequential quests. Given the limitations of this article we assume that readers are familiar with Swamiji’s life in some measure.

The young hero Narendranath was marked since his childhood with exceptional abilities, a prodigious memory, a quicksilver intellect, a compassionate heart, a mastery of music and oratorical skills, a strong presence and handsome countenance. His call to adventure commenced with his restlessness against the background of ritualism in the name of religion and the suffering of the people; a yearning to shift the centre of spiritual gravity from the known to the great unknown. His call took the form of a question that he asked of the wise men of his day “Have you seen God?” the answer of which he received with intense sincerity and conviction from an unlettered priest, Sri Ramakrishna.

While being initiated into the mysteries of the experience of the void, Naren cries, unwilling to let go of his ties to his family, duty, obligations, fear and his ideas.

His master Sri Ramakrishna became his guardian spirit and supernatural ally, an amulet that held him in the security of the World Womb. The death of his Master was the event that pushed him and his band of brothers to form a monastic brotherhood at Baranagore in accordance with the Master’s wishes. This was the first crossing of the threshold; a striking out into an unknown dangerous region of liminality where rules and limits lie suspended.
The mystical *Viraja Homa* marks the transition and a swallowing up into monastic rigours marked by uncertainty of food and shelter and even clothing, incubating an inner metamorphosis for two years, the belly of the whale; indicative of the Judeo-Christian myth of Jonah who having been called by God to give His judgment to Nineveh, refused to heed the call and fled on a boat which was swallowed into the belly of a whale for three days and nights which regurgitates him upon his prayer.

His march as a penurious mendicant across the sub-continent is the period of the road of trials and tribulations and his initiation first hand to his country, its condition and what it stood for.

This phase of the Hero’s journey is marked by ordeals and tests though guided by advice amulets and supernatural agents like the three temptations of the Buddha by Mara and of Christ by the Devil.

Once while at Khetri, Swamiji spurned the king’s invitation to attend a dance by a young girl. Desirous of meeting the young Swami she burst into a soulful protest that the philosopher’s stone discriminates not across metals, turning all alike into the purity of gold. Regretful of his error of viewing her as a temptress the Swami returns chastised.

Overcome by his exhausting journeys spanning almost five years he arrives at the feet of the Virgin Goddess Kanyakumari and seeks the Mother Goddess’ blessings and validation of his love for his people. With the luminosity of her fabled nose-ring she leads him into the light: his mission to restore the lost individuality of the nation and raise the masses.

The Swami now encounters his life mission, the Face of his Father and its terrible intimations and his lingering skepticism to his master, filled with self doubt whether he was up to that mission; until he saw in a dream, his Master leading him to the sea, beckoning him to follow: this is the atonement with the Father.

He wrote to Sri Sharada Ma, seeking her permission and blessings which she duly conveyed with her assurance. Armed with this sword he slays his dragons of self doubt and surrenders his ego to his unfolding
destiny. He soon is surrounded by helpers and guardian spirits like his princely patrons, the Maharajas of Khetri, Mysore, Ramnad and other disciples like Alasinga Perumal who organised his journey to the Parliament of Religions at Chicago. His allies multiplied in measure to his difficulties and included Miss Sanbourn, Professor Wright, Mrs. Hale and many others who removed his obstacles and countered his detractors.

As he rose to render his address at the World Parliament, the Goddess Saraswati ignited his tongue and in just three words brought to their feet the several thousand of the audience in rapturous applause. This was the moment of his apotheosis and he spoke of the Great Spirit that manifests in each religion and culture, undiminished and universal in a grand symphony, guiding us all into its one common heart.

He travelled extensively in the US and Europe urging a harmonizing of the material achievements of the West with the spiritual cultivation of the East and the elixir born of this churning was his ultimate boon. After three years of teaching and interaction with scholars and eminent people he wished to return with the Golden Fleece wondering what he might encounter on his return. This was the stage of skepticism or refusal to return. This is often the case of prophets who having seen the other shore, wish to remain there and not be burdened by a long ministry among their people as in the case of the Buddha.

Swami Vivekananda however returns triumphant with a host of disciples, helpers and resources, notably Margaret Noble, Josephine McLeod, the Seviers, Mr. Goodwin and others who bear witness to his conquest and his acceptance of his svadharma (destiny).

Jubilant crowds mobbed his arrival at Colombo and Swamiji was forced to change his travel plans (the magical flight) and the Virgin Goddess at Cape Comorin smiled as he crossed the return threshold and the Rajah of Ramnad personally drew his carriage. With a blast of his conch like the mythical Panchajanya from Colombo to Almora Swamiji proclaimed his redeeming message to his people.
He established an institution as his lasting legacy of his master’s ideals the Ramakrishna Math and Mission and committed his master’s mortal relics to a splendid shrine. With his journey to Amarnath, the Kshir Bhavani temple and other places he reaffirmed his deep mystical experience of insight straddling the inner world and the outer. With his second journey to the West he becomes the master of both the worlds, Inner and Outer as metaphorically as East and West.

He conquers his fear of death, whose premonition he conveyed while pouring water to wash the hands of his disciple Sister Nivedita at a Last Supper and welcomes death ‘like a groom his bride’ in a final act of freedom.

With his mahasamadhi he attains liberation from these earthly fetters and his tale and timeless message continued to reverberate right through the 20th Century and beyond. He has become immortal. His spirit descends upon his people to guide a fledgling Indian nationalism to a full attainment of freedom and continues to light the cause of service unto others.

Vedanta and its idea of the unity of the individual ego and the supreme soul was an ancient insight of the Upanishads. The uniqueness of the message of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda was the presence of divinity in everything and everyone indicating an equality that is as socially and politically potent as it is spiritually. It was not just a social but a spiritual imperative to serve god in man rather than just an intellectual appreciation of the grand unity. It was very relevant for the times, mired as they were in an oppressive caste system and extremes of poverty and ignorance and the contradiction of the religious belief with its social practice.

Swamiji’s message was the missing link that united compassion to Hinduism’s ideal of unifying wisdom. Swamiji’s faith was in the human potential and its divinity. This unique bond does not dismiss the corporeal as an illusion but on the contrary it insists on the return from God to Man and asserts their essential equality. Thus no man errs but progresses from a lesser truth to a higher one, keeping the road open to all with their diversity of faith and practice.
Puja

Here is the Temple of the inmost joy,
all Existence its open gate;
the Garden of the Radiant One,
where sweet rainfall blesses the patient earth,
the wheel of prayer turns day and night
and the bells call, ‘Come, dear heart, enter’.
Since time unknown the Invitation stands.

Nothing is said or heard, yet wondrously,
before a single thought can stir,
the good news spreads through all the worlds,
Your overflowing Gift of Love,
and Stillness blossoms as Your endless Name.

Nothing is gained or lost, yet splendidly,
the bells are calling, ‘Come’, the bright flames dance,
and all our hearts,
Star of the South, forever turn to You.
Meditative Mindfulness

The Practice of Being

FATHER AMA SAMY

Mindfulness practice and meditation are basic healing therapies and are most popular in the West where they have unfortunately become secularized and are watered-down versions of the originally rigorous Buddhist forms. Mindfulness (Pali: sati; Sanskrit smrti) means ‘remembrance’ or ‘recollection’. Remembrance is paying attention, being present or being aware.

The Buddhist practice of mindfulness is the basis of vipassana meditation. Vipassana is an ancient Buddhist meditation technique that waned with the passing of time but was revived in the last century in Burma and Thailand.

There are various schools of vipassana. Vipassana is contrasted with samatha, which is concentration and samadhi. Vipassana means ‘clear seeing’ or ‘inquiry’ – seeing into the impermanent nature of all reality and the (egoic) self. The Satipatthana Sutta is the classic

Father Ama Samy is the founder and abbot of Bodhizendo, the Zen meditation centre in Perumalmalai, Kodaikanal District in Tamil Nadu.
teaching on mindfulness. The teaching of mindfulness in this sutra as well as in vipassana in general has come to be understood in a problematic way: mindfulness practice is portrayed as watching, observing, analyzing and labelling of one’s sensations, emotions and thoughts; it is self-consciousness taken to the extreme, which may be counterproductive.

Mindfulness is three-fold: awareness, attitude and awakening to the ground of awareness. The interpretation of these dimensions is many-sided. Let us briefly present the essentials:

Mindfulness is first of all awareness: non-judgemental awareness of what is happening in one’s own body and mind as well as in the environment; it is being present and paying attention; it is not merely observing or watching; it is a felt sense, like drinking water and knowing if it is cold or warm. Some make a distinction between embodied self-awareness and conceptual self-awareness. Conceptual self-awareness is based in language, is rational, explanatory and abstract; embodied self-awareness is based in sensing, feeling and acting, and is spontaneous, open to change, concrete and present, moment by moment. Mindfulness of course is embodied self-awareness.

Try this simple exercise: Sit for a few minutes and pay attention to your breath and body sensations. You can pay attention to your breath sensation, to your body, to your being seated, to the sounds around you and so on, but breath-awareness is basic. Pay attention to how your breathing feels, in the abdomen particularly. Your abdomen is moving in and out. Just be aware of the sensations. When you are aware like this, your awareness is not restricted or confined, but is vast and boundless, and yet it is focused on the breathing sensation and the body.

Mindfulness is being grounded and centred in the body, in the felt sense of the body as well as in what is happening in your mind and in the environment. It is slowing down, being present, alive and aware, not being carried away by fantasies or thoughts, but coming back again and again to the breath and the body.

Though your attention is centred on the breath, there will be spaciousness in your awareness, a spaciousness as vast as the sky.
Dragon and Tiger, Japan, 17th century
this spaciousness, you can let-be yourself, giving yourself space for all emotions and thoughts; mindfulness is befriending and being-with your emotions, needs and thoughts. Like waves on the surface of the ocean, you let them come and go but do not tarry with them, do not cling to them. Do not be afraid. The emotions or thoughts are only emotions or thoughts; they will not destroy you. There is power in you, and strength. Do not allow yourself to be carried away or to get too involved in these thoughts and fantasies. Particularly thoughts and images of self-put-downs or arrogance and the like will capture and drag you down. Bodily desires, power fantasies and magical mentalities are seductions with no exit. Fantasies often destroy and mislead us. Of course, there is a place for imagination and fantasy, but it is not that anything goes.

Mindfulness involves an attitude of self-acceptance, unconditional acceptance. You are all right as you are. You are accepted, you can be yourself. It is a coming home to self and to the ground of the self. It is to be at peace with yourself; with your destiny and fate, with your body, mortality and with life and death. This calls for patience, endurance and courage. Such self-acceptance involves self-compassion. No mindfulness, no compassion. Further, it is also finding one’s home in the earth, sensing one’s interrelatedness with all beings. Being at peace and at home, one can choose one’s way from the centre of oneself, not merely from the head. Paradoxically, mindfulness opens one to the unexpected, to the possible and the novel. One’s life will not be fixated and over-controlled, but flow like a river.

Mindfulness calls you to orient yourself to what is good, true, beautiful and loving in the course of your life, not so much in terms of concepts or ideas, but in terms of felt sensations and feelings. It is similar to St. Ignatius’s second set of discernment rules: you go more by what moves your heart than by ideas (The Spiritual Exercises). Look at your life-choices and relationships and go by what gives your heart peace and inner freedom. It is a long process of testing and discerning and choosing your direction in life congruent with your heart and mind. Such felt sense and peace is not the end as such. It is what empowers us to carry on with our life and work. It is both to be at peace and at the same time ceaselessly to strive and struggle. As the
poet T. S. Eliot writes, ‘Teach us to care and not to care/Teach us to sit still’.

In learning to live in the present, one is aware of being rooted in the past and stretching towards the future, yet one is grounded in the here and now and learns to pay attention to what is taking place here and now. Above all, one pays attention to the other, is present to the other in openness and acceptance, not labelling and categorizing or being judgemental. Mindfulness is non-judgmental towards one’s self and towards the other. It is letting the other be other. At the same time it is the power to discern wrong as wrong and right as right.

Such mindfulness can be prayer. Mindfulness in a formal setting is practised in a seated posture; when this posture is born of faith, hope and love, it is prayer. It is non-discursive, contemplative prayer, prayer of being present, learning to let-be and let-go, surrender and self-acceptance. Usually our prayer is head-centred, conceptual and imaginative, which is an imposition from without; whereas mindfulness is a form of flowing from within the body and earth, heart and mind.

Above all, mindfulness means awakening to the ground of awareness itself, it is in a sense awareness of awareness. This fundamental awareness is the limit of the world; it is the ‘clearing’ for the appearing of the world. There is no world apart from this awareness. It is further the groundless ground of the world, beyond space and time, with no inside or outside. This is our process of coming home to the primordial source and ground of reality. It is the nameless Mystery that is our source, origin and end, the sustenance of our life and love. Mindfulness practice is finding our home in the Mystery that is graciousness.

Let me end with the legend of the Buddha’s temptation by Mara. Just before the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, realized enlightenment, it is said that the tempter Mara attacked him with armies of monsters to frighten him away from his seat under the Bodhi tree. But the about-to-be Buddha was not moved. In the final temptation, Mara demands that the Buddha vacate his seat and depart, for, as Mara claims, the earth on which the Buddha is seated belongs to him. The Buddha then touches the earth and calls on her to witness; the earth

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1 Ash Wednesday.
opens up and proclaims that she belongs to the Buddha and not to Mara. Thus Mara is vanquished. As the morning star rises in the sky, Siddhartha Gautama realizes enlightenment and becomes the Buddha. The awakening of the Buddha is his bearing witness: “I and all beings on earth together attain enlightenment at the same time.”

The Buddha touching the earth with his right hand and the earth’s witness to him is symbolic of us humans being rooted and grounded in earth, matter, body and psyche. Our spiritual realization dawns and matures only when we acknowledge our rootedness and grounding. And it flows from the unconditional acceptance of our selves and from awakening to the ground of our reality.

The Buddha’s left hand is resting on the lap holding an alms bowl. This is symbolic of our interdependence, inter-being and community. It points to our embodied relationality as central to our healing, becoming whole and awakening. It is in dialogue that one discovers oneself, gets reconciled with oneself, with others and with the earth and the world, and awakens to the Mystery of our selfhood, our Original Face before our parents were born.

Chant
(a quiet recitation prior to meditation)

John Wade

Be Still and Know That I Am God
Be Still and Know That I Am
Be Still and Know That I
Be Still and Know That
Be Still and Know
Be Still
Be
I was born in Hungary into a warm and loving family. At the age of sixteen I lost my parents and my only sister in the Holocaust. Why was it that I alone escaped the fate of my family? I had no answer, but felt very confused. Did I feel protected? No, I did not. But now, as I think it over and over, I may have found some support in a conversation I had with my best girlfriend. It happened one year before the end of World War 2, we were fifteen at the time. We talked about what would happen if in the terrible war we should survive alone, without our families. Her answer came promptly: “I’ll commit suicide.” My answer took a long time: “Maybe there is predestination,
MOUNTAIN PATH

a purpose or task in my life?” It is possible that this thought gave me some support in this critical period of my life, though I was not conscious of it at the time.

I got married very young and in 1949 we immigrated to Israel. My husband and I built a new life and a new family. I knew nothing about Yoga until one day I turned on the radio “by chance”, (now I know that nothing happens by chance) just as the speaker announced that a great Yoga teacher had arrived in Israel, Swami Venkatesananda, and would be giving a public talk. I immediately decided to go to hear him. After a short hour of listening to him I became convinced that Yoga was for me, for my body and soul. It would become my way of life.

And so, in 1969 I began training under the guidance of the Swami. I studied Hatha Yoga – physical yogic exercises, and Raja Yoga – the spiritual and philosophical part with meditation. I loved my teacher very much and he inspired me to become a Yoga teacher myself. In the course of time I left behind the physical part and concentrated only on the spiritual yogic approach to life with meditation and self inquiry, and I also did voluntary work.

In 1972 strange things began to occur. I was enjoying a beautiful summer morning on the beach, with my husband and our two sons. I was lying on the warm sand and fell asleep. In my dream I was an Indian boy, walking down the street with my Indian mother. I asked her to send me to school, but she explained that we were poor and had no money for school. Suddenly my mother stopped and pointed to an old man walking in the opposite direction. She then said to me, “Run my son, run to him, because he can teach you far more than you could ever learn in any school.” And so I did, I ran after the old man. Hearing my heavy breathing the old man stopped, looked at me with a warm, loving glance and put his hand on my head.

That was it! I woke up finding myself with my family by the sea. This dream seemed extremely strange, but as life’s rhythm is very fast, the swimming, going home, preparing and eating lunch, talking – all these caused the unusual dream to fade somewhat.
After lunch I went to bed for a siesta and immediately fell asleep. The entire dream appeared before me again, exactly the same as the first time, as if watching the same film in the cinema for a second time. Now I became tremendously impressed, but I hardly understood what the dream came to reveal. That was the beginning. From that day on I continued to have the loving man visit my dreams, without having any idea who he might be, and so I referred to him as my old uncle. In those dreams he would often teach or advise me, and at times reassure or protect me.

He appeared and reappeared even more often around the days of the Yom Kippur war in October 1973, at which time our elder son, Reuven, served in the army. He had been in grave danger, along with others, and we worried very much for the fate of them all. The news on the radio was exciting and many times terrifying, but in my dreams my old uncle came, comforting and consoling me lovingly. I felt he was there to protect, not only me, but also our son on the battle field. Indeed, how grateful we felt later on when hearing of his escape from death by what seemed to be pure luck.

Another prominent dream with my old uncle related to my younger son, Rafi, who was sixteen years old at the time. Rafi asked for our permission to buy a small motorcycle. He had worked during the summer and earned the money for it. We did not approve, explaining how dangerous it was, due to the crazy drivers on the roads. We asked him to wait two more years, by which time he would be old enough by Israeli law to drive our car. However, Rafi has a very strong will, when his heart is set on something he will not give up easily. We, as his parents, had a serious conflict with him. On the one hand we knew very well how risky driving a motorcycle could be for a teenager, but on the other hand we felt that forcing our veto on him was too great of an interference. This was his life, not ours. We had a really great problem.

And then my dear old uncle appeared again. In my dream the three of us, my uncle, Rafi, holding a motorcycle, and I, stood in the middle of a very busy street in Tel Aviv. My uncle asked me to wait on the sidewalk while both of them rode the bike in the heavy traffic.
They began driving awfully fast and dangerously, I watched them breathlessly, quite frightened. After a while they returned with broad smiles and my loving uncle said to me, “I took your son into very difficult situations. He is clever, skilful and cautious. You should give him your permission to buy the motorcycle, trust him and don’t worry.”

As I woke up the next morning I was so happy and felt relieved of a difficult problem. I immediately turned to my husband and said, “I approve, I approve the bike.” He was the only one to whom I told my dreams. My enthusiasm inspired and convinced him to give his blessing. I sincerely believe the dream helped me remain calm and quiet each time Rafi came home late. Thank God, he was never involved in an accident.

Nearly two years had passed since my first dream on the beach. Being a Yoga teacher I visited a library in a Yoga centre. I stood in front of a bookshelf and randomly picked out one book. I opened it up – and nearly fainted! My loving uncle’s beautiful face with a brilliant warm glance was staring at me from a picture on the first page. The name printed at the bottom of it was Sri Ramana Maharshi. The book’s name happened to be *Ramana Maharshi and the Path of Self-Knowledge* by Arthur Osborne. I began reading the first lines and found out that the “uncle” from my dreams was one of the greatest spiritual masters of the century!

I could not express my feeling in words at the moment of this new revelation. Suddenly a curtain was lifted from my eyes and a new kind of perception opened up in me. I felt an enormous thirst to learn and live according to Bhagavan’s teachings, and let it be absorbed in me. Fortunately I never had any doubt as I began to discover the Direct Path; I knew inside my heart that I had found my way, the purpose of my life.

I became grateful to Ramana Maharshi and to my fate. Since then, Bhagavan takes me hand in hand in day to day life, and shows the way to Self-realization. His teaching is complete and perfect. His answers to the deepest questions are the most direct and accurate, simplifying the most complex problems with just a few words, clearing out every doubt or misunderstanding. There is never an unnecessary word, nor a missing one.
I must confess that since I found my master and his teachings in many wonderful books, he appears very rarely in my dreams. But from the very first dream I was irresistibly drawn to him, feeling a magnetic love for Bhagavan. This is something beyond logic – how dreams, books and the radiating face of my master, could so greatly enrich my soul. I had never before experienced anything so enlightening; my devotion to Bhagavan is the most important happening in my inner life. I love my family very deeply and am grateful for my good fortune of having them with me. Even so, no one can compare this sort of love to the ties which bind me to Bhagavan. That love is happening as if on another sphere, as if I lived a double life and it played on like constant background music. So deep inside that there is no distance, nor can there ever be division between Bhagavan and me. He is in my soul.

Visit to the Ashram

It was a great surprise for me to find out that the Ramana ashram is continuously functioning and even growing, more than twenty years after Ramana’s Mahasamadhi. I wrote to the editor and became a lifetime subscriber of the Mountain Path with great pleasure and also asked for available books. As I learned that the Ashram receives visitors, a great longing arose in me to see the places where my master had lived. I wanted to meditate in the meditation Hall where his radiation vibrates in the air, to walk on the footpath of Arunachala where he walked and which he loved so much. I longed to be near His Samadhi.

Unfortunately I couldn’t allow myself to go for many reasons, family and other reasons. The greatest hindrance of all was my husband’s anxiety, he feared for my safety. At that time there had been no diplomatic relations between Israel and India; with this in the background concerns for one’s security made going a difficult decision. I didn’t wish to travel in such conditions that would make my family worry. I decided to wait for the right time, when the right circumstances would present themselves. It happened indeed after sixteen years of waiting and longing, the conditions became ripe. My husband gave his blessing and let me go.
I arrived at the Ashram in December 1987. It was in the middle of the night, millions of stars above my head accompanied me as I walked in. A strong feeling took me over: I AM HOME! In the first days I felt so excited and happy that I couldn’t stop shedding tears of happiness.

At that time I no longer had any questions at all, but I had to learn to strike down the restless mind and to remember to BE, only to BE! Bhagavan’s love brought me to Arunachala and his grace guides me to eternal Consciousness.

The Ashram manager in those years, Mani, received me kindly and I felt very grateful to him. My good fortune also brought me to Lucy Ma (Lucy Cornelsen), a permanent resident in the Ashram and a great devotee, with whom I corresponded for nearly two years, until she left her body. Her letters were so wise, loving and guiding, that parts of them got printed in the Mountain Path in December 1991.

I visited the Ashram two more times, happily enjoying the warm radiating atmosphere of Bhagavan. On my third visit I spent five beautiful weeks instead of the usual two-week visits I had previously got used to. I passed most of my time there sitting in the meditation hall, which I liked most of all. On the last days great sadness filled me, it was so very difficult for me to take leave of the place which radiated so much love and peace on me. I tried to console myself, hoping to return within the next two years. I had no way of knowing that I would never again visit the Ashram, at least not in physical form.

I arrived home to find my husband had been hospitalized for an urgent carotid operation in his neck. When I saw him the words came out of my mouth, almost without noticing, “I shall never leave you again!” Only later I began to realize what that meant for me – no more visits to the Ashram. Quite a big slap in my face, but after a short time I realized how much Rumi was right, saying, “Never grieve. Anything you lose comes back in another form.” That is just what happened. I began to feel how Bhagavan occupies my heart more and more, rules my thoughts and even my feelings. Of what importance is it, taking my body there, if everything is inside me right here and now?
It isn’t that my life changed, but rather it was my understanding that changed, transformed and deepened. After reading many wonderful books about the teaching of Bhagavan, meditating 2-3 hours daily and continuously holding him in my heart, I reached a state of stillness in my heart which couldn’t be disturbed by the outer world, even during the turmoil of life. That means having no desires anymore, what remains is only the strong thirst for self-realization. Practising self-inquiry led me to somehow catch the One, the One Self in all, the “I AM”. I feel extremely fortunate for receiving this most precious present, a guidance, which helps me through all difficult moments in life. Even more so, there is tremendous love, so intense that I can almost feel it in the cells of my body. Bhagavan is with me, HE is really the core of my being. I relate to life from a different angle of vision, aware of the truth of the underlying unity of existence, of the whole universe.

I owe all this to you, dear Bhagavan. Thank You.

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**The Names of Lalitha**

Ramesh Menon

*Dayamurti,*
you are the highest mercy,
waylight in the dark;
you who raise us up, again,
each time we fall in the night.

*Daityahantri,* who
are the huntress of evil
in the surreal heart;
Red queen of the labyrinth,
who rides the mystic tiger.

The poems are loosely based on the Japanese tanka form of five lines. A tanka is a haiku with two extra seven-syllabled lines. The lines have 5/7/5/7/7 syllables, in that order.
दृश्यनाद्वितीय जननालक्षिप्तये।
काश्यो तु सत्यान्युक्तिः सत्यादरुणाचले। ॥ १ ॥
करणापूर्वतापािं सर्वागवतसस्मृ।
तरणेनुजातासामां सत्यादरुणाचलम्। ॥ २ ॥
समस्तातनाधारें सत्यान्युक्तिप्रमु।
सच्चरथसोपते(?)सत्यादरुणाचलम्। ॥ ३ ॥
काश्यनप्रतिमासस्त सांध्विकाः सत्यसङ्करसदमु।
माया च राज्य सुरयविष्म सत्यादरुणाचलम्। ॥ ४ ॥
बद्धच्छवजातंज्ञातसंविकार्यते बर्रुम।
बर्त्तमातद्वास्मोधिः सत्यादरुणाचलम्। ॥ ५ ॥
काश्यनप्रतिमासस्त सुराकेरिदिम्प्रभम्।
बद्धवाक्रप्रप्रित्यान्य सत्यादरुणाचलम्। ॥ ६ ॥
दिश्याकेशिकल्वर्तारिचक्षुरक्षेत्रनाकरम्।
रक्षाकेसिककान्तं सत्यादरुणाचलम्। ॥ ७ ॥
आषभृतिसमाषुक्मक्किमाकस्म्मपदम्।
दिश्यभक्तिसत्युक्तानं सत्यादरुणाचलम्। ॥ ८ ॥
विनायकसुराशेष्व विसुवेदक्षेन्द्रसैंविंम्।
विमलारणाराज्यं सत्यादरुणाचलम्। ॥ ९ ॥
मन्दरा मध्यकावासुतकाजचम्पकाम्बजः।
इन्द्रापूतलां देवीं सत्यादरुणाचलम्। ॥ १० ॥
संपत्तः पार्वतिद्रो सुर्यचन्द्वानिलोचनाम्।
मन्दिरसिद्धानाम्बजं सत्यादरुणाचलम्। ॥ ११ ॥
॥ इति श्रीआरुणाचलार्यं सम्पूर्णम्। ॥
There are many poetic works composed in praise of Sri Arunachala. This particular stuti was published in a volume titled Stotrarnavah, from the series of the ‘Madras Government Oriental Manuscripts Series’, Volume LXX, edited by T. Chandrasekharan, 1961, page 74. For those interested, the volume can be found at the University of Madras Oriental Manuscripts Library, which originally published it. The catalogue notation on it is Acc.16097, S4968.

We do not know who the author of this work is. It was the tradition to attribute a poetic work to someone other than the original author as a mark of respect or to leave the work anonymous.

There is another stuti attributed to Sankaracharya which affirms the importance of giripradakshina and the belief common in tradition and among devotees of Arunachala, that thinking of Arunachala when one dies, gives liberation.

The composition does contain stanzas and lines which are common to several other works in praise of Arunachala and Lord Siva in general. Though this work is said to be an ashtakam, or composed of eight verses, it is actually eleven. This is not uncommon, for example, Bhagavan
composed Arunachala Padikam which nominally should be in ten verses but instead it is in eleven verses.

The first verse is particularly well known in south India and is quoted in the Arunachala Puranam which says the verse originated in the Rudra Samhita of the Skanda Puranam. The last verse is a summation. This work is marked by laudable poetic skill and devotion to Arunachala.

From a darshan at Chidambaram,¹ From taking birth in Tiruvarur,² From dying in Kashi,³ one certainly gets liberation, [and also] from remembering Arunachala. (1)

From remembering Arunachala — the One, Whose outer corners of the eyes are filled with compassion For those who come to Him [like a calf to its mother] for refuge, Who has the new moon and matted hair on His head. (2)

From remembering Arunachala — the One, Who is the Support of the whole world, Who is the embodiment of Existence-Consciousness-Bliss, And Who has thousand(s) of warriors. (3)

From bringing to mind Arunachala — the One, Who shines like a statue of gold, Who grants one’s desired object and its fruit, And Who is the Chief of the Gods. O save me! (4)

From thinking of Arunachala — the One, Whose locks of matted hair are studded with the moon, Whose body is half female, And Who is like an [ever] expanding ocean of mercy. (5)

¹ The Seat of Consciousness.
² The Lotus of the Spiritual Heart.
³ The Light of Realisation.
From thinking of Arunachala — the One,
Whose golden reflection shines forth,
With the brilliance of ten million suns,
And Who is captured by meditation at Chidambaram.  (6)

From thinking of Arunachala — the One,
Who has a lesson for all the enemies of the Gods,
Who consumed [and held] the deadly poison in His throat,
Protecting all worshippers.                                                      (7)

From recalling Arunachala — the One,
Who has eight forms,
Who grants the object of one’s desire,
And its fruit to those who have superior devotion.                    (8)

From remembering Arunachala — the Guru,
Who is the Sovereign of the Gods,
Who has bright red lotus feet,
And Who is served by Brahma, Vishnu, and Indra.                    (9)

From remembering Arunachala — one attains the Goddess
Worshipped by Indra and other Gods,
With the flowers of the wish-fulfilling celestial coral tree,
Mallika-jasmine,
Jati-jasmine, Kunda-jasmine, Champaka-magnolia, and lotus.  (10)

From remembering Arunachala — the One,
Who creates prosperity,
Who is Parvati’s Lord,
Who has the sun, the moon, and fire in His eyes,
And a gentle smile on His lotus face.                                       (11)

Thus ends the complete Sri Arunachala Ashtakam.
On July 4th, 2008, while America celebrated its Independence with fireworks, our family in North Carolina was experiencing fireworks of a different flavour. A storm accompanied by lightning struck a large pine tree that came crashing through the roof into our home, leaving us gaping at the open sky as rain, pine cones and branches of the tree showered down on the living room floor. I had just come back from a retreat on Ramana Maharshi and Self Enquiry. Grace helped me accept the event as a divine blessing. While our

Usha Rajagopal’s family hails from Manalurpet some 10 kms from Tiruvannamalai. Her father visited Bhagavan as a young child along with her grandfather. She first visited Arunachala in 2006 and had the darshan of Bhagavan, after which she continues to visit the Ashram with her family by his grace. She lives in Durham, North Carolina, USA.
home was being repaired, I spent the next six months on a couch reading the countless reminiscences by devotees of Bhagavan. While I was moved by all their experiences, those of three people especially caught my attention, Paul Brunton and Mr. and Mrs. S, the couple from Peru. Their thirst to find the truth and their unconditional faith in travelling across the globe echoed Bhagavan’s words to S. S. Cohen, “It is your faith that has brought you here, why doubt it?”. While Paul Brunton needs no introduction and in many ways was instrumental in guiding countless seekers from around the world to the feet of Sage Ramana and the sacred hill Arunachala through his work *In Search of Secret India*, there is practically no information regarding the Peruvian couple other than T.K. Sundaresa Iyer’s reminiscence. Here he shares with us an account titled ‘Thought Travels Too’, published in *At the Feet of Sri Bhagavan*:

“Mr. and Mrs. S. were visitors from Peru to the Ashram. They had heard of the Maharshi and His greatness, of how Arunachala accepted Him, and how He and Arunachala are one. To the couple, Sri Maharshi’s presence on earth seemed the second coming of the Christ Himself, so they had longed for years to meet this God-Man once in their lives.

“They were too poor to find the money for their passage to India. But in their burning desire to see the God-Man in flesh and blood, they laid by each week a few coins out of their small wages, and in a few years they had enough money to become deck-passengers without the pleasant luxury of the higher classes on the ship. After sailing for several months, they reached India and Tiruvannamalai.

“The couple narrated their entire story to Bhagavan, all the privations they had undergone to have a look at Sri Maharshi. Bhagavan was all kindness to them. He heard their story with great concern, and then remarked: ‘You need not have taken all this trouble. You could well have thought of me from where you were, and so could have had all the consolation of a personal visit.’ This remark of Sri Bhagavan they could not easily understand, nor did it give them any consolation as they sat at His feet like Mary. Sri Maharshi did not want to disturb their pleasure in being in His immediate vicinity, and so He left them at that.
“Later in the evening Sri Maharshi was enquiring about their day-to-day life, and incidentally their talk turned to Peru. The couple began picturing the landscape of Peru and was describing the seacoast and the beach of their own town. Just then Maharshi remarked: ‘Is not the beach of your town paved with marble slabs, and are not coconut palms planted in between? Are there not marble benches in rows facing the sea there and did you not often sit on the fifth of those with your wife?’ This remark of Sri Maharshi created great astonishment in the couple. How could Sri Bhagavan, who had never gone out of Tiruvannamalai, know so intimately such minute details about their own place?

“Sri Maharshi only smiled and remarked: ‘It does not matter how I can tell. Enough if you know that in the Self there is no Space-Time.’

“This confirmed in the minds of the couple Sri Maharshi’s original statement that they could well have thought of Him even at their own home and so obtained His blessings.”

The Spiritual Axis
My curiosity about Peru was further heightened by Major Chadwick’s account of how Bhagavan repeatedly said that there must be another sacred mountain on the other side of the globe. As he wrote in A Sadhu’s Reminiscences:

“Sri Bhagavan would wander out on to the Hill a few times a day, and if any attachment to anything on earth could be said of him, it was surely an attachment to the Hill. He loved it and said it was God Himself.

“He used to say that it was the top of the spiritual axis of the earth; there must, he said, be another mountain corresponding to Arunachala at exactly the opposite side of the globe, the corresponding pole of the axis. So certain was he of this that one evening he made me fetch an atlas and see if this was not correct. I found, according to the atlas, the exact opposite point came in the sea about a hundred miles off the coast of Peru. He seemed doubtful about this. I pointed

out that there might be some island at this spot or a mountain under the sea. It was not until some years after Bhagavan’s passing that a visiting Englishman had a tale of a spot, supposed to be a great secret power centre, in the Andes somewhere in this latitude. Later I found that though a centre had certainly been started it had failed. Since then I have been told of another person who is practising meditation in solitude in the region of the Andes in Ecuador. So it does appear as though there were some strange attraction about that part of the globe. The earth is not an exact sphere and maps are not so accurate as all that, so we are unable to pin it down to any definite point. It is quite possible that more is going on in that part of the world than we know and this would fit in well with what Bhagavan said.

“However I could never discuss the matter with Bhagavan as it was not until many years after his passing that I had any indication that anything of this sort was happening in those parts. I had many years ago travelled extensively in that country but had never seen anything which would lead me to think that there might be important spiritual centres there.”

Bhagavan’s every word echoed within as an utterance of truth and nothing that he ever shared can be taken lightly. This faith planted in me a deep desire to go to Peru and Macchu Picchu and honour Bhagavan’s words, the couple and the sacred mountain on the other side of the globe. My husband Rajagopal and I, accompanied by our children, were blessed to make this pilgrimage to commemorate our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. As we toured Peru, I was amazed by the many similarities between South India and Peru in the customs, traditions and most surprisingly the names of people, places, their Gods and Goddesses.

I recalled Major Chadwick’s conversation with Bhagavan about the possibility of a sacred mountain under the sea when several guides I happened to meet in Peru repeatedly spoke of the Andes being under the ocean for millennia and how even today they find shells and fossils on the mountains that support their belief.

Macchu Picchu and the Urubamba River
The Inca beliefs
Like Kashi, Cuzco, the Inca capital, is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities of the Western hemisphere. Originally called Akkamama, later named Cuzco, a Quechua word, it translates as the navel or centre of the world, which interestingly is one of the meanings of Tiruchuzhi, the name of Bhagavan’s birthplace. Akkamma, I am told, is the name of a goddess who is worshipped in parts of Karnataka even today. The tributaries of the Vilacanota River water Cuzco. The name of the river itself means Milky Way or sacred river. Like the Ganges, this river was seen as a celestial river flowing on earth. The Quechuas saw this river as a reflection of the Milky Way and believed in the connection between the two through cycles of rain. They saw water as the link between the earth and the sky.

This river originating in the Peruvian Andes turns into the mighty Amazon in Brazil. Interestingly, all the rivers in the southern hemisphere flow from south to north and even though the river is so close to the Pacific Ocean, like all the other rivers, it empties east into the Atlantic Ocean. The Incas traced their ancestry to the Sun Inti and therefore regarded the East as the most sacred of the four directions. All Sun Temples and almost every home that we observed in our travels had their main doors and windows facing East. Ina means Sun in Sanskrit.

The Incas, like the followers of the sanatana dharma, are worshippers of nature. They have only one God or Divine spirit whom they see in the many forms of nature. Their sacred number is three. They pay their respects to the three worlds, namely the underworld ruled by the serpent or Amaru, the land ruled by the puma, and the sky ruled by the condor. These they believe to be the manifestations of their divine mother Goddess Pacchamama! The similarity in names between the Goddess Pacchaimman of Arunachala and Pacchamama, as well as the green fertility Goddess of Peru, the Hindu worship of snakes as

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3 Apu is the name of the supreme being or God. There are also apus which are the spirits of the mountains and who reside on individual mountains. Both Macchu Picchu and Wayna Picchu have apus.
Nagas and rulers of the underworld, Shakti riding the tiger or lion and the skies being the home to Garuda like the Condor in Peru – all these parallels piqued my curiosity and the more I talked to the locals and looked around, the more did I find myself in a culture that shared much more with the ancient Hindu heritage of India than would have been obvious to a tourist.

The city of Cuzco itself was built in the shape of the puma. The Inca civilization traces its roots back to the sons of the Sun God Inti. Interestingly, the name of the first family is Ayyar. Ayyar Manco, the valiant survivor of the three Ayyar brothers, is believed to have descended to earth along with his sisters from a cave in the sacred hill and founded Cuzco, which later, under the reign of the Inca king Pacchakuti, became the headquarters of the Inca Empire.

Yatiri: A Sacred Ceremony
The chief was called Inca and the people were referred to as Quechua. After a bountiful harvest in summer, they offered their earth mother Pacchamama their gratitude for all her gifts by performing a Yatiri. The term is also used to refer to those individuals, both male and female, who are medical practitioners or healers.4

There is a shamanic centre at Etnikas, which is 45 minutes from Cuzco that was visited by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. I participated in a ceremony at this centre to honour the Divine Mother, Pacchamama. They offer several programmes for a fee and I chose to participate in the private, day-long ceremony offered without the hallucinogen Ayahuasca.

There were four stages to the process. The shaman explained in great detail the various stages with the assistance of the interpreter, Tedy. The first step was to cleanse the physical body. I had been advised to fast the previous evening and keep my body pure from all intoxicants. This is similar to the Hindu’s vrata.5 There are many volcanic rocks around the area and mineral springs that flow through them. Rich in sulphur and

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4 Yatiri literally means ‘someone who knows’, that is, a shaman. Yatiri are also qulliri or healers. A yatiri can be a man or a woman.

5 vrata
other minerals and very gaseous, the spring water acts like a purgative. I was administered more than five litres of this yellow coloured, fizzy water that looked like ginger ale. It tasted salty and I was asked to gulp it down quickly. After the cleansing ritual, the shaman prepared for the coca leaf ceremony. He held three leaves that reminded me of the bilva leaf in India, and chanted and chewed a leaf and then asked me to do the same. Then he started to make predictions with the guidance of divine spirits on matters relating to my health, personal and family life, career, and ultimately my spiritual journey.

He threw the dry coca leaves like a deck of cards on the floor and the predictions were based upon the way the leaves fell, the direction of the leaves, whether they fell face up or down, and so forth. The ceremony reminded me of the prasnam in rituals with shells that I had many times witnessed in Kerala. Amazingly, during the process I saw the leaf fall three times flat on the floor and flip of its own accord. The coca leaf reading then served as a road map for the next step. Based on the guidance received from his guides, the shaman prepared for the next step outdoors, which was to clean the subtle body. He spread out a cloth and it had several contents including llama black wool, seeds, charcoal and other natural materials. He began to blow and chant first on the objects and then on me. During this time he asked me to let go of all the dark memories and incidents that I was holding on to and forgive everyone and everything. Finally after chanting loudly he asked me to remain still with my eyes closed as he took the contents to be dissolved in the sacred Vilacanota River that was flowing beside the retreat. This process reminded me of the practice of drishti-parihara, the removal of the evil eye in our tradition.

The shaman then proclaimed that now that all my negative feelings and experiences had been released into the river, I was free of all negativity and ready to make an offering to Pacchamama.

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5 A vrata is a Hindu ceremony performed with the intention to gain a divine blessing for such purposes as health, wealth, offspring, etc.
6 A prasnam, literally ‘a question’, is a ritual employed to find out what the future may bring.
I was then taken to another location in the open that was surrounded by a ring of mountains, trees and water. The shaman rolled out a beautiful hand-woven cloth and started to place the things he had brought in a particular order on the fabric. First he offered red and white flowers, then he thanked all three aspects of Pacchamama by offering her food, gold, money, music and learning – like our offering to Durga, Lakshmi and Sarasvati. He offered many natural materials including raw rice, garbanzo beans, gold and silver foil, sweets, beads, corn, miniature flutes as symbols to thank Pacchamama for bringing music into our lives, lama wool, soil, representation of the stars, yellow confetti, and much more. I had taken with me raw rice, mung dal, turmeric and kumkum powder, whole betel nut and turmeric, soil and rock from Arunachala, water from Skanda Ashram, the Ganges and all the other sacred rivers, Bhagavan’s prasadam, semi-precious crystal, and a cloth for Pacchamama.

The shaman chanted and kept ringing the bell. He was so pleased to know that we too held our mountain sacred and had great reverence for all forms of nature. He was excited to learn about all the items being offered. He invoked Arunachala and prayed for the union of Macchu Picchu, Hyuana Picchu and Arunachala. He was amazed to know that our Goddess is also called Pacchaiamman. As he continued to chant, large drops of water fell from a dark cloud looming above the ceremonial space. I told him that in India we consider showers after a puja very auspicious and as a token of a divine blessing. The Quechus too had a similar belief.

Next he wrapped up the offerings in a bundle and blessed me with that. Then he placed some logs and dry grass and started a fire. Suddenly the entire place became very alive. The wind started to blow, fanning the fire in an easterly direction, and all of nature, including the howling winds and the swaying trees, charged with an indescribable energy and force, became vibrant and alive and seemed to participate in the ceremony. The shaman took the package and offered it into the

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Hyuana Picchu or Wayna Picchu is the near-by peak which rises up above Macchu Picchu.
fire like the *mahaahuti* in a *havan*.\(^8\) He made a comment about the visible participation of Mother Nature in the ceremony and quickly ran to bring back a bagful of coca leaves. He then asked me to offer the leaves. Finally he offered wine around the fire. I followed with the sacred waters from India. Despite the heavy wind, the leaves sat on the offering like a pile of bricks right in the centre. He soon started making predictions about that and announced that Pacchamama had graciously blessed the ceremony and said it was a very special one for him to have included Bhagavan, Arunachala and our tradition in this offering. I mentioned how in India we take the sacred ash from the fire as a blessing and smear it on our forehead. He took some ash and I too brought home some of the sacred ash to share with friends. Soon after, as if waiting for the ceremony to end, the rain descended and we packed and headed to Cuzco.

While I was sitting in the Etnikas centre gulping glasses of fizzy volcanic water and throwing up, I had wondered if I was out of my mind to have blindly followed two strangers into a remote area to participate in a series of rituals when I had no inkling what would happen. As always, like a child in trouble calling out for her mother, I called out to Bhagavan to protect me and carry me through this process. Surrendering to the Truth brought immeasurable rewards during and after the ceremony. That night I had a profound vision of Bhagavan and it confirmed my experience at the ceremony.

**Afterthoughts**

As I started writing this I wondered if I needed to share my experience in such detail. Something inside me whispered that it was the countless recollections by many of Bhagavan’s devotees who had lived and documented their personal experience in the presence of Truth that had inspired and deepened my faith. Although I had physically travelled across the globe, deep inside it felt like I had journeyed within.

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\(^8\) *Mahaahuti* means a large sacrifice ceremony in the *havan* or consecrated fire ritual.
There is a belief among the Juki (or Gypsies as they are known to the outside world) that the greatest king, the one who possesses the highest virtue and the ripest wisdom, will consummate the royal office by surpassing its limits. That he would be the last of his line, the illuminated monarch who needed no coercion to spread his views, since it was self-evident that these ideas and ideals nourished and instructed man in fundamental and ever abiding ways. That he would put away the sword for the pen, induce a love of life and a sense of profound piety in his people, and remain ever aware that the greatest counsel is more likely to be found among the humble poor than among the devious plotters close to the throne. He would

Douglas Halebi was born and educated in the United States, with paternal relatives of Gypsy origin in the Near East and maternal relatives of Anglo-American descent in North America. His uncle Noah instilled in him and his brothers a thirst for ever deeper, purer, richer understanding of life. All his literary ventures have been an attempt to dip into the well of knowledge his uncle extended to them.
exemplify courage and embody mercy, overflowing with generosity, indifferent to material treasure and therefore able to be surrounded by it without being corrupted or diminished in any way.

This same tradition, however, also says that if kingship passes from the world and man begins to revel in other things, still there will come a time when kingship is restored. That it is part of the order of things that man experiences renewal and reward in various ways and in different ages. That the modern, secular world, a ripe plum hanging down from an ancient tree, is a thing of beauty, but still a human creation. And that nothing man creates lasts forever.

In the cyclical vision of the Juki, then, kingship is an ever recurring phenomenon, played out on a vast historical canvas that also periodically regenerates representative government, aristocracy, revolutionary upheavals and tumultuous wars. Everything that flowers today fades tomorrow, and everything that flowers tomorrow once faded away in some distant age. History is like the coming of winter, always followed by a new spring. And every season returns to us again, though never in precisely the same way twice. This, in any case, is one interpretation of the venture of man. And according to it, each time man tastes of freedom it is sweeter, richer, fuller and more perfect than the time before. But so, too, each time he rises to consummate his destiny through a sacred kingship, he is mellowed, ennobled and instructed by it more deeply than ever. There is progress within retrogression and repetition, a uniqueness and incomparability within recurrence. Every rose is like every other rose, and yet it is also different and distinct. And man has the inherent ability to savour them all.

In the world we see set before us now, crude dictatorships are being shattered at the root, the world is convulsed by a love of freedom and weariness with tyranny. The momentum of history has crested, for now, on the side of the modern, secular, liberal state, a beacon of freedom and a passionate defender of the rights of man. One world is dying and another becoming infinitely more universal than we would have suspected even a quarter of a century ago. However, everything man creates has a terminus. The modern state, configured so ambitiously and in the name of rich and alluring ideals, will have
its hour in the sun. But let us remember that every sunrise in history is followed by a new sunset. The nation state, in all its variations, may yield again to the grandeur and grace of a kingship rooted in sacred tradition and putting before us the highest and most worthy standards. And it is only when man seeks out his highest possibilities and his richest desires that he can surpass himself, surpass the seemingly prosaic destiny put before him ‘in our time’. Perhaps, if we are wise enough, we may see the return of a sacred kingship that does not restrict and repudiate freedom, but honours it and taps into its wealth of possibility and promise? Perhaps a kingship of the future could bestow sufficient authority on a worthy monarch and yet celebrate the freest flow of knowledge and discovery yet known to our ravaged and worn world? And as the world displays more global intricacy and interdependence, there can still be a place within it for resurgent kingship.

As we know from Plato’s *Republic*, the world will only attain the plenum of its development when kings become philosophers or philosophers are made kings. Yet even as we are far removed from the reign of the philosopher-king, still the need of a worthy monarch is inherent in the world, such as it is now. Only kings build pyramids, reconfigure vast portions of the Earth’s surface, precipitate the birth and flowering of great cities that endure for millennia, and serve as the enduring standard bearers of high culture. Even in primordial times, men hastened to place a king above themselves and treated his office as sacred.

Until the time of the Renaissance (and, for many, until the eighteenth century Enlightenment in France), kings were the centre piece of world history. Peoples, empires, provinces and states were defined with respect to the king whom they honoured and defended. And in all history kings were the great patrons of art and learning, the principal source of charity and generosity in the lands they governed. They often assembled parliaments of scholars from all parts of the known world. They cultivated the friendship and trust of the richest intellects and the most gifted leaders, from the time that Aristotle tutored Alexander to the twelfth century Almohad Sultan
of Al-Andalus in southern Spain, who engaged in deep discussion with the philosophers Ibn Tufail and Ibn Rushd. Indeed, until the beginning of the modern epoch kings were deemed to be the most indispensable of all mortal beings. And it was said that a king typifies, in his own person, the finest attributes of his people. That he mirrors the best qualities latent in man, as man, and thus realizes the human state in its fullness and plenitude. In times past, kings acted as the catalyst that set in motion all the forces necessary to the flowering of whole worlds of man. They also built the roads and the dams and the cultural monuments that linger as their most enduring achievement.

Kingship, then, is inherent in man and remains a latent possibility that may flower again in the right conditions. For thousands upon thousands of years, man could not conceive of political sovereignty or authentic rulership without a king as head of state. This is by no means an accident; and when the royal office is occupied by a wise and benevolent monarch, one who exemplifies both theoretical and practical wisdom, his country blossoms and enjoys prosperity and stability. However, so important is the very nature of kingship that a bad king is as much a disaster as a good king is a source of wealth and plenty. So we must be exceedingly cautious, circumspect and judicious in selecting even a possible candidate for any future kingship. Such a monarch should be chosen by carefully weighing several factors, including the potential king's aristocratic lineage, his character, personal endowment, capacity for leadership and his love of grandeur and hospitality. In nearly every case, the best of rulers would be steeped in culture and bred to a high calling for generations at a time.

For true kingship, like society itself, is a slow growth in time, not an abstract and rarefied concept derived from political polemics or philosophical debate. The worthy king overflows with culture, moves with grace and splendour and lavishes rewards on every guest in his realm. He maintains a courtyard renowned for its poets, artists, artisans, philosophers, theologians, mystics, saints and its judicial icons as much as for its politicians and generals. And in the best kingdoms of yore, greater reward was given to the most learned men than to those who covet power more than knowledge.
A wise king knows that fine action is treasured in the very nature of things and that the nobility of his sentiments and the extent of his compassion will preserve his reputation against all enemies. A worthy king is sagacious, chivalrous, rich in learning, one who finds his calling in serving the people. And in an endless succession of magnanimous deeds. Yet as a ruler, he must also be capable of swift and decisive action and of taking up the sword to defend society and preserve order. He should be eloquent, a veritable master orator if possible, for reason and gentle persuasion are often more useful than the tools of war in resolving a crisis. His life should be lived to the full, in wealth and in health, and he should consider himself the guardian and preserver of his people's culture, history, institutions and values. In former times, a king would also be an excellent horseman and a magnificent swordsman.

However, in the contemporary world, it has become permissible for a great king to remain in his imperial residence and direct armies without personally leading them in the field. (This is also the case with Presidents, Prime Ministers, Commissars and other heads of state in our time.) The very nature of modern technology makes it superfluous for the king to be physically present on the battlefield or to act as if he were an ordinary soldier. Yet, even in spite of the unique conditions of modern warfare, there may still be a time when the king joins his troops and strives to rally them to victory. For his is the royal calling, the sacerdotal office of the priest-king, and he lives for his kingdom and his people. The future king, then, should well merit his office on grounds of heredity and inheritance.

There are few examples of a living society that created the imperative balance of royal authority, respect for the sanctity of life, the integrity of the law and a constant concern for the good of the people. One minor example comes to mind, in a land where the egalitarian spirit of a tribal community prevailed and even shaped its own concept of kingship. According to this view, a king should be held accountable to an assembly of the wise. (i.e., a group of learned experts, men of impeccable character known for the vastness of their erudition and their passionate love of justice, indifferent to
the temptations of power themselves, with an unremitting desire for the best of all governments.) The ‘selectors’ should be, and were, disqualified from personally assuming the mantle of kingship. And it was said to be all but impossible to influence their decisions by bribery or any form of coercion.

Such were the Ibadis,¹ a small thread woven into the tapestry of Middle Eastern history. It so happened, once, that the ‘Deputies of the Law’ conferred on the Imam of the Ibadi sodality a veritable royal authority. And in the Sultanate of Oman, they were known for centuries as men who made kingship the summit of good government and prosperity. The ultimate power of these ‘deputies’ was great; yet they rarely found it necessary to constrain or remove a sitting king. The King was chosen by merit and the state itself became a form of meritocracy. Theirs was not a perfect state; but it became celebrated for its character and its high aims. It should be said that they began in the midst of the seething succession controversies of early, prototypical Islam.

However they were soon mellowed by erudition and chastened by the vicissitudes of politics; and they surpassed their fathers in establishing a tradition of moderation, tolerance, love of learning, a unique concept of Kingship and of the Imamate. They began in a cauldron of bitter controversy, but ended in peaceful and prosperous ways, honouring the bravest souls among them and founding a kingship based on merit and not on a privileged ancestry or the lineage of the sword. Their success should be noted by any enlightened monarchy of the future.

Perhaps the wisdom of the East and the wisdom of the West will be conjoined one day, like the ‘confluence of the two wisdoms’ in the medieval world, where the sacred heritage of Divine Revelation was reconciled with the riches of Greek philosophy. And perhaps then we will see the anointing of a king who at last understands that there is an East and a West latent in every one of us, waiting to be coaxed into flower?

¹ The Ibadis movement is distinct from the Sunni and Shia sects. It is the prevalent form in Oman and Zanzibar and parts of the Maghreb.
After Sri Hanuman disappeared, Tulasidas remained saturated in bliss, eagerly waiting for dawn. He thought to himself, “How fortunate I am; how blessed. What merits must I have gathered to be worthy of this priceless gift! Will I really get the vision of the supreme Lord? He has not granted His vision to those who perform severe austerities for long and who reside in wild forests. Will He really favour me, with His grace?

“What service can I render to Sri Hanuman for this precious blessing? Sri Hanuman must mean what He said. Such great fortune is beyond one’s wildest fantasy but, exalted being that He is, Sri Hanuman will only ever speak the truth. It is my worthlessness which makes me doubt His word.”

With his mind racing along, Tulasidas paced to and fro, growing more restless as the night advanced.
In the meantime, Sri Hanuman finished his morning bath and worship in the river Vraja in Vaikunta and reached the abode of the Lord. He went around the Lord in pradakshina and, prostrating before Him, said, “O Lord! Your supreme devotee, Tulasidas, the incarnation of Valmiki, is pining for Your darshan. There is none more eligible for Your vision. Of course, I don’t have to tell You all this. You know Your devotees!”

With a teasing smile, the Lord spoke to Sri Hanuman, “O Anjaneya! How did you have the heart to deal such hard knocks to the poor fellow?”

Sri Hanuman pleaded, “O Lord, forgive me for my harsh treatment of Tulasidas and bestow Your grace on him.”

But the Lord said impishly to Goddess Lakshmi, “Do you know how Hanuman meted out skull-breaking blows on the innocent Tulasidas and made him unconscious? The sage Valmiki had composed the Ramayana in twenty-four thousand slokas. Hanuman wrote My story with twice that number. As a result, people became indifferent to Valmiki’s Ramayana, and Hanuman’s Ramayana became more popular. Valmiki was broken-hearted. I called Hanuman to my court and asked him to narrate Sundara-kanda from his composition. He glorified himself while rendering it, and I teased him about it.

“Hanuman was mortified and tossed his version into the sea. Then he asked a boon of Me that at some point of time, Valmiki should become his disciple. Now, by beating Tulasidas black and blue, he has settled the score with Valmiki. Does his behaviour befit him?”

The Lord laughed and the Divine Mother and everyone in the court joined in the merriment.

Sri Hanuman said in a faint voice, “O Lord, if You take the lead in making fun of me, will others spare me? Will You not show compassion on Tulasidas?”

“What is your interest in him?” asked the Lord, “I will give him darshan as and when I please.”

Sri Hanuman pleaded, “O Lord, I have assured him that You will grant him darshan today. Please validate your servant’s assurance.”
The Lord said, “How can you make a promise on My behalf without knowing My mind? O son of Anjana, Tulasidas is tainted by lustful thoughts and evil acts. He has to perform penance for twelve years more to qualify for My darshan.”

But the Goddess hastened to add with a smile, “Dear Anjaneya, foremost among the immortals, don’t worry. Today We will present ourselves before the great devotee Tulasidas, just as you have requested.” Sri Hanuman was delighted to hear Devi’s assurance. He prostrated in farewell and left.

Sri Lakshmi, assuming the form of Sita, bowed to the Lord and said, “O Lord, Tulasidas has been doing rigorous tapas for twelve years. Let Us grant him Our darshan and gladden his heart.”

The Lord assumed the forms of Rama, Lakshmana and Bharata and beckoned the divine eagle Garuda. Astride on the bird in the three forms, but remaining invisible, He reached the street where Tulasidas lived, and where he was waiting outside in the street for the arrival of the Lord. He was in a trance of rapture at the prospect of the anticipated vision.

He adored the Lord aloud, “O foremost among the gods, wielder of the bow Kodanda, blemishless Truth, faithful disciple of sage Vasishtha, friend of sage Viswamitra, slayer of Tataka, redeemer of Ahalya, darling of Janaka, beloved of Janaki, vanquisher of Parasurama! O dutiful and implicitly obedient son of Dasaratha, who renounced the kingdom like a trifle and surrendered cheerfully to the cruel dictates of fate! O Lord! You are the heart-beat of Kousalya; always accompanied by Lakshmana; one who reveres elders and is glorified by great sages. You were the punisher of wicked Jayanta; nemesis of Khara-Dhushana, Maricha and Kabandha. Weren’t You grief-stricken like ordinary mortals at the abduction of Sita? O omnipotent Lord, Who granted moksha even to a bird, Jatayu! How You relished the fruits offered by Sabari and bestowed Your grace on her! You are ever-delighted with Sri Hanuman; how fondly You held him to Your bosom! You are humility personified. You deigned to please the monkey-chieftain Sugriva and proved Your valour to him! O Destroyer of invincible
Vali! Playing the perfect human role, You sported to confess Your grief to Sri Hanuman! You set fire to Lanka through Sri Hanuman! O refuge of Vibhishana, slayer of Kumbhakarna and Ravana! You attained great bliss on reunion with Sita. O ideal king of Ayodhya!”

Unmindful of the stares of passersby, Tulasidas waited in the middle of the street eagerly singing the name, ‘Jai Sitaram’ with folded palms.

Though pleased with his devotion, the Lord wanted to test him further. Assuming the disguise of a Muslim wearing a turban, long robe, beard and earrings, he appeared before Tulasidas. However, Sri Lakshmi did not change her form. They stood before Tulasidas for a while, but he ignored them and looked over their shoulders for the Lord’s arrival.

The Lord told His divine consort in exasperation, “O dear! Have you seen his stupidity? Even if he didn’t recognize Me, he should have taken notice of you! Let us not waste Our time on such a fool,” and disappeared.

Fooled by the Lord’s maya, and taking Them for Muslims, Tulasidas had paid no attention to Them. He waited the whole day wondering about Sri Hanuman’s promise that the Lord would appear. In the evening, he hastened to the pauranik’s home where he found Sri Hanuman. Falling at his feet, he wept loudly.

Sri Hanuman exclaimed, “Dear friend! Didn’t you get the darshan of the Lord today?”

Tulasidas replied, “O Swami, I waited all day in the street. My eyes became sore with staring, but the Lord didn’t turn up for this wretch!”

“Alas! My friend, what a misfortune! Didn’t you recognize Him seated on the horse? He came in the guise of a Muslim. Since His presence elicited no response from you, He disappeared,” Sri Hanuman explained.

Tulasidas wailed, “Oh! How would I know? Why the disguise? Was the supreme Lord afraid to appear in His divine form? Is it fair to deceive me and wound my feelings with His masquerade? What a sinner I am that even when the Lord appeared before me, I couldn’t recognize Him? How can I make amends?”
Sri Hanuman spoke soothing words, “O noble servant of the Lord! Don’t be so distraught. I myself will bring the Lord tomorrow to the ashram. I give you my word.”

He was comforted by this. Sri Hanuman revealed his true form to the assembly and vanished. Beholding this wondrous scene, all prostrated before Tulasidas. “You are indeed blessed! You are a rare devotee.” They praised Tulasidas in glowing terms and carried news to Mamata Devi and the king of Varanasi.

Now everyone was eager to have the Lord’s darshan. The king got the city decorated beautifully with tender coconut fronds, fragrant jasmine canopies and colourful festoons. At the first sign of dawn, they carried Tulasidas and Mamata Devi in a palanquin to the Ganga where the pair took ritual baths and adorned themselves in silks and perfumes. They were taken to the ashram accompanied by trumpets, devotional songs and Vedic chants. An unprecedented mixture of splendour, joy and bustle enveloped the city.

In the meantime, Sri Hanuman hurried to Vaikunta and spoke to the Lord in an aggrieved tone, “O Lord of the universe, Refuge of the helpless! Is it proper to play games with Your devotees? Please be gracious to this slave and grant Your vision to Tulasidas.”

In annoyance the Lord said, “No. I will have nothing to do with that fool! Believing your words, I went to his place yesterday only to be humiliated. You want me to repeat the same today and suffer disgrace and pain! This is the result of granting favours to undeserving people. He should undergo penance for twelve more years. Only after he goes through the ordeal of fire will I consider your request. Is it a trifle to earn my darshan?”

Sri Hanuman implored, “If You are so resolved to decline Your darshan to Tulasidas, who has incarnated on the earth to propagate Your name and who has been pining for Your darshan, who can persuade You? My Lord, I beg You, please deign to grant Your darshan and endorse my promise to him.”

But the Lord was unrelenting. Sri Hanuman was torn between the all-consuming devotion of Tulasidas and the Lord’s rebuff. He
supplanted repeatedly in a piteous tone. When his pleas bore no fruit, he resorted to coercion, “O Lord of lords! If You remain adamant, I will uproot Vaikunta and carry you with it to Varanasi.”

Laughing at these words, the Lord turned to His divine consort and said, “Did you hear Hanuman’s threat? Does it befit a devotee to talk like this?”

Sri Lakshmi replied, “The Dronagiri where the sanjivini herb grows is ten times heavier than Vaikunta, and Hanuman carried it easily, like a child’s ball, in one hand all the way from the Himalayas. It is but a small thing for him to lift this place.”

“All right, let him do as he wishes. I am not going to budge from this place for the sake of appearing before the dim-witted Tulasidas,” replied the Lord.

Sri Hanuman said, “For upholding their promise, Dasaratha lost his life and Manmatha got burnt to ashes. Even if I have to meet my doom or give up my life, I will not fall back on my words to Tulasidas. I am prepared for any eventuality.” He went round the Lord reverentially, and sought His permission to lift Vaikunta.

The Lord warned, “O Hanuman, recall the fate of Ravana when he undertook a similar action and how he got trapped under the big toe of Lord Siva. Think well before you jump into action.”

Sri Hanuman replied, “If I suffer a cruel fate under Your lotus feet for the sake of others, I will embrace it happily as blessed fortune.”

Then straightening his tail and assuming his divine, colossal form, Sri Hanuman started to dig out Vaikunta. A terrible tremor coursed through the fourteen worlds, striking terror in all directions. The seven seas broke their shores and waves leapt up sky high; all beings trembled with fear. The celestials, frightened of a great calamity, prayed to the Lord for His intervention.

The Lord, amazed at Sri Hanuman’s boldness, said, “What a grand display of valour, what immeasurable strength! It has struck terror in all! Stop. I will comply with your request and go to Tulasidas.”

Sri Hanuman replied, “My Master, allow me to lift this supreme Abode with my tail, and I will carry Kailash in my hand and plant both in Varanasi. After this, I will prostrate before you in total submission.”
The Lord thought to Himself, “He may actually carry out this stupendous plan! His incredible audacity cannot be trifled with. What am I to do? I cannot clash with My devotees, for I am helpless before them, bound by the cord of their love. If I don’t reconcile with him now, more trouble may ensue.” Speaking endearing words to Sri Hanuman, He melted his heart and made him withdraw his cosmic form. 

Then, in the company of Sri Sita, Bharatha, Lakshmana and Shatrugna, thirty three crores of celestials, forty-eight thousand rishis, siddhas, vidyadharas, gandharvas and celestial damsels, and accompanied by sweet melodies sung by Tumburu and Narada, the sound of the veena and heavenly instruments, and showers of flowers and gold, the Lord sped on Garuda towards Varanasi and descended to Tulasidas’ abode led by Sri Hanuman.

The entire city, consisting of the king, his retinue and all the citizens, was wonderstruck at the magnificent sight and overjoyed and awestruck by Tulasidas’ immense good fortune. 

Seeing the grandeur of the Lord’s arrival, Tulasidas almost swooned with delight and wonder. He exclaimed, “O! O! What a blessed sight! How can one ever perform enough austerities to be worthy of such a divine vision? Celestials fill the heavens in all directions. The eminent sages of yore are vying with each other to be in the forefront. Ah, Sri Hanuman has arrived! And my Lord with His retinue! What language can do justice to His glory? The mind falls silent, words are unworthy of such grace.” A thrill shook his frame, his hair stood on end, his eyes were filled with tears of joy and his heart melted with love for the Lord. An incomparable spiritual ecstasy permeated his being.

The Lord came forward with a bewitching smile and held Tulasidas close to His chest, and spoke tenderly, “O my dearest devotee, how much you have suffered on my account? Your devotion and dispassion are incomparable. Now, let your eyes feast on My form as Rama to your heart’s content. Ask of Me whatever boon you wish. All your torments have come to an end, your impurities have been reduced to ashes. Enough of your austerities! You and Mamata will reside
near Me in My abode. The people of Varanasi are blessed with My darshan on your account.”

The Lord ran his hands over Tulasidas frame, and his touch transported Tulasidas to the realm of divine raptures. He repeatedly prostrated before the Lord, plunged in ecstatic adoration, “O Hari, Narahari, Murahari, Lotus-eyed One who reclines on Sesha! Wielder of Kodanda! Beloved of Janaki! Delight of ascetics! You made up Your mind to shower Your grace on Me at last! Why did You delay Your compassion this long? It took You so long to rouse Yourself from Your stupor! Why did You come to me in disguise yesterday?”

The Lord placed His lotus like hands gently on Tulasidas’ head and said, “O jewel among devotees! You have brought great delight to my heart. Your supreme bhakti has melted my heart and drawn me to you. Please ask of Me whatever you cherish.”

Tulasidas placed his head on the feet of the green-hued Lord and said, “My Beloved Lord! The only desire I cherish in my heart is Your darshan. Whenever this wretch thinks of You, O Lord, grace me with Your darshan along with Mother Sita. That will be the highest bliss for me.

“O benign Lord! Please bestow on me that means by which all sense clamour is silenced, the mind is tamed and attaining your lotus-feet becomes easy; and grant me attainment of that state in which the great sages like Narada abide.”

The Lord cast His most gracious glance on Tulasidas and said, “O exalted one! You are well versed in all scriptures. Is there anything that has not been mastered by you? O wise king among ascetics! What can be beyond your grasp, for it is you, as Valmiki in a previous life, who expounded the path of jnana through the sage Vasishta!”

Through this utterance, the Lord awakened the germ of Knowledge in Tulasidas and the memory of his past life. It was then that Tulasidas remembered his mission on earth. He felt contrite about how he had lost himself in sense pleasures and become an object of scorn and ignominy when he had been entrusted with the mission of bringing light through bhakti and jnana to humanity. He felt ashamed.
With his head bent in mortification, he went around the Lord and said in a penitent voice, “O Lord! I am mystified. How did I lead such an aberrant life even after having become the recipient of Your full grace? How did I come under the spell of sensual pleasures and evil attributes, losing myself in delusion, misery and pain, and turning away from devotion and divine remembrance? What was the reason for such a fall even after earning Your favour?”

The Lord said in a soothing voice, “You occupy a premier place among My devotees, My beloved child! I transcend all, yet when I incarnated in the world as Rama in Treta Yuga, I had to suffer untold miseries and wander about lamenting My fate like an ignorant man. It is through the teachings of sage Vasishtha that my worldly impressions were extinguished and I recalled My mission to establish dharma on earth. My Maya holds sway over the entire universe. Therefore, know that even gods are not free from her clutches when they assume a material body. It is but natural that you also came under her spell and lost your balance. Therefore, please don’t lacerate yourself with remorse.”

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If, for those who know their true self, there are no instruments of knowledge, no [embodied] self, and no fruits [of these to be experienced], can we say, ‘Know Sivam!’? Like the gold which shines ever brighter on being refined, we will eliminate your personal consciousness, so that, as it is worn away, you remain as Sivam only. (29)

For those who have followed the advice given in the previous verse, the very notion of ‘knowing Sivam’ as something external to themselves will no longer have any meaning. We might then ask

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what method might be employed to break out of and escape from this mould, mentioned in the previous verse, if all our mental and sensory faculties are declared invalid for such a purpose. The answer is given in a simile which compares the purification of consciousness to the refining process for gold.

Gold itself cannot be improved or changed; all we can do is remove its impurities so that it shines in its full radiance. It would be laughable to add something to it in an attempt to make it more pure. In the same way, the personal consciousness, the ego, cannot reveal and know Sivam, the real, for it is itself the impurity that obscures it. However, by remaining still, that is, by refusing to be drawn into the world of the mind and senses, that ego self will gradually be weakened and the light of Sivam will grow. This is the very process signified by the very title of the work Ozhivil Odukkam, one of whose meanings we have given in the commentary to v. 12 as ‘Subsiding [into the Self or Sivam] through the elimination [of obstacles, i.e. the personal consciousness, the ego].’

This theme of purification, of elimination of the false, is taken up by Bhagavan in Upadesha Untiyar v. 25, ‘To know the true nature of our Being, eliminating all attributes (like name and form, which hinder right perception) is to know the divine. When limiting adjuncts (upadhis) are removed, the Self shines forth within us.’

Is the Self, which is infinite bliss, exterior [to the individual consciousness]? Observe the nature of a life subjugated to the ego, which is like that of a fish swimming in the milk ocean, [yet unable to drink the milk]! The light of the Self endures without rising or setting, yet that [ego] transforms it into darkness, just as the action of fire can be suspended by mantras.

In this verse the author advances yet another potent argument in favour of the non-dual view of the world. He asks poorana aanantam aam taan purampo? – Is the Self, which is infinite bliss, exterior [to
the individual consciousness]? Without even attempting to say what reality is, surely we must admit that, whatever it is, we are in it and of it, and, in a real sense, we are it, yet somehow remain unable to ‘realise’ that fact. The author expresses this idea by comparing the jiva to a fish swimming in the Ocean of Milk.

The Ocean of Milk, which in Puranic legend was churned by the *devas* and *asuras* to extract *amrita*, is compared to the bliss of the self, and the jiva, to a fish swimming in it, feeding off only the other flora and fauna it finds there (i.e. the phenomenal world of maya) rather than drinking the milk (i.e. the bliss of the Self), the medium within which it is living and from which it is never separated. This image appears also in v. 34 of *Tiru Arul Payan* – ‘The Fruit of Divine Grace’, by Umapathi Sivacariyar, a member of the school of Meykandar Tevar, in which he gives a masterly summary of the tenets of Saiva Siddhanta in a hundred terse *kural venba* verses, ‘Souls, [immersed] in grace, [rejecting it], turn back to the sea of delusion, like fish in the Ocean of Milk.’

*akkini-t-tampam*, Sanskrit *agni stambha* is the art of suspending the action of fire by magic, one of *arupattunaalu-kalai* – sixty-four arts. The essence of fire is its heat, just as the essence of the individual consciousness is the pure consciousness of the Self, Sivam. In the same way that certain mantras can supposedly be employed to mask the heat of fire, *anavam*, the principle of egoity, masks the true knowledge, *jnana*, which is the essence of the personal self.

Sivam can be compared to the ocean; the soul, to its water; the impurity [which gives rise to the ego], to the salt in the water; karma, to the wind that stirs up the ocean, and the ego consciousness, to the waves upon it. Know that, in this way, that fundamental [ignorance], through the medium of the mental faculties and the five senses, whirls you ceaselessly about like a top.  

(31)
In this verse it is stated first that, like the ocean and its water, there is no essential difference between the absolute reality, Sivam, and the personal self, the soul or jiva; what differentiates them are the factors which affect the latter, the first of which is anava malam, the principle of egoity, the arrogance which causes it to ascribe its actions to itself and not to the deity. This impurity, like the salt dissolved in sea water, is inseparably united with the unenlightened jiva. In this unenlightened state, the actions in which the jiva engages disturb the still ocean of pure consciousness which is its basic nature, just as the winds upon the ocean disturb its surface, giving rise to waves. The individual consciousness, the mind, is nothing other than the proliferation of these waves: potham alai – individual consciousness [is] the waves [on that ocean].

Inwardly realise that you are the knowledge that knows the reality in which earth and the other elements, hearing and the other senses, the mouth and the other organs of action, the mind and the other organs of perception, the eye and the other organs of sense, and nada and the rest of the pure and pure-impure tattvas are seen to be unreal and cease to exist. [Know also that you are the knowledge that knows] the support that makes you aware of yourself as a finite soul. (32)

In the first part of the verse the 36 tattvas – universal constituents are listed in abbreviated form. These belong to three categories, impure, pure-impure and pure, each evolving from the previous one. The highest of the tattvas is the Siva tattva, this is the highest of the pure tattvas and is sometimes referred to as nada. Having listed these tattvas, the author defines the Real in relation to them, saying that it is kandu agandra unmai – the reality in which [the tattvas], being known, cease to exist. The tattvas, being insentient, have no existence other than as an appearance in the supreme reality, the Self, or, in Saivite terms, Parasiva, or Atattva. As long as these tattvas are taken to be real, a caarpu or support, appears from them in the form of the
individual consciousness, the jiva. Thus the author is instructing the disciple to the effect that he alone is the enduring reality within which the appearance of the world occurs. Freed from its false identification with the world appearance, the false ‘I’ of the ego disappears, and the liberated consciousness is revealed in its true nature as the non-dual reality of the Self.

The five divine operations are nothing other than the five states of the soul. Clearly understand the wondrous dance in which they ceaselessly delude you, spinning you endlessly like a whirling firebrand through these five states. You are like a clear crystal in which the five colours are reflected. (33)

In this verse the author merges the paradigm of the operations of the deity with that of the human soul, the jiva. The five avasthas are waking, dream, insensibility as in deep sleep or unconsciousness, turiyam and turiyatitam. The correlation of the five divine operations with the body-mind and senses is exact: the world and its objects arise, persist and disappear with the mind and senses in the states of waking, dream and deep sleep, corresponding to creation, maintenance and destruction; veiling corresponds to the delusion in which the mind identifies with the world and its objects, and the granting of grace to the soul’s realisation of its true nature.

In its embodied state the jiva is said to be like a whirling firebrand – kollivattam aakave. When a firebrand is whirled round in a circle, its single point of light, its red flame or ember, appears as an unbroken, continuous circle of red light. In the same way, the states which veil

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1 The fourth and fifth avasthas, turiyam – the fourth and turiyatitam – beyond the fourth are not explained in the commentary. In Siddhanta these have technical definitions relating to the condition of the soul when it first incarnates and, under the veil of anavam, is cognisant only of its own existence. According to these definitions these avasthas can be loosely equated with veiling and granting of grace. These terms are not to be confused with their counterparts in Vedanta, in which they are employed simply to denote the state of reality which lies beyond the three states of waking, dream and deep sleep. See Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi, Talk §353.
the pure consciousness of the individual jiva succeed each other in an apparently unbroken series, such that the individual perceives them as permanent, whilst remaining unaware of the underlying pure consciousness. To emphasise the point that this pure consciousness, however obscured, is not affected by this process, it is compared to crystal placed against a coloured background. Just as a clear crystal appears to possess the colour of its background, whatever colour that may be, the pure consciousness, whilst remaining unchanged, appears to be modified by the succeeding states of waking, dream and deep sleep.

The modifications of maya are endless, like the delusion caused by intoxicating liquor. They will not be eliminated by your own efforts unless you remain as you are, without identifying with them, as one who is merely playing a part in a masquerade. This you should know. (34)

The modifications of maya – *maya vikaaram* are the experiences undergone by the individual consciousness, the soul, or jiva, in the five *avasthas* – states mentioned in the previous verse. Chidambara Swamigal notes that although this practice of non-identification can occur only in the waking state, it will enable the operation of divine grace, which in turn will eliminate the waking state, and the other states along with it, which consist of the vasanas – seeds, latent tendencies generated through identification with the experience of that waking state, i.e. maya. In *Vichara Sangraha*, 1.5 Bhagavan explains that the elimination of the idea that one is the gross body is sufficient to eliminate the other bodily sheaths which appear in the other *avasthas*, “It is on the gross body that the other bodies subsist. In the false belief of the form ‘I am the body’ are included all the three bodies consisting of the five sheaths. And destruction of the false belief of selfhood in the gross body is itself the destruction of the false belief of selfhood in the other bodies. So inquiry is the means to removal of the false belief of selfhood in all the three bodies.”

The concept of the sadhaka playing his part in the world without attachment will be familiar to many readers from v. 27 of *Ulladu
Once the fear caused by mistaking a rope for a snake has gone, will it come back, however much we try to recreate the situation, weeping and trembling as before? Similarly, even if a Siva yogi, in whom the elimination of the five divine operations, (i.e. the five avasthas) is firmly established, should fix his thoughts on these and summon them, bidding them return one more time, they will not stir. What more is there to say? (35)

Just as in the darkness a rope can easily be mistaken for a snake, in the state of ignorance, we take the world’s appearance for reality, not seeing the underlying substratum, which is known as the Self, Sivam or Brahman. Once we see the rope in the light of day for what it is, we cannot recreate the illusion that it is a snake. Similarly a Siva yogi, one who is united with Sivam, or the Self, the Real, can no longer see as real the phenomena that play out upon the underlying substratum or screen of that Self.

The knowledge of the Siva jnani does not know itself. It is like the eye of someone who is stripping away the husk of an immature plantain. Although he may continue to speak [of ‘I’ and ‘you’], there remains nothing that is different from himself. The word ‘I’ is just a word to him, just as to the tongue the word ‘tongue’ is just a word. (36)

The banana tree does not have a stem as such. The leaves grow from an underground corm and are tightly wound round each other to form what is called a pseudo stem, which has the appearance of a

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2 The translation is taken from *The Collected Works of Sri Ramana Maharshi*. 
stem or trunk. If these leaves are prised apart and peeled away, there will be nothing left to be seen. However this will not be the case with the stem of a banana tree that has flowered and fruited, in which an edible stem called the *vazhai tandu* is formed. Hence an immature or virgin banana tree is specified.

The unconditioned, pure awareness is compared to the eye, and the layers of illusion (the *tattvas*) that mask the understanding of the devotee are compared to the sheaths of rolled up leaves that compose this virgin plantain stem. Just as the eye is unaffected by the peeling away of the successive layers of the plantain, and simply remains at rest once the last leaf is peeled away and nothing whatsoever remains, pure, unconditioned awareness presides over the elimination of the successive layers of illusion without being in any way affected by this process, and simply remains at rest, once these layers of illusion have been removed. The eye of the person who is stripping away sheath after sheath of the virgin plantain tree continuously looks at the gradually attenuating stem, expecting some residual kernel to be revealed at the end. However he finds at the end that nothing remains of the stem after all the sheaths have been stripped away. Likewise, following the instructions of the Master, the inner eye goes on observing how the thirty-six *tattvas* are peeled away, one after the other, leaving no final residue after their elimination.

This absolute, true knowledge does not know itself objectively, nor does it know anything else external to it, just as the eye, whose nature is to see, cannot see itself. This *ariyaa arivu* – knowledge which does not know [objectively] is described by Ramana Maharshi in v.12 of *Ullumadu Narpadu*: ‘That in which knowledge and ignorance are entirely non-existent is [true] knowledge. That which knows [itself or the world] is not true knowledge. Since it shines without anything other which it knows, or which makes it known, the Self is [true] knowledge.’

Although the jnani may continue to function in the world as if he were still subject to the illusion of duality, this is only an appearance. Just as, when the tongue says the word tongue, that word does not define its nature or function in any way, when the jnani, established
in the Self, uses words like ‘I’ and ‘you’, this does not imply anything about the nature of that Self, i.e. that it possesses duality. Just as the words at the disposal of the tongue are without measure and do not affect it in any way, the jnani is not affected by any of the outward appearances of duality that others may observe in his behaviour.

Since it is said [in the Vedas and Agamas] that all that one knows is not oneself, is it not evident that simply remaining still is to dwell as That (i.e. the Self, Brahman or Sivam)? Although its mouth may open and close, does a severed head know anything? Ascertain the truth for yourself. (37)

Here we see the use of the phrase summaa iruppatu – remaining still, quiet, at peace, which has a very powerful meaning in Tamil. It refers to the state of remaining as one with the Self, the most powerful and dynamic state of all, as Bhagavan himself tells us in Aksharamanamalai v. 37, ‘O Arunachala, when you yourself slumber in quite repose, enjoying bliss, what recourse for myself might there be, other than this?’

Again the author reminds us forcefully that all that the Vedas and Agamas can ultimately do, is tell us what we are not. We must enter the non-dual silence of the Self to find out what we are. What else is there to do, other than dwell like the mountain Arunachala in the unfathomable silence of pure being?

In the latter part of the verse, the Siva jnani is compared to a head which has been severed from its body, which represents the world composed of the thirty-six tattvas. In the state which transcends the tattvas, there remains nothing for the jnani to know, since he dwells in the state of pure consciousness, free of all limiting factors such as the organs of sense and action, the state which is pure knowledge itself. The analogy is quite appropriate, since from the point of view of the observer, he remains in the body, and still has a head and mouth, yet these are powerless to convey in words the state in which he is established.
If the Self, which neither knows nor forgets, is regarded as an object by those who would know it, is this delusion, or is it knowledge? To know consciousness is simply to remain as consciousness. Therefore know that, in one sense, consciousness is like the thirty-six tattvas, each of which, respectively, is not aware of its own knowledge (i.e. does not possess self-consciousness).

This verse continues to elaborate upon the point made in the two previous verses, namely, that That whose nature is knowledge, which we call the non-dual Reality, Sivam, Brahman, the Self, etc., being one and undivided, cannot be known objectively. Moreover, the disciple is being told that, since he is not, and could not be, other than that Reality, he already possesses that knowledge as his own nature, and that therefore to know it, all he needs to do is to remain as he is, having freed himself from the delusion of the thirty-six tattvas.

The verse begins with a recapitulation of a theme first introduced in v. 24, ‘If it (the Self) possessed thought, then there would be for it the absence of thought, forgetfulness. The arising and disappearing of thoughts is an illusion which appears to arise in the Self, whose nature is unchanging being-consciousness-bliss.’

Here, paradoxically, the Self and the tattvas are said to be similar in that neither knows itself, or themselves; the Self because its nature is knowledge, pure consciousness, and therefore there is nothing for it to know, and no ‘other’ to know it, and the tattvas because they are inert, totally without consciousness, entirely dependent upon the Self, pure consciousness, which provides the substratum for their apparent existence. Both are absolute: the Self is total truth, pure being, and the tattvas, total falsehood, absolute non-being.3

Will Sivam, your unseen support, which is beyond even the nada tattva, ever be known objectively by you? It would

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3 “I am saying that the Self is self-sufficient. One need not discuss the tattvas to find the Self.” Talk §641.
be as if you could lift the earth itself using a lever. If it did appear to you, it would be like a finger touching its own tip, or a mouth eating its own face and laughing about it. Consider and know.                                                   (39)

The *nada tattva* is synonymous with the *siva tattva*. It is the highest of the *tattvas*, and the one from which all the other thirty-five originate. This *tattva* is very high in its nature, being conceived of as the first emanation from the godhead, the womb of the Self, into manifestation. The author mentions it to emphasise the absolute gulf which exists between the unchanging Reality, the Self and any form of manifestation, however exalted or subtle, whose nature is impermanence.

The point of the verse is driven home by a series of three powerful analogies which require little comment, other than to say that they underline the ludicrousness and arrogance of our attempts to dissect Reality without once turning the light of enquiry upon our own self. Each more farcical than the last, they present us with a *reductio ad absurdum* of all our attempts, ever so seemingly plausible, to fathom Reality with the mind.

You are like a clear crystal that takes on the colour of its background. Why then, in order to be free of attachment, do you attempt to know objectively the [true] attachment, [which is Sivam]? Know that the ignorance which attempts to know Sivam as an object separate from itself is known as *anavam*.                                                                 (40)

The manner in which a crystal changes to reflect the colour of its background is an image that is often used to suggest the way in which the world appearance manifests within the Self without affecting it in any way, as the following lines from Tayumanavar demonstrate:

“The five senses, the five elements, the organs of action, and all the rest, you are not. You are none of these. Nor are you any of the qualities that pertain to these. You are not the body, nor
are you knowledge and ignorance. You are cit, the real, which is like a crystal, reflecting the qualities of whatever is placed before it, and yet having no connection with it. It is I who, through my nature, will impart to you true knowledge in the measure of your spiritual maturity.” Hymn 14. Verse 18, lines 2- 4.

In this verse the word patru – attachment is used twice, once in the normal sense, to refer to the illusion of worldly attachment, which in Saivite terms, consists of the thirty-six tattvas, and again to refer to Sivam, the Self, as that which never relinquishes its hold upon the jiva. The author probably has in mind the well-known v. 350 of Tirukkural:

“Hold onto the attachment to Him who is without attachment. Hold onto that attachment to be free of [worldly] attachment. The only way to experience the Self, Sivam, is to realise that it is not other than oneself, and to remain still, so that, unaffected by any form of obscuration, one merges as one with it, just as the crystal remains clear and bright when it is removed from the coloured background against which it stands.”

In this analogy the clear crystal is the Self, and the crystal placed against a background is the Self when it reflects the thirty-six tattvas, the world illusion of maya.

anavam, which appears at the end of the verse, is, as we have seen earlier, the principle of egoity which causes the soul to believe that it itself, not Sivam, is responsible for its own actions. The concept of anavam has distinct non-Advaitic connotations when taken in its technical definition according to Saiva Siddhanta, in that it is deemed to be an irreducible entity which, though it can be repressed, is always a potential attribute of the soul, like the verdigris in copper. In the current Advaitic context however we take the word to refer in a general sense to the ignorance or delusion that causes us to mistake the illusory world appearance for the Real, in other words as a synonym for the Advaita term avidya – ignorance.
Non-duality doesn’t lend itself to easy delineation and perhaps this is why one instinctively feels uncomfortable when the term is used too liberally. Employing a bright lamp to make out faintly distant stars only fouls the nighttime vision; that which is subtle requires special handling. What is it about non-duality that wants to be guarded, protected or kept hidden? To openly discourse upon it or bring it before the light of reason reduces it to a religious teaching, whereas in fact non-duality is the hidden essence of religious teaching. One may note that the Greek mythos is etymologically related to ‘mute’ or that which is not expressible in speech. This may be why the great non-dual traditions of China, Japan and India resorted to parable, myth, legend and verse to communicate their secrets. One has the sense that non-duality cannot — should not — be discoursed about with a flood of words: The Tao that can be spoken of is not the true Tao. So when discovering yet another publication with ‘non-dualism’ in its title, one involuntarily recoils.

Yet upon perusing James Charlton’s Non-Dualism in Eckhart, Julian of Norwich and Traherne, the reader encounters a prose that is rich, robust and impassioned and carries with it a sensitivity to the range and breadth of the semantic field that the term ‘non-duality’ accesses. The book’s opening chapter looks at the verse of Thomas Traherne where the author intersperses sample writings of the 17th century mystical poet with his own poems, a literary strategy that at least has the advantage of counterbalancing the above mentioned hazards by enlisting metaphor and verse to seek the essence of non-duality.

The second chapter turns to Eckhart and is more theological, ably capturing the unitive spirit of this 14th century Dominican friar and
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comparing it with the Vedanta and Mahayana Buddhism. The author identifies Eckhart’s method as ‘apophatic’, (a term associated with John of the Cross and other medieval mystics, indicating knowledge of transcendent Reality gained by way of negation rather than defining God positively). The author covers a lot of ground in a short space and makes use of insightful excerpts from various Eckhart scholars. Together with the author’s own reflections, the reader feels the urge to go back and reread Eckhart.

The third section on ‘Mother’ Julian of Norwich takes up the idea of divine maternity. In the Wisdom tradition, Sophia was always seen as embodied in feminine form. In general, however, while gender concerns are current in the 21st century theological reassessment of the Persons of the Trinity, it might be mentioned that non-duality in its classical form has an elegant way of settling the gender question: the Formless Absolute — Brahman or Paramatman — is neither male nor female, nor, for that matter, is It endowed with any formal attributes whatsoever.

In a brief section on Sri Ramana Maharshi, the non-duality of the three ‘theopoets’ (an awkward coinage that appears throughout the book) is compared with that of Bhagavan Sri Ramana. The former is designated ‘moderate non-duality’ while Sri Ramana’s teaching, equated with what looks like subjective monism, is deemed ‘strong non-duality’. The author’s distinction here seems to hinge on the subject-object relation and the degree to which one (ontologically) differentiates them. Next, in a noble attempt at versatility, the narrative turns to a divergent array of writers and thinkers: David Bohm, Simone Weil, Andrei Rublev, Jacques Derrida, Raimon Panikkar and the 13th century Japanese Zen Master Dogen Zenji. But the reader may find that here, where non-duality is considered from every imaginable vantage point, it becomes vague, causing one to wonder what value scholarly eclecticism can ultimately have in clarifying it. In fairness to the author, presenting non-duality with precision is not a question of methodology: inherent in the nature of non-duality is its ineffability; non-duality attends a realm that is not easily communicated. This brings to mind the scene of the two Zen masters, one about to discourse on the non-dual ‘truth of the ancient Buddhas’ and the other rushing forward to cover his
mouth lest he fall into the ghost cave speaking of that which cannot be spoken of. The Zen thinking is simple: you cannot know It or speak of It, but you can be It. And so, it might be said, non-duality is not so much be an ontology concerned with the ultimate status of the subject and object or the so-called physical world as it is an epistemological reordering that seeks to curb human claims to knowledge, privileging direct experience over thought and language. — Michael Highburger


Is there a proof, a guarantee, a promissory note, to prove that God exists, that is so certain that no reasonable individual could possible doubt its veracity? This strange, fascinating, compelling book is part autobiography, part history of philosophy wrestling with proofs for the existence of God, part travelogue, and partly a personal confession. The combination is both unique, fascinating, and compelling reading.

The book is both insightful and disappointing. Insightful for the author’s ability to turn a phrase, e.g., “proofing dough is making it rise,” something he often does throughout the book. It is also insightful in that the author gives a very informative review of the myriad theories of Western philosophers from the pre-Socratics to modernity. The flaw is that the author does not tell the reader with how each theory was subsequently demolished. Nor does the author point out that if God is an estranged ‘other’, implying a separation, a gap between God and the individual, then no amount of mediated proofs will ever bridge that gap nor prove that God exists. The author carries a heavy burden by attempting to make the Infinite knowable by a finite mind using logic.

Great philosophers around the world for two thousand years have attempted to provide a valid foolproof proof for the existence of God. The classics are Anselm’s ontological proof; Aquinas’ famous teleological argument; the first cause argument; the argument from design;
the moral argument; and Pascal’s wager. Various philosophers have presented at least twenty varying arguments for the existence of God.

Alas, logical arguments cannot nor ever will succeed, for proofs are logical deductions that can never reach absolute certainty. The various versions of proofs offered have not changed much over the years. The strength of the book is the author’s ability to give life to the various attempts. He is fair to each proposal no matter whether it appeals to him or not. As well, the author has a personal stake in this project that certainly makes the tale lively. As he says, “None of the proofs seems to be exactly it – enough to settle the question forever – yet they still carry me together toward that which they’re pointing.” In the end no logical proof can ever settle the question. Where the mind wants to venture, and can’t reach, the heart feels.

Readers looking for absolute proof will be disappointed. Though the book is extremely interesting it finally compels the reader to seek elsewhere for the pearl of greatest price, the mysterious Divine.

— John Grimes


There are many academic books available on Advaita Vedanta but few are devoted to the ordinary reader who wants to understand the basic principles that underlie this arcane science. This well-thought out book from the sampradaya of Swami Dayananda Saraswati provides an opportunity for us to see the richness and profound scope of Advaita done with a subtlety and clarity which will help all who delve into its pages. It is simple without being simplistic; it is knowledgeable without being clever. It is meant to help not impress. The author, a student of Swami Paramarthananda who has guided the author in writing this manual, has given us crisp treatment of the various prakriyas (teaching methods) employed in Advaita to convey the truths of Brahman and atma.
At a glance various chapter titles give us an idea of the book’s intention: our fundamental problem, lack of self-knowledge, Vedanta as a means, qualifications to gain self-knowledge, preparing the mind, enquiry into the self as subject, the three states of experience, Brahman, cause of manifestation, analysis of cause and effect, understanding Isvara, Tattvamasi, and jivan-mukti.

The one qualification I have with this otherwise excellent study is with some views in Chapter 17, ‘The Diverging Views’ concerning the concepts of knowledge and realisation. According to what I have understood of Swami Dayananda’s school, there is no such thing as the action of self-realisation since it is always present. What does occur is the dropping away of the misconception that one was ignorant (avidya). Since Brahman is neither a subject nor an object, who is there to ‘gain’ it? There is no experience; all our efforts to experience self-realisation are the result of ignorance; there is only consciousness eternally present and unaffected. By the study of sruti (scripture) the right vritti (thought) in our buddhi destroys ajnana (ignorance). This revelation is atmanubhava or atmajnana.

We are entering an intellectual quagmire from which there is little chance of escape from controversy unless we see that it is a question of emphasis and nuanced semantics. Bhagavan’s ‘experience’ at Madurai was not an intellectual realisation, it was a radical existential moment. Bhagavan’s school extols effort by the use of jnana-vichara, bhakti and single-minded determination (iccha-sakti). There is the act of self-realisation, mysterious and transcendental. Implicit in this view is the discernment of the danger that by relying entirely on the intellect to reveal true knowledge (atma-jnana) we lose sight of the mind’s innate power to deceive. In Talk §307 Bhagavan said that akhandakara vritti is purely experiential and only such a ‘jnana-vritti’ can destroy the causal ignorance (mula avidya) manifesting as dehatma buddhi. Such direct experience of the Reality alone can sever the knot of bondage.

Aside from these reservations I would recommend this book to all who want a reliable, concise textbook to understand the intricacies of Advaita Vedanta. — Christopher Quilkey
Mahakumbhabhishekam
Following the important *Mahakumbhabhishekam* to Bhagavan’s Shrine and Matrubhuteswara on August 25th, 2013, daily mahanyasa pujas were performed each day for a mandala comprising 48 days until the final day when an elaborate homa and abhishekam were performed. On the 12th October the programme started at 5am in the New Hall with Rudra Japam around the kalasam, followed by an elaborate homa with Vasordara Deeparadhana at 9.15am and kalasa abhishekam in Bhagavan’s and Mother’s Shrines.

Navarati
The Navaratri festival began on the 4th October. The Goddess Yogambika was carried in procession and was installed at the entrance of the Mother’s temple. Each successive night of the following days there were the *alankarams* in the following order: 1) Meenakshi, 2) Gaja Lakshmi 3) Tapas, 4) Linga Puja, 5) Rishabha Vahanam, 6) Sesha Sayanam, 7) Venuganam, 8) Saraswati and lastly, 9) Mahishasura Mardini, celebrating Durga’s victory on *dasami shukla paksha* (the tenth day of the waxing moon).

Karthikai Deepam
The annual Karthikai Deepam festival was held between 8th and 17th November. This is a special time of year for devotees of Lord Arunachalaswarar and the atmosphere as always was charged with a heightened devotion and excitement. After the heat of summer the weather is nearly always cool and refreshing. This year the clouds were dark in the immediate days leading up to the Deepam day and the town and ‘girivalam’ path had rather a deserted look, owing to some heavy rain. Though there was rain a day before Deepam and the day after, on the big day the sky was clear and the weather glorious. However a solid cloud mass hovered over the summit of Arunachala in the evening and we could only see for the most part reflections of the *Jyothi* (flame) as it shot up into the sky at sunset accompanied by
bursts of crackers everywhere. At the same time Bhagavan devotees gathered outside his Samadhi-shrine and sang as in Bhagavan’s days, his Arunachala Stuti Panchakam before the impressive Deepam. Later there were direct glimpses of the fire and in the succeeding days the Jyothi was flawless and bright for all to see. It kept burning for eleven days. Some three tonnes of ghee were used to keep the lamp burning.

Obituaries

Dr. R. Ravindran was born in Yaazhpaanam, Sri Lanka in 1932, into a devout family. In his third year, the family home was host to regular visits by spiritual guru Yogaswami who had visited Bhagavan Ramana. At the age of six, he met Bhagavan Ramana when the family came to the Ashram in the late 1930s. At breakfast one morning, Bhagavan saw the youngster tugging his father’s shirt sleeve — he had only received two iddlies while others were getting four. Bhagavan, intuiting his wish, indicated that two more iddlies be put on the boy’s leaf. From that time on, Ravindran said he had ‘been fed by Bhagavan'. While in medical college, he came to Ramanasramam to receive Bhagavan’s blessing before migrating to the UK to study surgery. He later settled in Adelaide, Australia, in 1977 and specialised in orthopaedic surgery. Regardless of the long distance he would make an annual pilgrimage to the ashram for a stay of a few weeks. He passed his mornings in the Old Hall in meditation and helped raise funds for local orphanages. The last time he was at the ashram was in September when he stayed a month. Later he stopped in Chennai to do consultation work for Sri Lankan Tamil refugees before returning home to Australia. In October, he developed a severe infection (sepsis) that proved fatal. He merged at the feet of Bhagavan on the 16th October after a life of dedicated service and devotion.

Dr. Ravindran is survived by his wife, Beatrice, and their three sons. Universally known and loved for his gentle, soft-spoken, courteous and compassionate nature, he will be missed by all.
Sri Vennelakanti Sriramulu was born on 24th June 1940 in Ongole district. At the tender age of ten, he had the good fortune of witnessing the bright star of Bhagavan’s Mahanirvana. In later years he was closely linked to the ashram through his marriage to the granddaughter of Sri Griddaluru Sambasiva Rao, who was instrumental in Bhagavan making a will and was so blessed that he signed for Bhagavan in the legal document.

Sri Sriramulu came regularly to the ashram. He devoted his entire life to sangha seva and Bhagavan’s sadhana as an active member of Mumbai Ramana Kendra. He was gregarious and affectionate with a charming smile on his lips. He was always immersed in Ramana Nama Smaranam and had Bhagavan’s holy name on his lips as, in a state of anaayaasa (pain-free and quickly), he merged into Arunachala on 19th October.

Sri Sunil Damania, of Mumbai, known to devotees as Sunilbhai, hailed from a devout spiritual family. His father Ishwarlal Damania and mother Ratenben, were both freedom fighters and devoted to Bhagavan. They started visiting the Ashram from the forties with their young sons. Ishwarlal helped in the purchase at Tiruchuzhi of the birthhouse of Bhagavan (Sundara Mandiram). He also carried out the complete electrification of Mother’s Shrine and New Hall in 1949. Sunilbhai’s brother Jagadish became a total renunciate after Bhagavan’s mahasamadhi and was an inmate of Ashram: his samadhi is inside the Ashram. Maintaining the family trait, Sunilbhai was devout and deeply spiritual. He also regularly visited Anandashram, Kerala. But what all devotees will remember with gratitude is his helpful nature. He was untiring in assisting and driving visiting devotees around Mumbai; helping in the annual Ramana function in Mumbai; and attending to sick devotees in hospitals. Though ailing he made one final pilgrimage to the Ashram in September this year. He attained the feet of his chosen master Ramana on the 21st October.