

The Maharshi

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Twelve-going-on-Thirteen All Over Again

By Santha Rangachary

ONE of the great regrets of my life is the loss of a letter which I received in 1934. It was in reply to a rather hysterical missive I had despatched addressed 'Personal and Private' to Sri Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi at Tiruvannamalai. This communication dealt with a serious, self-admitted weakness of mine which was my mother's despair — a combustible temper which would explode at the slightest provocation. It was a bad time for me. I had just lost a father I had worshipped. I was twelve, going on thirteen, and at once all had been said.

I desperately needed a confidant, an adviser, somebody preferably outside the family, and out of the blue the name of Ramana Maharshi came to me. His was the only name I had ever heard my father — a stubborn, intolerant sceptic — mention without any codicils. I decided, therefore, to write to the sage of Tiruvannamalai secretly. After a number of unsuccessful attempts, I finally sent off a letter asking the Maharshi directly to "please, I beg of you, help me with my temper problem." Within a week I received a reply signed by the *Sarvadhikari*, informing me that my letter had been received and placed before the Maharshi and that his message to me was that if I myself made a constant and earnest effort to overcome my temper I would rid myself of it, and that he sent me his blessings.

My first reaction to that letter was one of astonishment at being treated like a grown-up, since I had always been told what to do, guided, instructed, warned, but never challenged except on Sports Day. And here was this great Guru as good as telling me: "It is your temper, isn't it? So, you yourself deal with it." He had simply batted the ball back to my court in the nicest possible way by treating me as an individual in

my own right. I rather liked that.

Ramana Maharshi entered my life again a year or so later when my sister took our whole family on a pilgrimage. The whole thing was going to take less than a week and we were to stay at Tiruvannamalai only for two days. But as it turned out we stayed at Ramanasramam for the whole week and I wept like a lost child when we had to leave. The visit to Ramanasramam was a shattering experience for me. I do believe I literally fell in love with Ramana Maharshi. I was in a daze, a trance, my tongue was gone, my mind was gone, I was in a state of dumbfounded ecstasy. This love which had been awakened was the kind which totally bypasses the physical and creates an awareness of a different kind of consciousness which can only be described as a mindless rapture, pure joy. It is an unlocated, pervasive state of being sparked off by some kind of recognition and it stays with you and you are never the same again.

We arrived at Tiruvannamalai just before dawn. After reaching the Ashram we bathed, had our breakfast, and then made our way to the Hall. My mother, brother and sister went ahead and quickly disappeared into the Hall. I hung back, unaccountably

apprehensive. Then, as I at last composed myself and got to the door and looked in, I saw reclining on a sofa, a golden-brown figure with the most radiant countenance I had ever seen before or since and, as I stood there riveted to the spot, the Maharshi turned and looked at me. When I remember it even now, more than forty years later, tears come to my eyes as they did then. I stood there, God knows how long, just looking at that face. Then, as in a trance, I moved forward deliberately towards him and touched his feet. Fighting my way through the disapproving glances that followed, I then made my way to a place near the window. Once I was seated I let my tears flow. I remember I spent a good part of that morning wiping my eyes. They were not tears of grief nor were they tears of joy. Maybe they were for something which I saw fleetingly in the Maharshi and which I also wanted and shall forever seek. Yes, I cried for myself then and I still do it now.

Never before had I seen in a human countenance a more intense, inward life and yet one which remained so transparent and childlike. There was about him an irresistible and indefinable spiritual power which simply overwhelmed me. I was conscious of people sitting all around me but was totally incurious about them. After an hour or so of silence I suddenly felt like singing. Without hesitation or embarrassment, I lifted my 13-year-old voice in a rendition of Tyagaraja's *Vinanok koni Yunnanura*, keeping time softly with my fingers on my knee. The audience sat still and unresponsive. The total lack of reaction to my performance, should have embarrassed me, but I was away in a state of mind which recognized nobody except that reclining figure on the sofa. After a few minutes I threw myself with another gush of abandon into *Thelisi Rama Chintana*. As I began the *anupallavi*, which exhorts the mind to stay still for a moment and realize the true essence of the name Rama, the Maharshi turned his eyes upon me with that impersonal yet arresting look of his, my heart soared and I thought: "I want to be here for ever and ever."

For three hours every morning and every evening my vigil in the Hall continued for seven days. After the first day my family had, without any discussion, silently and unanimously changed our planned pro-

gram and requested and got an extension of residence. I sat in my seat near the window still and thought-free, just gazing at the Maharshi. Occasionally somebody would ask a question and the Maharshi would turn and look at him, and you got the feeling that the question had been answered. Or somebody would ask for the meaning of a particular phrase in a Sanskrit or Tamil stanza and the Maharshi would answer softly, briefly.

He was not a man of many words. His long years of practised detachment from people made him laconic in speech. His knowledge of classical Tamil religious literature was considerable; he could himself compose verses and he did. His enlightenment had not been directed by a Guru but had come from his own Self-consciousness. It was all there lighting him up from inside and his most effective form of communication was intra-personal through the sense of sight and the medium of silence. He was a very human being, who laughed and joked occasionally, but he could suddenly plunge deep into himself while sitting in a hall full of people and rest in that stillness of spirit, which, as he himself said, was being in God.

One afternoon somebody showed Maharshi some verses written on paper. Maharshi read them, made a brief comment, and then clarified it by narrating a story from *Yogavasishtam*. I listened and felt that I could understand the words that were being spoken though I really could not have grasped their meaning. Years later, when I myself read that book, I wondered at the delightful ease and simplicity with which the Maharshi had narrated that story, going straight to the spirit like an aimed arrow, and then lapsing into what I can only describe as a speaking silence. In those eloquent silences that punctuated his brief remarks, one seemed to feel unspoken thought flowing around the room touching and drawing everybody into its illuminating course. That was a strange experience to me, that in the presence of Maharshi, speech seemed redundant. I was totally and blissfully satisfied just being in his presence.

That whole week we spent in the Ashram, I practically did nothing else but sit in that Hall. We attended the *Vedic* recitals at dawn by the students

of the Ashram *Patasala*. My brother and I watched every morning the Maharshi's gangly walk up and down the hill and I remember, on one memorable occasion, the gentle sage smile, as he stood still for a couple of minutes when he saw my brother adjusting his camera. I had never before spent so many days talking so little, just sitting around so much, or so lost in a single-minded pursuit of the Maharshi. The evening we finally left, my brother and I kept coming back to look at the Maharshi "just one more time" as he sat in the enclosed veranda beside the hall having a light oil massage. I finally said: "We will go only after he turns his head and looks at us once more." After a minute or two the Maharshi turned full face towards us and looked at us. Without a word we turned and walked away.

I shall not claim that my whole life was transformed after this meeting. No. I went back to school and then to college, got married, set up house, had children, started a journalistic career of my own. My *grihasthasramam* became my main preoccupation. But my visit to Ramanasramam had done something to me. It had left a mark on my mind and heart. The picture of the Ashram and of the Maharshi was always in my mind like the background curtain of a stage. Whenever I was tired or dispirited or perplexed the wish to go to Ramanasramam would possess me like a hunger. Even when I was so busy that I did not know whether I was coming or going a sudden look at a picture of the Maharshi hanging on the wall would momentarily root me to the spot and my mind would suddenly go blank.

I did go to Ramanasramam a fortnight before death claimed the Maharshi's frail human body. Because of the vast crowds which had come to visit him, the Ashram authorities had made special arrangements for everybody to get *darshan* of the white-haired smiling figure who sat on an easy-chair in the veranda of the room in which he later breathed his last. For a brief moment I stood below and looked up at that benign countenance, the eyes so bright and serene, and knew it was the last time I was looking at the living Maharshi.

I went to the Ashram again some years later. As usual, as soon as I passed through the Ashram gates, its peace closed around me and emptied my mind. I

sat on a veranda where I had only to turn my head to the left to see the mountain and bring my eyes back to the *samadhi* to see in my mind the Maharshi sitting on his sofa. I sat there the whole of that day doing nothing, not reading, not writing, not eating, not thinking, not remembering, not wondering why it was so quiet or where everybody was, and the voice of a young lad who came running through the gate screaming: "Nehru has passed away" was just an incidental sound. During all those hours I never for a moment wanted to be anywhere else or doing anything else.

Whenever I feel I want to go away somewhere, away from home, family, friends, book, mistakes, fears, sorrows, my mind automatically turns to Ramanasramam. And my body follows. I make the journey to Tiruvannamalai, walk into the Ashram, enter the Hall, and I am "home" and totally at peace.

Every human being has really only one Guru like one mother. Some are fortunate enough to meet their Gurus, some pass them by, like ships in the night. I stumbled upon mine when I was twelve. I now stand alone in myself. In a sense I am twelve-going-on thirteen all over again, standing on another threshold, remembering, waiting.

—*The Mountain Path*

How is Grace Obtained?

271. Dr. Syed: How is Grace to be obtained?

M.: Similar to obtaining the Self.

D.: Practically, how is it to be for us?

M.: By self-surrender.

D.: Grace was said to be the Self. Should I then surrender to my own Self?

M.: Yes. To the one from whom Grace is sought. God, Guru and Self are only different forms of the same.

D.: Please explain, so that I may understand.

M.: So long as you think you are the individual you believe in God. On worshipping God, God appears to you as Guru. On serving Guru He manifests as the Self. This is the rationale.

—*Talks*

Peace That Passeth All Understanding

Swami Prasananda Guru

The following conversation took place on January 2, 1942 when some visitors from North India, well versed in Hindu Sastras, visited Sri Ramanasramam.

Visitor: If the ultimate Reality is one and absolute, why does the world appear as an object, seen as different from the subject who sees it? Who is it that sees the object as distinct from himself, the subject?

Maharshi: Who is it that is putting this question?

V.: One who seeks the Truth.

M.: Who is he?

V.: He who desires to know the Truth.

M.: Instead of having a mere desire to know the truth, if he has the *anubhava* (experience) such questions as these would not arise.

V.: True, after Realization they cannot arise. But until he has the experience, he has not only the desire for it, but also some doubts regarding the nature of the ultimate Reality. Hence arises the question, why the world should appear as an ob-

ject different from the subject who sees it. I do admit that the question has significance only until the desire for Realization is fulfilled. But till then, the question remains, and it has to be answered.

M.: That there is no answer to your question is the only answer, because the question does not really arise. In order to know the truth, you who seek to know it should exist as such, i.e., as yourself, the primal being. It is therefore yourself that you should know in the first instance. It is of you that knowledge or ignorance is predicated. You said you do not know the Truth and desire to know it. Instead of engaging your mind with such thoughts as "I know," "I am ignorant," etc., you should direct it towards the enquiry as to what the 'I' itself is. Through such enquiry you will find, as a matter of experience and not merely as something to think and argue about, that what remains alone and absolute is the Self. So that your question, viz., why the world should appear as an object seen by a subject, cannot and does not at all arise. A question that does not arise cannot have an answer.

V.: How then should I know the 'I'?

M.: By investigation into this question itself, and thereby will you get the experience or *Atmanubhuti*. The ardent desire to know the Truth has a beneficial purpose to serve until one has such experience.

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V.: Mental activity during meditation does not seem to converge at a point, as it should, on the object of meditation and it does not stay there but gets diverted into numerous thought channels. Why is it so? How can the mind be made to overcome this tendency towards diffused thinking and attain its Primal State of freedom from thought?

M.: It is the mind's attachment to objects, constituting the nonself that makes the mind wander about during meditation. Therefore, the mind should be withdrawn from the nonself, and an effort should be made to fix it in Self-enquiry. All extraneous thought is effectively eliminated when you attune the entire mind to the one question: "Who is it that is making the enquiry?"

V.: In spite of having come to the definite conclusion as a result of one's investigation that 'I' has no essential relation with the nonself, i.e., with the body, senses and the objects perceived by the senses, the mind persists in going after these very same things which constitute the nonself. What is it due to and how can it be remedied?

M.: It is due to lack of *abhyasa* and *vairagya*. When Self-enquiry has become steady through

practice, and the spirit of renunciation firm through conviction, your mind will be free from the tendency of thinking about the nonself.

V.: How can I gain steadiness in practice?

M.: Only through more practice.

The cynosure of all eyes in the hall is Bhagavan, whose silence is much more potent. Those who sit in the hall within His presence have a splendid opportunity for the practice of *dhyana*. A genuine devotee cannot but experience what is called the peace that passeth all understanding, which is Bliss Divine. What is more valuable than the realization of such Bliss?

—*The Call Divine*

Right and Wrong

Q.: If it is a question of doing something one considers wrong, and thereby saving someone else from a great wrong, should one do it or refrain?

Bhagavan: What is right and wrong? There is no standard by which to judge something to be right another to be wrong. Opinions differ according to the nature of the individual and according to the surroundings. They are again ideas and nothing more. Do not worry about them. But get rid of thoughts. If you always remain in the right, then right will prevail in the world.

(The devotee was not satisfied with this answer and asked for further elucidation.)

Sri Bhagavan then pointed out that to see wrong in another is one's own wrong. The discrimination between right and wrong is the origin of sin. One's own sin is reflected outside and the individual in ignorance superimposes it on another. The best course for one is to reach the state in which such discrimination does not arise. Do you see wrong or right in your sleep? Be asleep even in the wakeful state, abide as the Self and remain uncontaminated by what goes on around. Moreover, however much you might advise them, your hearers may not rectify themselves. Be in the right yourself and remain silent. Your silence will have more effect than your words or deeds.

105th Anniversary of

Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi's Advent at Arunachala

You, your family and friends are cordially invited to join us in celebrating the 105th Anniversary of Sri Ramana Maharshi's arrival at the holy Arunachala Mountain.

The program will begin at 11:00 A.M.
and will be followed by the serving of prasada.

Nova Scotia Ashrama
Sunday 2 September 2001

New York Ashrama
Sunday 9 September 2001

Letters and Comments

Chanting the Names of God

I recently bought a book on Ramana Maharshi's teachings and found the website with your e-mail address.

I read that he stated that japa meditation can be useful. I heard, many years ago, that chanting can be harmful unless the mantra is given by a guru. I also read somewhere, written by another guru, that some mantras can be used freely by all seekers.

Can I chant the names of God on my japa beads without fear of harmful results? Could you recommend any mantras? In the past I have meditated/chanted 'I Am' and found it to have beneficial results.

I have been seeking, searching, reading, and practicing countless 'systems' for many years; everything from mainstream religions to Western occultism to Eastern mysticism, but I have not found that which brings me to the permanent stillness which Sri Ramana Maharshi mentions, in the little I have recently read (I first started studying his ideas only a week ago!).

Any advice? Any devotees in Chicago? Any help you can offer would be appreciated. Thank you for your time.

If you chant the name of God with sincerity and devotion no harm can come to you. On the contrary, only good — spiritual good — will come to you.

Sri Ramana Maharshi said, "I Am' is the greatest of all mantras, the first name of God." It is an excellent mantra.

Help is always there for the sincere seeker. Just like a man who chooses only one woman to marry and stays with her for his entire life, one should choose one

guru and one path and stay with that. There is no harm in seeking what suits you, but at some point one should make a decision and stick to one practice and one guru.

Editor

First let me say how valuable the Letters and Comments section of the newsletter is. I hope you will keep this section and maybe even expand it. The questions are to the point and the answers are extremely helpful clarifications.

My questions: What is the exact translation of *Om Namoh Bhagavate Sri Ramanaya*?

And is it appropriate for use as a mantra?

California, USA

Is it appropriate for use as a mantra? Yes, of course. The repetition of a mantra is an established, traditional method of realizing the eternal japa that is always repeating within us. The Maharshi never denied its efficacy. In fact, he had recommended to a number of devotees to repeat mantras, and we know of one instance wherein he even recommended "Om Namoh Bhagavate Sri Ramanaya." It means "I bow to Lord Sri Ramana".

For those who have taken to the path of Self-enquiry and look to Sri Ramana Maharshi as their Guru, it is very appropriate to repeat this mantra. Bhagavan has taught that all practices ultimately lead to the Vichara, Self-enquiry of 'Who am I?'. But we may not be able to practice this at all times, in which case the repetition of the mantra with prayerful humility will keep us attune to Him and open to His ever-present Grace.

Please read "How the Mantra Came to me" in At the Feet of Bhagavan, by T. P. Ramachandran Iyer.

Editor

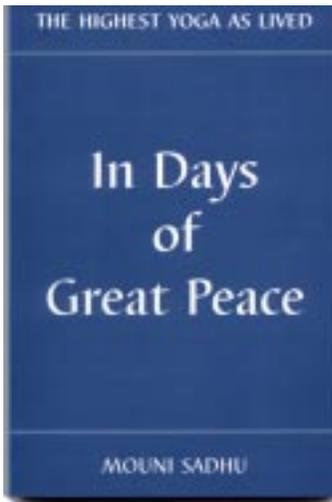
Steady Determination

R.: When an endeavour is made to lead the right life and to concentrate thought on our Self, there is often a downfall and break. What is to be done then?

M.: It will come all right in the end. There is the steady impulse of your determination that sets you on your feet again after every fall or breakdown. Gradually the obstacles disappear and your current gets stronger. Everything comes right in the end. Steady determination is the thing required.

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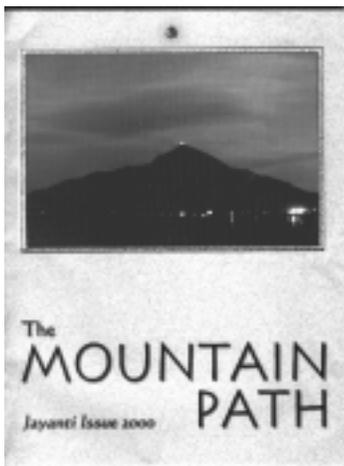


In Days of Great Peace, a book recounting Mouni Sadhu's (M. Sudouski) visit to the Ashram of Sri Ramana Maharshi in 1949, was first published in 1953. It was out of print for many years and has now been republished by Sri Ramanasramam.

Through a narrative that is both simple and profound, the author takes us on his journey to the quiet hermitage of the renowned Sage of Arunachala in South India. Basking in the radiance of the 'Great Rishi' his mind turns inward, following the path of Self-enquiry of 'Who Am I?'. He describes, with perceptive insight and emotion, how in the gracious presence of the Master, thoughts are stilled and one rests calmly in the thought-free, egoless state.

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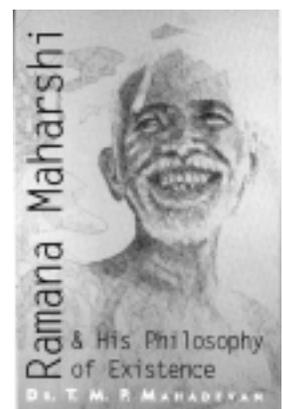
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