

Sep / Oct 1991	THE MAHARSHI	Jan / Feb 1992
Nov / Dec 1991 Vol.1 No.5	ॐ नमो भावते श्री रघुनाथ	Produced & Edited by Dennis Hartel Dr. Anil K. Sharma
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As I Saw Him - No.5

My Life, My Light

by Varanasi Subbalakshmi

MP3

Varanasi Subbalakshmi rendered useful service in the Ashrama kitchen during the lifetime of Sri Bhagavan. Her chosen God was Lord Viswanath of Benares. However, when she was going to Benares for good she had a dream in which Lord Viswanath told her to return to Arunachala, saying that Bhagavan Ramana was the embodiment of Rama, Krishna, Siva and all other Gods.

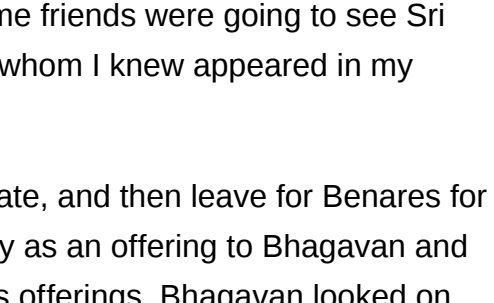
I lost my husband when I was sixteen. I went back to my mother's house and lived there as a widow should, trying to pray to and meditate on God. My mother's mind too was devoted to the spiritual quest and religion was the main thing in her life.

Once we went on a pilgrimage to Kaveri Pushkaram and on our way back we stopped at Arunachala. There we were told that a young Brahmin saint had been living on the hill for the past ten years. The next morning we went up the hill along with others with whom we were travelling. At Mulaipal Tirtha we cooked our food, ate and had some rest. Then we went further and found the young Swami near Virupaksha Cave. There was a brick platform at the entrance of the cave and he was sitting on it. As soon as I saw him, I was at once convinced that God Arunachala Himself had come in human form to give salvation to all who approached Him.

He was about thirty at the time, and wonderful to look at; he was bright and shining like burnished gold, his eyes were blooming and clear, like the petals of a lotus. He looked at us for a long time. The peak of Arunachala was towering over our heads, the huge towers of the temple were below and an immense silence surrounded the Swami. Then the ladies started whispering. One wanted to pray for a child for her daughter-in-law who was barren, but another was saying that the Swami was too exalted for such worldly matters. Finally the Swami was told of the young wife's sorrow. He smiled and lifted his folded hands to the sky as if saying : "All happens by the will of the Almighty."

We returned to Nellore and the impression of that visit faded away. I did not even dream at that time that my life would be spent at the feet of the Swami.

When I was thirty-one I went to Rameshwaram on a pilgrimage and on my return journey I stopped at Tiruvannamalai. I learned that the Swami was then living at the foot of the hill. That afternoon we went to see him at his Ashrama. There was a thatched shed over his mother's samadhi and a tiled hall for meeting the Swami. He was seated on a couch and about a dozen devotees were on the bare floor. We sat in silence for ten minutes and returned to the town.



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Bhagavan's presence gave me the experience of inner silence and mental stillness, but away from him I could not regain it and I spent a year vainly trying to free myself from all thought. Some friends were going to see Sri Aurobindo's Ashrama at Pondicherry and they took me along. They were to stay there for a week. I was not much impressed and went for a short visit to Ramanasramam. A learned Shastri whom I knew appeared in my dream and asked me: "Where was the need for you to go to Pondicherry? Entrust yourself to Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi. He is God Himself. He will surely lead you to salvation."

But even such a clear dream was not enough. I cherished a plan of going to Benares and spending my life there in holy austerities. I decided to go to Bhagavan, learn from him how to meditate, and then leave for Benares for good. My friend Parvatamma decided to join me in the spiritual adventure. Accordingly we went to Tiruvannamalai and rented a house. In the afternoon we took cashew nuts and sugar candy as an offering to Bhagavan and went to the Ashrama. We placed our offerings on a stool before him and sat down. The cow Lakshmi happened to be lying near Bhagavan's sofa. She got up and began to chew our precious offerings. Bhagavan looked on and said nothing. His attendant, Madhava Swami, did not even look. We thought it might be impious to disturb the cow, but soon I got exasperated and exclaimed, "Please remove the cow !" Madhava Swami replied: "Why? I thought you offered those sweets to Lakshmi !"

What is Atma?

The next day at noon I was again at Ramanasramam. His midday meal over, Bhagavan was reclining on the sofa and explaining a verse from the *Bhagavad Gita* to Sri Ramiah Yogi. As no one else was in the hall, I gathered courage and asked: "What is *Atma*? Is it the limitless ether of space or the awareness that cognizes everything?" Bhagavan replied: "To remain without thinking 'this is *Atma*' and 'that is *Atma*', is itself *Atma*." He looked at me and I felt my mind melt away into nothing. No thought would come, only the feeling of immense, unutterable peace. My doubts were cleared.

Every day I would visit Bhagavan and listen to his talks with the devotees. Deep in my mind there was the same rock-like stillness, immensely solid and yet strangely vibrant.

Several times I was invited to work in the Ashrama, but the Ashrama ways were not orthodox enough for me. One day Bhagavan's own sister asked me to take her place in the Ashrama, for she had to leave for some time. I could not refuse. At that time *Shantamma* I was the chief cook and my duty was to help her. To my great joy Bhagavan was in the kitchen with us most of the time. He taught me to cook tastily and neatly. I would spend all day in the Ashrama and in the evening I would go to the town to sleep, for there was no sleeping accommodation for women in the Ashrama.

Once Bhagavan said: "You widows do not eat vegetables like drumsticks and radish. Diet restrictions are good to strengthen the will. Besides, the quality of food and the manner of eating have an influence on the mind." I was very happy to work in the kitchen directly under Bhagavan's supervision; yet I wanted to go home. The Ashrama ways were too unorthodox for me. And there was too much work. I did not want to work all day long. I wanted to sit quietly and meditate in solitude.

I Leave the Ashram

So I left again for my village and I went away for about a year. I divided my time between idleness and meditation.Yet my heart was at the Ashrama. I would tell myself: "Where is the need of running about. Is not Bhagavan here and everywhere?" But my heart was calling me to Bhagavan. Even when I was pleading with myself, that in the Ashrama there would be no time for meditation, my heart would say: "Working in the kitchen by his side is far better than meditation." At home I had all the leisure I wanted, but it seemed to me that I was wasting my time. Later I learned that that was the time Bhagavan used to remember me very often. Once they were preparing *pongal* (pulse with rice and black pepper) to celebrate Bhagavan's monthly birth-star (*Punarvasu*) and Bhagavan told *Shantamma*: "Subbalakshmi is far away yet she worries whether *pongal* is cooked here today or not." On some other festival day Bhagavan announced:

"Subbalakshmi will turn up; keep some *pongal* for her." That very day I arrived at the Ashrama.

His great love for me, a worthless devotee, bound me firmly to his feet. Again and again I wanted to leave the Ashrama, but he held me for my own good, more powerfully than I held on to him.

Whenever I was collecting courage to tell Bhagavan about my desire to leave, he would seem to read my thoughts and forestall me by giving me something special to do. I felt I had too much to do and that my life was being wasted.

One day Bhagavan was looking at me intently and said: "It looks as if you are still hankering after meditation." I replied: "What have I got except endless work in the kitchen?" Bhagavan said with deep feeling: "Your hands make do the work but your mind can remain still. You are that which never moves. Realize that and you will find that work is not a strain. But as long as you think that you are the body and that the work is done by you, you will feel your life to be an endless toil. In fact, it is the mind that toils, not the body. Even if your body keeps quiet, will your mind keep quiet too? Even in sleep the mind is busy with its dreams."

I replied: "Yes, Swami, it is as natural for you to know that you are not your body as it is for us to think that we are the body. I had a dream recently in which you were explaining this very point. I was dreaming that I was working in the kitchen and you were having your bath in your usual place behind the bamboo mat partition. You asked: 'Who is it?' I replied:

"Who shall I say I am?" You said: 'Exactly so, you are nothing of which something can be said.' Now, just remember that was my dream and it was quite clear. Why can't I remember always that I am not the body?" "Because you haven't had enough of it," he smiled.

Do Not Torture The Body

I used to fast quite often, as advised in some scriptural texts. In one of the books, I read: "He who wants to know himself and yet pays attention to his body is like a man who trusts a crocodile to take him across a river." I read the text to Bhagavan and he explained: "It does not mean that you should starve. You need not torture the body. It only means not giving the body more than it needs. With your mind, hold on to enquiry and just keep the body going so that it does not become a hindrance. For this, pure and fresh food, simply prepared and taken in moderation, is a great help."

Another day I asked Bhagavan's permission to put on the *sannyasin*'s orange robes and beg for my food. He said: "Will coloured clothes give you renunciation? First learn what *sannyasa* means."

Once five or six devotees sat down before Bhagavan and sang a hymn in praise of the Guru. He got up in the middle of the recitation and went away, saying: "Prayers and praises will not take one far. It is the merciful look of the teacher that bestows true knowledge." I felt elated. Had I not received his merciful glances? But the next day he was saying: "Unless one becomes a six month old baby there is no hope for him in the realm of self-knowledge." My heart sank. Although I lived in the presence of Lord Arunachala Himself, I was far from becoming an infant.

Why Should You Doubt?

Another time Bhagavan was telling us stories from the lives of devotees of bygone ages. I questioned him: "It is written that God appeared before the devotee and shed His grace on him while he was still in his mother's womb. Can it be true?" To that Bhagavan replied: "Why should you doubt? Will doubt profit you? Only your devotion will suffer. Those stories are as real as your telling me that you are present here and now."

Bhagavan was one day reading and explaining *Tiruppugazhi* in Tami] to Alamelammal of Madura. I did not know Tami] and I could only look on. I saw a change in Bhagavan. A light was shining from within him. His face was radiant, his smile became a copper worth of camphor and hope to please the Almighty. His words reverberated in the mind and were instantly and deeply understood. All my being was carried upwards on a current of strange vibrations. The memory of this experience is ever present in my heart. A great joy has remained with me that I was privileged to sit at the feet of the Divine Being.

It was ever like this with him. Whoever went to him, he would go down to his level; his words and gestures, even the intonation of his voice, would adapt themselves to the make-up of the people around him. With children he was their playmate, to family people - a wise counsellor, to pundits - a well of knowledge, to yogis - the God of will, the God of victory. He saw himself in them and they saw themselves in him and their hearts would be bound to his feet in everlasting love. All who came to see him would be charmed by his love and kindness, beauty and wisdom, and the overwhelming sense of unity he radiated like fire radiating heat. To some he would grant a special vision, invisible to others; with some he would openly discourse. Crowds would gather round him and each one would see him differently. Even his pictures differ. A stranger would not guess that they are all of the same person.

Grant Me Salvation, Swami

One afternoon a lady from Kumbhakonam sat near Bhagavan and exclaimed: "How glad I am that I have met you, Swami. I have craved to see you for a long time, Swami. Not that I want anything, Swami. Only please be kind and grant me salvation, Swami." With that she got up and went away. Bhagavan had a hearty laugh. "Look at her - all she wants is salvation. Give her salvation, she wants nothing else." I said: "Is it not what we all want?"

He replied: "Is salvation something to be handed over on request? Do I keep bundles of salvation concealed about me, that people should ask me for salvation? She said 'I do not want anything.' If it is sincere, that itself is salvation. What is there I can give and what is there they can take?"

Somebody brought a bell to be rung at the *arati* ceremony and it was put into Bhagavan's hands. He tried its sound in various ways and laughed: "God wants us to make a fire of our past evil deeds and burn our karma in it. But, these people burn a copper worth of camphor and hope to please the Almighty. Do they really believe that they can get something for nothing? They do not want to bend to God, they want God to bend to them. In their greed they would swallow God, but they would not let him swallow them. Some boast of their offerings. What have they got to offer ? The idol of Vinayaka (Ganesha) is made of jaggery. They break off a piece of it and offer it to Him. The only offering worthy of the Lord is to clear the mind of thoughts and remain steady in the peace of Self."

In the early days, when I joined the Ashrama, Bhagavan used to help in grinding lentils, peeling vegetables and even lending a hand in cooking. He would get up long before daybreak to join the kitchen staff at their work. We ladies would arrive by sunrise, and Bhagavan would see that all was ready for our arrival and we would often find a part of our work already done. To forestall him we would come by five; he would come at four; we would come then at three. When he saw that we were left without sleep, he stopped entering the kitchen before sunrise and gave us time to sleep.

He was the very embodiment of wisdom and kindness, though he did not mind our faults and mistakes, he made us follow his instructions to the letter. We had to do the same task again and again until it was done to his complete satisfaction. Did he do it for himself? Of what use was it to him? He wanted to prove to us that he could do things right, that only lack of patience and attention causes all the mess. He sometimes seemed too severe, even harsh, to make us do something correctly, for he knew what we did not know - that we can act correctly if we only try. With experience came confidence, and with confidence the great peace of righteousness.

In daily life he avoided all distinction. At work and at food he was one of us. But in the hall, seated on the sofa, he was the great Lord of Kailas, the Holy Mountain. Whenever Bhagavan would enter or leave the hall, we would all get up respectfully. One could see that he did not like so many people being disturbed because of him.

He wanted us to learn well the lesson that God is present in every being in all his glory and fullness and must be given equal reverence. He was tireless in hammering this lesson into our minds and hearts, and he would ruthlessly sacrifice the little comforts we so loved to provide for him, as soon as he noticed a trace of preference. The law that what cannot be shared must not be touched was supreme in his way of dealing with us. Separative and exclusive feelings are the cause of the "I" and therefore the greatest obstacles in the realization of the One. No wonder he was exterminating them so relentlessly.

Once Bhagavan had jaundice. He had to be put on a fruit diet, but he would not eat fruit unless all ate, and in equal quantities too! Where could we get such a lot of fruit? Yet he was adamant and would leave his share untouched unless he saw an equal share on everybody's leaf-plate. Those who say that a sick man needs special food and must not give trouble, miss the point. Bhagavan was not sick. His body had jaundice, that was all. He wanted to impress on our minds that under no condition must a man have a greater share. Our learning this lesson was more important to him than the cure of his jaundice.

To serve him at mealtimes was by itself a dangerous adventure. Our womanly desire was to fill him to the brim. His rule was to clear the plate no matter what or how much was served. Not a speck of food would be left uneaten. So we had to be watchful and serve much less than what we would like to. It was not easy and we would often fail. He would scold us bitterly, or, what was infinitely worse, would fall ill and suffer. I cannot understand how he managed to produce an illness when a lesson was needed, but our life with him was crisis after crisis.

He would take any amount of trouble to teach us the virtues necessary for self-discovery. Our life in the Ashrama was a school of yoga, and a hard school too. For book-knowledge was as nothing to him; only character and genuine spiritual experience counted.

With time he ceased working in the kitchen, but we could still find him in the dining hall. When all would leave after food, he would linger on his seat and we would collect around him and chat and listen to his precious words. He would teach us and guide us and we would forget the years that passed and be again the happy crowd of yore.

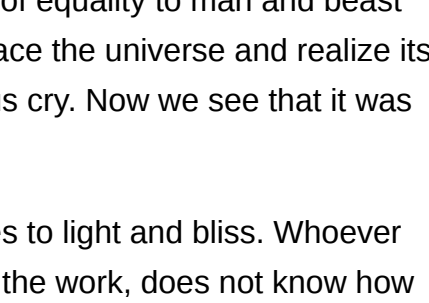
Changed to the Very Root of Our Being

One had to live and work with him to know what a great teacher he was. Through the trifles of daily life he taught us Vedanta in theory and practice. He led us with absolute wisdom and infinite kindness and we were changed to the very root of our being, not even knowing the depth and scope of his influence. It is only now, after so many years, that we can see the meaning of the orders, prohibitions, scoldings and storms that we had to endure. At that time we understood so little and just obeyed, because we felt that he was God. Even that feeling we owed to his grace, for from time to time he would let us see him as he really was, the Lord Almighty, and not the human frame to which we were accustomed.

We were women, simple and uneducated. It was our love for him, a reflection of his love, that chained us to his feet and made us stay. For him we gave up hearth and home and all our earthly ties. We only knew that we were safe with him, that in some miraculous way he would take us to our goal. He himself was our goal, our real home. More than that we did not know or care. We were even slow to learn the lesson of equality to man and beast which he was so anxious to teach us first. To us he alone existed. The radiant form of Ramana was enough for us. We did not know that it was not enough, that a human soul must learn to embrace the universe and realize its own presence in every living being. We would concentrate too much on him and resent his compelling us to enlarge our little circle. His sometimes harsh treatment would bewilder us and make us cry. Now we see that it was love that suffered as it laboured.

Yogis control themselves severely for long to reach the state to which Bhagavan would take us by making us work near him in the kitchen. The small tasks of daily life he would make into avenues to light and bliss. Whoever has not experienced the ecstasy of grinding, the rapture of cooking, the joy of serving *idolies* to devotees, his devotees, the state when the mind is in the heart and the heart is in him and he is in the work, does not know how much bliss a human heart contains.

Although physically he is no more with us, he still directs us, as in the past. He will not let go his hold on us until we reach the Other Shore. This is our unshaken faith. We may not always be conscious of his guidance, but we are safe in his hands. Sri Krishna, in His mercy became a cowherd to teach simple milkmaids the way to salvation. Similarly Bhagavan, the same supreme Being in another form, took to cooking in order to save a few ignorant women. With his eyes he served his devotees the food of the spirit, with his hands – the bread of life.



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Films from Sri Ramanasramam

Part 3

(continued from the *Sep-Oct* issue)

MP3

The next two minutes of 16mm film are a continuation of the 1938 film featured in our last issue and taken by Jayadevial Dave. It begins with a view of the newly built dining hall, shot from the hill, about 100 meters up. This combined dining hall and kitchen, built from local stone and high quality material, was Sri Ramanasramam's largest construction endeavor to that date - certainly, some sceptics believed unjustifiably large. But, in reality, it was a foresighted enterprise, towards which Jayadevial Dave must have been importuned to aim his camera with impressive results.

From the dining hall the camera briefly pans to the west, taking in the *gosala* (cow shed) and other buildings, mostly hidden by overgrowth. Then on to the new office and bookstore, standing side by side with "SRI RAMANASRAMAM, OFFICE, NIRANJANANDA SWAMI, C. R. SARVADIKARI [spelling as given] written above the entrance. The office building, also a well-built structure, stands today and is used for storing and packing book orders. It is just north of the Samadhi Hall. And when the Samadhi Hall was built in 1970 the whole bookstore building was razed and the space incorporated into the large hall enshrining the *Lingam* over Bhagavan's grave.

Now on to the Old Hall where we briefly see Jayadevial Dave and Krishnaswami. The camera quickly scans the holy hill then focuses on a whitewashed stone where we read "Skandasaramam" in English and Tami], and an arrow pointing the way. Even today this rock is whitewashed and painted with the same message.

At this juncture, the Maharshi enters the scene walking down his beloved hill, followed by his devoted attendant, Madhava Swami. Before entering the Ashrama grounds, Mr. Dave walks into view with joined hands to offer salutations to the Maharshi (and obviously to be filmed). The Maharshi lifts his cane as to shoo him away and avoid the adoration. He then makes his way to the stairs that go up and then down into the Ashrama.

In the next scene we see Bhagavan, the attendant Krishnaswami, and Mr. Dave walking west of the Ashrama in Palakuttu. The Maharshi seems unconcerned about the filming as he proceeds on his normal daily walk to this area; of course, not so with the other two. We see a thick forest in contrast to its present condition. The group unceremoniously walks around the bank of the small tank in Palakuttu and the film ends. This is the last of the films from the 1930s.

From here, our next film takes us ahead about eight years to 1946. On the opening scene the *front gate of Sri Ramanasramami* appears, just as we see it today. Then a few quick images pass: a detailed view of the *Mathrubhuteswara Temple* construction, the main entrance of the *gosala*, the Old Hall, and then Bhagavan appears in a delightful manner.

Walking after the office Bhagavan turns left towards the Old Hall and is immediately met by a man holding a one-year-old babe. He spontaneously lifts the point of his walking stick and playfully pokes the child in the tummy, then affectionately pats the child and moves on. This short little act of playful affection is one of the few scenes wherein we see the Bhagavan so often read about - his human tenderness, his gracious spontaneity.

This is the same year that the famous 'Welling Bust' photo of the Maharshi was taken. It could have been taken that very day, for his features are charmingly softened by a short crop of white hair covering his face and head, his look is cool and penetrating and an inexpressible aura of freedom and joy seems to touch the heart of the onlooker.

The Maharshi turns toward the camera, grasps the towel resting over his left shoulder and flips it under his right arm, being quite aware the camera is focused on him. He walks almost directly toward the camera. The attendant Rangaswamy, along with T.N.Venkataraman's two sons, Sundaram and Ganesan, follow behind him. During the next thirty seconds the cameraman takes five other shootings of Bhagavan walking towards him. In one we see the storekeeper, Kumaswamy.

(continued in the *Jan-Feb 1992* issue)

Book Review

Ramana Smrti Souvenir

Published by Sri Ramanasramam

IN 1980 The birth centenary anniversary of Sri Ramana Maharshi was observed in India and abroad. It was a grand occasion marked by a heightened awareness throughout of this unique personality, born in a remote South Indian village one hundred years ago. One of the more lasting and inspiring tributes to the beloved sage is this *Ramana Smrti Souvenir*, released as an offering during the celebrations.

The lead article of this issue (*As I Saw Him, No.5*) is an extract from this book. There are several other articles such as this, providing us with a novel view of how the Maharshi instructed his intimate devotees - mostly women - in the highest principles of spirituality through the simple chores of daily life. While reading these unforgettable tales, one actually feels the Maharshi's presence and his relentless concern for the welfare of his devotees.

Shantamma, Lokammal, Gouriammal and *Sampurnamma* are a few of the many women devotees represented in this work. Their recollections bring to light new facets of Bhagavan's personality and are rich with a clear reflection of the love and guidance they received from their Master. These reminiscences re-create a large family of devotees, from all walks of life, bathing in the grace of a Mahapurusha.

Besides this, there are a total of sixty-two tributes and recollections by admirers, scholars, new and old devotees from the East and West. T. K. Sundaresa Iyer, Voruganti Krishnayya, Swami Chidbhavananda, Wei Wu Wei, K. K. Nambiar, T. M. P. Mahadevan, *Dilip Kumar Roy*, *A. Devaraja Mudaliar*, Swami Dayananda Saraswati and Dr. Karan Singh are just a few of the eminent personalities who contributed.

It is a 7 x 10 inch publication, having a picture-frame quality photo adorning its frontispiece. Also, many of the contributor's photos follow their tribute, along with numerable bust photos of the Maharshi.

The book concludes with an invaluable six-page "Visitors Guide" to Tiruvannamalai and Sri Ramanasramam.

We highly recommend this book to all who wish to dive deeper into the unique life and teachings of the Maharshi.

Ramana Satsangs

Satsangs with recitations, songs, readings and meditation have been going on in a few places near or in large cities. Some of them are weekly. If you would like to attend any of these, please see the *Sri Ramana Satsang online* pages.

"The Maharshih" is a free bimonthly newsletter distributed in North America by *Arunachala Ashrama*, Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi Center. You can subscribe to this newsletter's announcements by *email*. All back issues are available as *html pages* and in *Acrobat PDF* format from 2000 to the present. *Books, images, videos and audio CDs* on Sri Ramana Maharshi can also be found in the *eLibrary*, the *On-line Bookstore* pages and the Ashrama's *YouTube* channel.

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