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THE MAHARSHI

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नमो भावते श्री रसणाय

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An Interview with Rajapalayam Ramani Ammal

She carries herself with a special dignity, born from the peace of deep devotion. This is what we feel when Ramani Ammal walks past us at Sri Ramanasramam. The spiritual aspirations which consumed her since her childhood have blossomed into a graceful flower of virtue and self poise. In this interview, videotaped in December of 1989, she briefly told us her life story.

Questioner: Please tell us about how you first came to Ramanasramam.

Ramani Ammal: My chosen deity in childhood was Lord Krishna. From my youth I had very pleasant dreams and would sometimes see Lord Krishna or other familiar deities in these dreams. But at the age of sixteen or seventeen I once saw a strange sage-like person coming down a hill and was captivated by his grandeur. I later came to realize that this sage was Sri Bhagavan.



After having vision of Bhagavan in my dream, a certain fear that had gripped me for some time all of a sudden disappeared. My relatives and others noticed this and commented how I was now moving about freely. This was Bhagavan's first influence on me.

Also, at the age of sixteen I was reading the *Jnana Vasishtha*. While reading it I experienced that I was enveloped in *gyoti*, a bright white light. I thought that if this is what happens just by reading it, how much more wonderful would it be if we practised *dhyana* and the other spiritual injunctions taught in the book. I used to be thrilled simply by reading those ancient Tami scriptures. But it wasn't until I was twenty before I got hold of a book on Bhagavan.

Kumaraswami Raja, the Chief Minister of Madras, who was a cousin of mine, brought me Bharati's biography of Bhagavan, *Ramana Vijayam*, in 1946. Mrs. Kumaraswami Raja was very fond of me, and though other relatives prohibited me from reading spiritual books, she used to stealthily supply me with them. The day she sent this book over with a boy, I was sitting in the house with a friend, a headmistress, who though Christian, was sincerely interested in our religion.

The boy who brought the book said, "Mami said to hand this book to you." I got up and went up to the gate to receive it. The moment I touched the book I lost body consciousness. My whole body became stiff. I somehow managed to return and sit next to my friend. Noticing my plight, she commented that I shouldn't read such books that make me forget myself. Everyone was complaining about this same thing, for in those days most of the time I would be sitting quietly, alert to my spiritual aspirations. All thought that I was simply idle with no work to do.

With difficulty I opened *Ramana Vijayam* to the first page and was met by the photo of the young Ramana. I became speechless. My friend, who was somewhat alarmed at my condition, had to leave and I somehow saw her off. With great reverence I took the book and started reading it. As I read, my eyes kept closing involuntarily, and I was drawn within, which I later came to know was meditation. Bhagavan taught me meditation in this way.

After reading this book, I felt I should leave home and go meet Ramana Maharshi. It is my family custom that women never even leave the house, not to mention leaving the town. That *vairagya*, or desperate determination to leave my house for spiritual fulfillment, was implanted in me by this book; and I am sure it was by the direct influence of Sri Bhagavan himself.

Because of my intense desire to go and see Bhagavan, my younger brother was moved to help me. He is a very pious person, with a soft nature. With his help I secretly left home and reached Tiruvannamalai and the holy feet of Sri Bhagavan. But after reaching there, I was overcome with a sense of guilt for running away from home. This feeling of guilt, and a sense of bringing ill fame to the respected Rajagopalan family, was uppermost in my mind when I first came into Bhagavan's presence. I felt depressed because of this.

When I arrived I went to the office to inquire where Bhagavan was. I was told that Bhagavan was near the well. When I came near the well, I saw a thatched shed next to it and all I could see in it was a flaming fire. I thought to myself, "I asked for directions to go to Bhagavan and they have sent me to a sacrificial place where there is a fire." It was only after a few minutes that I saw Bhagavan's comely form emerge from those flames. Even when I had the *Jyoti Darshana* I was blaming myself, thinking that I had this delusion of seeing a fire instead of Bhagavan because I was foolish enough to come out into the hot sun. It was only afterwards I realized Bhagavan had bestowed upon me this great boon of *Jyoti Darshana*. Next I heard Bhagavan saying to me, "You have now come home. Why don't you sit down?"

Coming from a family where women never go out, and having never gone out myself, I did not know how to behave in company. When Bhagavan said "You have now come home. You can sit down," I sat down right in front of him and not in the place reserved for women. For three days I kept sitting in front of him and all the while the feeling of guilt for running away from home was haunting me. I kept sitting in front of Bhagavan, not knowing how to act or ask questions, or anything else.

On the third day I heard Bhagavan telling someone: "I also ran away from my home, and at the railroad station I was so frightened that anyone could have identified me as a runaway, caught hold of me and sent me home. I ran away like a thief." When Bhagavan narrated this, it completely wiped out all my guilt feelings from that moment onwards. This was an act of pure grace directed towards me. It is very strange that by those few words Bhagavan entirely removed any residual fear in me. Bhagavan later said that sometimes you have to do a wrong thing to achieve the ultimate right thing. He even commented that there is nothing wrong in a woman running away at the tender age of twenty to come here.

I should narrate how my first *Giri Pradakshina* took place. I was not accustomed to walking at all, but whenever people came to tell Bhagavan that they were going on a *Giri Pradakshina*, I longed to go too. One day *Venkataramayya* and others were touching round the hill, and in this group there were two devotees who were over eighty years old. I did not say anything to Bhagavan, but was all the time praying that I should be included in that party. Immediately Bhagavan said to Venkataramayya "Take this giri - the one seated there - with you." Bhagavan didn't stop there, for he even said, "She will walk very slowly. Will that be all right?" Then Bhagavan turned towards me and said, "These are our own people. Are you prepared to go with them?" Looking at me, he simply said, "Go!"

The *Pradakshina* took almost six hours. At Adi Annamalai I could move no more. I requested the group to proceed without me, and told them I will reach the Ashram later. But they said, "How could we leave you when Bhagavan entrusted you to us? Even if it takes you another day to complete the *Pradakshina*, we will stay with you. Only with you can we re-enter the Ashram."

I was again feeling very guilty when we finally arrived. I was thinking that others take three to four hours to complete the *Pradakshina* and I have taken six hours, wasting not only my time, but theirs too. I felt that they were all older than me, and a younger person, like me, had caused them so much inconvenience. When I entered the Ashram my heart was heavy with this feeling. With great difficulty we entered into the presence of Bhagavan and as soon as I sat down, Bhagavan started narrating how the *Pradakshina* should be done by walking as slow as a royal queen in her ninth month of pregnancy. "So there is nothing wrong in what she did," he concluded. After this, many times I used to go around the hill all alone.

I used to fast a lot in those days - almost fifteen days out of a month. It was helping in my *sadhana*. One day, with the permission of Chinnaswami, I stayed in the Ashram till 7:30 p.m., which is the supper time. Bhagavan turned to me and said, "Aren't you coming for supper?" Then he said, "*Sattvic* food should be eaten. There is no meaning in mere fasting." Since then I stopped fasting. Even if I wanted to fast, for some reason or other it would be broken. That is a real wonder to me.

I was not aware of this Brahmin-non-Brahmin separation in the Dining Hall. One day I entered and saw the screen dividing the seating area. Some people were already seated. I was in a fix as to where I should sit. Bhagavan saw my plight and asked me to sit right next to him. He said to an attendant, "She doesn't know anything, so put her leaf here." Then he said to me, "Don't worry about these Brahmins." That is how Bhagavan in his kindness used to take care of me, for I was all alone and ignorant of the customs and ways of the world. Since Bhagavan was showering all this personal attention on me, Chinnaswami also took a personal interest in my welfare. As *Muruganan* was away, Chinnaswami offered me his residence to stay in, and also offered to send someone to guard me. I told him that I was not afraid and would lock the house from inside and needed no one to guard me. Bhagavan overheard this and said, "She is a young girl, and does not know the consequences. Let her sleep indoors, behind closed doors, but you send a servant to sleep outside on the verandah." I did not know anything when I came here. Even cooking I learned here and, of course, Bhagavan taught me many things from within.

Interviewer: Since you used to sit in front of Bhagavan quite often, could you please give a detailed description of what is called 'Bhagavan's Glance of Grace'?

Ramani Ammal: Bhagavan's look was real magic. You could not do anything but just look into his eyes, which would transform you into *Samadhi*. Everyone in the hall used to feel Bhagavan was looking at them alone. This was the true experience of each one of us. In his inimitable way he was giving the glance of grace to each and everyone seated in the hall. Bhagavan's look used to take us deep into *Samadhi*. Just by looking into his eyes, we came to know what meditation is. This was, and is, the common experience of all devotees. You ask anyone and you will get the same reply.

Once he gave me such a look and for a very long time I was absorbed in *Samadhi*. Bhagavan was reading the newspaper, letters were being brought in, normal activity was going on, but I was oblivious of the happenings outside of me. In fact, I was unaware of my body.

I once remember a Harijan lady who for the past twenty-five years was gathering honey to send to Sri Bhagavan. On every occasion she was unable to bring the honey herself and had to send it with someone. After waiting for twenty-five years, she finally found the opportunity to come. The poor lady was in tattered clothes, standing before Bhagavan. Her eyesight was poor and I still vividly recall the unusual way she looked at Sri Bhagavan, calling out "Oh Darling, where are you? I want to see you." Bhagavan in all his graciousness said, "Granny, look this way. I am here." Looking at the honey she had brought with her, he said to me, "They are Brahmins, they won't eat this. We will share it, and eat it."

It is often said, Bhagavan did not give direct *Upadesa*, but what else is all this? Although Bhagavan repeatedly pointed out human frailty, people were not prepared to rectify themselves.

As if talking to himself, he looked at this poor old woman in ragged clothes and said, "Poor lady, she must be hungry. And where will she go for clothes? Who will offer her food and clothes?" Upon hearing this, Ondu Reddiyar got up and said, "We will give her food and also see that some clothes are purchased." Then Reddiyar took the woman to the Dining Hall and fed her sumptuously. He also sent someone to town to buy her a sari. As the old woman had no money, she had walked a great distance to come here. Bhagavan knowing this, said in an impersonal way, "Would anyone be interested in getting her a bus ticket?" Reddiyar again came forward and said, "We will provide her with a bus ticket and see her off." When this lady returned from the Dining Hall she was touching the ground, and then touching her eyes. That is a way of prostration and thanksgiving. It is noteworthy that whenever the poor or untouchables came, Bhagavan took a very personal interest in them, which was a moving sight to see.

Sri Bhagavan had absolutely no connection with either body or mind. People used to be confused by seeing him read letters and newspapers. His inner state never changed since he was sixteen. This was demonstrated repeatedly, but only those who had the eyes to see, could see and realize it. Sri Bhagavan was also a real taskmaster. He used to quietly move around to various places within the Ashram without notice. So every place had to be kept clean and neat because Bhagavan was very particular about cleanliness. He was also particular about punctuality. This kept every member of the Ashram alert and on their toes, ready at all times to do what was necessary. Look how this Ashram has grown. Unless Bhagavan was very careful in his silent supervision, could it have grown to this extent?

Questioner: Where were you at the time of Sri Bhagavan's *Mahanirvana*?

Ramani Ammal: I was at Rajapalayam. That night I saw a blue light beautifully rising up into the sky. I knew Bhagavan had left the body. I felt that I did not want to live after that and started a fast. By fasting I wanted to drop the body. After five or six days of not touching food I had several visions. In one of them I was taken inside the Arunachala Hill and saw there *rishis* performing *yagnas* and *yoga*. I also saw Sri Bhagavan seated there. Some *munis* or *rishis* offered some *prasad* to Bhagavan. Then Sri Bhagavan himself gave it to me, and I was made to eat. I remembered that I was fasting, but couldn't refuse Bhagavan's *prasad*. How can I say that it was a dream? I consider it was Bhagavan's grace alone. He also said to me, "You say and repeat 'I have gone away, I have gone away'. Where have I gone? I am right here. You are not looking inward. If you look within, I am there." For many days afterwards the smell of that *prasad* lingered. The aroma even spread all through the house. My brother and sisters kept talking about it. When I was fasting, my brother and sister were also fasting with me. The morning following that vision we started taking food again.

In the dream I also remember Bhagavan was seated near a tank and *rishis* and *munis* were serving him. He looked splendid, gracious, magnanimous, and magnificent. It was a beautiful sight. I saw there Kamadhenu, the celestial cow, the celestial tree, and many other wonderful things. It was a divine sight indeed. From that day onwards I had no thought at all that Bhagavan had left us. He is all pervading, and I experienced him particularly in my heart. I no longer felt sorrow. He is even here now.

When I came again to Tiruvannamalai I was filled with bliss. You can feel Bhagavan's presence every minute. Right this very minute I feel his Divine Presence. I have no unhappiness. I am happy all the time. Sri Bhagavan's Presence is so overpowering. See how we all are gathered here. What have we done to deserve this?

Interviewer: To my knowledge I haven't done anything good and I also wonder, along with you, how Bhagavan has gathered us here.

Ramani Ammal: I can't say that I have ever done anything bad. From my childhood I didn't know what is good and what is bad either. But doing good or bad has nothing to do with our coming to Bhagavan's Presence. It is only by his grace that we are filled with his glorious Presence.

[We extend our warm appreciation to J. Jayaraman who was the Tami] interviewer, James Hartel who videotaped it, Sri V. Ganesan who translated the interview into English, and to Geeta Bhatt who kindly typed it.]

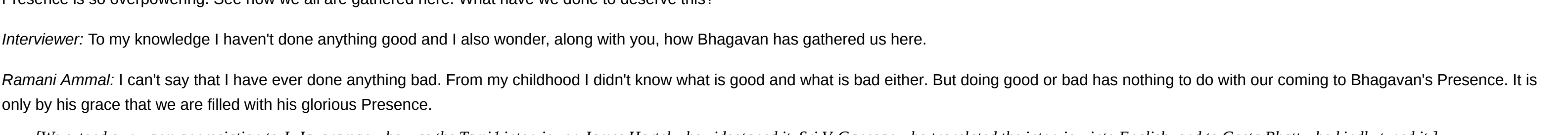
Triumphs of the Spirit Part 1

MP3

"And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment." - Mark 12:30

THE HISTORY of Christianity down through the ages has been highlighted by those few blessed souls who accepted Christ's teachings at face value and strove with all their powers to practice them. The unique, unqualifying principles taught by Christ produced spiritual heroes like Francis of Assisi and Therese of Lisieux in this millennium and St. Anthony of Egypt in the last. It was the fame of this Anthony in the fourth century that inspired thousands to renounce everything and join the legion of men and women who lived pure lives of prayer, austerity, and contemplation in the vast remote desert of Egypt. Ironically, this unparalleled flowering of deep spiritual yearning was directly rooted in the oppressive policies of the Roman Empire.

By the year 300 A.D., fractures in the Roman Empire were a serious concern to the Emperor Diocletian. In his efforts to further unite and control his domain, he sought, like other rulers in the past, religious conformity. This resulted in the last great persecutions to the sect known as the Christians.



Religious persecution drove the youthful Paul of Thebes to the Egyptian desert. He is said to be the first Christian documented to devote his life to solitary prayer in the remote parts of the North African desert. Reaching an isolated rocky region he found a large cave containing an open courtyard with a huge palm tree and a spring of running water. Nearby were chisels, anvils, and hammers used for the minting of money. Egyptian records show that this place had been a mint where false money was coined during the time of Anthony and Cleopatra. Paul remained there in solitary contemplation for nearly a hundred years, utilising the palm leaves for his clothes and the palm fruit for his food.

Paul's perfect self conquest and undivided love for God would have never been known to man if not for the Divine revelation given to St. Anthony of Egypt, who was by far the most famous of the earliest holy desert dwellers. It was Anthony's disciple, Pachomius, who founded communities of ascetics in the desert, and from this beginning the tradition of Christian monasticism began.

Once Constantine the Great, the emperor of Rome, formally declared himself a Christian in 324 A.D., the Western civilisation enthusiastically embraced the religion of Rome. The teachings of Christ quickly blossomed, producing a bountiful harvest of deep religious fervour. The tales of the heroic spiritual efforts of the Desert Fathers captured the imagination and hearts of the faithful throughout the Roman Empire and by the fifth century the monasteries of Egypt and the Middle East were crowded with aspirants struggling for perfection. The histories and teachings of many of these illumined souls from this golden era of Christian asceticism were documented and passed down to us through the centuries. The great distance of time hasn't weakened the power and glory of those holy ascetics, both men and women, who strove for perfection.

During this period, the monk Palladius, and several other desert monks, travelled from Alexandria in the north, down through the Nile River region searching out the famous hermits, monasteries, and holy men and women of the desert. The record of their travels and interviews, and that of other histories and dialogues from this era, forms a valuable source of inspiration and guidance. An English translation is available in two volumes under the title, *The Paradise of the Holy Fathers*.

The extent that Christian charity and ascetic ideals had spread can be appreciated - or truly marvelled at - by the description of the city of Oxyrhynchus: "And we came also to Oxyrhynchus, a great city in the Thebais, but we are not able to relate all the wonderful things which we saw therein; for the city is so full of the habitations of the brethren that the walls thereof are well-nigh thrust out with them, so many are the brethren! And there are so many other monasteries round about the walls, on the outside, that one would think that they were another city, and the sanctuaries of the city, and the temples which are therein, and all the spaces about them, are filled with the monks . . . one might think that the monks were not very much fewer in numbers than the ordinary inhabitants of the city. . . . Now the people said that the monks who lived inside were five thousands in number, and that five thousand brethren lived round about it. And all the inhabitants of the city were believers, and the officers and the princes of the city, who were lavish in their gifts to the congregations, used to place watchers at the gates and entrances thereof that if they saw any needy person or any stranger they might bring him to them, in order that they might supply his need from their gifts. And what shall we say concerning the fear of God which was in these men to such a degree that, when they saw us, who were strangers, passing through the streets, they drew nigh, like angels, and us and helped us? Now we would make known that which we have learned from the holy Bishop who was there, namely, that he had under his authority ten thousand monks and twenty thousand virgins. I am wholly unable to express how great is the love of strangers and the affection which exists among these men and women, for our cloaks and the other portions of our apparel were well-nigh torn to rags by the force which each one of them, in the ardour of his love, displayed in dragging us to his home. And we saw there multitudes of fathers and great monks who possessed gifts of diverse kinds."

Even allowing for some embellishment in this account, one can imagine the delight of the pious monks upon reaching that blessed city. But, edifying as this description is, it is the struggles, sacrifices, spontaneous acts of charity, spiritual ecstasies, and the sayings of the accomplished ascetics that, if read with devotion and faith, quickly fills the soul with sincere yearning, right direction, and dispassion.

The Paradise of the Holy Fathers speaks to us of the inner 'Paradise', which ever stands before us and within us, and will immediately open up to us if we but seek that 'Paradise' alone.

Blessed Macarius said: This is the truth, if a monk regards contempt as praise, poverty as riches, and hunger as a feast, he will never die.

Abbess Syncletica of holy memory said: There is labour and great struggle for the impious who are converted to God, but after that comes inexpressible joy. A man who wants to light a fire first is plagued by smoke, and the smoke drives him to tears, yet finally he gets the fire that he wants. So also it is written: Our God is a consuming fire. Hence we ought to light the divine fire in ourselves with labour and with tears.

One of the monks, called Serapion, sold his book of the Gospels and gave the money to those who were hungry, saying: I have sold the book which told me to sell all that I had and give to the poor.

Theophilus of holy memory, Bishop of Alexandria, journeyed to Scete, and the brethren coming together said to Abbot Pambo: Say a word or two to the Bishop, that his soul may be edified in this place. The elder replied: If he is not edified by my silence, there is no hope that he will be edified by my words.

— continued in the *Nov/Dec issue*

Films from Sri Ramanasramam Part 12

MP3

(continued from *May-Jun* issue)

ON JUNE 1, 1949 a simple ceremony was performed at Sri Ramanasramam to commemorate the opening of the New Hall attached to the *Matrubhuteswara* Temple. The Maharshi was to shift his residence from the Jubilee Hall to this New Hall. At 9:45 a.m., *pujas* were being performed in the temple, the bells were ringing and priests were waving *arati* with burning camphor when Bhagavan walked into the New Hall, accompanied by Brahmins chanting the Vedas. He was requested to take his seat on the new *Yogasana*, which was aesthetically carved out of a single piece of rock and was highly polished and decorated. In his typically disinterested manner, Bhagavan acquiesced to all the requests.

The New Hall was made out of the same materials as the Temple, with granite walls, floor and pillars. It was a large, imposing structure, equal - everyone thought - to the grand spiritual stature for whom it was built. But, ironically, by the time it was completed and the Sage took up his residence in it, the mortal vitality of the Maharshi was ebbing and all the glory and satisfaction associated with its completion was overshadowed by misgivings.

In July of 1949, K. K. Nambiar brought his 16mm movie camera with him on one of his regular visits to the Ashram. This time he somehow managed to arrange for sufficient lighting to take a rare film of the Sage sitting inside the New Hall.

The Maharshi is seen sitting on the cushioned stone couch. His legs are stretched out with two pillows under his knees, while he sits upright holding a newspaper with both hands. There is one vertical pillow on each side of his back, supporting him. During the fifty seconds of this scene he leisurely flips the pages of the newspaper, scanning the contents from top to bottom, never seeming to read any one news item completely.

By this time he had already undergone two minor surgeries on his left arm, just below the elbow. But, however close we scrutinise his arm in this film, there is no apparent swelling, scar or bandage. During a period in mid-July of 1949, the tumour ceased to ooze blood and the bandage was removed. The film must have been shot at this time. The tumour was said to be still growing, yet it is not visible from the angle of the lens (the tumour was on the inner side of the left arm). Also, the Maharshi seems to be using this arm quite freely, turning the pages of the newspaper without any apparent discomfort, which in no way means that there was no discomfort at all.

A profound scene ensues as he folds the newspaper, lays it on the table to his left, and assumes silence. He lifts his head, opens his eyes wide, and stares into the vast nothingness. The power of that peace which emanated from those unblinking eyes shattered the encrusted layers of many egos, soothed the despairing hearts of the suffering masses, and attracted thousands from the world over.

What we now see is a forty-five second clip of the Maharshi assuming his natural poise. It seems the cameraman filmed him at three or four intervals, in which we later see his eyelids slightly closed, but never shut or blinking. When this film was restored and re-edited in New York in 1978 it was decided to repeat this forty-five second piece seven times, extending its length to five and a half minutes. One of the forty-five second sections was re-edited as a close-up, wherein we see the face of the Sage in detail. Viewers of this film, especially devotees, will find themselves transported to the silent *sannidhi* (presence) of the Maharshi, as his sublime experience of Self-Awareness is easily imprinted on our hearts and minds.

— continued in the *Sep-Oct* issue



Summer of 1949 in the New Hall
[click to see a larger image](#)

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 Satsangs* 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.

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