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Arunachala Yatra

The following is a report of the pilgrimage that Eric Ford, James Hartel, Arthur Coucouvitis, Meena Shah, Janet Robinson, V. K. Balachandrar and Dennis Hartel of the USA and Dr. Anil Sharma, Vijaya Sharma and Dr. Wally Shishkov of Canada had the good fortune to participate in. Although the plans for the pilgrimage came from Arunachala Ashrama here in the West, they were wholeheartedly taken up and implemented by devotees in India.

At 7:30p.m., on Thursday, August 29, 1996 seventy-four Pilgrims boarded the Pandyan Express in Madurai for a three day journey which culminated at the inner sanctum of the Arunachala Temple in Tiruvannamalai.

All these pilgrims, earnest devotees of Sri Ramana Maharshi, were observing the occasion of the one hundredth anniversary of the Sage's advent at Arunachala, and all these devotees were highly inspired to travel the same route the youthful Sage took when, one hundred years ago, Sri Arunachala physically dragged the boy unto Himself, crowned him *Siddha Purusha* and enthroned him on His sacred slopes, to reign as King of the Yogis.

The pilgrims, ages 13 through 80, gathered in Madurai, travelling from all corners of India, the U.S.A. and Canada. The members of the *Ramana Kendram* in Madurai spent months meticulously working out every detail of the *yatra*, travelled every foot of the distance, anticipated every need of the devotees and prepared for all possible contingencies. With the devoted assistance of Mr. A. S. Krishnamurthy of the Southern Railway, all the amenities, assistance and loving service we would have wanted to be extended to the lone Venkataraman one hundred years ago were lavishly showered on us during this pilgrimage. The preparations made by the Madurai devotees, and other devotees from places along the way, were a transparent reflection of their unparalleled devotion to their Master.

The description that follows will undoubtedly fail to recount this holy *yatra* as it was, in succeeding waves of devotion, experienced in the hearts and minds of each and every pilgrim. Every one of the devotees whose *punya karma* carried them to Madurai to participate in this pilgrimage will certainly have their own story to tell, which, in all likelihood, will not correspond to the actual events of the *yatra*, but rather to their own personal experience of Bhagavan and how He walked with him or her, or how He absorbed him or her in divine remembrance. This summary can only outline some of the memorable events and scheduled programs.

On the morning prior to our departure from Madurai, most all the pilgrims that had already arrived were taken to Tiruchuzhi by van. For some it was their first visit to the Maharshi's birthplace. *Puja* was offered at the Bhuminatha Temple and in the Sundaram Mandiram. Gifts were presented to the priest who resides in the Mandiram and there were recitations of Sri Maharshi's works in the small room of his birth.

Returning to Madurai and performing *puja* at the shrine in Ramana Mandiram, devotees began making their way to the railway station, which was less than a mile away. Throughout the *yatra* the pilgrim's luggage, when not needed, was carried in a van that followed them all the way to Tiruvannamalai. A nominal fee was paid to the organizers in advance and this amount covered all the expenses of the journey. Even some who were unable to pay the fee were welcomed to join.

The train left Madurai at 7:30 p.m. and was scheduled to reach Villupuram Junction at 3 a.m. Most of the devotees were accommodated in the last car of the train, which was especially reserved for the pilgrims. Soon after boarding we were served meal boxes, containing iddies, chutney and bananas. Later, about the time when Venkataraman bought two wood apples to appease his hunger, slices of wood apples were distributed. In groups, the devotees spent most the night singing and remembering the holy event they were now reliving.

By 3:30 a.m., the train reached Villupuram Junction, but unlike the boy, Venkataraman, we did not have to detain. Our car, which was the last car of the train, was detached and immediately attached to the Tirupati Express. Though we reached this railway station about the same time as the Maharshi did, we departed much earlier, at 4:30 a.m. Within half-an-hour we were getting down at the Mambalapattu Station. When the train pulled away we saw through the dark a huge 1000-gallon water car that was left by an earlier train for our morning bath. Tea and biscuits were served and in the early morning light, led by a large, colorful banner, the pilgrims marched through the local village resounding the morning air with "Arunachala Siva, Arunachala Siva." Children woke and mothers and fathers left their dwellings to watch the joyous parade of devotees marching down the street. They were singing the *Marital Garland of Letters*, composed by the Maharshi for his devotees. By the end of the *yatra*, this hymn was sung so incessantly for three days that there could have been no pilgrim that did not consign it to memory.

For the next eight kilometers we walked on a road that was often parallel and very near to the railway tracks. It is believed that the Maharshi walked along the tracks, fearing he may lose his way by taking an unknown road. In these early hours there was little traffic on this black-topped road, and while the chanting and singing of Bhagavan's hymns continued, the boy-sage's presence was so tangibly felt that devotees were often seen glancing at the railway tracks, believing that the Boy's form may actually appear before their eyes.

By 9 a.m. we reached the village of Mugaiyur. Here, on the roof of a Brahmin's house, iddies, puris, sambar and coffee were served. An overcast sky sheltered us from the warm-morning sun and, like the welcomed breakfast, a pleasant breeze refreshed all the pilgrims.

Having briefly rested at the Mugaiyur Railway Station, we continued for another nine kilometers, walking on the service paths alongside the railway tracks. The pilgrims slowly spanned out over a kilometer, as some walked faster and others slower. A ridge of clouds covered us and extended for about one mile to our right. It was remarkable that, in spite of the brisk breeze blowing, the clouds remained fixed in place till about noon, when the devotees began arriving at the Tirukkovilur Station.



Devotees met the pilgrims at the station with fresh, cool water...

click to see a large image

This temple two 16-year-old Seers had *Arunachala Jyoti Darshan*— Tirugnanasambandhar over one thousand years ago and Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi one hundred years ago, on 30-8-1896." The preparations for installing this inscription have begun.

As the sun set, the pilgrims sang *Akshara Mana Malai* and then made their way across the mostly-dry Pennar River bed at about the same time of day the Maharshi did one hundred years ago. Arriving back at Kilur the devotees had their meals and retired for the night.

On Saturday morning, August 31, all the devotees gathered in the house of the Mutthukrishna Bhagavathar. There has been little change in its structure since Venkataraman visited and was loving served a meal by the Mother of the house and pawned his earnings for cash. A week earlier, with the owner's permission, the front portion of the house was newly painted, a small pandal in front of the veranda was erected and other minor improvements were done at the expense of Sri Ramanasramam. Also, the ashram installed a beautiful framed, glass-enclosed, colored photo of Sri Bhagavan to remain as a permanent fixture in the central room of the house. *Arati* was performed in front of the photo while the devotees sang *Akshara Mana Malai*. All the pilgrims came out to the front of the house and a two-by-five foot, professionally-painted sign was ceremoniously unveiled. The sign had a well-painted bust of Bhagavan and text describing the Sage's connection with the residence.

Since it was the pilgrims intention to honor with gifts the descendants of the Bhagavathar's family and a descendant of the temple drummer who gave his portion of food to the hungry Venkataraman, exhaustive inquiries were made on earlier visits by the Madurai devotees and representatives of Sri Ramanasramam. It was discovered that the Bhagavathar and his wife had no children and his sister's descendants presently owned and rented out the house. The earnings that Venkataraman pawned to the Bhagavathar were never located. It is believed by his family that the Bhagavathar actually took the earnings to a local pawn shop, got the four rupees and a redemption slip and gave it over to the boy.

A descendant of the drummer was present and thrilled the pilgrims with his *nadaswaram* renditions at the Varateswara Temple, where the schedule of programs now continued.

The devotees squeezed into the inner sanctum and sat before Lord Varateswara. "Arunachala Siva, Arunachala Siva" resounded uninterruptedly for a long period while devotees meditated on Arunachala-Ramana in their hearts. Drums reverberated from the ancient stone walls of the temple, *nadaswaram* was played and all felt sanctified and elevated. Magnificent flower arrangements bedecked the image, *arati* was performed and *prasadam* distributed. The pilgrims then moved to the Mother's shrine. *Sri Lalita Sahasranam Stotram* was recited by the devotees and *puja* was performed. The whole temple united with the pilgrim's devotion and ascended in unison enveloping the atmosphere in a vibrant Divine Presence. That day's worship in the Varateswara Temple was a grand, spontaneous outpouring of devotion from the pilgrims and local participants alike.

In the Mantap before the Mother's shrine felicitations and gifts were offered to all the *archakas* (priest) of the temple, temple servants, temple officers, the Mutthukrishna Bhagavathar's relative, who with deep devotion joined the pilgrims that day, the *nadaswaram* player who was the drummer's descendant, a young drummer boy with a bright, clear face that charmed us with his resemblance to the young Venkataraman, and to other organizers, local and distant, of the *yatra*. With great joy and satisfaction Sri S. Guruswamy, the President of the Ramana Kendra in Madurai, officiated the event. Also, financing for connecting a permanent water supply to both the Varateswara and Arayainallur Temples was offered to the temples' executive officer.

Immediately following the felicitations a poor feeding took place in front of the temple. The pilgrims then went for their afternoon meal at about 2 p.m.

After rest and tea the pilgrims gathered in the stone mantap in front of the Varateswara Temple. A few distinguished devotees were scheduled to speak and modest loud-speakers were set up. This meeting evolved into a warm, informal, family-like gathering where anyone who wished to share a few thoughts about Bhagavan and the pilgrimage was given time. The sentiments expressed were replete with extreme cordiality, deep devotion and veneration to the Master. Devotees wept and laughed while listening to their fellow pilgrims, who by now had all been united as one inseparable "Arunachala Yatra Family."

The Maharshi spent the last night before arriving at Arunachala in the Tirukkovilur Railway Station and, naturally, the pilgrims felt they should spend the night at the same place. However, rain had started falling even while the evening program was going on under the stone mantap in Kilur and the sheltered space available at the train station was limited. Organizers first consideration was the woman pilgrims. It was thought that they should be taken by van to Sri Ramanasramam for the night. But the woman devotees refused to go, although they did agree to stay in the rented hall while all the men went and stayed under the shelter at the train station. *Bhajans* and chanting were going on late into the night when at midnight Sri Guruswami arrived with the van filled with lady devotees. He said, "What could I do? The ladies were weeping and wanted to come here." They were somehow accommodated in the single, small, mosquito-infested waiting room, though they neither minded nor complained. We could hear them singing, chanting and talking about Bhagavan all through the night. Some of the devotees chose not to sleep at all that night and remained awake, remembering their Lord in so many ways. There was no tiredness or exhaustion, as Bhagavan's grace was experienced to a high degree.

During the night we could overhear some of the conversations of devotees: "I don't think I ever contemplated Bhagavan and remembered Him day in and day out as we have done on this *yatra*." And another, with genuine sincerity, was heard to say, "Oh, I wish this *yatra* would never end."

This was the sentiments of many of the pilgrims as the train pulled into the Tiruvannamalai Station at 6:30 a.m. on Sunday, September 1, 1996. "Arunachala Siva! Arunachala Siva!" resounded in a chorus from the pilgrims arriving by train and this was echoed back by a large group of devotees gathered to receive them. The President of Sri Ramanasramam, Sri V.S.Ramanan, his father *Swami Ramanananda Saraswati* and others warmly embraced the pilgrims, as sincere devotion welled up and rained down from the eyes of the devotees. Ramana-Arunachala had reached His destination.

Amidst the chanting and emotion, Swami Ramanananda unveiled the engraved stone slab installed in the station, describing the Sage's arrival one hundred years ago. The pilgrims, joined by many local devotees, gathered in a procession following the banner and marched to the Arunachala Temple, chanting "Arunachala Siva!" Entering the temple we all offered ourselves to the Lord of Ramana, Sri Arunachaleswara, then proceeded onwards to Ramanasramam.

The pilgrims reached the Samadhi Hall at about 9 a.m., just after the completion of the *Mahabhishekam puja*. Wall to wall the hall was tightly packed with devotees, but the pilgrims, following behind the banner, somehow entered and merged into the crowd, like a river merging into the ocean.

Later in the afternoon, following a short talk describing the *yatra* to the large gathering of assembled devotees, all the pilgrims were invited on to the stage and individually introduced themselves to the audience. Sri S. Guruswami presented a special commemorative gift to Mr. A. S. Krishnamurthy of the Southern Railway. In addition to assisting the *yatra* organizers in every possible way, he was responsible for having commemorative stone engravings, describing the Maharshi's journey, installed at all the railway stations where the young Sage alighted while in route to Arunachala. Sri V. S. Ramanan was formally honored for his assistance and guidance in connection with the *yatra*. Sri V. S. Ramanan presented a commemorative coin and ribbon to Sri N. Somasundaram of the Madurai Ramana Kendra in recognition of his untiring service to devotees. Concluding, Sri Somasundaram was requested to lead the pilgrims in the chanting of "Arunachala Siva," just as he had led them all throughout the pilgrimage.

What had transpired in a span of sixty hours will remain an unforgettable memory, kindling the flame of devotion and dedication in the hearts of all those blessed devotees who followed in spirit and word the sacred path to the holy hill of the beacon light, as lived and taught by the Sage of Arunachala, Sri Ramana Maharshi.

Mr. Sridhar, a Hindu from Goa, asked: What is Kousalam (skill) in Yogah karmasu kousalam (Yoga is skill in action)? How is that gained?

Maharshi: Do actions without caring for the result. Do not think that you are the doer. Dedicate the work to God. That is the skill and also the way to gain it.

— Talks, #319

Abhyasa (Practice)

Devotee: Can this path of enquiry be followed by all aspirants?

Maharshi: This is suitable only for ripe souls. The rest should follow different methods according to the state of their minds.

Devotee: What are the other methods?

Maharshi: They are *stuti*, *japa*, *dhyana*, *yoga*, *jnana*, etc.

Stuti is singing the praises of the Lord with a feeling of great devotion.

Japa is uttering the names of the gods or sacred *mantras* like 'Om' either mentally or verbally.

Dhyana. When one is in *dhyana* the mind does not contact the objects of the senses, and when it is in contact with the objects it is not in *dhyana*. Therefore those who are in this state can observe the vagaries of the mind then and there and, by stopping the mind from thinking other thoughts, fix it in *dhyana*. Perfection in *dhyana* is the state of abiding in the Self.

Yoga. The source of breath is the same as that of the mind, therefore the subsidence of either leads to that of the other. The practice of stilling the mind through breath control is called *yoga*.

Fixing the mind on psychic centers such as the *sahasrara* (*lit.* the thousand petalled lotus) yogis can remain any length of time without awareness of their bodies. As long as this state continues they appear to be immersed in some kind of joy. But when the mind emerges (becomes active again) it resumes its worldly thoughts. It is therefore necessary to train it with the help of practice like *dhyana* whenever it becomes externalized. It will then attain a state in which there is neither subsidence nor emergence.

Jnana is stilling the mind and realizing the Self through the constant practice of *dhyana* or enquiry (*vichara*). The extinction of the mind is the state in which there is cessation of all efforts. Those who are established in the spontaneous effortless state have realized their true nature, the Self. The term 'silence' (*mouna*) and inaction refer to this state alone.

All practices are followed only with the object of concentrating the mind. As all these mental activities like remembering, forgetting, desiring, hating, attraction, discarding, etc., are modifications of the mind, they cannot be one's true nature. Therefore to know the truth of one's being and to be it, is known as release from bondage and the destruction of the knot (*granthi nasam*). Until this state of tranquility of mind is firmly attained the practice of unswerving abidance in the Self and keeping the mind unsoiled by various thoughts is essential for an aspirant.

Those who follow the path of enquiry realize that the mind which remains at the end of the enquiry is *Brahman*. Those who practise meditation realize that the mind which remains at the end of the meditation is the object of their meditation. As the result is the same in either case it is the duty of aspirants to practise continuously either of these methods till the goal is reached.

— From Self-Enquiry

Advent at Arunachala celebrations

in
New York and Nova Scotia

Evelyn K.Saphier from New York and Mr.Yashwant Rai from Nova Scotia submitted the following reports.

New York City

As the celebration of Sri Ramana Maharshi's one hundredth advent at Arunachala commenced, his God-intoxicated, melodious poetic hymn to Sri Arunachala "The *Marital Garland of Letters*", resounded the new spacious, sun-filled sanctuary of Arunachala Ashrama on Clyde Street, in Forest Hills, New York City.

The young children of our Ashrama's extended "family" worshipped at Sri Bhagavan's shrine, offering flowers before his radiant image while the gentle, devoted voice of Swami Viswanathan (recorded in 1979) was heard singing his own Sanskrit composition of 108 *names of Sri Ramana*.

An inspired reading of the story of Sri Bhagavan's monumental pilgrimage from Madurai to Tiruvannamalai evoked before our minds' eyes the scenes and events which our fellow devotees, participants in the *Centennial Yatra* led by Dennis Hartel in India, would be fervently reliving at this time.

Arunachala Bhakta Bhagawat, whose unswerving dedication to the establishment of an "Indian-style Ashrama" in New York City has been the cornerstone of our humble community, spoke words from the heart, reminding us of the directness, simplicity and accessibility of Sri Bhagavan's path of Self-enquiry.

During the celebration it seemed that Sri Bhagavan was pouring his grace into the devotees' hearts, which overflowed, resounding the sanctuary with *bhajans*, poetry and inspired talks. The ecstatic songs of Swami Prakashmayananda, in particular, surcharged the atmosphere with intense devotional fervor. Together, devotees chanted *upadesha sara*, *sri arunachala panchakam* and *Arunachala Siva*, concluding with *na karmama...* and *arati* at the shrine.

In the glow and warmth of Sri Bhagavan's grace, *prasadam* was shared among the devotees. There were numerous delicacies which had been prepared by virtually all the ladies present.

How blessed we are to have been in the company of fellow devotees on this most auspicious of days in which our beloved Master Sri Ramana Maharshi so magnanimously poured out his unreserved grace on all.

The words of poet *Muruganar*, sung in years past, stand true as ever today:

*Dear devotees, avid for grace,
Our master is an ocean—take and hold your fill.
Approach him freely, with minds and hands wide open.
Drink, drink to your heart's content!*

Nova Scotia

On September 1, 1896, when Sri Ramana Maharshi was only 16-years-old, he arrived at the holy Arunachala Hill. Exactly one hundred years after that momentous day this event was celebrated across the world with great devotion. In India a large number of devotees, drawn from all over the world, celebrated the event by travelling the same 350-mile route on foot and by train, just as the teenage Ramana Maharshi did 100 years ago. We take immense pride in saying that the idea of celebrating the event in India by walking and travelling by train originated in the Arunachala Ramana Mandiram, Bridgetown, Nova Scotia. About ten devotees from Canada and the U.S.A. participated in this historic march and most of the expenses required to conduct this pilgrimage were covered by the Arunachala Ashrama in Bridgetown.

At the Bridgetown Ashrama the event was celebrated with great fervor and devotion. Never before have we seen the Temple Hall so jam-packed with devotees from various parts of Canada, U.S.A. and England. For nearly two full hours the mountains behind the Ashram reverberated with the recitation of "Arunachala Shival! Arunachala Shiva!"

Darlene Karamanos welcomed the devotees and gave a brief history of Arunachala Ashrama in Bridgetown, Nova Scotia.

Mr.Yashwant Rai, with the help of maps, charts and video explained the route that Sri Bhagavan followed a hundred years ago, the same route that Dennis Hartel and his party had just followed in their journey of pilgrimage.

Earlier in the day Dr. Lakshminarayan from Moncton, New Brunswick performed *Sri Ganesh Puja*, and *Sri Chakra Puja*. His presence was a source of inspiration for all devotees, though everybody felt the absence of Dennis Hartel and Dr. Anil Sharma.

A large number of devotees had brought sweets and other food items as offerings and placed them at the altar. The *prasad* was served after *arati*.

Our grateful thanks to all the families, particularly to Mrs. Lakshmi Raju, Mrs. Aruna Pandey and Mrs. Janak and Raj Sharma for supervising the *prasad* arrangements.

Sri Bhagavan gave the world a simple and easy method for spiritual *sadhana*. Go to the source, ask the question "Who Am I?", find your own identity within the cavity of your own heart.

In the course of an informal conversation Sri Bhagavan pointed out that Self-Realisation is possible only for the fit. The vasanas must be eliminated before jnana dawns. One must be like Janaka for jnana to dawn. One must be ready to sacrifice everything for the Truth. Complete renunciation is the index of fitness.

— Sri Ramana Maharshi, Talk # 320

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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