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The History of Arunachala Ashrama

A Pilgrimage to Sri Arunachala in 1973

*In our May/June 2017 edition of the Maharshi we published Part IV of the The History of Arunachala Ashrama. That part concluded with the founding of the Nova Scotia Arunachala Ashrama in 1972. We now continue with **Part V**, taking the reader along with the inmates of the Ashrama on their first trip to Sri Ramanasramam in August of 1973.*

ARUNACHALA Bhakta Bhagawat always spoke directly, which gave no room for ambiguity when it came to those who wished to join the Ashrama in Nova Scotia. He would make it clear that the Ashrama was for those who were serious about the meaning and purpose of life: “We believe in hard work, total devotion and dedication and a single-minded commitment to the practice of the teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi.”

This “hard work” point would dissuade most uncommitted young wanderers from venturing further into the Ashrama life. There were many hippy-type seekers wending their way through a maze of gurus and Ashramas in the 1970s. Consequently, those few aspirants who ultimately grasped the opportunity to do service and sadhana at Arunachala Ashrama were of the serious, dedicated type. Bhakta Bhagawat called himself a “servant and servitor, a doorman and doormat” of Sri Ramana Maharshi’s Ashrama, and this ideal not only appealed to the few earnest seekers who settled into the Ashrama life but inspired them to do likewise and dedicate their lives to God.

In Nova Scotia, the Ashrama residents were working night and day to make the new property, which was much in need of repairs, into a livable, comfortable home for the children of their Master.

In New York, the storefront Ashrama was slowly attracting more seekers who would attend the evening recitation and meditation.

Bhagawat had not been back to India for more than 10 years. He longed to set his feet once again on the holy ground of “Bharat Mata” and place his head at the feet of his master and lord at the Holy Hill of the Beacon Light – Arunachala. He prayed to Bhagavan to take all his children dedicated to establishing his Ashrama in the West to Sri Ramanasramam, but where were the funds to buy the tickets? There was hardly enough to maintain both the New York and Nova Scotia Ashramas. In a miraculous manner, the required amount did materialize in August of 1973 and seven pilgrims made their way to the sacred abode of Bhagavan Sri Ramana.

In those days, Ramanasramam was still much like the quiet hermitage of old, separated from the town. The path around the mountain was still a dirt road, which was smooth and easy to tread barefoot. A good number of older devotees who dedicated their lives to Bhagavan Ramana and the practice of his teachings were still residing in and around Sri Ramanasramam. The explosion of seekers from the world over had not yet happened. Sri Ramanasramam was still treading against a current of financial instability. The arrival of a small band of devotees from America who



Front Row: Postmaster Raja Iyer, Evelyn, Matthew and Joan with colored photos presented to Arunachala Ashrama

were set upon establishing the Maharshi's teachings and making his mighty personality known in the West was a matter of excitement to all at Ramanasramam. And the manner in which they arrived in the Ashrama was quite unlike others from the West.

With the enthusiasm of the Mahatma Gandhi Salt March, the new arrivals, holding the Arunachala Ashrama banner aloft, chanting with full throats, "Arunachala Ramana Maharshi Ki Jai! Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi Ki Jai!" marched straight through the front gate, up the stairs and into the Old Hall with "Ki Jai!" reverberating throughout the peace laden grounds of the Ashrama.

This would have certainly attracted much attention but for the fact that back then when the morning pujas were over the Ashrama was nearly empty. Unmindful of their surroundings this fervent group of seven devotees raised their voices from the depth of their hearts which awakened within them the ancient slumbering blossoms of devotion.

Arunachala Bhakta Bhagawat, Yogamayaji (Bhagawat's wife), their son Bhaskar, Evelyn Kaselow, Dennis Hartel and Joan and Matthew Greenblatt were warmly welcomed to the Master's abode with an equal amount of enthusiasm by the President, Sri T. N. Venkataraman and all the inmates of the Ashrama. Group photos were taken and presents exchanged. The President, before Bhagavan's Shrine of Grace, presented the new arrivals with two large photos, hand colored by Saidas. Till this day, 45 years later, these photos, one of Bhagavan and the other of Arunachala, adorn the altar of

Sri Arunachala Ramana Mandiram in the Nova Scotia Ashrama.

Elder devotees of the Master, like Viswanath Swami, Kunju Swami, Sastri Mama, Ramaswami Pallai, N. N. Rajan and others would routinely regale the new pilgrims with their intimate and illuminating experiences of Bhagavan. Listening, the new arrivals felt that whom they spoke of was not buried, encased within a concrete box with a lingam installed overhead. No, he was right there before their very eyes, whispering the joyous secrets of Self-realization directly into their open hearts.

Of this visit Evelyn Kaselow writes in her diary: "The wonder that is Arunachala is indeed beyond all human expression. When we first came to Arunachala it was for us a place of immense peace, but by the time we left



Left to right: A. B. Bhagawat, Joan, Evelyn, unknown, Viswanath Swami, Rambahadur, Dennis

we knew it to be God himself. We have heard frequently the saying ‘Kashi is the Abode of Siva, Kailas the Abode of Siva, but Arunachala is Siva himself!’ This we believe to be true from our own experience! Here, Arunachala has become for us a tidal wave of grace, light and peace in which nothing is required but simply that we abide in stillness and humility. By coming to Arunachala the devotee comes to the Lord himself.”

Overwhelmed by the enthusiasm and support from all the inmates of Sri Ramanasramam, the pilgrims wended their way back to USA and Canada in late September 1973. This torrential flood of grace, vouchsafed to them by Bhagavan, left no doubt in their heart of hearts that He would take the work from them to establish His Divine Presence in the West. Yet many trials and hurdles to overcome awaited them. *(to be continued)*

The Maharshi's Way

by Arthur Osborne

SRI Bhagavan discouraged anything eccentric in dress or behaviour and any display of ecstasy. It has already been shown how he disapproved of the desire for visions and powers and how he preferred that householders strive in the conditions of family and professional life. He evoked no spectacular changes in the devotees, for such changes may be a superstructure without foundation and collapse later. Indeed, it sometimes happened that a devotee would grow despondent, seeing no improvement at all in himself and would complain that he was not progressing in such cases. Sri Bhagavan might offer consolation or he might retort, “How do you know there is no progress?” And he would explain that it is the Guru not the disciple who sees the progress made; it is for the disciple to carry on perseveringly with his work even though the structure being raised may be out of sight of the mind. It may sound a hard path, but the disciples’ love for Bhagavan and the graciousness of his smile gave it beauty.

Any exaggerated course such as *mouna* or silence was also discouraged. On at least one occasion Sri Bhagavan made this very clear. Hearing that Major Chadwick intended to go *mouni* next day, he spoke at length against the practice, pointing out that speech is a safety-valve and that it is better to control it than to renounce it, and making fun of people who give up speaking with their tongue and speak with a pencil instead. The real *mouna* is in the heart and it is possible to remain silent in the midst of speech just as it is to remain solitary in the midst of people.

Sometimes, it is true, there was exaggeration. In accordance with the concealed nature of his *upadesa*, Sri Bhagavan would seldom explicitly bid or forbid, and yet those who embarked on any exaggerated course must

have felt his disapproval, even if they did not admit it to themselves, for they almost invariably began absenting themselves from the hall. I recollect one such case where the mental balance was threatened and Sri Bhagavan said explicitly, “Why does she not come to me?” One has to know how scrupulously he avoided giving explicit instructions or telling anyone to come or go, how skilfully he parried any attempt to manoeuvre him into doing so, how binding and how precious the slightest indication of his will was considered, in order to appreciate the significance of such a saying.

In this case the devotee did not come and shortly afterwards her mind was unhinged. This was not the only instance. Despite the air of normality, the terrific force radiating from Sri Bhagavan was too potent for some who came. It was noticeable that, in any such case, as soon as the mental balance had been restored the person would cease to seclude himself and begin coming to the Ashram. It was also noticeable that Sri Bhagavan would sometimes scold such a person like a naughty child who had permitted himself some indulgence that he could and should have resisted. In a fairly high proportion of cases, a fight began to be put up under his influence and the sufferer struggled back to normality.

Although such cases have to be mentioned in order to complete the picture, it should not be imagined, from the space bestowed on them, that they were at all frequent. They always remained rare.

It is hard to postulate anything definite about the methods of Sri Bhagavan because exceptions can often be found. There were cases when his instructions were explicit, especially if one could approach him alone. Ananta Narayan Rao, a retired veterinary surgeon who had built a house near the Ashram, had several times been summoned urgently to Madras where his brother-in-law was seriously ill. On one occasion he received a telegram to this effect and, although it was late in the evening, took

it straight to Sri Bhagavan. Previously he had never paid much attention, but this time he said, "Yes, yes, you must go." And he began speaking of the unimportance of death. A. N. Rao went home and told his wife that this time the disease must be fatal. They reached Madras a couple of days before his brother-in-law passed away.

One heard occasionally of more dynamic instances also, such as a devotee being instructed to use the name 'Ramana' as an invocation, but they were never much spoken about.

Usually a devotee would himself take a decision and then announce it tentatively. The deciding was a part of his *sadhana*. If it was rightly done there would be a smile of approval that made the heart sing, perhaps a brief verbal consent. If the decision was not approved that also would usually be visible. A householder once announced his decision to leave Tiruvannamalai for some other town where he could get a better paid job. Sri Bhagavan laughed, "Everyone is free to make plans." The plan did not come off.

When one of India's political leaders went to Madras to hold meetings an attendant who was an admirer of his asked leave to go there. Sri Bhagavan sat with a face like stone, as though he had not heard. Nevertheless the attendant went. He rushed from meeting to meeting, arriving always too late or failing to obtain admission. And when he got back Sri Bhagavan teased him about it. "So you went to Madras without permission? Did you have a successful trip?" So completely devoid of ego was he that he could talk or joke about his own actions as naturally and impersonally as about those of anyone else.

The influence of Sri Bhagavan was to turn one from

the pleasure and pain, the hope and anxiety, that are caused by circumstances to the inner happiness that is one's true nature and, realizing this, there were devotees who never asked for anything, even in mental prayer, but strove instead to overcome the attachment that gives rise to wishes. Even though they had not completely succeeded, it would have seemed a sort of betrayal to go to Sri Bhagavan with a request for outer benefits, for anything but greater love, greater steadfastness, greater understanding. If afflictions came, the method was not to seek to get them removed but to ask, 'To whom is this affliction? Who am I?' and thus draw nearer to conscious identity with That which suffers neither birth nor death nor any affliction. And if any turned to Sri Bhagavan with that intention peace and strength would flow into him.

Human nature being what it is, there were also devotees who did ask Sri Bhagavan for help and protection in the events of life. Taking a different point of view, they looked upon him as their father and mother and turned to him whenever any trouble or danger threatened. Either they would write a letter telling him about it or simply pray to him, wherever they might be. And their prayers were answered. The trouble or danger would be averted or, in cases where that was not possible or beneficial, peace and fortitude would flow into them to endure it. Help came to them spontaneously, with no volitional intervention on the part of Sri Bhagavan. That does not mean that it was due merely to the faith of the devotee; it was due to the Grace that emanated from him in response to the faith of the devotee.

— from *Ramana Maharshi and Path of Self-Knowledge*

Advent at Arunachala

You, your family and friends are cordially invited to join us in celebrating the 122nd Anniversary of Sri Ramana Maharshi's Advent at Arunachala. The programs will include parayanams, bhajans, talks, followed by prasad (lunch).

In Nova Scotia, Canada
Sunday 2 Sep. – 11:00 AM
 Arunachala Ashrama
 1451 Clarence Road, Bridgetown,
 Nova Scotia B0S 1C0 / Tel: 902-665-2090

In California, San Francisco Bay Area
Saturday 15 Sep. – 11:00 AM
 40086 Paseo Padre Pkwy
 Fremont, CA 94538
 Tel: 510-656-2752

In Queens, New York City
Saturday 8 Sep. – 11:00 AM
 Arunachala Ashrama
 86-06 Edgerton Blvd., Jamaica Estates,
 New York 11432 / Tel: 718-560-3196

Sri Yashwant Rai

1929 -2018

IN 1972, a few friends of Yashwant Rai joined him in founding the Vedanta Ashrama Society of Nova Scotia. The intention was to provide a spiritual anchor to all the new immigrants that began to arrive in Nova Scotia from the late 1960s onwards. Yashwant Rai arrived in 1967 and a steady stream of new arrivals continues to this day.

Mr. Rai's arrival in Canada was full of unexpected cultural shocks and delights. Intelligent, kind-hearted, generous, entertaining and endowed with relentless energy he continually served his family, circle of friends and newcomers with whatever resources he had available. His telephone number was freely passed around to all new arrivals and night or day he would assist them in any way possible, even taking them into his home for months together.

All these exceptional qualities of head and heart soon blossomed into an intense desire not only to 'serve' but to 'realize'. Realize what? Realize God or his true essential nature – the Self. It was when he was in the heat of this new burning aspiration that he encountered the members of Arunachala Ashrama, Nova Scotia and the teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi. It was then that his goal and purpose solidified and gained fresh impetus.

For the next 45 years, Mr. Rai and his devoted and spiritually mature wife, Srimati Sushila, spared nothing to serve Sri Ramana Maharshi's Arunachala Ashrama and its devotees in Nova Scotia.

In addition to this he continued to serve members of the Indian community in Nova Scotia, charities in India

and for decades served as a volunteer priest at the Temple built by the Vedanta Ashrama Society in Halifax. He traveled to India every year for 40 years without a break, not just to visit his relatives, which he did, but to enrich his spiritual aspirations and understanding.

In the 1970s and 80s he regularly visited Sri Ramanasramam in Tiruvannamalai to benefit from the continued presence of the Master and the company of Sri Ramana's intimate disciples who were still residing there.

This year the devotees of the Nova Scotia Arunachala Ashrama had the good fortune to visit him at his home in Halifax several times. Although failing in health, he managed to bring two carloads of his family members to the Ashram in the month of June. Sensing that his earthly end was near, a few of us went to visit him at his home. He was semi-conscious, somewhat restless, yet propped up into a sitting position. We smeared on his forehead vibhuti and kumkum from the sacred shrine of Sri Ramana at Tiruvannamalai, chanted with deep feeling Bhagavan Ramana's 'Arunachala Pancharatnam' and the 'Arunachala Siva, Om Shakti' chant. While listening he voiced the words "Arunachala, Arunachala" and then became very still. Peace prevailed. We all took leave of our dear friend and benefactor. Two days later, on Tuesday, July 19th, Sri Yashwant Rai quietly slipped into the eternal Ocean of Peace and Happiness, that Arunachala Ramana was for him.



My Heart's Journey

A Pilgrim's Diary

by Evelyn Kaselow

December 30, 1982:

This afternoon at 4 p.m., Ramaswami Pillai, Paul and I went on a bicycle rickshaw pradakshina during the lunar eclipse. I attempted to walk beside the rickshaw so we could talk (Ramaswami and Paul rode in the rickshaw), but since the driver had trouble pedaling so slowly I ultimately had to climb in and sit on the small front bench.

Paul and I recited the "Sri Lalitasahasranam Stotram" as we went and Ramaswami's mood was melted. Here and there he would single out a name and repeat it in ecstasy.

We stopped the rickshaw to walk around the shrines of Ganesha and Hanuman and had passed Adi Annamalai by the time the recitation ended. The sun was setting and the sky was covered in hues of gentle

pink, lavender and an unearthly blue. The normal reality of objects and events seemed called into question in the magical light of dusk.

Ramaswami said, "You have the recitation of 'Sri Lalitasahasranam Stotram' by heart, it seems. Very few can do it – it's a very rare thing. And you do it with faith.... 'Sri Lalitasahasranam' is so concentrated, so powerful! You can go on and on reciting it like Bhagavan's hymns."

At Bhagavan's bridge we offered chocolates, peanuts and tea to Swamiji. He declined our peanuts saying, "You will first have to give me teeth!" However, he then made it clear he had declined the Ashram's offers to make him dentures. He told us that at the preceding culvert Bhagavan had composed the verse of "Arunachala Aksharamanamalai": *"Unless Thou savest me I shall melt away in tears of anguish, Oh Arunachala!"* Bhagavan told him that at that time a great flood of tears actually poured forth from his eyes!

"We'd be so carefree with Bhagavan!" Ramaswami continued. "We'd be singing and dancing!"

"Really?" I asked.

"Oh yes! We had a hell of it!" he exclaimed laughing. On the paved road approaching Kubera Lingam we

saw the moon in eclipse rising. The sun had just set and Ramaswami commented that in a certain town in South India one may see the beautiful sight of "The Twin Suns," i.e., the sun and moon rising and setting simultaneously on opposite horizons.

Ramaswami told Paul, "Whatever good work you take up there will be people to criticize you, but with love there comes understanding. You cannot really know a person unless you love the person." He spoke so beautifully while riding around Arunachala I wished I could have captured every word verbatim.

January 3, 1983

Once more I joined Ramaswami Pillai during the rest period after lunch and he talked on various subjects. Again and again he stressed the importance of practicing Sri Bhagavan's teaching of Self-enquiry and Self-surrender: "The two are one, you see. Only when you know 'who am I?' can surrender really come.

"Sri Bhagavan's teaching is really practical, but some people make it into a philosophy. They really wish to publicize themselves. People may talk on and on about Bhagavan, they may praise him, but unless they practice his teachings none of this impresses me.

"I can't talk this way with everyone," Ramaswami

Sri Ramana Jayanti Retreat in Tampa

Saturday Morning, December 29th – Tuesday Morning, January 1st

This year's retreat will have periods of meditation, chanting, readings, presentations, satsang and quiet time for reflection and relaxation, and will once again be held at the Franciscan Center of Tampa, Florida. A program to engage the children in spiritual-oriented activities is also scheduled.

Participants are requested to arrive by Saturday morning to attend the special Arunachala-Ramana worship at the Hindu Temple and the program in the Old Hall replica.

If you would like more details and a registration form emailed to you, please write to:

dbatistajimenez@gmail.com

Or call: (561) 768-8968

The Franciscan Center's accommodation capacity is limited to 65 guests, which will soon be met. We therefore recommend all genuinely interested individuals to request a registration form, complete it and immediately return it. The final registration date is October 31st. Details related to the cost for lodging and food will be provided in the registration form.

The retreat will be held at:

The Franciscan Center, 3010 N. Perry Avenue, Tampa, Florida 33603

Website: <http://www.franciscancentertampa.org/>

commented. “I am talking with you as though to a goddess. Because, you see, in India we stress that a man must be very careful with women – even one’s own mother! But you recite ‘Sri Lalitasahasranam’ daily by heart. Not everyone is capable of this. Some brahmins may do so, but you do it with devotion and faith. When I hear ‘Sri Lalitasahasranam’ I am completely immersed. You can practice it the way I recite Akshara Mana Malai – automatically it goes on. I may pick it up anywhere and continue with it.”

I described to Ramaswami the routine of morning and evening recitations done at Arunachala Ashrama, stressing that we all recite Mother’s Names by heart.

He said, “Regular *parayana* is good, but Self-enquiry must be practiced always – continuously. By practicing *stotram* regularly, one may acquire most of what one desires in life. First one, like a child, asks of God and receives; second, he will say, ‘Whatever You wish is best.’; finally, there comes a state in which even to think is a sin. Thought itself will be rejected.

“To think of many things makes a man weak!” he stressed. Talking of the many popular gurus of the day, Ramaswami commented, “I have read the books (this one or that one) that form the spiritual literature of today. But when one comes to the practice, the ‘spiritual literature’ is something separate.”

Ramana Satsangs in the USA and Canada

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)

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

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

Canada, Ottawa — Anantha Padmanabhan (613-733-8250 / madhupaddy@rogers.com)

Canada, Toronto — Thiru (416-876-1942 / thirusivasamy@hotmail.com)

Canada, Vancouver — Akash (778-321-4499 / eternalshiva@hotmail.com)

Canada, Victoria — Saibish (250-818-2875 /saibish@gmail.com)

Chicago Area — Jean-Luc & Rita (719-480-3530 / blueskyvalley@mac.com)

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

Chapel Hill, NC — Ranjani Ramanan (919-338-2551 / ranjanil@yahoo.com)

Detroit, MI Area — Murali & Kalpana (248-210-7543 /

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

Florida, Ft. Lauderdale Area — David & Janet Robinson (954-600-1967 / arunahill@gmail.com)

Florida, Tampa — Rohit (813-766-0145 / rohitkvaidya@yahoo.com)

Florida, Palm Coast — Shriram & Rekha (904-347-3434 / ssmarathemd@gmail.com)

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

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

New Jersey, West Windsor — Gurunath & Leena (609-273-6216 / gsnetravali@hotmail.com)

Austin, TX Area — Sriram Vaidyanathan (vsriram_prasad@hotmail.com / 512-695-4444)

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

San Francisco Area — Karthik & Sunita (510-656-2752 / sunita_parasuraman@yahoo.com)

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