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## Ramanashram Today

### Arthur Osborne

*There are so many spiritual centres in India that not only the foreign tourist but even the Indian devotee may well be excused for wondering which one to visit. However, it is not simply a question of duplication; each one has its own specific character, so that while one meets the need of one person, another provides a haven to someone else. First of all comes the question of the aim of a spiritual centre, because this decides the sort of people who are likely to be attracted to it. The Maharshi was clearly and solely concerned with guiding people towards Liberation or Self-realisation, that is to moksha. But is this not the case with every Ashram and holy place? Not at all. There are places where people go to pray for a son or a job, to win a lawsuit or pass an examination, to obtain release from sickness or misfortune.*

I DO NOT say that no such prayers are ever answered at Ramanashram, but I do say that the Maharshi did not approve of such motives in those who came to him. Rather, he tried to awaken in them the realisation that they were not the suffering body but the eternally blissful Self and thereby to give them serenity even in misfortune. There are also places where people go in the hope of developing powers, obtaining visions of the deity, reading people's thoughts, curing sickness, and so forth. To all such aspirants the Maharshi was even more discouraging. Not only do such powers not lead to Liberation, but they can actually be an impediment to it, since men become just as attached to them, or to the desire for them, as to worldly wealth and power.

All this implies that Ramanashram is not a place visited by large crowds in search of transient gains. Rather, it is for the serious aspirant who has understood

that Liberation is the supreme goal and who seeks the grace and support of the Master to guide him on his way.

Even if the goal is agreed upon, there are various paths or disciplines for approaching it. The Maharshi taught the path of Self-enquiry – Who am I? This is not investigating the mind, conscious or subconscious, but seeking the Self underlying the mind. Therefore he said: "There can be no answer to the question; whatever answer the mind gives must be wrong." The answer comes as an awakening of pure consciousness, a current of awareness in the heart.

This is pure jnana, but the Maharshi also taught a path of bhakti. He often said: "There are two ways: ask yourself 'Who am I?' or submit." A philosopher could easily prove that these two paths are mutually exclusive. If you seek to realise your identity with the One Universal Self, which is the Absolute, you logically cannot worship

a Personal God or Guru at the same time. Logically not, but in real life you can, because you have different moods and are helped by different kinds of approach. Therefore, in spite of logic, the Maharshi said that the two paths are not incompatible; and his devotees have found it so.

It will be seen that both these paths are direct inner disciplines, independent of ritual; so here we have another characteristic of Ramanashram. There is a minimum of ritual and organisation there. People go and sit silent in meditation before the Maharshi's shrine or in the hall where he sat for so many years with his devotees. They walk on the sacred mountain, Arunachala, or sit in their rooms. They visit or talk. They arrange to take their meals at the Ashram or prepare their own food, as they choose. There is scarcely any outer discipline. The Vedas are chanted in front of the shrine, morning and evening, as they used to be in the Maharshi's presence in his lifetime, but even for this attendance is not compulsory. And those who do attend sit together, shoulder to shoulder, brahmin and non-brahmin, Hindu and foreigner, which would not please those who make a fetish of orthodoxy. This, however, does not imply laxity; the discipline comes from within.

Pure jnana marga and pure bhakti marga though it is, the Maharshi's path contains a strong element of karma marga also, since he expects his devotees to follow it in the life of the world. Time and again someone would come to him and ask his authorisation to renounce the world, and he would not give it. "Why do you think you are a householder? The similar thought that you are a sannyasin will haunt you even if you go forth as one. Whether you continue in the household or renounce it and go to live in the forest, your mind haunts you. The ego is the source of thought. It creates the body and the world and makes you think of being a householder. If you renounce, it will only substitute the thought of renunciation for that of the family and the environment of the forest for that of the household. But the mental obstacles are always there for you. They even increase greatly in the new surroundings. Change of environment is no help. The one obstacle is the mind, and this must be overcome whether in the home or in the forest. If you can do it in

the forest, why not in the home? So why change the environment?"

How does this affect Ramanashram? In the first place, it means that there are few sadhus or sannyasins to be found there. Also, not many of the Maharshi's devotees live there permanently. Most of them pursue their professional life in the world, practising his sadhana invisibly, without form or ritual, and only coming to Tiruvannamalai from time to time, to recharge the batteries, so to speak. Thinking of them, a doctor, an engineer, a professor, a bank manager, an editor, a cinema proprietor and many others come to mind. When it becomes appropriate for one of them to retire from active life in the world and settle down at Tiruvannamalai, circumstances become propitious. It just happens so. Visitors tend, therefore, to be such as have pledged their life to silent, invisible sadhana while performing their obligations in the world, and who seek the grace of the Maharshi, the power of his support, to aid them in doing so.

Another result of the formless, essential nature of the Maharshi's path is the large proportion of foreigners both among the visitors and the resident devotees. There is no need to be a Hindu to follow it. Anyone, whatever religion he professes, whether he professes any formal religion or not, can practise Self-enquiry or can worship and submit. Therefore the Maharshi never expected any of his devotees to change from one religion to another. Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Parsis came to him, as well as Hindus. Some continued to practise the forms of their religions, others not; it was up to them.

Mr. Evans-Wentz, the well-known writer on Tibetan Buddhism, visited the Maharshi and asked whether he recommended any special methods for Europeans, and he replied: "It depends on the mental equipment of the individual. There are no hard and fast rules." Each aspirant was guided and helped according to his aptitude, not on any basis of race, caste, sex or religion.

While the present article was being written, it so happened that the Ashram received a letter from an American woman who never saw the Maharshi, and indeed has never been to India, containing the following message: "Great blessing and benediction was

unexpectedly mine. At 7 a.m., just before waking, a vivid vision of Maharshi, potent and powerful, was vouchsafed briefly to me, in colour. Yes, I know visions are not our aim and goal. However, the depth of surrender, ecstasy, awe, wave after wave, deeper and deeper – wave after wave of Bliss ineffable – was overwhelming, wonderful and encouraging: almost all vestige of mind was gone. The veil into Self was delicate, tenuous-thin. Of course, thankful, humble and grateful, my dedication deepens greatly after this. The import and impact of it is with me still.”

Is it any wonder that people turn to him from all parts of the world? Even from behind the Iron Curtain letters come. Normally, it has been possible for any spiritual aspirant in any religion to find guidance within the framework of his own tradition. Today it is no longer easy, if at all possible, to find a guide in any religion who has himself attained the heights and can guide others thereto. Nor is it easy, even though one had such a guide, to follow any strictly orthodox path in the conditions of the modern world. However, the divine grace always provides an answer to man’s needs, and in this age has appeared on earth the supreme guide, bringing a path to be followed invisibly by anyone who gives his heart to it.

The Maharshi often reminded those who came to him that they were not the body. Now there are those who presume that he was the body and, no longer seeing his body at Tiruvannamalai, take it that he is not there. But not those who have felt in their hearts the power and subtlety of his guidance, the vibrant, all-pervading peace of Arunachala, the sacred mountain at whose foot his Ashram is located. He used to say: “The purpose of the outer Guru is only to awaken the inner Guru in the heart.” And shortly before leaving the body he told a group of devotees: “When the Guru has awakened the inner Guru in the heart of his devotees, he is free to leave the body.”

Yes, it may be said, that is all very well for those who were already his devotees when he shed the body, but what about those others who approach him now and feel the need for an outer Guru? It may be that in some cases he influences them indirectly through those older disciples in whom the inner Guru has been awakened. Certain it is that in many cases he influences

them directly and powerfully, as with the American lady from whose letter I have quoted (though not necessarily with any dream or vision).

A visitor asked once whether the contact with the Guru would continue after the dissolution of his physical body and he replied: “The Guru is not the physical form, so contact will remain even after his physical form vanishes.” If it be asked how he can guide individuals or perform any function after having become One with the Absolute, the answer is: in the first place, he has not become One with the Absolute but simply realised his preexisting and eternal Oneness. In the second place, he had already realised this Oneness while wearing the body and was universal then, as he is now. He himself told us that death makes no difference to the jnani. The only way of understanding how the jnani, who is universal, can perform an individual function is to become one.

Therefore, when people asked him such questions he would usually reply: “Never mind about the jnani; first find out who you are.” And when you have done that fully you are the jnani. But surely this continued guidance after leaving the body is unusual! Yes, it is unusual; but who is to bind Divine Providence with regulations? The circumstances also are unusual. I have remarked how the formless path the Maharshi prescribed compensates for the modern difficulty in finding adequate guidance within the forms of any religion; similarly, the invisible Guru may compensate for the modern difficulty in finding a fully potent living Guru on earth. Such explanations are for those who like to speculate; for those who are content to strive on the path, guidance is there.

This invisible guidance also has an effect on the Ashram. It means that many or most of those who come, both from India and abroad, are new people who never saw the Maharshi in his lifetime but have been drawn to him in various ways since then.

The conclusion, then, is that if you are a ritualist or strict formalist, if you crave material boons, if you seek visions or powers, there are other places better suited to you than Ramanashram. But if you have understood the ultimate spiritual goal of liberation and seek grace and guidance on the path, you will find it at Ramanashram. – *Surpassing Love and Grace*

## Arunachala in London

*The following is an account from Claudia Buss about the surprise discovery of a Sivan Temple in South London that is dedicated to Arunachala. This may be the only South Indian temple dedicated to Arunachala outside of India.*

A few weeks ago when it had snowed heavily here, Louis, my brother, was traveling to work by a different route because there were no trains from his local station. So he went to Lewisham, which is further down the line. As he was walking from his house he turned down a side street and as he turned the corner he saw a temple with a classical South Indian tower. He said it was such a surprise to see it there on a residential street in south London, in the snow and the dark — and just a short walk from his house.



The next day he sent me a link to the temple's website:

<http://www.londonsivankovil.org.uk/sivan/index.html>

We agreed that we would like to visit it, but felt a bit uncertain about just walking in there off the street.

Then three weeks ago, I was at Charing Cross Station in the morning, making my way to work when I saw a man carrying a Ramanasramam bag with the words 'Who Am I?' on it. I felt reluctant to go up to a total stranger and open a conversation, but as I saw him disappear down the stairs towards the tube I realised that I would regret it if I didn't say anything.

So I caught up with him and asked him where he got the bag and he said, "India", and then I showed him a picture of Bhagavan which I have in my credit card holder. He was so surprised. We started talking and it turns out he is a priest at the temple in Lewisham. His name is Sridhara Gurukkal. We exchanged contact details and he invited me and Louis to meet him at the temple.

So the following week Louis and I went and met Sridhara at the temple. He told us that he was traveling to Tiruvannamalai for Sivaratri and would be back in London at the end of May. He is from Tiruvannamalai. His father still lives there and saw Bhagavan when he was a child.

We hope to see him when he gets back. It's wonderful to have this temple so nearby. It has a really beautiful atmosphere and is open for long hours so we can just walk in off the street, take off our shoes, meditate, and do pradakshina of the lingam and so on. A wonderful discovery.



Arunachaleswar name over the door of the inner shrine (below)



## Venuammal

VENUAMMAL was the youngest child born to Sri Arunachalam and Srimati Kalyani in 1888 in the Tamil Nadu village of Mandakolathur, which is about 35 kilometers from Tiruvannamalai. She was the youngest of five children — three brothers and one sister. Her elder sister was Echammal, the well-known devotee of Bhagavan who after the tragic death of her husband, son and daughter in quick succession took refuge in Bhagavan in 1906 and who prepared food for him daily for forty years.

Venuammal was about seven years younger than her sister Lakshmiammal (Echammal) and also had her own tragedies. She was married at the age of nine, had a daughter, Balakuchambal, at the age of fourteen and lost her husband at the age of fifteen. It is unthinkable now that at such a tender age so much domestic cares and responsibilities could be thrust upon such a young girl, but that was the ways of this ancient Indian culture for thousands of years. So at the age of fifteen in 1903 Venuammal was widowed with a one-year-old daughter.

She was fortunate in that she received help from her late husband's family, her parents and her brothers in Mandakolathur. It is believed that she moved back to her home village after the death of her husband and remained there until sometime after her daughter was married.

Venuammal's daughter Balakuchambal was ten years old in 1912 when she married Sri Ramasesha Iyer, who was a sincere devotee of Bhagavan. He was employed by the Revenue Department in Tiruvannamalai and in other towns of the North Arcot District. Echammal was already living in Tiruvannamalai and had devoted her life to the service of Bhagavan and his devotees. Venuammal at some point followed her daughter to Tiruvannamalai and naturally fell into the same stream of life that her sister was in and became a staunch devotee of the Master. She served the devotees much like her sister. When Bhagavan's mother came to live with him on the hill, she naturally gravitated towards her and served her diligently. Alagammal

loved Venuammal so much that she used to tell others that she was like a daughter to her. Venuammal served her tirelessly during her last illness and was constantly by her side. Venuammal can be seen sitting with Alagammal in the 1920 photo below.

In October 1920, Venuammal was very happy when her daughter gave birth to her first child, Rajalakshmi. But her happiness was again derailed when her daughter Balakuchambal suddenly died two and half years later. On the day of the death of her daughter, Venuammal was completely devastated. She decided to go straight to Bhagavan to lay bare her grief. It was the year 1923 and the Ashram had already moved down the hill to its present location. Since it was night and dark she sought the company Jnanambal Patti who walked with her from the town down the dark road to Ramanasramam with the help of a kerosene hurricane lamp while the dead body of her daughter lay in her home. Reaching the Ashram at 11 P.M. Venuammal fell at Bhagavan's feet weeping uncontrollably. Standing alongside Bhagavan was his younger brother, Niranjananda Swami. He expressed his displeasure that Venuammal came there at that time of night and fell at Bhagavan's feet weeping about a purely worldly matter. To Niranjananda Swami's comments Bhagavan asked him if it was his sister weeping here before them now under same circumstances would he speak to her like that?



Bhagavan shared Venuammal's grief and consoled her by explaining that the purpose for which her daughter was born into this world was over and so she had to leave the world. Moreover Bhagavan said that only the body dies and not the Atman which is deathless. Deeply comforted by Bhagavan's genuine concern, gracious words and love she returned home.

From that time on Venuammal took the full responsibility of raising her granddaughter, Rajalakshmi, who can be seen in the 1928 photo below. Rajalakshmi presently lives with her sons in Chennai, and even at her advanced age she is great source of inspiration to devotees. Inspiring details of her childhood and close association with Bhagavan was

published in the April and October 2008 issues of the *Mountain Path*. In those articles we read of the special care and attention Bhagavan gave to Rajalakshmi. Certainly, in the same manner, Venuammal received Bhagavan's love and attention, though not much has been recorded.

One recent proof of this was the discovery of a beautiful pencil-colored Sri Chakra drawn by Bhagavan for Venuammal, probably around the year 1920. She had it framed and worshipped it daily till in her old age she was unable to do so. At that point she passed it on

to her grand daughter Rajalakshmi who continued its worship until she became aged. Rajalakshmi then gave it over to her eldest son Sri Lakshmikanthan Arunachalam, who kindly made it available to us by allowing the Ashram photographic archivist, Sri V. Karthik, to take it to his Chennai studio and have it professionally scanned. Please use the following Internet link to view this color copy of this sacred Sri Chakra:

<http://www.ashrama.org/images/sri-chakra/>

Venuammal continued to live in Tiruvannamalai even after Bhagavan's Mahanirvana. When she became weak with age she moved in with Rajalakshmi in Chennai for sometime and ultimately breathed her last at the age of 77 at her brother Sri Janakirama Iyer's

house in Vilapakkam. It was the same place that Echammal's ashes were brought after her passing.

Sri Janakirama Iyer was the father of Chellammal whom Echammal adopted and brought up in Tiruvannamalai and whom Bhagavan loved so much. There are many incidents written about her in the Ashram literature.



Echammal brought up Chellammal's son, popularly known as K. V. Mama, under the same circumstances as Rajalakshmi. He is also seen in this 1928 photo.

## 63rd Aradhana of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi

You, your family and friends are invited to join us in observing Sri Ramana Maharshi's 63rd anniversary of his Mahanirvana

**11 May 2013**

**Saturday, 11 A. M.**

Arunachala Ashrama

8606 Edgerton Blvd., Jamaica Estates, NY 11432 / [ashrama@arunachala.org](mailto:ashrama@arunachala.org) / 718.560.3196

## Does Distance Matter?

**A**FTER the devotee departed, Bhagavan turned towards us and said: “People imagine that the devotees crowding around a Jnani get special favors from him. If a guru shows partiality, how can he be a Jnani? Is he so foolish as to be flattered by people’s attendance on him and the service they do? Does distance matter? The guru is pleased with him only who gives himself up entirely, who abandons his ego forever. Such a man is taken care of wherever he may be. He need not pray. God looks after him unasked. The frog lives by the side of the fragrant lotus, but it is the bee who gets the honey.” (Selected portion of a devotee’s reminiscences. Shantammal speaks of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi.)

### Ramana Satsangs

Regular satsangs with recitations, songs, readings and meditation are conducted in or near large cities. Some of them are weekly. If you would like to attend any of these, please contact the individuals below for more information.

**Atlanta Area** — Mangalam Kalyanam (678-546-0378 / smoothcutter@hotmail.com)

**Ann Arbor, MI** — Nirupama & Ramesh (574-514-4766 / <neeru\_2@hotmail.com)

**Birmingham, AL** — Sai Kand (205-441-6859 / kandsai@yahoo.com)

**Boston, MA** — David & Anna (617-928-1487 / annaklegon@gmail.com)

**Connecticut Area** — Prashanth & Shobana (860-691-1862 / vprashanth@msn.com)

**Dublin, Ohio** — Abilash & Madhavi (614-789-9058 / mungamuru@hotmail.com)

**Ft. Lauderdale Area** — David & Janet Rubinson (954-755-4758 / arunahill@gmail.com)

**Houston, TX** — Kumar Saran (832-435-3761 / saran01@earthlink.net)

**Los Angeles, CA** — Natarajan and Indira Venkatesan (310-473-9441 / nvenky30@yahoo.com)

**New Jersey, Pennington** — Nandini (609-730-8447 / nandinikapadia@yahoo.com)

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

**Puerto Rico** — Rosa & Scott Mathewson (787-531-5295 / rosilinm@hotmail.com)

**San Francisco Area** — Karthik & Sunita (510-656-2752 / sunita\_parasuraman@yahoo.com)

**San Francisco Area** — Subadra & TKS (925-373-6909 / subadra2001@yahoo.com)

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

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