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I Saw A God Die

by Darrell Berrigan

"The holiest man in India, a living god, lay dying. A Post correspondent stood by and watched him leave the mortal world. Here is his eyewitness account of a supreme moment for millions of devout believers."

THE SATURDAY EVENING POST, like *Life Magazine*, was another popular journal that reached its zenith in the post-television era. Published eight times a year - it was monthly in 1950 - it still maintains a respectable circulation of 540,000 in the U.S. and abroad. With the distinction of being published since 1728, we can honestly say, by longevity alone, it has established itself as an institution.

Darrell Berrigan, who was a regular contributor to the Post, was raised in California. After a series of disappointing professions in the States, he set out for the Orient as a freelance correspondent in the late 1930s. There, remaining a bachelor, he travelled throughout China, Japan, Thailand, Burma, India and other Far East countries, contributing news and stories to the *United Press International*, *New York Times* and some other major periodicals. Eventually he settled down in Bangkok and became the editor of what was said to be the best daily newspaper in Thailand - *The World*, published in English. His visit to Sri Ramanasramam was some six years prior to this editorship, and was one of the many stories that took him traversing the Orient.

He arrives at the Ashrama about the first of April 1950, and writes, "I had come myself because a great Indian politician, a great scholar and an exceedingly wealthy industrialist had each told me that the Bhagavan was probably the last of an ancient line of *Maha Rishis*, or 'great realized souls,' who were living." After providing us with his pen-picture description of Tiruvannamalai and Ramanasramam, he records how he removes his shoes and sits amidst the large crowd waiting for Bhagavan's *darshan*:

THE NEW YORK TIMES

Saturday, April 15, 1950

RAMANA MAHARSHI

BOMBAY, India, April 14 (UP) — Ramana Maharshi, saintly philosopher who spent twelve years meditating in an underground cave, died today of cancer at his retreat in Tiruvannamalai. His age was 74 [sic]. He renounced worldly pleasures when he was 17 years old to seek truth and enlightenment.

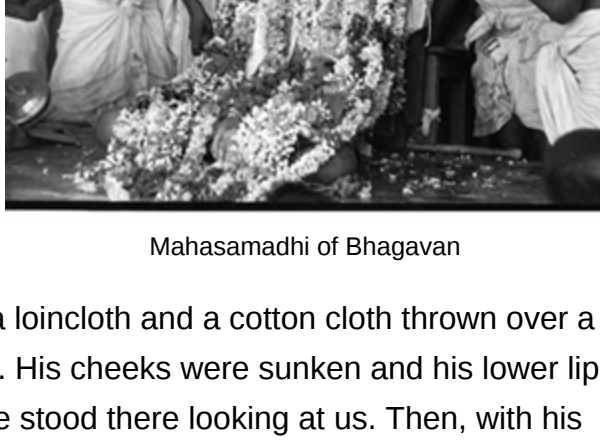
The Seattle Times

Saturday, April 15, 1950

Ramana, Sage of India, Dies

MADRAS, India, April 18 — (AP) — The Indian sage Ramana died last night at his ashrama (hermitage) in Tiruvannamalai, about 140 miles northwest of here. He was 71 years old and had been afflicted with cancer of his right arm, Ramana renounced life's pleasures when he was 16 and began a series of austere penances in his search for spiritual and philosophical truth. His disciples included many Occidentals, some of them Americans.

[Contributed by T.S.Vaidyanathan, Seattle, Washington]



Mahasamadhi of Bhagavan

"A young man with the bored face of a stagehand came out of the little room in front of us and placed an alarm clock at the foot of the couch. The crowd seemed almost to suck in its breath, waiting. Then an old man appeared in the doorway. He was naked except for a loincloth and a cotton cloth thrown over a bulging growth on his left arm. His body was the color of faded leather. His cheeks were sunken and his lower lip was thrust out in a pout. His eyes were bright with a strange light as he stood there looking at us. Then, with his head falling slightly to the side, he tottered unsteadily to the couch, eased himself aboard and settled back among the pillows. One by one, the men and women rose and walked to the little gateway in front of the couch and prostrated themselves before the living god.

"The man beside me relaxed. "See his arm?" he whispered. "Cancer."

"Very bad?" I whispered back."

"He gave me a long, knowing look. "He will leave his body soon."

A little bewildered at all the veneration from the multitudes, Berrigan tries to figure out what it is in this old man that deserves it: "... Except for the fact that he seemed to ignore the fact that he was far gone with cancer, he looked like any other kindly old man not particularly interested in the antics of the younger generation. He reclined on the couch with his strange eyes on us, but apparently not seeing us, his head wagging slightly from palsy. He paid no attention to those who prostrated themselves before him, only occasionally smiling when a mother raised her child for him to bless. At times he would doze off with his head to one side, then he would come awake without any transition, pluck at an ear, rub his hand over the stubble that frosted his chin and head or pick absently at the cloth that covered the blood-stained bandage on his left arm."

After watching all this for some time Berrigan concludes: "I could not see what it was that had drawn thousands upon thousands of men and women from all over India to prostrate themselves at his feet."

In spite of this, Berrigan seems impressed. He stays on at least two weeks, anticipating the Sage's end, perched somewhat like a vulture waiting to feed on his dying prey. During this period he had plenty of time to do research for this lengthy, five thousand word article and, according to his own accounts, spent most of his time talking, arguing with others and wandering about the hill and ancient temples. "We had little time for contemplating the inner realities," so he confesses.

THE NEW YORK TIMES

Sunday, April 16, 1950

RELIGIOUS RECLUSE MOURNED IN INDIA

Shri Ramana Maharshi Was Called a "Living Saint"

Made Abode in Cave

Special to the New York Times

NEW DELHI, India, April 15 —

Hindu India mourned today the death of one of her greatest "living saints" and a remarkable man of his time, Shri Ramana Maharshi, who died last night at the age of 71 in his Ashram retreat at Tiruvannamalai near Pondicherry.

Shri Ramana was renowned as a religious recluse and seer whose piety and philosophy of self-abnegation gained him followers in many countries. His devotees in Tiruvannamalai, who include men and women of many nationalities, held to their master's own philosophy as he was taken from them.

They believe, like him, that there is no death, but that Shri Ramana's physical form has ceased to function,

while his inner-being continues on an exalted plane.

It was his development of this theory that made the second son of an obscure village lawyer one of India's most revered sages.

Shri Ramana had humble beginnings, and his school record was far from brilliant. Neglecting his studies, he brooded on religious subjects. One day in July, 1896, while reflecting on the mystery of death, the young Venkataraman, as his name was then, conceived the idea that death of the body is a relative thing and that the intellect belongs to a power beyond which never dies.

After a month of profound meditation on this subject, he left home abruptly and repaired to the temple of his particular God, Arunachala, in Tiruvannamalai. Here he shaved his head and adopted the robe of the Sanyasi (holy man). Soon he came to be regarded in the neighborhood as a queer one and he was jeered, stoned and eventually disowned by his family.

To escape persecution, the young ascetic took abode in a cave.

He became so immersed in meditation that, according to his own later accounts, he was totally unaware of the terrible ravages to his physique by starvation and the bites of scorpions and insects that nearly devoured him alive.

Though he rarely spoke — but composed religious expositions that later became famous throughout the Hindu world—the recluse attracted followers. Eventually, his dwelling became a place of pilgrimage. In later years, the large Ashram grew about the odd man, whomade no effort to proselytize and continued in silent meditation and writing. His followers changed his name to Maharshi, which means great saint.

Here in India, where thousands of so-called holy men claim close ties with the infinite, it is said that the most remarkable thing about Shri Ramana Maharshi was that he never claimed anything remarkable for himself, yet became one most respected of all.

In his essay he furnishes a rather long biographical sketch of the Maharshi with some flippant observations and misconceptions that border on the humorous. For example, after explaining in some detail Bhagavan's death experience as a boy, he throws in, "The young man lost his head completely over the discovery," which may have been appropriate if the word 'ego' was substituted for the word 'head'. And in another place he mentions, Venkataraman was so lost in his trance that for years he had to be spoon-fed." Now isn't that interesting?

Of course, Berrigan was a journalist and the story was everything. This being the case, it is easy to imagine how those sincere devotees absorbed in their *sadhana* and grieving over the Maharshi's illness kept a respectful distance from him. Hence, it is obvious from the following quote, he fell into the wrong type of company: "The Bhagavan himself became a puppet, a prisoner of his brother, exploited for the benefit of the ashram organization." By this, and numerous other dubious observations aimed at the administration, we can conclude that gossiping was for him an ongoing pastime.

Somehow, though, it seems he endured to the end, April 14th, 1950. And it is about this end, the end of the Maharshi's bodily life, we obtain a clearer vision by his description of those final, fatal days.

"Every *darshan* period we searched his face for signs of the end. They were there on the evening of the fourteenth of April. He lay stretched out as before, but his jaw was slack, his mouth hung open and his remarkable eyes were firmly closed. Death was so strongly written on his face that hundreds of men and a few bold women who defied the ashram's rule against their presence after dark sat on the porch or clung to its railing waiting tensely for news. A group of Brahman priests from the old temple arranged themselves in a circle around a bundle of incense and began chanting a hymn to the sacred mountain. It was a song written by the Bhagavan himself years ago. A few police from the town below took up positions.

"Everyone kept his eyes on the little window through which we could see the heads of the attendants around the Bhagavan's bed and the fan which one of them moved back and forth over the holy man. We watched the fan, the only sign we had that the Bhagavan was alive.

"The priests sang verse after verse of the hymn to the sacred mountain, whose southern shoulder rose into the blue-black, star-dotted sky above the ashram: 'Arunachala Siva! Arunachala Siva! Arunachala Siva! Arunachala!'

"The devotees stirred uneasily under the whip of the voices. A few stood and pressed against the railing under the little window. The Sarvadhikari and his sister pushed through the crowd and entered the sickroom. The police pushed forward and ordered the people back. The crowd waited tensely.

"Suddenly someone cried, "The fan has stopped!" The crowd moaned and pushed forward. 'My God!' someone said. Then the fan was seen to move again. The crowd's voice grew louder, following the lead of the chanting priests.

"The brother reappeared on the causeway and stood over the devotees, tall, lordly, chewing betel luminatively. "Don't crowd there!" he yelled hoarsely, waving a limp hand at a group standing under the porch. "Get back!" An attendant walked rapidly past him and disappeared into the crowd. Word went round that the Bhagavan's closest disciples had been called for a last *darshan*.

"A young Indian rushed up to Chadwick. "You can see him now!" he yelled excitedly. "I don't want to see!" Chadwick burst out irritably. He let his head fall into his hands.

"The excitement of the crowd milling around the gate increased. Prayers and shouts and excited questioning boiled up into a hysterical bedlam. Devotees fought through the crowd to the little room. The chant of the priests strained above the confusion - 'Arunachala Siva! Arunachala Siva! Arunachala Siva! Arunachala!'

"And just as the madness reached its peak the fan stopped moving in the little room and a meteor cut a golden path across the sky and faded out over Sri Arunachala at the moment that Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi breathed his last. As I fought my way toward the little room I heard Chadwick groan, "He is gone!"

"An American woman fainted and was carried out. A group of Indian women staggered from the room, clinging to one another, their faces drawn with grief. Behind them came the attendants, carrying the body on its couch, pushing through the hysterical crowd into the hall of the temple. There, banked with pillows and drowned in garlands of jasmine, the body that once housed a god sat all night, giving mock *darshan* to the devotees who sat around it singing hymns."

Berrigan writes a few more details about the burial procedure and the thousands that passed by to view the Maharshi's dead body. A photo of the body being carried out of the Nirvana Room and another of the burial pit are shown. There is another photo taken of Bhagavan a few days before the last day and also two more photos of devotees outside the Nirvana Room. He didn't fail to include one of the Sarvadhikari with a caustic comment below it.

In the *May 30, 1950 Life Magazine*, we have the reverential portrayal of an aged holy man (the Maharshi), written with insight and genuine sincerity by Winthrop Sargeant. Here, we find something essentially different. Although Darrell Berrigan of the *Saturday Evening Post* was impressed by the magnitude and pathos of his story, he never quite fathomed the practical value of the Maharshi's teachings and example. He was a writer first and always, a story-teller. Nevertheless, unwittingly, Berrigan takes us into the emotional and physical environment of Sri Ramanasramam during the final earthly hours of the Maharshi. Cooking his story and serving us his own special hodgepodge of food, we find some portions of it palatable, and these morsels are sufficient to fill us with the wonder of the event.

[The research of Kamala Motihar, Geeta Bhatt and Eric Ford made this article possible. We sincerely thank them.]

Kunju Swami

Events Of Wonder On My Way To Arunachala

Part 3, continued from our Jan/Feb issue

translated from Tamil by J. Jayaraman

When I reached home my parents were very happy to see me. I stayed for two days, though my mind had already travelled to Tiruvannamalai. While I was occupied with the thought of how to acquire the money for the journey, my father called me and asked, "Do you owe anyone money for the food that you ate when you were with the Yelapondi Kuppandi Swami?" I replied, "Yes, a little." Immediately he handed me five rupees an commanded me to settle my account the next morning. Alas, I had found my way to Tiruvannamalai!

Thinking that a small impropriety could not be counted a sin when it helped to gain a supreme ideal, I consoled my conscience and planned my departure using the five rupees to cover the train fare. Although I went to bed that night with a very peaceful heart, I was unable to sleep. Early in the morning - it was the month of January, 1920 - I left my house at 3 a.m. without telling anyone. As I went out, I turned towards my home and prostrated to it and my dear parents sleeping inside, convinced that I would never return. My heart was now racing for the long-sought *darshan* of Sri Bhagavan.

Afraid of being spotted at the Palakkadu Train Station, I went to a smaller railway station en-route. I found upon inquiry that the train to Tiruvannamalai was not due until the evening. Needless to say, I waited anxiously and hoped I would not be discovered. Hunger and thirst was forgotten in my longing for God. Besides, I dared not use the money for anything other than the train ticket, as that was my priority.

The train finally arrived at 6 p.m. When I asked for a ticket to Tiruvannamalai, the ticket clerk sold me a ticket only as far as Katpadi, a station near to Tiruvannamalai. Finally, when it came time to board the train, I was hardly aware of it, as I was almost totally absorbed in the current of Bhagavan's *darshan*.

Alighting at Katpadi at 4 a.m., I learned that the train to Tiruvannamalai left at 6:30 a.m. I sat still and waited. When I went to the ticket counter at 6 a.m. to buy my ticket I was shocked to hear that the train had already left a half hour earlier and the next train wasn't until 6 p.m. I didn't know what to do and was disturbed. I hadn't eaten since the morning of the previous day and so bought a half-anna worth of jujubee fruit. I spent the day munching on these jujubees and sipping tap-water to solve my food problem. My mind calmed as I waited for the evening train.

Taking no chances I approached the ticket counter at 5:30 p.m. to buy my ticket to Tiruvannamalai, but to my amazement the clerk refused to sell me one! Nonplussed, I was standing transfixed when a kind elderly man nearby informed me that the train to Tiruvannamalai is quarantined because of a plague epidemic and so no tickets to that destination can be sold. He advised me to buy a ticket to Tirukkovloor, and to quietly get off at Tiruvannamalai when the train stops briefly to unload mail. Tirukkovloor is the next station after Tiruvannamalai. When asked for a ticket to Tirukkovloor, the ticket clerk asked me for additional money. I didn't have it. Crushed with unimaginable frustration, I stood to one side thinking of Bhagavan and overcome by sorrow.

When there was only a few minutes left before the train to Tiruvannamalai was to arrive - wonder of wonders - the mystery of Bhagavan's grace descended upon me! Between the two rails, just a short distance from where I stood, a quarter-rupee coin lay glittering. I immediately picked it up and ran to the ticket counter. My train arrived in the station the very moment I was handed the ticket to Tirukkovloor. Thrilled with the thought of Bhagavan's grace on my poor self, I got on the train and found a seat.

The train arrived at Tiruvannamalai station about 9 p.m. No lights were on in the station. Only from the remarks of the other passengers I understood that I had reached my destination. I looked around to see if anyone was getting off. I noticed one passenger in front of me detrainning into the darkness and so I followed him. I blindly continued to follow this passenger without an inkling of where he was leading me. In retrospect, I now realized that missing the first train to Tiruvannamalai was Bhagavan's will, for if I had taken the earlier train I would have faced the problem of arriving in Tiruvannamalai during the daylight hours, with the possibility of facing the authorities.

Finally, reaching a big *Mantap* (way-side rest hall), my guide dusted a bit of the floor with his towel and lay down to sleep. Exhausted after two days of hunger and wandering, but filled with the joy of finally reaching my destination, I also lay down and immediately plunged into deep slumber.

When my eyes opened about 5 a. m. the next morning I looked over to my side and saw that my guide had already left. I looked out of the *Mantap* and had my first glorious *darshan* of the holy Arunachala Mountain. Then, following the directions sent to me by my friend, Ramakrishnaswami, I came to the place behind the west wall of the great temple. The directions said I could reach Bhagavan's abode by following the steps that led up the hill from this spot, but I discovered three different paths with steps leading up the hill and was confused. I decided on the steps to the right, and after climbing a little ways I saw a building. As I came near it I saw an ochre-robed *swami* standing with long matted locks that reached all the way down to the ground. It was my belief then that matted-hair *swamis* were notorious for inflicting curses upon the slightest provocation. When I saw this *swami* standing there I knew it was not Bhagavan, of whom I had seen a photo of, so I immediately fled in fright, came back down the hill and began climbing the middle path, which had large steps. I later discovered the matted-locked *swami* was the well known Jatal Swami.

After climbing a short distance on the middle path I saw a tank (Pada Teertham) and two people standing on its bank (Mudaliar Patti's son and daughter-in-law, Tambiran Swami and Kamakshi Ammal). I approached them and inquired about Bhagavan's abode. My tired face and Malayalam accent yielded a sympathetic response: "Oh, you poor fellow! You must be tired. Please take your bath here and then follow this path and you will see Skandashram where Bhagavan lives. We will soon follow you with some food to eat."

I quickly bathed, removing all the outer dirt but inwardly was seeking purity and the removal of all my inner dirt. I hurried up the trail like a calf racing toward its mother and my mind in ecstasy, hastened far ahead of me to Bhagavan.

I had given some prior thought as to how I should prostrate before Bhagavan, and how I should conduct myself in general. I also resolved that I would take as divine *Upadesha* (personal teaching) the first words Bhagavan directed towards me. Just as I arrived at Skandashram, my friend, Ramakrishnaswami, along with Perumalswami and Akhandanandar were prostrating before Bhagavan. I followed suit, sat down before him and gazed on his holy form. Goose bumps tingled all over me. I was thrilled.

Ramakrishnaswami, who was amazed and happy to see me, informed Bhagavan that it was me who sent him here, that I was from his village, and that I had been a *sadhu* on my childhood. Bhagavan simply nodded his head in acknowledgment. Then Ramakrishnaswami asked me to stay here with Bhagavan while the three of them went out for some time. Later I found out that they had gone to buy the body of *Annamalai Swami*, who had died of the plague that very day.

Soon I heard someone weeping convulsively from a room adjacent to the inside of the verandah.

"Such a gem! Oh, Annamalai has gone. How cruel and unjust!" These were the words painfully spoken between the sobs of an old woman. There was a man sitting by her side. Bhagavan turned to them and said, "Why this sorrow?" And pointing to me, as to pacify them, continued, "Look here, another has come to take his place!" I did not realize the significance of those precious and prophetic words until later. The old woman sobbing was Bhagavan's Mother, and sitting at her side was his brother, Niranjanananda Swami.

At 8 a.m., one Tirujananda, placed a mud bowl in my hands, took one himself, and requested me to sit. Sri Bhagavan also sat on a nearby platform with a mud bowl. The three of us were then served rice, dhal and rasam by Venu Ammal, sister of *Echammal*, who had already been feeding Bhagavan daily for many years.

— continued in the *May/June* issue

Films from Sri Ramanasramam

Part 10

(continued from Jan-Feb issue)

During several visits to Sri Ramanasramam in 1948, Aravind Bose brought with him a cameraman and shot what are now the best preserved color films of Sri Bhagavan. He took it upon himself to capture the Maharshi in his natural surroundings as he went about his daily routine. Bose's success in this was limited to the available lighting. For instance, we all know that the Maharshi spent the greater part his day in the Old Hall on the sofa reading the newspaper, perusing letters, proof reading, answering questions and sitting silent, looking out into the vast nothingness. Dozens of aspirants would be sitting at his feet, either meditating or simply gazing on his holy form. This was the *'Durbat'* of the *'Maha Rishi's'* kingdom and in it the greatest of all miracles were being performed, secretly. It is here where the Sage entered the hearts of the sincere aspirants and kindled the light of the Self Supreme. But all this could not be filmed or, for that matter, even seen by the naked eye. Moreover, in the Old Hall the lighting was inadequate for filming. Well, Mr. Bose had an idea, and it is in this next scene that it unfolds.

We first see a dozen lady devotees casually gathering in front of the Old Hall. Just at the point when all their attention is drawn towards a single object out of the camera's view, the camera shifts over to that point, which is the Maharshi walking out from under the verandah of the Old Hall. He makes his way to a wooden bed covered with layers of cloth, topped with a woven grass mat, and pillows arranged at one end. Following behind him is Niranjanananda Swami, his brother. Then the numbers swell, as more men begin entering into view, one of whom is Mr. Bose.

We have the devotees, we have the Sage, the throne, and the outside lighting, but where is the stage director to pull all these elements together? Mr. Bose amply rises to the occasion, as we now see him waving his arms, instructing devotees to sit here and there.

Meanwhile, Bhagavan approaches his seat, strokes the top mat twice with the end of his cane (apparently to smooth out the mat) and with an air of disinterest takes his seat. The camera pans slowly to the right where about fifteen men are seated in a row three deep. The panning continues to where the ladies are sitting. Prominent is the English lady, Miss Merston. *Annamai Ammal* is also there, sitting erect, looking straight ahead with downcast eyes. Her remote stillness seems to personify a determined aspiration. About a dozen ladies have joined.

To the right of Bhagavan's seat is seen another dozen, consisting of priests (*Appichi* and *Kittu* are present), attendants, and relatives of the Maharshi. The attendant, Satchitananda Swami, enters the scene carrying a small, round stool, on top of which is placed a wicker tray filled with shelled peanuts. He sets the stool down in front of the Maharshi, picks up the tray, passes Bhagavan a small plate on which he drops a handful of nuts.

Next we see the attendant moving from place to place doing out the nuts. Occasionally the scene reverts to Bhagavan who is engaged in selecting the peanuts from his plate and popping them in his mouth, one by one. Mr. Bose, now in a relaxed mood, stands behind Bhagavan eating nuts. The Sarvadhikari and his son, T. N. Venkataraman, are at his side.


Then everyone stands. Shanti sitting, is handed a tooth pick and *kamandalu* (water pot) and begins to clean his teeth and drink water. All are now in a jovial mood. Sundaram, T.N.Venkataraman's son, stands directly behind Bhagavan and smiles unabashedly, looking straight at the camera. We feel that we are watching a large family gathering, picnicking in a country park under a gentle summer sun. Bhagavan relaxes, waves his hand in jest, smiles broadly and then looks toward the ground. There the white peacock has made his entrance. No doubt Bhagavan's smiles and jest were evoked by the bird's timing and subsequent filming. We can almost hear him say, "Oh, Look! He didn't want to miss this!"

All this looks so casual and unpretentious. Who would think that here sits a man whose mere glance has plunged wild and distraught minds into the eternal depths of unrivaled peace and joy. What is this we see? He is fooling us all.

— continued in the *May-June* issue

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.

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