

Mar / Apr 1996	THE MAHARSHI	Jul / Aug 1996
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The Recollections of N. Balarama Reddy

Part VIII
Bhagavan our Guru
(continued from the *Mar/Apr issue*)

MP3

Once I was in my village pursuing my sadhana when I became very troubled by thoughts relating to the opposite sex. I wrote a letter to Bhagavan through Major Chadwick. Chadwick gave the letter to Bhagavan to read. Bhagavan read it without comment. But at the very time this trouble was brought to Bhagavan's attention by Chadwick, these troubling thoughts left me. Little incidents like this demonstrate the potency of having a guru of Bhagavan's stature. He was always there for us to turn to.

If we wanted to question Bhagavan on any matter we usually had to keep the question with us until we felt that Bhagavan was ready to hear it and reply. Sometimes his look would be so distant he seemed unapproachable, or he would be so intently occupied we could not think of disturbing him. Most of us were simply in awe of him and found it difficult to start up some conversation, or ask a question.

But what questions were we to ask? Did we not have faith in him, and wasn't that what mattered most? And what instructions were we to ask? We all knew his teachings. We all knew what we had to do. Those who had come to him and had taken to his path had already gone through the elementary spiritual practices. Undergraduate or post-graduate students may ask questions of their professor. But those who are working on their Ph.D. degrees are quietly occupied with their research and, on rare occasions, meet and consult their advisors. The serious aspirants that came to Bhagavan were like Ph.D. candidates.

Once I asked Bhagavan why, for no apparent reason, one sometimes feels composed and cheerful, sometimes restless and unusually active, and sometimes lazy and languid. Bhagavan replied: "In man the three *gunas* of nature (*prakriti*) are in constant movement. When *sattva* comes to the fore, one is quiet and cheerful; when *rajas* predominates, one is restless; when *tamas* is uppermost, one is languid and cheerless."

"How to get over their influence?" I asked.

"By becoming a *gunatita* (transcending the *gunas*)," he replied.

"How to become a *gunatita*?"

"By realizing the Self," Bhagavan concluded.

The Maharshi was available to all. The management may have put limits on length of stays in the ashram, but anyone could live outside the ashram and daily come and visit the Maharshi. The women devotees did that. Since no women were allowed in the ashram at night, they all had to leave after the evening meals.

One day about 7 P.M., when it had already turned dark, an indiscreet incident between a man and woman occurred. When Bhagavan came to know of it, he said that the woman devotees should be fed their evening meal by 6.30 P.M. and then sent home. In the case of moral propriety Bhagavan intervened, but he would never judge or condemn people for their moral lapses. He understood human frailty and was determined to teach us how to transcend it, not to dwell on it.

In Bhagavan's Hall

In Bhagavan's hall, the devotees would be occupied with one of three things: some would be sitting in silent meditation with eyes closed; some would be quietly gazing on Bhagavan's holy form; others would be engaged in discussion, which usually consisted of questions put to Bhagavan. Any other activities required permission from the office.

Once T.M.P. Mahadevan had just returned from a trip to the West. He delivered lectures wherever he went and a number of those lectures were about Bhagavan and his teachings. A few of the resident devotees wanted to hear an example of how he lectured on Bhagavan. He offered to give one right then and there. But before he could do this, permission had to be taken from the office. Without undue delay it was given. T. M. P. Mahadevan then gave a lecture. Except for this lecture I don't ever remember anyone giving a lecture in the hall, although there were those whose very questions were the equivalent of a lecture. Usually, such visitors wanted to show off their knowledge.

Also, I don't remember many songs or bhajans being sung in the hall, except for the daily parayanas. Devotees did occasionally sing, no doubt, but permission was also required. Personally, I preferred to sit quietly before Bhagavan. In this way I felt I was reaping greater benefit than any puja or sankirtan.

There was one *Daivavata*, a devotee of Bhagavan who had been living in the north for some years and who had just returned to the ashram for a visit after a long absence. Among other things, he was known for his enthusiastic kirtan and dancing. He used to do it in earlier years before the Maharshi and while doing pradakshina of Arunachala. Some of the devotees expressed a desire to see him perform. It was arranged in the dining hall. Bhagavan sat where he usually did at mealtime and we all sat in rows. *Daivavata* began singing and dancing up and down the rows with great enthusiasm. He also sang Ganapati Muni's "*Chavavimsar*" in his own melody, dancing with the tune.

Once the private secretary to the Governor of Pondicherry arrived at the ashram with a few of his associates. He came into the hall with a large sheet of paper filled with a long list of questions written in an elaborate, complex style of French. He handed the paper over to Bhagavan, walked over to the window opposite Bhagavan's couch and sat on the window sill. Bhagavan looked at the questions and noticing they were written in French called me to him and asked me to translate them. I found the French difficult to translate and I was struggling with it, word by word, while translating it to Bhagavan.

Bhagavan, realizing my difficulty, said, "That's not necessary. Just tell me what the gist of this question paper is." I scanned through the whole list of questions and then told Bhagavan that it says that he really doesn't want oral answers to all of these questions, but rather the answer in the form of an experience.

Bhagavan paused a moment. He then slowly turned his face in the direction of the questioner and rested his eyes on him. When about thirty seconds passed like this, I noticed the man's body began to tremble. Soon he was shaking all over. Then he blurted out, "Oh no, Bhagavan, not now! Please Bhagavan, not now!"

I was standing a little to the side of Bhagavan watching this extraordinary scene and wondering what a being this Bhagavan is. He is a storehouse of power, but yet so kind, gentle and compassionate. And in spite of all this grandeur, he always seems so human and natural, even laughing and joking with us on occasions.

The attendants used to spread various sheets over Bhagavan's couch, changing them frequently. Occasionally they would place a tiger's skin on the couch and Bhagavan would sit on that too, just like it was any other sheet. Once I was sitting near the end of Bhagavan's couch facing him. That day a tiger's skin had been spread on the sofa and the head of the tiger was hanging over the armrest and, seemingly, staring straight at me.

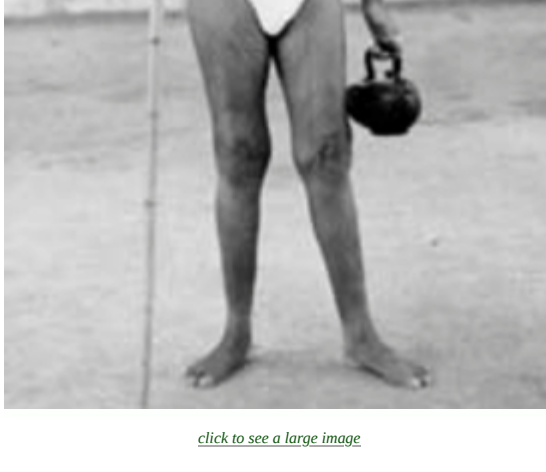
Chadwick was also sitting in the hall at the west end. He would usually follow a punctual schedule and at exactly 7 P.M. he rose to leave. On his way out he walked up behind me and whispered in my ear, "Do you see? There is Chinnaaswami, the ashram tiger, staring straight at you." We both chuckled at the joke. When Chadwick went out, Bhagavan asked me what Chadwick had said to me. When I repeated it, Bhagavan enjoyed the humor and we both laughed.

Gandhians and Service

Now and then, before India gained independence, followers of *Mahatma Gandhi's* Swaraj movement would visit the ashram. Most of these visitors were not what we would call spiritual aspirants, but rather social reformers. They would question Bhagavan about their work and ambitions. Sometimes Bhagavan would answer and other times he would simply remain quiet.

On one occasion, a prominent leader for the advancement of the lower classes came on a visit. She asked Bhagavan a number of questions concerning her work and ideals. Bhagavan simply listened and remained silent. The lady left. Shortly after her visit, an article written by this lady was found in a Madras newspaper. She wrote that she had discussed all her plans with Bhagavan and he agreed with them. When Bhagavan saw this, he commented, "What can I do? Even if I am silent, such statements are printed in the newspapers."

Rajendra Prasad was an intimate disciple of *Mahatma Gandhi*. But, unlike many others in the freedom struggle, he had genuine spiritual leanings. I was in the ashram in August of 1938 when he visited, together with Jannalal Bajaj and others. I don't think we can say that Gandhi sent him to visit the Maharshi. Probably Rajendra Prasad had a desire to meet Bhagavan and benefit from his company and, Gandhi, being broad-minded, gave him permission to go.



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Those who actually followed *Gandhi's* ideals could be called karma yogis. Adi Shankaracharya writes that karma yoga is useful for purifying the mind. But the purified mind has to be harnessed to some technique of spiritual practice. Only then will the sadhana be effective. Bhagavan has said that only a true jnani can be a true karma yogi. It is not that doing good works and giving to others is wrong. But only a jnani knows that there are no others; there is only the Self. Who is to give to whom?

Bhagavan's whole life was simply an offering to the world. Everything he did was for others only. The scriptures say that a jnani has no will of his own and whatever he does is prompted by Ishwara, or God. Bhagavan knew that social service could temporarily relieve *suffering* to some extent. He also knew that the same person who was helped, would some day come to grief again, not only later in this life but in life after life. To remove all suffering, to completely extinguish the cause of all *suffering*, the Maharshi was born. He wanted to liberate us from the mistaken belief that we are this frail body, mind and ego. To do this he gave the method of *Self-Enquiry*, showed us how to practice it and effectively aided seekers by his powerful presence and grace. But even with all that he taught us, there were many who came to him, stayed for some time and then went astray. Such was the case with the pious attendant of Bhagavan, Madhava.

He worked in the ashram for about ten years, mostly serving Bhagavan as a personal attendant. At one point he seemed to have become restless, or perhaps he felt that he required rest somewhere away from the ashram. At this juncture, he came to me one day and asked if I could help him with the travel fare to Yogi Ramani's ashram in Andhra Pradesh.

Up to this point Madhava was considered a model devotee. Everyone praised his virtues of steadiness, devotion and service to Bhagavan. So I was a little surprised when he told me he desired to leave the ashram. I asked him what Bhagavan and Chinnaaswami said about his plans. He told me that they both approved of them. Later I discovered it was not so. Bhagavan had recommended that he simply cease working for some time, take his meals in the ashram and rest, free from all responsibilities. Apparently he did not heed Bhagavan's advice and as a result had to suffer.

Madhava left the ashram as planned, but returned after a short time. His job as one of Bhagavan's attendants had already been given to someone else. Consequently, he had nothing to do when he returned and I would often see him walking in Bhagavan's hall. His restlessness persisted and it wasn't long before he left the ashram again. When he returned a second time he was wearing ochre robes, which means he must have been initiated into sannyas by some swami during his travels. Yet he was still unsettled and he went away again. Then, all of a sudden, we heard he had died in Kumbhakonam under strange circumstances.

It is not altogether uncommon for aspirants to deviate from the prescribed path after coming to Bhagavan. It is only those who persist to the end with their spiritual practice, devotion and faith that succeed. Of course, Bhagavan's helping hand is always there for those sincere sadhakas who strive and reach out for it.

Once the Sarvadadhikari asked me to set my alarm so I could wake up at 2 A.M. It was discovered that Bhagavan was rising at this time every night and walking to the latrine near the goshala. The attendants were sleeping right through this and, of course, Bhagavan probably took special care not to disturb their sleep when he rose. When the Sarvadadhikari discovered what was happening he became concerned that if Bhagavan should fall, or some other mishap should occur, there would be no one to help him.

So at 2 A.M. I awoke and walked over and stood near Bhagavan, who was then reclining on the couch outside on the verandah. When Bhagavan saw me standing there he quietly slipped off the couch and walked to the latrine with the aid of a flashlight. I followed. No words passed between us. There is no doubt that Bhagavan understood why I was there and who requested me to come at this hour of night, yet everything transpired in silence.

On such occasions, when silence prevailed, we would assume that Bhagavan approved or was pleased. When he was displeased, we could easily know, for he did not hesitate to correct us. In this way, we were always on our guard and alert to his will.

One day I received a letter from my family informing me that they were traveling to Thirupati. They requested me to leave the ashram and meet them there. When Bhagavan was returning from his walk and was near the well, I mentioned the details of this letter to him. He made no reply. Now, how could I just leave? Normally he would indicate his approval of the plan by asking questions or commenting, and in some manner make it clear to me that it was all right to go ahead. In this instance he said nothing and just kept walking.

The very next day I received another letter from my family informing me that the trip was cancelled. How can we explain this? Is it a siddhi, a miracle, or what? Everything happened naturally in Bhagavan's presence, and he was always so unassuming.

— continued in the *Jul/Aug issue*)

A Visit To Russia

MP3

ON March 12, I flew out of New York for a one week visit to St. Petersburg, Russia. My friend, Kamala Motihr, invited me to join her on this trip, which was a welcome respite from my demanding work in New York City.

Before leaving I was given the name, address and telephone numbers of Albert Timashev, a young devotee living in St. Petersburg. He is on the mailing list for this newsletter and corresponds by email to Arunachala Ashrama. I carried some pictures of Bhagavan with me, thinking that I would give them to him when and if we met. Dennis, an editor of this newsletter, had already emailed him about my visit.

My first attempt to talk to him on the phone resulted in utter frustration for both of us. His spoken English was, at best, limited, and my knowledge of the town of St. Petersburg was nonexistent. Because of the language problem we could not decide how to meet. I told him I would call back when I found someone who could speak to him in Russian. At the end of two days of hectic sight-seeing, I asked my Russian guide to call Albert and arrange a meeting.

After a ten minute rapid-fire Russian chat with him, she told me that he would meet me on Monday, the 18th of March in front of the Russian Art Museum, and that he would be wearing black jeans, a brown leather jacket and a brown cap.

St. Petersburg is said to have only thirty days of sunshine a year, but since the 13th of March we were greeted by bright, sunny skies every morning. Again, on Monday the 18th, we awakened to clear skies and bright sunshine, the same unusual weather pattern that was cheering the spirits of all, visitors and residents alike. At one o'clock, my Russian guide Ludmila and I waited outside of the Art Museum. Ludmila soon spotted Albert, a young bright-faced, alert looking man. Ludmila introduced us. Albert then went to bring his other friends, who had already arrived and were waiting nearby. Albert knew written English, but had little, or no experience, speaking it. Nevertheless, he stumbled on the best he could, as his four friends - three women and one man - looked on and smiled. I showed them the pictures of Bhagavan I had and gave them some candy I had brought.

Of the four others, Constantine was the one who introduced Bhagavan to these friends and to the other members of their center, called the Center for Spiritual Development. Olga was somewhat older and seemed to be the leader of the group; Julia said she was a vegetarian for the last twelve years; and Svetlana, another vegetarian, appeared to be very much like a sincere devotee.

Talking again through my Russian guide, it was decided that Olga would meet me at five o'clock after her work and take me to the Center for Spiritual Development. At 5 p. m. Olga came and took me by taxi to another part of town. In Russian she tried to tell me something about their Center and the evening they had planned for me. Knowing no Russian, all I could do was nod and smile. Ironically, the only understandable sounds came from the tape deck in the taxi that played the latest American pop music.

We reached the Center at 5:30 p.m., which was housed in a two-story building in the interior part of town. The side streets were packed with frozen, slippery snow, making the walk to the Center treacherous, and the low voltage of the street lamps seemed to accentuate the harshness of Russian winters.

The Center occupied a fairly large room and was furnished much like a classroom with rows of desks and a piano at one end. I was led into the tiny office and seated at a table arrayed with fresh fruits, bread, baklava, cookies and candies. I was offered peach liquor and then chai (tea).

The Russian hospitality appeared to dictate that I eat while the five of them gather around me asking questions about Bhagavan and spiritual practice. After a little while of this solo eating performance I offered the food to each one of them. They laughed, relaxed, started to eat along with me as we broke the cultural barrier.

At 6 p. m., I was ushered into the larger room that was by then filled with about forty people, all eagerly waiting to talk to me. Albert informed me that they all followed one of four masters and knew about Bhagavan. Those gathered seemed very eager and earnest. The questions were many, ranging from the reasons for Bhagavan's physical illness, comparing Bhagavan and Sri Aurobindo, the stillness at Sri Ramanasramam, to simple methods of spiritual sadhana. Also, they all wanted to learn how to chant 'Om' and Arunachala Siva.

Albert and another young woman did the best they could to translate their questions and my answers. A long discussion followed among them, as I became increasingly more doubtful as to how my answers were being translated. At some point I suggested we meditate together. I recited OM, followed by the recitation of "*Arunachala Pancaratnam*," a period of silence and then the chanting of Arunachala Siva.

A most profound and deep silence followed this short meditation session. The energy in that room was so powerful and profound that we all became quieter and more centered. I almost felt Bhagavan gave them all an experience of the stillness of Sri Ramanasramam that they had so eagerly asked about.

We ended the general session at 7 p. m., though the core group of five continued to meet with me for another hour and half. Constantine, a young man of easy laughter and a deep spiritual quest, said he chanced to buy Oleg Mogilever's Russian translation of *Arthur Osborne's Ramana Maharshi and the Path of Self Knowledge* and that got the others interested in the Maharshi.

The next hours I spent with these sincere Russians left me deeply touched. The cultural tour of St. Petersburg, with all its opulent art, palaces and culture, paled before this simple evening with these five fellow sadhakas. In that small meeting house, on the night of March 18th, 1996 Bhagavan touched us all in a very special way. This was an experience that will stay fresh in my heart for ever.

— by Geeta Bhatt

The 100th Anniversary of Sri Ramana Maharshi's Advent at Arunachala

On August 29, 1896 a young boy of sixteen stealthily left his home in Madurai and travelled to the holy Arunachala Mountain. The boy was later acclaimed as Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi, an illumined personality courted by Maharajas, religious scholars, the pious poor and sincere aspirants from the world over. But on that momentous day one hundred years ago when he left his home, swept away by a Divine Current that even absorbed his individuality, he was a solitary pilgrim lost to the world of sense and irresistibly drawn to his Father, Arunachala. On September 1, 1896 when the young Sage first arrived at Tiruvannamalai, Lord Arunachala vouchsafed to mankind a living example of the supreme state of Self-Abidance. And along with this paradigm of purity and peace we received the unique teachings of *Self-Enquiry* of 'Who am I?' and the grace necessary to achieve its end.

March 22, 1996 Letter To Sri V. S. Ramanan,

President, Sri Ramanasramam

MP3

With Bhagavan's Grace we now would like to come to India in August, and with that same Grace we feel inspired to suggest a few plans for the celebration of the 100th anniversary of His advent at Arunachala. What we are about to propose is not simply a suggestion. It is an offer of responsibility that we, with the assistance of devotees and friends from here and there, would like to take in remembering and honoring that holy event that took place one hundred years ago.

To begin with, we wish to go to Madurai on August 28th, spend one night there and leave by train on Thursday, August 29th, following the same route Sri Bhagavan took to Arunachala. This entails detouring at Villupuram Station, boarding the train to Manjalapattu and then walking along the railway tracks to the Arayainallur Temple, taking the exact same route Bhagavan did as a young boy of sixteen one hundred years ago.

Bhagavan then spent two nights at Tirukoilur before reaching Arunachala on September 1st. The commemoration activities we are proposing will take place in Tirukoilur and the adjoining Kilur Village and culminate at the Arunachala Temple on Sunday morning, September 1st.

First of all, we would like to honor the Arayainallur Temple Tirukoilur, the Viratteswara Temple in Kilur, the house of Muthukrishna Bhagavathar where Bhagavan was fed and exchanged his earrings for rupees, and also the descendants of that pious family.

Arayainallur Temple:

Bhagavan had the vision of light in this temple. This temple was also honored by another young sage, Jnanasambandhar, one thousand years earlier, who had the same vision. We pious devotees would like to honor the Temple on this occasion with monetary gifts for its continued maintenance and with the performance of special pujas to mark the occasion. Bhagavan was not allowed to spend the night in this holy Temple. We would like to arrange for the Temple to be open night and day for pilgrims and devotees from August 30 to September 1. Also, pilgrims should be allowed to sleep somewhere on the premises during the night.

Viratteswara Temple:

Here we will also arrange special pujas and offer a gift for the Temple's maintenance.

Muthukrishna Bhagavathar's House:

We would like to have the house whitewashed and, by compensating its owner, use the house on August 31st. From inside this house we will have large quantities of food prepared and throughout the day give bhiksha to pilgrims and the indigent, thus repeating the kindness extended to Bhagavan from this home exactly one hundred years ago.

We also wish to honor the descendants of the Muthukrishna Bhagavathar's family with gifts.

Train to Tiruvannamalai:

We propose to take the train to Tiruvannamalai on Sunday morning, September 1st and then walk to the Arunachala Temple, reciting Bhagavan's "*Aksharamanamalai*." All those who had spent the previous two nights in Tirukoilur will join, as also those who had already come to Tiruvannamalai for the festivities. The latter should travel to Tirukoilur by bus in the early morning and board the same train for the 20 mile journey to *Arunachala*. We may require to charter buses and arrange for more cars to be added to the train for this event. I am not sure of the current train schedules either. But with Bhagavan's grace, I am sure these plans will greatly enhance the celebrations you have already scheduled, and they will certainly inspire us to follow the royal path to peace and bliss, lived and taught by Bhagavan, the Master of our hearts and minds.

April 4th faxed reply to the above letter

Pranams. Have just returned to Ashram after staying in Anandashram, Kanhangad for five days and have gone through your letter about reliving Bhagavan's journey to Arunachala from Madurai. Wonderful! We will plan as suggested in your letter. Will revert to you on this in about 15 days.

Thanks for Arunachala Ashram's contribution for the Centenary Souvenir.

My deep regards to Sri Bhagawata. With warm affectionate regards,

— Yours in Sri Ramana,
Sundaram

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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