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Remembering Swami Viswanathan

After reading the delightful article on Swami Viswanathan by Murray Feldman published in the October 2012 issue of the Mountain Path, many inspiring memories of this saintly disciple of the Master were stirred to the surface of the minds and hearts of devotees of Arunachala Ashrama, New York and Nova Scotia. Despite a lapse of more than 35 years we all still feel the benefit of our association with this great soul. In this issue we take the opportunity to remember him and offer a few anecdotes from his life, his writings and our meetings with him in the 1970s.

FIRST of all we should remember that Viswanathan was a close relative of Bhagavan. In India Bhagavan would have been called his uncle, but here in the USA where we, unfortunately, do not have the tradition of intimately embracing family members much beyond our siblings, parents, uncles and aunts, Viswanathan would be called a second cousin to Bhagavan.

It happened like this. Bhagavan's mother, Alagamma, had a brother in Dindigul whose wife died soon after the birth of a son named Ramaswami. Because of the absence of a mother, that boy was reared during his early life by his aunt Alagammal and her husband Sundaram Iyer in Tiruchulli. In fact, when Alagammal was about to give birth to Bhagavan, she was actually hoping it would be a girl so that that girl could be paired up and married to Ramaswami when they both grew up. The marriage of first cousins under certain circumstances is not that uncommon in South India. As we all know and are much thankful for, this wish of Alagammal did not materialize. As a result many thousands from around the world have received, and are still receiving, the grace and guidance of the boy that was born on December 30th, 1879 in Tiruchulli.

Back to Ramaswami. He grew up to be a highly intelligent and successful attorney in Dindigul. You might remember that Bhagavan, when he was eleven, attended school in Dindigul. At that time he lived with Ramaswami's father.

Viswanathan was the third of five sons born to Ramaswami and his devoted wife Ammalu Amma. Like his father, Viswanathan was highly intelligent and had a serious spiritual frame of mind from his youth. He first met Bhagavan at Skandasramam when he was only 17 years old. The effect of that meeting completely transformed him and two years later Viswanathan quietly left home and permanently attached himself to Bhagavan. It was January 2, 1923 and Bhagavan had just moved down the hill from Skandasramam to where the present Ashram stands. There was only a thatched shed over the Mother's samadhi at that time.

Viswanathan's father, Ramaswami, went there to take him back home, but Ramaswami was so astounded to observe the spiritual grandeur of Bhagavan, whom he had not seen since he had left for Tiruvannamalai as a youth, that he was unable press his request, or rather he realized the good fortune of his son to have come

under the benign guidance of such a sage. Viswanathan stayed on in the Ashram and received personal guidance from Bhagavan in every step of his sadhana.

Many years later he told us, "Sri Bhagavan has given me the experience that he is none other than my own Self. He is not external to me." In the Swami's presence one could feel the truth of this statement. His transparent purity, his total surrender and spontaneous joy inspired us to preserve in our hearts not only his memory but also the letters that he in his kindness wrote to us in the 1970s.

In addition to the letters we received from him, his brother R. Sivaraman gave us some copies of those he had received. In a letter to Sivaraman, dated May 5, 1959, Swami Viswanathan writes:

"I just act as I am prompted from within, without any plan, elation or depression. The spiritual background of my life makes it easy for me to live anywhere in any company, unaffected. I shall be always grateful to Bhagavan for having opened to me this unhampered way of life, for having been initiated into it more by his own example than by any deliberate teaching. And I wish that you also learn by His grace to walk through life without friction or discord, to be established in harmony Divine, which is but our real nature, the Natural State of the Inner Spirit."

After Bhagavan's Mahasamadhi, Swami Viswanathan was one of the first devotees that the Ashram management asked to return and live in the Ashram without any particular responsibility or duties. Everyone recognized that his silent absorption in Bhagavan was a great source of inspiration to all who met him.

On July 6th, 1959, Swami Viswanathan writes again to his brother Sivaraman:

"It is he who has nothing who will be able to command everything, and his resources are consequently unlimited.

"Returning by the Gopalasamudran this morning after a short walk, I saw the Karnivadi range in front of me and I felt I was bound to the foot of the hills. If not right up to the foot, at least I was journeying whatever little distance towards it, and this was a happy thought. I think our journey towards the Ultimate Reality is similar – the moment you perceive its

existence, have a glimpse of it and every step you take is towards it, you then realize that the 'Way' is the 'Goal'. The real interest and pleasure, somebody has said, is in the process of achievement and not in the actual achievement itself. The journey to a place is often more interesting than the place itself."

Many earnest Western seekers, like Murray Feldman of Canada or the young devotees of Arunachala Ashrama, when they reached Ramanasramam for the first time were met with the undeniable feeling that Swami Viswanathan was a pure instrument of Bhagavan. He warmly welcomed us into the family of Bhagavan's devotees, taught us the essence of His teaching and demonstrated it in his own pure, humble manner.

He took us on several giripradakshinas and as he pointed out and described, with spontaneous cheer and joy, the places Bhagavan would stop, what He did, what He said, how He looked and acted, we young devotees would actually experience Bhagavan's tangible presence amongst us. In the Swami's company we could never feel sad for not having been there with Bhagavan physically. Bhagavan was a living presence for him and he radiated that presence in every facet of his personality.

We once tape recorded Swami's talks while on giripradakshina, but the 40-year-old tape needs to be restored and transcribed. We hope to make this available to devotees in the near future.

In 1974, Swami Viswanathan was given the task of editorship of the Mountain Path magazine. He wrote to us on May 14th, 1974:

"Mrs. Osborne has relinquished her editorship of the Mountain Path and the Management has put my name as the Editor despite my disinclination to shoulder that responsibility. As it is, I have to write an article once in three months. Other things will be taken care of by other devotees. They have set up an Editorial Board of five or six persons.

"I have not much zest in me for extrovert activities. I prefer to commune with Bhagavan in Silence, and He Himself has confirmed that it is the greatest help one could render for others as well. Yet, I shall put into writing whatever reminiscences of Bhagavan I have in my memory. I pray to Bhagavan to give me the light and energy to do this job."

The following five years of his editorship clearly demonstrated that Bhagavan did provide him with the 'light' and 'energy' required to fulfill this task, though he humbly states in the same letter:

"I hope you should have received the April issue of the Mountain Path. It is Prof. K. Swaminathan at Delhi who goes through all the articles and makes them fit for publication. He is, I should say, the de-facto Editor

behind the scene. My name is there only on account of my long connection with Bhagavan. Everything is HIS WILL ultimately and may it prevail!"

Though it may have begun as the Swami describes above, as the years rolled by he took on the vast majority of the work required to bring out many inspiring quarterly issues of the Mountain Path.

(To be continued)

Wanted Reformers

In the following excerpt copied from Day by Day with Bhagavan, Bhagavan quotes Swami Rama Tirtha about reformers. The actual newspaper advertisement published in the early part of the 20th Century appears below. This was republished in the book Poems of Rama by the Rama Tirtha Publication League, Lucknow, 1924.

2-1-46 Afternoon

Another visitor asked Bhagavan if it was not necessary that the varnasrama differences should go if the nation was to progress.

Bhagavan: "How can one say whether it is necessary or not necessary? I never say anything on such subjects. People often come and ask me for my opinion on varnasrama. If I say anything they will at once go and publish in the papers, 'So and so also is of such and such an opinion.' The same scriptures which have laid down varnasrama dharma have also proclaimed the oneness of all life and abheda buddhi as the only reality. Is it possible for anyone to teach a higher truth than the Unity or oneness of all life? There is no need for anyone to start reforming the country or the nation before reforming himself. Each man's first duty is to realise his true nature. If after doing it, he feels like reforming the country or nation, by all means let him take up such reform. Ram Tirtha advertised, 'Wanted reformers — but reformers who will reform themselves first.' No two persons in the world can be alike or can act alike. External differences are bound to persist, however hard we may try to obliterate them. The attempts of so-called social reformers to do away with such classes or divisions as varnasrama have not succeeded, but have only created new divisions and added a few more castes or classes to the already existing ones, such as the Brahmo-Samajists and the Arya-Samajists. The only solution is for each man to realise his true nature."

WANTED

REFORMERS,

NOT OF OTHERS

BUT OF THEMSELVES,

WHO HAVE WON NOT UNIVERSITY DISTINCTIONS,

BUT VICTORY OVER THE LOCAL SELF.

AGE:-THE YOUTH OF DIVINE JOY.

SALARY:-GODHEAD.

APPLY SHARP,

WITH NO BEGGING SOLICITATIONS

BUT COMMANDING DECISION TO THE DIRECTOR OF THE UNIVERSE,

YOUR OWN SELF.

OM! OM! OM! OM! OM! OM! OM!

Forty Verses on Reality

Sri Ramana Maharshi Explains

The compositions of Sri Ramana Maharshi describe the direct means to attain the ultimate spiritual experience and provide a clear, precise description of that pinnacle of all spiritual pursuits, the permanent abidance in the one, eternal Self. For a serious sadhaka, his verses and translations offer direct, unambiguous instructions with indisputable descriptions of the ultimate state of realization. For those inclined to in-depth study, some commentaries on his writings were published during his lifetime and these were followed by numerous expositions after his maha nirvana.

Nevertheless, we should remember and value what the Master himself has said about his own compositions. These explanations were sometimes recorded and can be found, like the following, in various Ashram publications. Certainly a more profound commentary on his teachings and the ultimate Truth that he taught was observed in his everyday life — his every act was a commentary, a living demonstration. By simply studying his life we naturally will have a deeper understanding of what he taught and the grace he vouchsafes to those who dedicate their lives to the practice of his teachings. Also, by a diligent study of his recorded conversations we can see that the essence of what he usually discussed and explained to seekers can be traced back to one or more of his original compositions or translations. He left no argument or misunderstanding unanswered; he allowed no reasonable excuse for any seeker to divert his or her attention from the ultimate goal and the effort required for its attainment. A sincere seeker can never be satisfied with the mere understanding of a spiritual concept, unless and until that concept serves to evoke a more deep and direct experience of the Truth.

The following excerpt is from Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi; the English text of the verse that Bhagavan explains has been added.

Talk No. 567. Sri Bhagavan explained to Mr. MacIver [over a period of three days] the first few stanzas of “Sad Vidya” as follows:

Invocation

Without the Reality existing, can there be a knowledge of existence? Free from all thoughts, that Reality abides in the Heart, the Source of all thoughts. It is, therefore, called the Heart. How then to contemplate it? To be as it is in the Heart is its contemplation.

The first stanza is the auspicious beginning. Why should the subject-matter of the piece be brought in here? Can knowledge be other than Being? Being is the core - the Heart. How then is the Supreme Being to be contemplated and glorified? Only to remain as the Pure Self is the auspicious beginning. This speaks of attributeless Brahman according to the Jnana marga (method of knowledge).

Those, for whom there is the intense fear of death, seek only the feet of the lord as their refuge, Who has neither death nor birth. Dead to themselves and their possessions, can the thought of death occur to them again? Deathless are they.

The second stanza is in praise of God with attributes. In the foregoing, to be as one Self is mentioned; in the present one, surrender to the Lord of all.

Furthermore the second indicates (1) the fit reader (2) the subject-matter (3) the relationship and (4) the fruit. The fit reader is the one who is competent for it. Competence consists in non-attachment to the world and desire to be liberated.

All know that they must die some time or other; but they do not think deeply of the matter. All have a fear of death: such fear is momentary. Why fear death? Because of the ‘I-am-the-body’ idea. All are fully

aware of the death of the body and its cremation. That the body is lost in death is well-known. Owing to the I-am-the-body notion, death is feared as being the loss of oneself. Birth and death pertain to the body only; but they are superimposed on the Self, giving rise to the delusion that birth and death relate to the Self.

In the effort to overcome birth and death man looks up to the Supreme Being to save him. Thus are born faith and devotion to the Lord. How to worship Him? The creature is powerless and the Creator is All-powerful. How to approach Him? To entrust oneself to His care is the only thing left for him; total surrender is the only way. Therefore he surrenders himself to God. Surrender consists in giving up oneself and one's possessions to the Lord of Mercy. Then what is left over for the man? Nothing - neither himself nor his possessions. The body, liable to be born and to die, having been made over to the Lord, the man need no longer worry about it. Then birth and death cannot strike terror. The cause of fear was the body; it is no longer his; why should he fear now? Or where is the identity of the individual to be frightened?

Thus the Self is realised and Bliss results. This is then the subject-matter: freedom from misery and gain of Happiness. This is the highest good to be gained. Surrender is synonymous with Bliss itself. This is the relationship.

Fruit is to reflect on the subject-matter and gain Knowledge which is ever-present, here and now. The stanza ends with "the immortal ones."

Text

1. Because we perceive the world, acceptance of a unique First Principle, possessing diverse powers would surely be admitted by all. Pictures of name and form, the seer, the supporting screen and the revealing light, all these are verily He.

The five senses mean the subtle functions (tanmatras), namely, hearing, touch, seeing, taste and smell. Variations of these form the whole universe; they vary according to the three gunas as follows:

by tamas (dullness) the gross elements;

by rajas (activity) the instruments for knowing objects;

by sattva (clearness) the different kinds of knowledge of the senses; also

by tamas - the gross objects i.e., the world;

by rajas - the vital airs and the karmendriyas

by sattva - the sense organs of perception (jnanendriyas).

Karmendriyas are organs of holding, walking, speech, evacuation and reproduction.

Now consider the ringing of the bell; the sound is related to hearing; the bell is the object, the modification of tamoguna. The rajasic tanmatras, changing as the vibrations of sound, extend round the bell, then as ether get connected with the ear in order to be felt as sound. The knowledge recognizing it as sound is the sattva tanmatra.

So also the other senses: Touch (vayu) - air tanmatra; form (rupa) - tejas tanmatra; taste (ap) - water tanmatra; smell (prithvi) - earth tanmatra.

Advent at Arunachala

You, your friends and family are cordially invited to join us in celebrating the 117th Anniversary of Sri Ramana Maharshi's Advent at Arunachala. The program will include parayanams, bhajans, talks and puja, followed by prasad (lunch).

In Queens, New York City

Saturday 7 September — 11:00 AM

Arunachala Ashrama

86-06 Edgerton Blvd., Jamaica Estates,

New York 11432 / Tel: 718.560.3196

In California, San Francisco Bay Area

Saturday 14 September — 11:00 AM

40086 Paseo Padre Pkwy, Fremont, CA 94538

To understand the tanmatras as the subtlest particles of matter is not right, for it is incomplete. They are only the subtle forms of sound, touch, sight, taste and smell, which form the whole components of the universe. Such is the creation of the world.

For want of proper terminology these ideas cannot be rightly expressed in foreign languages.

2. All religions postulate the three fundamentals, the world, the soul and God. The one Reality alone manifests itself as these three. To say, "The three are indeed three," is only while the ego lasts.

Therefore, to inhere in one's own Being, where the 'I', the ego, is dead, is the Perfect State.

This stanza says that all are agreed on one point. What is it? The state beyond duality and non-duality, beyond subject and object, beyond jiva and God, in short, beyond all differences. It is free from ego. "How to reach it?" is the question. By giving up the world, it says. Here "the world" stands for thoughts relating to it. If such thoughts do not arise, the ego does not rise up. There will be no subject or object. Such is the state.

Sri Ramana Retreat in Florida



THE Ramana Satsang group in Tampa, Florida is inviting all seekers and devotees to a 3 or 4 day retreat of meditation, chanting, readings, presentations, etc. to coincide with Bhagavan Ramana's 124th Jayanti on December 19th. The program is tentatively planned to start on December 19th or December 20th and continue to the mid-day of Sunday, December 22. Besides Florida devotees, some members of the New York Arunachala Ashrama are planning to attend.

There is room for many others, so we request that any one interested to attend please let us know before the end of September. There will be some cost involved for the rooms and food. Details will be provided upon request. If you would like further information and/or registration:

dennis@arunachala.org / (718) 560-3196 or rohitkvaidya@yahoo.com / 813.632.7843.

The program will be held at:

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

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

The Franciscan Center was founded by the Franciscan Sisters of Allegany, New York. The center is located on seven acres of property overlooking the beautiful Hillsborough River in Riverside Heights, Tampa, Florida. It is 10 minutes east of the Tampa International Airport, 40 minutes east of the Gulf of Mexico (St. Pete and Clearwater Beaches) and 10 minutes from downtown Tampa. Photos and descriptions of the accommodations and facilities are available on the Franciscan Center's website.

Bhagavan Makes a Pen for Rajalakshmi

Below is another interesting anecdote sent to us by Sri A. Viswanathan of Chennai. His 93-year-old mother lived with Bhagavan during her childhood.

WHEN I took my mother to a relative's house yesterday, we observed that this old relative was using a fountain pen with a nib, which since the arrival of the ball point pen is a rare commodity. On seeing that nib pen my mother recalled an interesting incident with Bhagavan from her childhood. She used to attend Sanskrit classes in the Arunachaleswar Temple and one day on the way to the temple she found a bird's feather laying on the road. She picked it up and showed it to Bhagavan when she visited the Ashram the next day. Bhagavan sharpened the edge of the thick end of the feather and showed my mother how it could be used as a pen for writing. My mother said that she used it for quite some time until the edge got blunted or damaged.

The above incident was very interesting to me because it demonstrated, once again, how Bhagavan made use of the most common and simple items found in everyday life.

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)

Chapel Hill, NC — Ranjani Ramanan (919-338-2551 / ranjani1@yahoo.com)

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

Ft. Lauderdale Area — David & Janet Robinson (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)

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)

Tampa, Florida — Rohit ((813-632-7843 / rohitk vaidya@yahoo.com)

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

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

Washington, D.C. Area — Uma & Santosh (301-528-5526 / uma_santosh@hotmail.com)

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