

# THE MAHARSHI

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## EARLY YEARS

BY SWAMI VISWANATHAN

**I**T WAS in the beginning of January 1921 that I first saw Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi. He was then living in Skandashram, which looks like the very heart of the majestic hill, Arunachalam. It is a beautiful, quiet spot with a cluster of coconut and other trees and a perennial crystal-clear spring.

The Maharshi was there as the very core of such natural beauty (on the eastern slope of the sacred Arunachala). I saw in him something quite arresting which clearly distinguished him from all others I had seen. He seemed to live apart from the physical frame and detached from it. His look and smile had remarkable spiritual charm. When he spoke the words seemed to come out of an abyss. One could see immaculate purity and non-attachment in him and in his movements. I sensed something very refined, lofty and sacred about him.

In his vicinity the mind's distractions were overpowered by an austere and potent calmness and the unique bliss of peace was directly experienced. This, indeed, is the blissful atmosphere of Ramana — Ramana Lahari! In this ecstasy of Grace, one loses one's sense of individuality and there remains something grand and all-pervading, all-devouring! This, indeed, is the Spirit of Arunachala which swallows up the whole universe by its gracious effulgence.

There were about ten devotees living with him, including his mother and younger brother. There were also a few earnest devotees who had then gathered there from various places. One of them was Vallimalai Murugar who, for hours every day, sang with great fervor the Tamil songs in praise of Lord Subrahmanya, well-known as Tirupugazh<sup>1</sup> Often, when he sang, Bhagavan would tap with two small sticks at the two rings of an iron brazier

of live coal kept in front of him to keep time (*tala*). Fumes of incense spread out in rolls from the brazier suffused with the subtle holy influence of Maharshi. While Maharshi's hands were thus tapping at the brazier, his unfathomable look of grace gave one a glimpse of the Beyond, in silence. It was an unforgettable experience.

There was also a devotee from Chidambaram, Subrahmanya Iyer, who often sang with great fervor the Tiruvachakam, hymns in praise of Arunachala composed by Maharshi and some songs in praise of Maharshi himself. One morning, when he began a song on Maharshi with the refrain "Ramana Sat-guru, Ramana Sat-guru, Ramana Sat-guru Rayane," Maharshi joined him singing. The devotee was so much amused at this that he burst with laughter and exclaimed, "Where else could one find somebody singing his own praise thus?" Maharshi replied, "Oh! What is there extraordinary about it? Why limit Ramana to a form of six feet? When you sing on Ramana, is it not the all-pervading Reality that you adore? Why should I not sing its glory?" We all felt lifted to Maharshi's standpoint.

The Ashramites got up at dawn and sang selections from Tevaram, Tiruvachakam and hymns to Arunachala. Maharshi's brother told him that I knew some hymns in

1. Compositions of Saint Arunagirinatha, a famous poet-saint of Tiruvannamalai.

Sanskrit and Maharshi looked at me expectantly. Seeing that it was impossible to avoid it, I sang a few verses in Sanskrit. When I had finished Maharshi gently looked at me and said, “You have learned all this. Not so in my case. I knew nothing, had learned nothing, then. Some Great Power took possession of me and effected a thorough transformation. Whoever, then, knew that it was to happen thus? Your father, who was intending in his boyhood to go to the Himalayas for *tapas*, has become the head of a big family. And I who knew nothing and planned nothing, have been drawn and kept down here for good. When I left home, I was like a speck swept on by a tremendous flood. I knew not the body nor the world. I knew not whether it was day or night. It was difficult even to open my eyes; the eyelids seemed to be glued down. The body became a mere skeleton. Visitors pitied my plight, as they were not aware how blissful I was. It was only years later that I came across the term ‘Brahman’ when people brought some books on Vedanta to me. And I was amused and said to myself ‘Is this known as Brahman?’” An old devotee of Maharshi, Siva Prakasam Pillai, has mentioned this in his “Ramana-charita Ahaval” as “the sage who obtained consciousness of Brahman without knowing even the term Brahman.”

Finding that I knew a bit of Sanskrit, Maharshi asked me to take down a copy of *Sri Ramana Gita* and give it to my father, saying briefly, “He will understand.” *Sri Ramana Gita* is a redaction of Maharshi’s teachings in Sanskrit verse by his famous disciple Kavyakanta Ganapati Sastri. Though I made a copy of that manuscript and took it with me I did not then enter into the details of the teaching it contained. I learned from the Ashramites that Ganapati Sastri, the great scholar and poet, was an ardent devotee of Maharshi and that he had got the title ‘Kavyakantha’ from a board of eminent scholars of Navadwipa in Bengal, very early in his career.

Thus I was in Maharshi’s holy presence for a week and then returned home. As I was about to take leave of Bhagavan a bit of camphor was lit and set before him as is traditionally done before manifestations or images of Divinity. I drank in the holy form of the Maharshi with my eyes and remembered the following Upanishadic verse:



Early photo of Skandashram

सूर्यो भाति न चन्द्र तारकं नेमा विद्युतो भान्ति कुतोऽज्यमग्नि ।  
तमेव भान्त मनुभाति सर्वं तस्य भासा सर्वमिदं विभाति ॥

“There the Sun shines not, nor the moon or stars, not the flashes of lightning, how could this fire? He shines and all these shine by His glory. All this appears by the grace of His effulgence” as I took leave of him.

For two years after this I was engaged in the movement for national liberation. Still there was a lingering spiritual dissatisfaction within me and I felt the imminent need of inner harmony over everything else. At the same time I was keenly aware of the insufficiency and inefficacy of my personal effort alone. At this juncture, casually, I took the manuscript copy of *Sri Ramana Gita* and turned the pages. My eyes settled on those brilliant verses in praise of the Maharshi in the eighteenth chapter, and as I read them I was deeply moved. The reminiscences of my first visit to Maharshi were vividly recalled and I decided to proceed to the blessed abode of the Maharshi in Arunachalam and abide there forever.

I reached Tiruvannamalai on the evening of January 2, 1923. After sitting for a while on my way in the serene twilight, I proceeded towards the Ashram eagerly. Though the moon was up, the light was dim on account of clouds and I could not discern my way up the hill to Skandashram. When I was looking about for some guide, someone intimated to me that the Maharshi was living at the samadhi cottage of his mother on the way round the hill, about a mile from the town. I knew that Maharshi’s mother had passed away in 1922, but

had no idea at all that he had changed his abode. So I walked along that road and arrived at the Maharshi's thatched hut.

When I arrived his brother was worshipping at the Samadhi of his mother and the Maharshi was peacefully reclining with closed eyes on an elevated dais. As I bowed and stood before him he opened his eyes, smiled at me and queried, "Did you take leave of your parents to come here?" I was caught and I asked him in reply why he should put me such a question when he had himself attracted me to his feet. The Maharshi's face bloomed again, and he advised me to inform my parents about my whereabouts, so that they may be somewhat free from anxiety.

There were many others also assembled there from various places and I came to know that they had come for the forty-third birthday celebrations of the Maharshi which was to take place the next day.

## Ganapati Muni

When I entered Maharshi's hut early the next morning and bowed to him, there were many devotees seated before him. But my attention was particularly gripped by a radiant personality amidst that group. He was, I learned, Kavyakanta Ganapati Sastri. He had the face-cut of the great poet Rabindranath Tagore and from the light that shone on his face, I found how mistaken I had been in my hitherto impression that he was only one of the learned pandits. His broad forehead, gracefully bright eyes, aquiline nose, charming face and beard, and the melodious ring in his voice — all these proclaimed that he was a genius, a great poet, a rishi. Everything about him reminded me of the Vedic seers, especially Vasistha, and it is interesting to note that he was of the line of Vasistha. There was authority, dignity and sweetness in his talks and his eyes sparkled as he spoke.

He had just composed on the occasion of the Maharshi's forty-third birthday the following verse in Sanskrit:

देवी शक्तिरियं दृशोः श्रितजनध्वान्तक्षयाघायिनी  
देवी श्रीरियं अम्बुजाक्षमहिषी वक्त्रे सहस्रच्छदे ।  
देवी ब्रह्मविधूरियं विजयते व्याहारगूढा परा  
विश्वाचार्य महानुभाव रमण त्वां स्तौतु कः प्राकृतः ॥३७ ॥

"It is effulgent Devi Uma shining in your eyes dispelling the ignorance of devotees. It is Lakshmi Devi, the consort of lotus-eyed Vishnu, in your lotus-face. It is *Para-Vak* (inspired Word) Saraswati, the consort of Brahma, dancing in your talk. Great Seer Ramana, the Teacher of the whole world, how can mortal man praise you adequately."



Those who have come in contact with Ganapati Muni would find this verse well-suited to describe him also. He was then living in the Mango Tree Cave on the eastern slope of Arunachala. Adjoining it and a little above it is the perennial spring, Tiru-Mullaipal-Thertham. This cave has often served as the Maharshi's summer abode when he lived at Virupaksha Cave. It was here, in the Mango Tree Cave, that Ganapati Muni composed extempore the last quarter of a 'Thousand Verses in Praise of Uma' (*Uma Sahasram*) within a few hours one night, in the presence of the Maharshi.

One evening I went to that cave to see him. I waited for him a few minutes in the room next to the cave before Ganapati Muni emerged from the cave. There was the fragrance of *tapas* in the person of the Muni and about his residence. I sat down before him after paying my respects to him. He silently looked at me for a few minutes. Then I had a talk with him about spiritual *sadhana* and the details of discipline needed for it. After a few days I expressed to the Maharshi my desire to go through the principal Upanishads. Maharshi directed me to go to 'Nayana',<sup>2</sup> saying that he was the man who could elucidate anything concerning sacred lore. So I went to Nayana and placed before him a passage from the Taittiriya Upanishad for explanation. He dilated upon its profound significance with clarity and ease. After hearing him for an hour, I came to the conclusion that I need not make a study of the Upanishads under him, as whatever he uttered was

2. 'Nayana' was the name which the Maharshi and all intimate devotees used to refer to and address Ganapati Muni. It is a Telugu word of endearment, meaning father as well as son.

Upanishadic. Though Nayana was himself a man of wisdom and *tapas*, he used to direct aspirants coming to him to the Maharshi. He knew that there was a special effect in hearing the truth of Atman from the Maharshi himself. And Maharshi would send to Nayana devotees who sought light upon *upasana* (methods of worship) or details pertaining to various sastras. Thus their mutual appreciative relationship was beautiful.

## Guidance and Grace

After the devotees who had gathered for the birthday celebrations had left the Ashram, one morning I approached Maharshi with my problem: “How am I to rise up from my present animal existence? My own efforts in this direction have proved futile and I am convinced that it is only a superior might that could transform me. And that is what has brought me here.” Maharshi replied with great compassion, “Yes, you are right. It is only with the awakening of a power mightier than the senses and the mind that they are subdued. If you awaken and nurture the growth of that power within you, everything else will be conquered. One should keep on the current of meditation uninterrupted. Moderation in food and other restraints will be helpful in maintaining the inner poise.”

It was this grace of Maharshi that gave a start to my spiritual career. A new faith was kindled within me and I had found in the Maharshi a strength and support to guide me forever.

Another day, questioned about the problem of *brahmacharya*, Maharshi spoke thus: “To live and move in Brahman is the real *brahmacharya*. Continence, of course, is very helpful to achieve that end. But so long as you identify yourself with the body you can never escape sex-thought and distinction. It is only when you realize that you are the formless, Pure Consciousness that sex-distinction disappears for good and there is *brahmacharya* — effortless, spontaneous.”

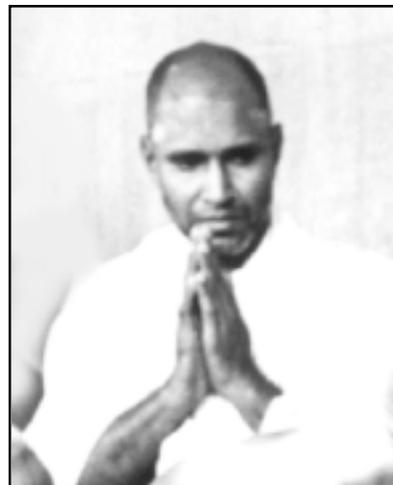
Four months after I came to Arunachalam, my parents came there to have *darsan* of Maharshi and take me back home. Though they did not succeed in their latter intention, they were somehow consoled by the Maharshi before they returned. My father is a cousin of the Maharshi, older than him, and as such knew him very intimately as a boy before he left home for Tiruvannamalai. Though he had heard from others about the Maharshi

and read carefully *Sri Ramana Gita*, he came there with an open mind to see for himself what the Maharshi was. But the moment he saw him he was so overpowered by a sense of veneration that he prostrated before him with emotion and observed, “There is nothing here of the Venkataraman I knew, nothing to identify him.”

Maharshi gracefully smiled and remarked, “Oh! It is long since he disappeared,” indicating the complete transformation he had undergone. My father then told the Maharshi that he had not come to him so long, as he had not achieved dispassion for the world. “How could a man,” he said, “who has no spirit of renunciation in him be benefited by the company of the sage?” The Maharshi, from his usual and normal high level, replied, “Oh! Then you seem to be obsessed by the delusion that you are going to achieve *vairagya* (non-attachment) in some distant future. If you just discern your real nature, the Self, with what is it attached? Dispassion is one’s very nature.”

One day someone told the Maharshi about a devotee who claimed to be Ramana himself and said that honoring him was honoring Ramana. Maharshi replied with a smile, “There is nothing wrong about it; it is all right. But if somebody else claims the same status for himself, this man should not deny it, because every one is Ramana, all is Ramana.” We all enjoyed that straight and humorous remark of Maharshi.

As the reconstruction of the Ashram cottage was then going on, Maharshi often remained with his devotees and visitors in the big stone *mantap*, situated on the other side of the road. Maharshi used to dine with all in the shade of a huge mango tree in front of his mother’s *samadhi*. There was cool water kept in big pots at the foot of the tree during these hot summer days. All of us enjoyed the cool shade, the cool water, and the grace of the Maharshi, which like a cool breeze removed the heat of man’s torments.



Swami Viswanathan

## FORTY VERSES IN PRAISE OF SRI RAMANA

By Kavyakantha Ganapati Muni

Translated by Dr. Anil K. Sharma

tadbhāgadheyam asamānam anekamauni-  
vāsārjitaṁ kṣītibhṛtaḥ khalu lohitasya |  
aṅgīcakāra bhagavan ramaṇo maharṣir anyeṣu  
satsu yad imaṁ bahuṣu sthaleṣu || 39 ||

*tad* - that, *bhāga* - good fortune, *dheyam* - giving,  
*asamānam* - unequalled, *aneka* - many, *mauni* - saints,  
*vāsa* - dwelling, *arjitaṁ* - earned, acquired, *kṣīti* -  
mountain, *bhṛtaḥ* - borne, acquired, *khalu* - indeed,  
verily, *lohitasya* - of the red-coloured, *aṅgīcakāra* -  
chose, *bhagavān* - Bhagavan, *ramaṇo* - Ramana,  
*maharṣir* - Maharshi, *anyeṣu* among others, *satsu* -  
good, holy, *yad* - because, since, *imaṁ* - this, *bahuṣu*  
among many, *sthaleṣu* places

Verily, that good fortune acquired by the red colored  
mountain (Arunachala), gained by the dwelling there  
of many sages, is now unequalled, because Bhagavan  
Ramana Maharshi has chosen this (dwelling) from  
among other holy places.

śāntir nitāntam adhikā paramāsyā śaktir  
vairāgyam adbhutatamaṁ karuṇā tu sāndrā |  
jñānaṁ nirastakuhanaṁ madhuraṁ ca vṛttaṁ  
nṛṇāṁ nidarśanam ayaṁ ramaṇo maharṣiḥ | 40 |

*śāntir* - peace, *nitāntaṁ* - extraordinary, *adhikā* -  
surpassing, superior, *paramā* - chief, highest, *asya* -  
of him, *śaktir* - power, *vairāgyam* - dispassion,  
renunciation, *adbhutatamaṁ* - most extraordinary,  
*karuṇā* - compassion, *tu* - used as exclamation, *sāndrā*  
- strong, intense, *jñānaṁ* - knowledge, *nirasta* -  
banished, *kuhanaṁ* - hypocrisy, *madhuraṁ* - sweet,  
pleasant, *ca* - and, *vṛttaṁ* - conduct, *nṛṇāṁ* - for, of  
men, mankind, *nidarśanam* - pointed to, indicated,  
*ayaṁ* - this, *ramaṇo* - Ramana, *maharṣiḥ* - Maharshi

For his extraordinary peace, supreme power, most  
extraordinary dispassion, intense compassion, for  
knowledge that has banished hypocrisy and for his

sweet conduct, Ramana Maharshi is indicated (as the  
ideal) for mankind.

nārasimhirgaṇapatir vāsiṣṭho ramaṇaṁ gurum |  
catvāriṁśanmitaiḥ padyaiḥ skandāṁśam  
stutavānṛṣim | |

*nārasimhir* - son of Narasimha, *gaṇapatir* - Ganapati,  
*vāsiṣṭho* - Vasishta, *ramaṇaṁ gurum* - Guru Ramana  
*catvāriṁśan* - forty, *mitaiḥ* - by measured, *padyaiḥ* -  
verses, *skanda* - Skanda, *āṁśam* - incarnation,  
*stutavān* - praised, *ṛṣim* - Rishi

Vasishta Ganapati, son of Narasimha, has praised with  
forty measured verses the Rishi, the incarnation of  
Skanda, Guru Ramana.

om tat sat

### Let Us in Meekness Worship

Countless the habitats lived,  
Countless the names borne,  
Countless the kith and kin possessed,  
Countless the bodies by karma caused,

Countless the Karmas daily performed,  
Countless the thoughts entertained,  
Countless the name and fame acquired,  
Countless the heaven and hell experienced,  
Countless the Gods worshipped,  
Countless the faiths followed —

And so, realizing through *jnana* and grace  
Our God of *turiya* form,  
The Divine Cloud that pours the rains  
of limitless rapture,  
Descending through the dome of heaven  
And through the love-filled eyes  
of fervent devotees,

Who chant the names countless  
That scriptures countless recount,

The Treasure vast of silence  
That Wisdom Bliss of an inexplicable state,  
That Immensity

Let us in meekness worship.

— *Thayumanavar*

## THE OMNISCIENT RAMANA

By M. R. Venkataraman

I HAD the great fortune to have daily 'darshan' of Bhagavan during the last few years of His mortal life, for I studied in Tiruvannamalai. My father, the late Dr. M. R. Krishnamurthy, had on an impulse relinquished his medical practice to be of service to him.

My mother, Subbulakshmi Ammal, was equally devoted to the Bhagavan. She used to prepare snacks and take them to Ramanasramam as an offering to the sage and for distribution among the devotees present in the meditation hall. After school hours, I used to visit the Ashram in the company of my parents. During the last few months of Bhagavan's life when he was seriously ill, my father stayed on for night duty and I was sometimes his silent companion.

It was the actual experience of many devotees that Bhagavan was aware of even their unspoken thoughts and he would respond to them in a manner that was truly amazing. This was because a life-link comes to be established between disciple and Guru, like the one between parents and children and among brothers and sisters, which Bhagavan himself had hinted at.

This characteristic of Bhagavan was brought home to me in a telling incident that shall remain etched in my memory and the purpose of this article is only to share that experience with others.

In Tiruvannamalai town, our residence was on Avarangattu Street and four doors away lived an old lady whom we called 'Mudaliar Patti' (not to be confused with Alangartanni Ammal of Karaikal who was also known by the same name). I was studying in standard nine (it was called 'form four' in those days).

One evening when I returned from school I heard this 'Patti' telling my mother, "Do you know that Brahmana Swami<sup>1</sup> did most of his alms-taking on this street of ours during his early days on the hill? He was given to silence in those days. He would stand in front of our house and clap his hands in order to draw our attention. We used to keep a stock of sour porridge ('pulithakuzhu') always in our house. I would take a

bowful of this and pour it into the cupped hands of the Swami. He would drink the porridge with relish and walk away without even wiping his hands!"

I did not believe this story and told my mother that 'Mudaliar Patti' was spinning a yarn. "Bhagavan would never have taken food from her hands," I said.

The next thing I knew was a stinging slap on my back. It was from my mother who was livid with anger. "How dare you sit in judgment over any action reported of a realized soul like Bhagavan? Are we not ordinary mortals who should know our place? Let this be the first and last time of sacrilege on your part!" I was chastened by the ferocious intensity of my mother's bhakti.

The next day was a holiday and I accompanied my mother to the Ashram as she took a vessel of 'omappodi' (fried South Indian savory) for distribution there. Sachidanandam, an attendant of Bhagavan who we knew well, was on duty in the meditation hall.

As Bhagavan sampled this snack brought by mother, he spoke to her, "Subbulakshmi, only today did Sachidanandam tell me that you used to give *bhiksha* to him in the early days and that he would receive the mixed rice in his towel. Noticing the *sambar* dripping through, it seems you bought for him a copper *thooku* that had a lead coating inside. Well, he had at least a towel to start with but I had no such luxury in my begging days."

This revelation was too much for me; standing at my mother's side, I started sobbing aloud. Turning to me, Bhagavan asked my mother in a compassionate tone, "What happened? Why is the boy weeping all of a sudden?"

My mother replied grimly, "Only last evening Mudaliar Patti was relating to me the same incident about sour porridge. This fellow doubted the veracity of the account. Now that Bhagavan himself has confirmed it in detail, he is feeling the burden of his guilt. Let him weep by way of '*prayaschitham*' (atoning penance)."

At the end of the sobbing, I felt relieved and my

### The Nova Scotia Children's Ashrama

Directors of the Children's Ashrama are going on a pilgrimage to Arunachala this year. Therefore, the Children's Ashrama in Nova Scotia will not be conducted. Families are still warmly invited to visit at anytime throughout the summer.

1. Bhagavan was called Brahmana Swami soon after arriving in Tiruvannamalai.

mind became extremely light.

Fifty years have gone by, but even now as I recollect and relive the experience, I am overcome with the same sensation of supreme peace. That is a bless-

ing which goes to prove that Bhagavan Ramana is still a living presence to all those who have the devotion and diligence to come into his energy field.

– From *The Hindu*, 16 April, 2004

## LETTERS AND COMMENTS

I have a few enquiries regarding Sri Ramana Maharshi's teaching, and they are:

1. Can anyone practice Self-enquiry?
2. Must we be initiated into the path?
3. Must we take Bhagavan as our Guru in this path?
4. What is your advice for a newcomer?
5. How do I know that I am able to practice Self-enquiry?
6. Any other advice?

Sorry for this trouble and hope to hear from you.

My prayers and adorations to Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi. Thank you.

Singapore

1. Can anyone practice Self-enquiry?

*Yes. No one can deny the existence of their self, so to enquire into its nature is natural.*

2. Must we be initiated into the path?

*On this path no formal, external initiation is required. With sincere and steady practice everything required will be automatically forthcoming. Sincerity, steady practice and perseverance are the means.*

3. Must we take Bhagavan as our Guru in this path?

*You can. Bhagavan is a living presence, stretching out his hand to pick up anyone and pull them along, if they but turn to him for support and guidance.*

4. What is your advice for a newcomer?

*Why do you say 'newcomer'? You would not have come to this point of investigation if it were something new. Your samskaras are goading you in this direction. Concentrated practice is required. If you are sincere and persevere, everything will fall into place and you will feel that whatever happens does so for your spiritual benefit — you will feel guided.*

5. How do I know that I am able to practice Self-enquiry?

*Try it. With earnestness, prayer and surrender, try it.*

6. Any other advice?

*Yes. Do something. Do not waste time on idle occupations and thoughts. Collect your thoughts and focus them on one point. Dedicate your life to the spiritual ideal. It is the purpose for which we obtained a human body. Do not squander this opportunity. Time is fleeting. Any step may be our last and we will tumble into our graves. Have faith and march forward.*

Editor

## 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 contact the individuals below for more information.

**Boston Area** — David & Anna Klegon (617-928-1487 / dklegon@rcn.com)

**Ann Arbor, MI** — Gayatri & Mohan (734-623-7199) / cedararbor@yahoo.com

**Atlanta Area** — Mangalam Kalyanam (678-423-7324 / smoothcutter@hotmail.com)

**Washington, D.C. Area** — Prakash & Mamtha Adishesan (703-502-4892 / adishesan@worldnet.att.net)

**Miami, Ft. Lauderdale Area** — David & Janet Rubinson (954-755-4758 / arunahill@earthlink.net)

**San Francisco Area** — Swaminathan & Sangeeta (510-324-1160 / nachiketas@hotmail.com)

**Toronto, Canada** — Krishnan & Padma Sastri (905-849-6005 / psastri@hotmail.com)

**Ottawa, Canada** — Anantha Padmanabhan (613-733-8250 / padmanabhan\_ananth@hotmail.com)