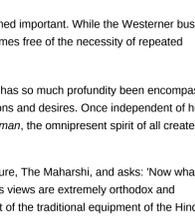


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The Maharshi in America

It is well known that from the age of sixteen Sri Ramana Maharshi never left the holy environs of his beloved Arunachala Hill. But what did travel were the tales of his pristine purity, the liberating qualities of his teachings, and the inexplicable power of his presence.

From all over India and the far corners of the world, seekers flocked to his Ashrama. In the midst of all these seekers there were those who made their living seeking out and writing on newsworthy stories. Evidently, as time passed, the Maharshi became a newsworthy item, and the media from around the world began making their way to Sri Ramanasramam; of course, the American media didn't fall far behind.



Life Magazine, May 1949, pp.93-94

HOLY MAN

"Sri Ramana Maharshi has India's answer to most of man's problems." This was the heading and subheading beneath the large double-page picture above. It was the largest photo in the May 30, 1949 issue of LIFE magazine. It was also part of the longest article spanning ten pages with eleven photos and over 5,000 words, contributed by the distinguished American writer and musician, Winthrop Sargeant.

Competing for attention in this same popular photo journal-weekly was a ten page photo-biography of Franklin D. Roosevelt's early life. Also seen are news and photos of the weeks events, covering stories like, 'Warsaw rises from its wreckage,' 'John McCloy takes on job as Germany's boss,' 'Monaco buries its sprightly old prince,' and other small articles under the titles of 'Art,' 'Education,' 'Science,' 'Movies,' etc.

But by far the most prominent feature in the whole 108 page issue is the article 'Holy Man' written about the Maharshi. It has four times more written text than the next longest article, which is quite amazing, considering the magazine then had a readership of over 26,000,000. Amazing also for the fact it was written not just by an ordinary reporter, but by a qualified journalist who was also a sincere seeker, capable of going far deeper into Indian philosophical thought than any ordinary foreign newsmen.

After introducing himself to a member of Sri Ramanasramam he is candidly asked, "Are you interested merely in something to write for your paper, or have you a deeper purpose?"

He then writes: 'I replied quite shamelessly that I was in search of salvation.' But if this was the true purpose of his visit it is not easily detectable by his observations, which remain for the most part, objective, correct, yet interesting. He was telling a story for a large, uninitiated American audience, and to grab and keep their attention seems to be his primary concern. In this he succeeds very well, even while delving into Hindu Psychology, Theology, Reincarnation, Philosophy, and the intricacies of Mukti (final emancipation).

Under the subtitle, 'Experiment vs. Contemplation,' he writes: 'To the orthodox Hindu mind, which considers the material world an illusion of the senses, experiment has never seemed important. While the Westerner busied himself with test tubes in an effort to subdue and comprehend his material environment, the Hindu simply sat and thought. . . . Ultimately, by a process of purification, the soul becomes free of the necessity of repeated rebirths and is permanently united with the vital force itself. This final state is the goal of all human life. . . .'

Then for several paragraphs he turns his attention to the Bhagavad Gita, a book he undoubtedly has a fascination for. 'Seldom in the history of religious and philosophical writing has so much profundity been encompassed in a few pages, and the result is a compendium of the essentials of Hindu religion. As Krishna describes it, life is an impermanent dream-like state in which the soul is beset by illusions and desires. Once independent of his desires and unattached to glory, ambition, pride or any other fruit of worldly achievement, he can go through life in complete serenity and pass from it into an eternal union with Brahman, the omnipresent spirit of all created things. . . .'

After explaining the gist of the Gita with clarity and conviction, and knowing that he has just indulged upon the reader's limits of reflective thought, he brings us back to the central figure, The Maharshi, and asks: 'Now what has all this ancient doctrine got to do with Sri Ramana Maharshi, the sun-tanned old gentleman who lives at the foot of the mountain near Tiruvannamalai? Everything, Sri Ramana's views are extremely orthodox and correspond exactly with those propounded in the Gita. His life of austerity, his renunciation of all worldly desires, his contemplative serenity, his unshakable peace of mind are all part of the traditional equipment of the Hindu sage. . . . Sri Ramana's soul is already united with Brahman. Only the presence of his physical body, an outer husk connected with the world of appearance, still sustains the illusion that he is a man like other men. . . .'

Any student or devotee of the Maharshi would fully endorse these observations of Mr. Sargeant. He has grasped the essence of the Advaitic ideal and how the Maharshi embodied it. But under the subtitle 'Who am I?' his elaborations on the Maharshi's teachings fall short. 'The method is merely a variation on a theme that is at least 3,000 years old. Sri Ramana's favorite point of departure, the question 'Who am I?,' was stated long ago by Socrates as 'Know thyself,' and has been echoed by thousands of great moral teachers everywhere.'

That is as far as the author elucidates on the actual technique of the 'Who am I?' method, which is no elucidation at all. However, the quotation from the Maharshi that follows, does serve to compensate and provide the vast American readership with some thought-provoking concepts: "If only the mind is kept under control," says Sri Ramana, "what matters it where one may happen to be? The mind of the ignorant one, entering into the phenomenal world, suffers pain and anguish. When the world recedes from one's view, that is when, free from thought, the mind enjoys the bliss of the Self. There is no such thing as the physical world apart from and independent of thought. Just as the spider draws out the thread of the cobweb from within itself and withdraws it again into itself, even so out of itself the mind projects the world and absorbs it again into itself. The Self alone is the world." This is the full extent of the Maharshi's teachings given in this article.

What, perhaps, had a greater attraction to the readers of this magazine was the picturesque description of Sri Ramanasramam and the physical appearance of the sage. In this task the author remains respectfully objective, writing kindly without adulation or marked devotion. This results in a lucid, credible and very readable account: 'After some conversation and tea drinking I was led into the presence of Sri Ramana himself. He was a small, thin man of seventy with close cropped white hair and a stubby beard and mustache, an extremely kindly and intelligent face and a deeply tanned body, dad in a loincloth. He reclined on a massive stone couch propped up with pillows. An American alarm clock ticked on a shelf behind him and a calendar hung from one of the posts. . . . Sitting crossed-legged on the floor about him were two or three dozen people, all gazing rapturously at the master. . . . Sri Ramana would have looked like a superior human being in any surroundings. He had the quietly assured look of a man who has experienced a great deal and thought everything through to a final, unshakable conclusion. Even an unbeliever could see that he possessed a sort of personal serenity that is rare even in the contemplative Orient. I mumbled a few words of greeting which I hoped were appropriate and was smilingly waved to a place on the floor. The Maharshi spoke very little, sometimes in English, sometimes in the Tamil language which a considerable pan of his audience didn't understand. But that didn't matter. 'You can attain peace merely by being near him,' the professor of English Literature explained later.

The Maharshi was presented with an old book of Tamil scriptures from which he read odd passages aloud, commenting on them in a leisurely tone of voice while his listeners gazed raptly. Finally he stopped talking altogether and simply smiled an endless warm-hearted smile. After an hour or so he rose from his couch and, supporting himself with a long cane, was led by a disciple back to his living quarters. The whole scene had a biblical quality about it, like something that might have happened thousands of years ago. It was a re-enactment of the typical scene between master and disciples that has been going on since long before the time of Buddha and that continues in India today as if time stood still and history did not exist.'

Besides valuable observations like the above, and credible explanations about Hindu life and philosophy, Mr. Sargeant did not resist the temptation to dabble in the sphere of incredulous speculation. He indulged in this by comparing the supernatural powers claimed by followers of both Sri Aurobindo and Sri Ramana, creating a sense of competition and obvious foolishness. Perhaps he thought the readers needed this for entertainment and relief from an otherwise serious, impressive and somewhat intrusive Hindu profile upon a powerful Christian nation. A thoughtful and informed reader would easily forgive him for this slight lapse and judge the overall value of his work. And while millions of Americans sat and pondered over these curious photographs and the ancient wisdom from the East, the final year of a glorious testimony to the heights of human and spiritual perfection, in the form of Sri Ramana Maharshi, began.

Footnotes

[1] The article 'Holy Man' was originally printed in the May 30, 1949 issue of Life Magazine

[2] In 1979, Winthrop Sargeant published a 735 page, word-for-word translation and commentary on the Bhagavad Gita.

A Request

While researching the above Life Magazine article and several others we happened to discover that the Maharshi's death was reported in the New York Times with a one paragraph notation on April 15, 1950 and an eight paragraph article the following day. The tributes to the sage, albeit well intended, are replete with inaccurate - though interesting - observations. We plan on printing them in our next issue.

We believe that similar reports were submitted to other large city daily newspapers around the country. We ask our friends and readers in these cities to visit their libraries and investigate the matter and, if something is found, to send us a photocopy of it. We will print all received material.

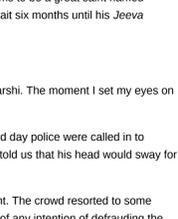
Sri Kunju Swami

continued from the Nov/Dec 1992 issue

In our last issue we regretfully reported the passing of the revered disciple of Sri Bhagavan, Sri Kunju Swami. We also began translations from his Tamil book, Enadu Ninaivugal. We continue here with reminiscences from Kunju Swami's early life, translated by J. Jayaraman of Sri Ramanasramam.

The Yelapondi Kuppandi Swami then wrote out on a palm leaf the following six verses from Kaivalya Navaneeta in Malayalam, and asked me to go home and return at the same time the following day after reading it.

- 1. I worship the ever-shining Pure Consciousness, which manifests as Brahma, Vishnu, or Mighty Siva, accordingly as He creates, preserves or withdraws (the universe), and also as the countless individual beings, yet remaining ever-free and perfect as the Blazing Sun over the ocean of Bliss.
2. All the ancient sages drew from the boundless ocean of milk, and filled their pitchers (their works). I boiled them all on the fire of the Master's words, churned them with the churn of self-enquiry, and I now present this cream of Emancipation - Kaivalya Navaneeta - to all.
3. The sages say that there are four prerequisites for realization of the Truth:
1. Viveka: discrimination between the temporary and the permanent;
2. Vairagya: indifference to the enjoyment of pleasures here or hereafter;
3. the group of six qualities and
4. Mumukshatvam: the longing for liberation.
4. & 5. The six qualities are sama, dama, uparati, titiksha, samadhana and sraddha. Of these -
1. sama is control of mind;
2. dama is control of the senses;
3. uparati is cessation of activities (relating to caste, creed, family, etc.);
4. titiksha is control of passions, and includes endurance;
5. samadhana is, according to the sages, the settling down of the mind to reflect on the Truth, as revealed by the scriptures and the sages;
6. sraddha denotes faith in the Master and the scriptures. Such are the meanings of the six terms of this category.
6. No one can achieve anything in the world without being properly equipped for the task. For the same reason, only those who are equipped with these four categories of prerequisites can gain illumination. A novice cannot get it so readily. If so gained, it follows that the person has been successively purified in countless past incarnations.



click to see a larger image

I memorised these six verses even on the road towards my home. When reaching home, my father inquired about what transpired during my visit with the Swami. I related what happened, finishing with the recitation of the above six verses.

I visited the Swami every day for the next fifteen days during which time I committed one hundred verses of the Kaivalya Navaneeta to memory. My father told me the mere memorizing of the verses is useless and I should ask the Swami for the meaning also. This I did and was taught the meanings.

About this time Rangaswami Gounder of Pollalathaluk came to see the Swami. Seeing me there he made inquiries and with my father's permission took me and the Swami to his home. At his home in Puduppaalayam the study of the Yoga Vasishtha in Tamil verse began. The text abounded with stories of multifarious samadhi experiences, of which I had not the least inkling. So I asked the Swami in private if such study of the scripture is enough to gain these samadhi experiences, or is there something more to be done. Swamiji replied that mere study was not enough and then taught me certain spiritual practices, which he advised me to perform diligently. Accordingly, I supplemented the Vedantic study with the practices.

When I found that no special experiences were coming my way I again approached the Swami. He told me that I should continue in the practice, with greater intensity, and that these experiences would occur. After some months passed in Puduppaalayam, I felt I could return home and continue the practices. So, with the Swami's permission I returned home, practiced hard, but still had no results. Not only that, but my earlier state of peace seemed gone and since no new experiences were coming, I felt distraught. This unsettled condition continued for the next two years.

Meanwhile, the Swami went on a pilgrimage to some places throughout Tamil Nadu. When he returned with the Puduppaalayam Gounder and some other wealthy patrons, he announced that he would enter Jeeva Samadhi (conscious death) on a certain day two years hence, and that all these VIP's with him had gathered to handle the arrangements.

At a designated samadhi spot, three miles from our village, work began in earnest on a cavernous construction. Swamiji spoke to my father and got me to help him. He began introducing me to all and sundry as his principle disciple and the successor to head his Ashrama. All this pomp and arrangements repulsed me. My mind was in great turmoil. One day I laid bare before the Swami all my disappointments and apprehensions, adding, "Alas, I have been grievously deprived of any spiritual experiences. Are there not any living saints or Maharshis like those we read about in the scriptures?"

Immediately came the Swami's reply: "Yes. Why not? There is a great soul known as Ramana Maharshi living in Tiruvannamalai. He shines with the splendorous experience of Jnana, which he gained as a mere boy of sixteen. I too have had his darshan."

On hearing this, my mind stood still, stunned, as if an electric shock had struck me. I was plunged into a hitherto inexperienced ecstasy. Right then I decided I must go to Tiruvannamalai and asked the Swami for his permission. He exploded with anger: "I am to enter Jeeva Samadhi in just six months and you must supervise all the arrangements. How can you go! You may go wherever you please after my samadhi." I felt helpless at his reply.

A week later Ramakrishnan, my friend from the neighboring village, came to see me. He was one year elder to me and, as I seemed to be shaping up to be a sadhu, he had affection and respect for me. In fact, he too wished for such a life, though he came from a wealthy family, who were at that time planning his marriage. Detesting his state of affairs, he asked me for some suggestions. I told him that there seems to be a great saint named Ramana Maharshi living in Tiruvannamalai and that he should go immediately to his Ashrama, adding that I was also anxious to go there but because the Swami has forbidden me, I must wait six months until his Jeeva Samadhi. "Please leave for there now, write to me about the Maharshi's instructions, and I will join you in six months," I told him.

I put him on the train that very day. Two days later his relatives came to me saying, "Where has he gone? Surely you are the one behind all this."

I replied, "I didn't send him away. He simply asked me for the way to Tiruvannamalai and I told him." A week later I received a letter from Ramakrishnan, along with a photo of Ramana Maharshi. The moment I set my eyes on the holy form of Sri Bhagavan I was filled with ineffable joy and peace.

The day of Swamiji's Jeeva Samadhi drew near. The crowds began to swell as the news spread throughout the land. With three days left the Swami began taking only milk. On the scheduled day police were called in to manage the large, unruly crowd of spectators. At 3 p.m. He descended into the samadhi cavern. Only family members and his chief disciple, that is myself, were allowed to be near him. He told us that his head would sway for a while, and when it stopped we should immediately close the cave with the large stone slab.

Well, we all waited. A half an hour went by; an hour went by; things did not go as planned. The Swami, with much agitation, fled the cave, merged into the vast crowd and vanished from sight. The crowd resorted to some heckling and abuse, then finally dispersed. Along with a few others I went in search of him and discovered him under a tree in a nearby grove. He was quite distressed and nervous. Devoid of any intention of defrauding the public, he had genuinely felt that he was ready for Jeeva Samadhi. He had first deluded himself and then others.

He asked us to return to our homes and left the area the next day. He also advised me to continue with the daily study of Vedanta and the spiritual practices. I returned home and my parents where overjoyed to see me. I stayed only two days, as my mind was already in Tiruvannamalai.

— continued in the Mar/Apr issue

Films From Sri Ramanasramam Part 9 (continued from Sep-Oct 1992 Issue)

IN 1948, Aravind Bose, a Bengali devotee, shot a series of 16mm color films which were collected together and is now popularly called the 'Bose Film.' In our September/October 1992 issue we began describing this valuable film, noting that it displayed a considerable amount of professionalism absent in most of the other films taken by devotees. It also is the best preserved film, providing us with vivid color shots, unequaled in our whole collection.

We ended our last description with the Sage's visit to the goshala, the cowshed. In this scene we saw his marvelous beauty and grace, expressed with every look, gesture and touch, as he mingled with the innocent born, his children of the animal world; and on this occasion, the lucky cows of Sri Ramanasramam.

Let us repeat the last few lines from our last description and continue on: Looking somewhat lean and cheerful he walks up to the black cow and begins to gently scratch her back. While doing so he gazes around, checking to see that all these four-legged inmates of the Ashrama are being cared for properly. He moves over to a young calf and rubs its back, gives instructions to a worker, turns to the left, takes one step and then a gracious smile blossoms and lights his face. The reason is soon apparent: his beloved cow Lakshmi walks straight to him and bends her head down low. He reaches out to her.

At this point, if you slow down the film speed and look at the Maharshi's smiling lips, you can distinctly see him say endearingly, "Amma (Mother)," as he begins to talk to her.

He then raises his right hand and places it on the crown of Lakshmi's head, affectionately rubbing in the small hollow just behind the root of the horns. Anyone who has ever tended cows knows that scratching this particular spot, which is inaccessible to the cow, is a welcomed source of pleasure for the animal. Lakshmi meekly lowers her head out of the camera's view but obviously very near to the feet of her Master.

The camera shifts and we see the Maharshi is still in the cowshed petting and scratching a dozen cows, while the while carefully scrutinizing their well-being.

Another blink of the camera and the Maharshi is on the move, surrounded by a dozen devotees, his cane with his right hand and a white towel thrown over his left shoulder, the cameraman films the group from no less than eight different vantage points. Amidst this serene atmosphere in the Maharshi's majestic presence, as the group slowly strolls through the Ashrama grounds it is hard to imagine the cameraman and his crew darting here and there, setting up and shooting in a frantic rush. The whole Ashrama must have been on high alert, although what we see filmed looks all quite natural and normal, which it was.

In the group we see Swami Viswanathan, Appu Swami, K. Patasala, J.N.Venkataraman and others. The Maharshi seems indifferent to the camera focused on him as he quietly goes about his normal daily amble.

At one point, when walking west near the front of the Veda Patasala, Bhagavan seems to be saying something. Turning to Venkataraman's son, Ganesan (only a small boy then), who is shyly walking by his side, he puts his hand on the boy's right shoulder, turns to him and makes an amusing comment, then raises his left hand from his shoulder and stretches it out to indicate something big and smiles broadly. Others smile too. Ganesan briefly smiles in the direction of Bhagavan, looks up at him, then quickly lowers his head, obviously embarrassed by the all attention.

But whatever it was that amused the Sage, however slight the humor, it continued to dance upon his countenance with cheer, goodness and grace, as he walks on looking directly into the camera and then passing it. His cheerful charm shines brightly, contrasted by the stoic, sober looks of all his followers and the curious side-glances from the timid boy.

— continued in the Mar-Apr issue

Practical Instructions

When camphor burns, no residue is left. The mind must be like camphor, it must melt away and be wholly consumed by the earnest resolve to find and be the real Self; by this resolve the 'Who Am I?' quest becomes efficacious. When the mind is thus consumed - when no trace of it as mind is left - it has become resolved into the Self.'

People who look for specific results from meditation but do not get them, become discouraged and conclude that meditation has done them no good; to them the Sage says: "It does not matter at all whether these results are attained or not. The attainment of steadiness is the main thing; it is the great gain. Anyhow they must trust themselves to God and wait for His Grace without impatience. The same rule applies to japa also, japa uttered even once does good, whether the person is aware of it or not."

Meditation and Mind control: "Meditation (dhyana) is a battle; for it is the effort to keep hold of one thought to the exclusion of all else; other thoughts arise and try to sink that thought; when the latter gains strength the others are put to flight. Breath-regulation (pranayama) is for him that cannot directly control his thoughts; it serves as a brake serves a car, but one should not stop with breath-regulation; after its purpose is gained - the quieting of the mind's restlessness - one should take up the practice of concentration; in course of time it will become possible to perform with control of the breath; the mind will then become quiet as soon as meditation is attempted. When meditation is well established it can no more be given up; it will go on automatically even during work, play and other activities. It will go on even in sleep. The means for getting well-established in meditation is meditation itself. Meditation extinguishes all thoughts and then the Truth alone remains."

"People ask me how to control the mind. I reply: 'Show me the mind.' The mind is no more than the series of thoughts. How can it be controlled by one of those thoughts, namely the desire to control the mind? It is foolish to seek to end the mind by the mind itself. The only way is to find the mind's Source and keep hold of it. Then the mind will fade away of itself. There are just two ways of controlling the mind. Either seek its Source, or surrender it to be struck down by the Supreme Power."

Being asked how one can find his Guru, the Sage said: "By intense meditation."

'Some More Sayings of the Sage', From Maha Yoga, Chapter 12



The Sage of Arunachala

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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 Maharshi" 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.