

# The Maharshi



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## Ramana Jayanti Retreat

*The devotees of the Tampa Ramana Satsang, with the assistance of the Ft. Lauderdale Satsang, arranged a remarkable three-day event at the Franciscan Retreat Center in Tampa, Florida.*

**F**IFTY to sixty devotees gathered from the U.S. and Canada and among them there was not a trace of disappointment. Rather, the whole experience was like a dip into a cool refreshing ocean of peace and joy, a step into the grace-filled orbit of Ramana Bhagavan.

On Thursday, December 21<sup>st</sup> the attendees began to arrive, and by Friday noon most all had gathered in the dining hall of the Franciscan Retreat Center. The Center is situated on eight spacious acres, peacefully nestled along the Hillsborough River. It has 42 bedrooms, double and single, a chapel, a meeting room, extensive kitchen facilities, a dining room and two small meditation rooms on the second floor.

The Satsang coordinators planned every detail with precision, exhibiting a dedication and devotion rarely witnessed. On the first floor, a large meeting room overlooking the Hillsborough River was transformed into a central shrine which had at its center a large, framed photo of Bhagavan sitting on a couch. Even a couch had been brought in to simulate the setting of the Old Hall in Sri Ramanasramam. On the second floor, two smaller rooms were set aside for silent meditation – one is a windowless room that the Franciscan Center itself calls “The Cave” although some devotees called it Virupaksha; and another room with a view of the Hillsborough River, which some devotees called Skandasramam, also was set aside for silent meditation. Large photos of the Master and Arunachala were set up on altars and easels in all of these rooms as well as the

dining room. Each bedroom was adorned with a unique, doubled-framed photo of Bhagavan and Arunachala imprinted with various quotes from Asharamanmalai – a welcome gift for the devotees. *Who Am I?*, the booklet containing the essential teachings of Bhagavan, was also placed in the bedrooms along with a beautifully printed program brochure. Lunches and dinners were catered from the local Hindu Temple of Florida, while breakfast and other food preparations were provided by the Tampa devotees. The Tampa and Fort Lauderdale devotees bore the costs for the decorations and set-up, food for all three days, and provided airport pick-up and drop-off. The remarkable efforts of the Florida Satsang devotees made the retreat an unforgettable experience for everyone.





As the program played out over three days, it became indisputably clear that Bhagavan had reciprocated all these efforts with a powerful presence and grace that no attendee could deny. It did not take long for the devotees to realize the rare opportunity that this event presented. They gathered as one intimate family, meditating on Bhagavan's life and teachings, discussing it, experiencing it and sharing it with their brothers and sisters gathered for this purpose.

The attendance of every event in the program was optional, freeing the aspirants to follow whatever spontaneous inspiration and guidance they were experiencing.

The first main event was a formal puja, a Jayanti abhishekam for Bhagavan, in the Hindu Temple of Florida. A beautiful bust photo of Bhagavan, another of Arunachala, a large stone from the Holy Mountain and a Siva Lingam were the objects of worship. Eleven devotees chanted the Rudram and other mantras, elaborate puja was performed by the head priest and prasad was distributed. The puja sought to mirror the worship that had been performed at Bhagavan's Shrine of Grace in Ramanasramam on the Jayanti Day just two days earlier. More than 50 devotees gathered before the shrine and experienced intense joy and devotion listening to the sonorous Vedic chants of the puja ceremonies. The 90-minute worship passed in a moment as we were all caught up in a trance-like state,

lost in the one-pointed awareness of the overwhelming presence of Bhagavan Ramana.

After the worship we stayed on in the Temple and ate a delightfully prepared meal. A group photo was taken. We then returned to the Franciscan Center for the night.

In the morning we gathered at the shrine where a couch had been brought in to support the Master's photo as to simulate the setting of the Old Hall in Sri Ramanasramam. The morning Vedas were recited by devotees proficient in the scriptures. We chanted Bhagavan's works and followed them with silent meditation and a short reading. We had similar programs on Saturday evening and Sunday morning.

On Saturday afternoon there was a video presentation of two 25-year-old interviews — one of Ammani Ammal and another 30-minute interview of Ramaswami Pillai. Also, incidents from their lives and their close association with Bhagavan were read out.

Mangalam, the sister of the President of Sri Ramanasramam, and her daughter also attended the program. Devotees gathered for this opportunity to question her so as to gain greater insight into the lives of the different members of Bhagavan's family. The granddaughter of Niranjanda Swami, Mangalam shared her deeply-engrained memories of many of the challenges, published and unpublished, encountered by her father, grandfather and great grandmother, Alagammal. She also narrated joyful anecdotes of her childhood interactions with the Master. Everyone

was captivated and brought nearer to Bhagavan by her most humble and moving talk.

Sri Ramanasramam had kindly prepared a special 32-minute video of the December 19th Jayanti Program in Sri Ramanasramam. This was uploaded to a website and downloaded by us to be shown at the retreat. This was yet another event of the retreat that made Bhagavan's presence even more tangible.

In the end we all realized that it was solely due to the potent presence of the Master that this event had succeeded in such an indescribable way. The company of such sincere souls and the continued guidance and presence of Bhagavan Ramana and his direct teachings of Self-enquiry and Self-surrender will continue to sustain us throughout our lives. This assurance was firmly anchored in the hearts of all those fortunate devotees who attended this Ramana Jayanti Retreat in Tampa.

*To see photos of the event, go to:*

<http://www.flickr.com/x/t/0092002/photos/96679594@N05/>

## Tampa Jayanti Retreat

ON Friday morning, the day when most devotees arrived, I was able to take a brief walk around the grounds of the Franciscan Retreat Center and to pause along the Hillsborough River that runs along its west side. The live oak trees covered in Spanish moss and the statue of St. Francis, surrounded by his dear animal friends all blissfully absorbed in God, completed the tranquil garden setting.

During the drive home on Sunday, I reflected on the connection between the imminent celebration of Christ's incarnation and Bhagavan's Jayanti. It seems that when we come together for satsang that we are made new and spiritually refreshed by His Grace. Gratitude and love to all devotees for fulfilling His will in making this retreat possible.



Om Namo Bhagavate Sri Ramanaya

—Janet Rubinson, Coral Springs, FL

## Farewell

*By Mouni Sadhu*

I AM returning from the temple hall where people were passing before Maharshi's couch as in a procession. I have not taken part in it. I am waiting for 6 p.m. when the flow of visitors stops. From six till seven-thirty the Master is often alone. Hence it is the best time to approach and take leave of him.

The night is exceptionally hot with no breeze, not even a breath of the usual cooler eastern wind. The road is empty and there is no one at the Ashram gate, only several motor cars stand in its large courtyard.

Twilight reigns in the temple hall. I stop for a moment at the door. Maharshi is sitting in his habitual posture, reclining on pillows and looking into space. One of the young attendants is sitting in a corner, almost invisible in its darkness. No one else is in the Hall.

Maharshi now sees me and a slight smile appears. I approach him but all the well-prepared words of farewell and the last requests disappear from my mind. It remains empty; there is not even a single thought.

I salute and stop quite near to him. He looks into my eyes. I plunge into the light of His. No words are now needed. I know that the Saint reads my heart. He has seen each word in my mind even before I put them together.

Deep down some sadness flutters in me. I see for the last time the one who is my Master and my Friend whose like I shall never find again were I to search all the worlds. Yet a subtle but irresistible wave of strength flows from Him. It carries away this cloud and penetrates the whole of my being. Now my consciousness is pure and transparent, I feel it is thus that I wanted to stand before Him.

I see a kind of encouragement to express myself in words emanating from His beautiful face. Well, I say to myself, I shall try if it is necessary.

And I begin to tell Him slowly and clearly that I have to leave the Ashram and beg His permission, and after He nods in consent, I proceed to ask His blessing for my present, my future, and forever. His

eyes seem even more luminous, the face, expressing a superhuman kindness, seems to become more serious. He gives me the blessing. I know He sees my next, still unexpressed entreaty. I do not hear any words, yet I feel He is asking me whether I am aware of the meaning of my own prayer. And, without moving my lips, I give Him my answer. Yet all is so natural, so simple, so real that I would rather doubt my standing here than this mute conversation. A short silence follows.

Oh, I could stand like this, near him, without end, for all eternity with no other wish in my heart. Minutes seem to pass though they may be only seconds.

The last request which I want to express is, according to the Master's teaching, a kind of concession to the visible, hence the unreal, world. It is for this pupil to have a visible, tangible sign of the Guru's grace sanctified by ages of tradition. I had been told that Maharshi never gives it, and even in his biographies I had read the answers given by him to such requests. It meant that he was careful and strict even with appearances.

But here, now that I am standing before him with an open heart feeling all that is taking place with joy and certainty, how could I be refused?

As soon as I begin my sentence somewhat shyly, his wonderful smile comes to encourage me.

I bow my head and feel the touch of his hand on my brow, the delicate touch of his fingers along my head. A subtle current of power and purity passes through my whole frame.

Like in a lightning flash I realize that the power of this moment will sustain me in all the years to come, and its light will forever shine on my life.

We do not talk any more. I salute for the last time, he nods in the Hindu way which denotes consent or approbation and I withdraw slowly towards the door, looking at His face with all intensity to engrave it for ever in the depths of my heart. I walk in a joyous peace back to my cell through the dark paths of the garden. A few Ashram friends accompany me to my gate in perfect silence for Indians know how to behave in solemn moments.

The inner voice says: separation from the Master is no more possible. And so it has proved.

## The Last Words of Bhagavan

*Sri. V. Subramanian (Sri Ramanasramam's manager, Mani) collected the following information in response to a question put to him about Bhagavan's last words. Sri Mani writes: "Thank you for your kind letter dated 20th Sept. The following are our (those of Sri KVS, myself and others) findings after referring to various recordings. I should hasten to add that it has been elegantly drafted by, who else, Sri KVS."*

**A**FTER I sent you a copy of Dr Karamchandani's article, we have been trying to reconstruct the events that occurred on 14th April 1950 and the preceding day at the Nirvana Room of the Ashram where Bhagavan left his body at 8.47 p.m. on 14th April 1950.

As you will only too readily agree, there were really no last words of Bhagavan for Bhagavan can never be talked about in terms of the past. Time stops in his Presence; he is timeless. Sri Kunju Swami, a close devotee of Bhagavan, used to say, "We never saw Bhagavan for he had no body. He had no body then and has no body now. So he is ever here." Smt. Kanakammal, a great devotee, used to say "We all come and go, Bhagavan is always there."

That is perhaps why none of the devotees who were with Bhagavan could pinpoint the last words of the Master. They talked about his words, his silence, his luminous look and sweetest smile. The following extract from Sri Viswanatha Swami's article in *The Maha Nirvana of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi* will be of interest: "On Friday morning Bhagavan said 'Thanks' to an attendant (Sivananda) who had just finished massaging his body. The attendant, who did not know English, blinked with surprise. So Bhagavan smiling explained to him the meaning of the English term. It is probable that, when about to leave the physical plane, Bhagavan intended thus to express his thanks to all who had served him. Bhagavan translated 'Thanks' as 'Santosham' for the attendant. At about sunset, Bhagavan asked the attendants to raise him to a sitting position. They raised him up as comfortably as they could, one of them gently supporting his head. One of the doctors began to give him oxygen but Bhagavan motioned to them to stop with a wave of his right hand."

It is not known whether Bhagavan spoke or made a sign at that time. In any case, it would be more appropriate to take ‘Thanks’ and ‘Santosham’ as the words which last fell from his lips. Precious as Bhagavan’s words are to all of us, equally precious are the moments when he spoke wordlessly through his compassionate look. I give below an extract from Suri Nagamma’s *Letters from Sri Ramanasramam*:

“On the evening of 14.4.1950, I went at 6.30 and stood in the queue arranged for an orderly darshan of Bhagavan. When I got up on the raised mound opposite the door of the room where Bhagavan was sitting and stood there for a while with my sight concentrated on him, I prayed to him mentally: ‘Oh Prabho! Won’t you for once radiate on me your compassionate look?’ Bhagavan’s eyes slowly began to open and from those eyes a mild and compassionate look came on me. That was the last time I had the great fortune of his compassionate look.”

The white peacock was indeed crying his heart out on that day and night. I am unable to locate any reference to Bhagavan asking whether the bird had been fed except what is said in the well-known U.S. devotee Robert Adam’s writing published in the book *Face to Face with Sri Ramana Maharshi (Enchanting and Uplifting Reminiscences of 202 Persons)* brought out by Sri Ramana Kendra, Hyderabad. I give below the relevant extract:

“In April 1950, I was in Bangalore to see Papa Ramdas. When informed that Ramana had left his body, I went to Tiruvannamalai. The crowds had already started to come, thousands and thousands of people. So I climbed the Hill and went into one of the caves and stayed there for five days. When I came down the crowd had disappeared. He had already been interred. I enquired of a devotee who had seen him last, ‘What were the last words he spoke?’ He said,

‘While he was leaving the body a peacock flew on top of a wall and started screeching. Ramana asked his attendant, “Has anyone fed the peacock yet?” Those were his last words.’”

We feel that it is very unlikely that these words were spoken by Bhagavan while he was leaving the body or at any time after the morning when he became too weak to speak. None of the dozen people who were in the Nirvana Room on 14th April 1950 has left a written record of this fact and none of us here remember any of them, including my father, making any mention of it. If these words were, indeed, spoken at or nearer that time, everybody in the hall would have referred to the ‘famous last words’ orally and/or in writing. Hence, I think that it would be appropriate to infer that these words were spoken during one of the last days and we may conclude that ‘Thanks’ and Bhagavan’s explanation of the word were his last pronouncements and this was his testament of appreciation to all his myriads of devotees all over the world.

There were a dozen people – doctors, attendants and others – who were in that small room during that evening when Bhagavan’s condition was believed to be critical. There is no record of his having spoken to any of them except asking to be raised to a sitting position. It is likely that he did not ask but made a sign even as he ‘motioned’ to the doctor ‘to stop with a wave of his right hand’ the administration of oxygen.

The thousands of devotees waiting around the Nirvana Room then started to chant Bhagavan’s “Arunachala Aksharamanamaalai”. Sri Viswanatha Swami writes: “Bhagavan’s eyes opened a little and flashed for a moment. From their outer edges tears of ecstasy rolled down.” Last words, last look, last tears for the human mind. Bhagavan, as you know, is forever without Beginning and without End.

### My Offerings

*By Sri Pranav*

Softly, like

The gentle breeze

Thou hast come to me.

No riches have I

Nor pomp;

No incense

Nor fragrant flowers,

No gem-set gold throne

To seat Thee;

Not even a poor hut

To lodge Thee.

Only I shall

Enthroned Thee

In my heart

And I shall

Gather together

The scattered flowers

Of my thoughts

And offer them

One by one.

- *The Call Divine, 1960*

## Akshara Mana Malai

### *On the Centenary of its Composition*

By T. S. Vaidyanathan

“**D**ESIRELESSNESS is wisdom,” teaches Sri Ramana Maharshi in the seminal work “*Who am I?*”. Followers of Ramana Maharshi strive for desirelessness as a spiritual goal.

Even spiritual aspirants committed to “desirelessness” must engage in life-sustaining acts like finding food and water. Renunciates in India are permitted to live on begged food as a means of cultivating desirelessness and humility.

Circa 1914 some renunciates who were closely associated with Ramana Maharshi lived on begged food. They daily went to town in a group singing praises of the Lord.

Before descending the Hill for alms, the sadhus would blow a conch shell, thus providing an initial notice to the pious residents of the town who would offer them food. Once again at the foot of the Hill they would blow the conch to announce their arrival at the town. The town folks graciously offered them plenty of food out of respect for their association with Ramana Maharshi who was living on the Hill.

The arrangement worked well until some other sadhus, not followers of Ramana Maharshi, found out about the special generosity that householders extended to devotees of the Maharshi. They too formed a group, blew on a conch and walked the streets singing traditional praises of the Lord. Purposely, they started on their rounds to collect food a little earlier than the devotees of the Maharshi. The generous householders could not distinguish between Bhagavan’s real followers and the imposters similarly clad who sang similar praises of the Lord. Hence, the devotees of the Maharshi often had to return with only meager collections and accept hunger.

These devotees, victims of identity theft, turned to their God and Guru, Ramana Maharshi, the personification of infinite compassion. Led by Perumal Swamy, they requested that Bhagavan compose for them a unique composition to sing that would not only secure them the Presence of the Master but also reveal to the world their true status as His genuine followers.

Normally those begging for food would sing a song with the refrain “Samba Sada Siva, Samba Sada Siva, Samba Sada Siva, Hara Hara!” At first, the Maharshi composed only a few similar lines with the refrain of “Arunachala”. Disappointed, Perumal Swamy was waiting for a longer composition. One day the Maharshi went for *giri pradakshina* alone. On that occasion, with tears streaming from his eyes, one-hundred-and-eight verses invoking the grace of Lord Arunachala gushed forth from the depths of his heart as from a perennial spring.

The very name of the song reveals its import (*bhava*). The bride is the *Jiva* (Maharshi himself); the bridegroom is Lord Arunachala. In the poem, the Maharshi fashions various situations in which the bride pines for the bridegroom.

Normally a pining lover’s words would be piteous, but when accompanied by pure devotion the effect is perfect. The bride displays various feelings: self-pity, bashfulness, maturity and hurt at being spurned. All these combine to create an exquisite poem with a remarkable co-mingling of *bhakti* (*devotion*) and *sringara* (*romantic love*) with an underpinning of pure Advaita Vedanta. Like sugar in milk, the poem is sweetened with unbounded wisdom. In the original Tamil text, the words employed have more than one meaning, rendering a perfect translation impossible. Those who sing, listen to or merely read the song are overwhelmed with joy because the *bhava* is sweet and the words are delicately balanced. This “Marital Garland of Letters” has the power to soothe the hearts devotees and guide them to illumination.

The food problem of the Maharshi’s followers was immediately resolved when they began to sing this poem in town. In *Day by Day with Bhagavan* it is recorded that Bhagavan said that “Akshara Mana Malai” fed the devotees for many years. Of course, the power of the song is far greater than simply providing a daily ration of food. The devotees who sing “Akshara Mana Malai” with devotion will experience the Divine Presence of Arunachala and Sri

Ramana Maharshi wherever they may live. Sri Ramana Maharshi poured out his heart and imparted his spiritual power into this hymn as a gift to his devotees so that they may easily invoke his gracious presence whenever they wish, wherever they may be. Regularly chanted, this sacred poem confers the protective umbrella of Arunachala-Ramana. Indeed, it has the power to remove the spiritual obstacles facing the devotee and to guide him in day-to-day life.

A hundred years have passed since the “Akshara mana Malai” came into existence. The Centenary of

its composition will be observed by organizing daily chants of “Akshara Mana Malai” at Sri Ramanasramam and all the centers dedicated to Ramana Maharshi around the world. May all devotees learn and chant “Akshara Mana” with fervour! May they all emerge victorious in their endeavour to gain Self-knowledge, of which Arunachala and Ramana Maharshi are supreme symbols! May all benefit by the power of the Presence of Ramana Maharshi revealed in his immortal composition “Akshara Mana Malai”!.

## 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** — Aruna & Ram (860-284-0078 / rsankaran2000@yahoo.com)

**Chapel Hill, NC** — Ranjani Ramanan (919-338-2551 / ranjanil@yahoo.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 & Indira Venkatesan (310-473-9441 / nvenky30@yahoo.com)

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