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Bhagavan's Attendant Venkatarathnam

*Sri Venkatarathnam lived with Bhagavan from 1944 to 1950. During the last year he served as one of his personal attendants. **Neal Rosner** came to Sri Ramanasramam from the USA in 1968, attached himself to Venkatarathnam and diligently served him until his passing in 1976. Neal's immersion into the spiritual heritage of India under the guidance of Venkatarathnam is elaborately described in his book *On the Road to Freedom: A Pilgrimage in India*. Neal now resides in Amritanandamayi's Kerala Ashram and is known as Swami Paramatmananda.*

In the following article, details regarding the life of Venkatarathnam have been extracted from a 25-page essay written about Venkatarathnam by Neal Rosner. He presented this manuscript to us thirty years ago at Sri Ramanasramam. We have also utilized some material from the above-mentioned book.

THE following is what Sri Venkatarathnam personally told me about himself. He was born in Koduru, Krishna District on the 23rd of May 1921, and at the age of three months his father died of a diabetic carbuncle. At seven his Upanayanam was performed and from that day onwards he never failed to repeat the Gayatri mantra for even a day. Even when in Maharshi's service, he would not come into his presence without having done some Gayatri beforehand. From his seventh year till his last he performed the yearly Sraddha of his parents. He had deep faith in this and believed that the pitrus (departed ones) would bless him with good health and Brahmajnana. Even when he was physically in a serious condition, he would somehow struggle and do it.

He went to school in Gudivada, Hyderabad and Guntur in Andhra Pradesh. At this time he was somewhat opposed to Hindu orthodoxy and even wrote a paper for the uplift of Harijans, about which he laughed while recalling later. He also now and then would go to see movies of the bhakti type only. He used these occasions at the cinema to test how his mind would react. A scorpion in Hyderabad once stung him, but being afraid to tell his elders, he simply bore the pain until they discovered it and sent him to a doctor. Whenever he had free time from his studies, he would either go to a temple or do japa, sometimes a lakh (100,000) in one day.

Unquenchable Thirst

For some unknown reason, when he was eighteen he started experiencing an intense, unquenchable thirst and was drinking nearly three buckets of water a day, although the quantity of urine passed remained normal. He went to many doctors and was even in the Madras Government Hospital for one month, but no one could find a cause or cure. Finally, when he went to Guntur, someone told him that there was a Hanuman Upasaka, named Sri Hanumadass Garu, and asked whether he would like to see him. He agreed and after going there, Hanuman spoke through Hanumandass' garb saying that Venkatarathnam had come and that he

should go round a Hanuman Temple in Guntur 108 times daily for one month and he would become all right. This he did, and on the night of the 29th day he woke up and on one side of his bed was standing Hanuman and on the other side was a thin, ghostly Muslim. From that time onwards he was free of the thirst.

Marriage Proposal

After this, Dass Garu initiated him into Hanuman's puja and japa. Later Hanumanji told Dass Garu that Venkatarathnam should go to Tiruvannamalai and serve Sri Ramana Maharshi.

After he graduated from school, he thought of using the money from a scholarship he was awarded to go and live in Tiruvannamalai, but his brothers wanted him to get married. A rich family who offered a big dowry and a lucrative post was arranged. Even though his mother knew his temperament she had to keep quiet since she was under the influence of her other sons. Venkatarathnam said that they should first ask his guru, Dass Garu, for permission. They searched him out and after finding him proposed their idea. Dass Garu said that it would be all right if Venkatarathnam got married. When the brothers returned thinking victory was in their hands, Sri Venkatarathnam objected, saying that according to Sastra, a brahmachari must first serve a Guru before entering into Grihastashrama (married life). No one accepted this evasive objection and so he told them that if such a thing is not written in the Sastras, he was ready to burn the Sastras. He asked them to immediately bring the Bhagavata and Ramayana and he would set fire to them. Naturally they did not want to be a party to this crime, and so they helplessly let him go to Arunachalam. He, however, told them that he would go only on an experimental basis and if it suited him there he would stay, otherwise he would return. At this time one of his brothers declared, "You will all see. He will become a sadhu for sure," and this came out to be true.

At Ramanasramam

Accompanied by a friend, he came to Sri Ramanasramam in 1944. On arriving there he found that Siva Mohan Lal, an intimate brother bhakta from Hyderabad, was there. After showing him the Ashram, Lal brought him to the presence of the Maharshi and introduced him. Sri Venkatarathnam sat down to do japa, but strangely he could not remember his mantra even though he had repeated it so many lakhs of times.



Venkatarathnam lighting incense

Suddenly, there was revealed in his heart an infinite Expanse of Pure Consciousness, the Atma, and this experience lasted for some time. He stayed for a few days in the Ashram and then returned to his mother, but all the way back in the train this same experience occurred again and again.

He told his mother all this and she said, "Better you go back to Bhagavan. It is clear that he wants you there with him. Only promise me that you will not take sannyasa." He promised and returned to Arunachalam with the blessings of his mother. He later said that it was only much later that he realized the depth of his mother's wisdom in making him promise not to become a sannyasi.

At the Ashram he was put in charge of the book depot. He later laughed when telling this because it seems that one astrologer had told him that he would get married and do business and he really thought this is what happened because he had married Sri Ramana and was selling his books. Afterwards he became an assistant of Sri Niranjanananda Swami, Sri Ramana's younger brother and the Sarvadhikari of the Ashram. Then he was put in charge of the Ashram library and the books that were kept for the personal use of Bhagavan. Bhagavan personally taught him to bind and stitch books and also to read and write Tamil.

Once, while demonstrating to him how to stitch a book, Bhagavan caught hold of his hands to guide him. While making the stitch, Sri Venkatarathnam's sacred thread got intertwined in the stitching thread and got stitched into the book by Bhagavan. It was an awkward situation and they both laughed.

Bhagavan's Attendant

In 1949, Shiv Mohan Lal asked Bhagavan if Sri Venkatarathnam could join as one of Sri Bhagavan's personal attendants. Bhagavan told that he had no objection but that the office people must give the permission, which they did.

Bhagavan was very strict in correcting him and if anything was done improperly it would be a matter of two days of continuous chiding in front of all the devotees.

One evening Sri Venkatarathnam came into the hall and quietly went behind the Maharshi and started fanning him. In the morning Bhagavan had told that nobody should fan him. Now he exploded and scolded him saying, "Oho, very good, very special, this fellow thinks he is doing a great service. He has so much bhakti, much more than the rest of the bhaktas here. Why doesn't he go and fan all of them and get the punya (merit) of fanning the devotees of the Guru? He thinks that by his tapas he can make me bend to his will." Bhagavan spoke like this on and off to every incoming devotee for nearly two days. Finally, when alone with the Maharshi, Sri Venkatarathnam broke down in tears and asked Bhagavan to forgive him for having made Bhagavan exert himself so much to correct his fault. Sri Bhagavan graciously said, "Never mind, everyone makes a mistake," and that was the end of the matter.

Bhagavan then had about six or seven attendants who would serve him taking shifts. When it came time to choose shifts, they asked Venkatarathnam which shift he wanted. He told them that he would take that shift which remains after everyone else had chosen for himself. So he got the 10 P.M. to 4 A.M. shift, since everyone liked to sleep at that time.

This turned out to be a blessing in disguise, because after 9.30 P.M. all the bhaktas would go away to sleep and Venkatarathnam and Sri Maharshi would be left all alone for the night. It was at this time that Sri Venkatarathnam got his heart's desire to be intimately close to Bhagavan without others around fulfilled. Many nights were spent in spiritual talk or simply gazing on the Divine Face of the Maharshi.

Failing Health

By this time, Sri Bhagavan's health was already serious with sarcoma cancer in the left arm. At the sight of the blood while dressing the wound, Sri Venkatarathnam would feel faint. Whenever he would come near Bhagavan, Maharshi would rebuke him thus, "Don't come near me. You people come here thinking 'Oh, Bhagavan is sick. He

is dying'. I don't want you to come near me when your mind is full of such thoughts. Stay away." Then Sri Venkatarathnam asked Bhagavan that without thinking that Bhagavan is sick or that such and such a thing must be done to relieve the suffering, how can he serve Bhagavan? Bhagavan told him that he should simply play his part as in a drama and do whatever is necessary without having any feeling and to have the mental attitude of a witness, attending to the work as the situation demands. After this, he again was permitted to attend on the Maharshi. Following Bhagavan's instructions, he began to feel everything as Atma Vilasa (the Divine Play) and that Bhagavan was simply playing a role as a sick person, although in reality he was the Paramatma Himself.

Mahanirvana

After Sri Maharshi's Nirvana on 14 April 1950, Sri Venkatarathnam felt relieved rather than pained at his passing away. When I asked him why this was so, he said that until that time, he constantly had to be extremely alert to attend to Bhagavan externally but now he felt that he could devote his mind to Him and internally dive into Him. Nevertheless, he would feel sad when he thought of the love and concern that Maharshi had shown towards him and would sometimes weep. After the 10th day following Bhagavan's Mahanirvana he left for Gudivada and then to Sri Sailem with a friend.

In Sri Sailem he used to go to the forest for dhyana and thought he should stay there practicing what Sri Maharshi had taught him, i.e., Atma Vichara. One night he had a dream in which Maharshi appeared dressed in a gold cloth and chided him saying, "Why are you acting like this?" He understood that this meant he should not withdraw and that Sri Bhagavan was watching over him and protecting him, so he returned to Ramanasramam.

Serving Mother

In 1952 he went to serve his mother who was ailing with paralysis and wanted him nearby. She had already spent a year or two at Arunachalam with him in the presence of the Maharshi. When she first came to the Ashram, Sri Venkatarathnam went and prostrated to her and returned to the bookstall where he was working at that time. On seeing this, Niranjanananda Swamy chided him for not showing his mother round the Ashram and finding her a place to stay. He said, "Oho, I see, you are a gunatita (beyond all differences) and need not serve your mother, is it?" Then Sri Venkatarathnam went and got her settled in a room, since the Sarvadhikari had ordered him to do so.

Whenever his mother would sit in Bhagavan's presence, she would become completely unconscious of the world. Even after everyone had gone out for food she would be sitting like that in trance. She told her son this and he suggested that she sit outside near a window facing Bhagavan. He later related that she really had the Grace of Bhagavan during her residence there. When others told her that it was a sorry thing that one of her sons had become a sadhu, she retorted and said that because she was a woman she could not live as a sadhu but her desire to do so had found its fulfillment in her son, Sri Venkatarathnam.

When he came to serve her in his home, she insisted on taking food only from his hands, even though he was not maintaining *madi* (orthodox procedures). He had personally served and touched the body of the Maharshi and that consecrated everything he touched afterward, she thought. She always kept a photo of the 21-year-old Maharshi by her head. Every day after bathing his mother, he would read to her *Bhagavatam*, as this was her favorite book.

As her end approached, Sri Venkatarathnam would everyday keep the Darbha Seyya (kusa grass mat) under her cot, as it was her only wish that she should die on the Darbha Seyya and not on the cot. On the last day he shifted

her to the ground in spite of the cold and damp weather and the objections of Venkatarathnam's brothers. Then he kept her head in his lap and plunged himself into dhyana. At that time the same experience of an infinite expanse of Grace in the heart, which he had had in Sri Ramana's presence, occurred again, and it was while he was in this state that his mother expired in his hands.

Yatra (Pilgrimage)

After six months he and his eldest sister went on a yatra to North India and performed the karma for their mother in different holy places. He had gone to Sringeri to have darshan of H. H. Sri Chandrasekhara Bharati Swamiji who had recently come out of prolonged mouna. He asked the Swamiji for his ashirvadams (blessings) for Atma Sakshatkara. The Swamiji asked him if he wanted to take sannyasa and he answered that he did not know what was best for himself and that whatever Jagadguru says he was prepared to do. The Swamiji then gave him a song in praise of the Jivanmukti written by Sri Sadasiva Brahmendra Saraswati and told him to repeat it and to go to Badrinath. Because he had not taken leave of Bhagavan at his samadhi site, he returned to Arunachalam and then went north.

(To be continued)

My Trip to Arunachala

Here are the notes from my trip to Arunachala.

Monday: We took the car and drove to the Ashram. The driver was Senthil. On the way we could recognize the beautiful sight of Arunachala! Then we ate at a yucky restaurant. Then we got a beautiful room with 2 beds — 1 big and 1 small. The toilet had ants, lizards, and bees. Then we went to the Ashram and started Girivalam. I went in the car with Senthil. Amma and Thata walked the whole time. We saw the beautiful sight of Arunachala. Amma took a picture of us. We drank elaneer (coconut juice) and I didn't like it.

Tuesday: Amma went to do meditation at 6.00 a.m. Thata woke me up for breakfast. I found a peacock feather but I left it in Parasu Thata's house in Chennai. Thata was sick. So we came to the room. Amma was at the Ashram. In the evening we saw all the places where Bhagavan stayed. I sat on a horse at the Pachaiaimman kovil. How could Bhagavan have stayed in that small room in Pavazhakundru if there were snakes, cockroaches and bees there? — I wonder!

Wednesday: Senthil and I climbed up to Skandashram. I saw the place where Bhagavan's mother died. At that time Amma and Thata went to see Kanakkamal. At night we had great pooris! The food at the Ashram was better than Amma's!

Thursday: We ate breakfast and left for Chennai.

I feel I will always come back to Sri Ramanasramam.

Love, Niranjan, from California



Is God personal?

M. Yes, He is always the first person, the I, ever standing before you. Because you give precedence to worldly things, God appears to have receded to the background. If you give up all else and seek Him alone, He alone will remain as the I, the Self.

—*The Maharshi's Gospel*

Bhagavan and His Family

N. Balarama Reddy

Bhagavan took immense interest in the construction of the temple built over his mother's samadhi. Some may think that the temple was conceived and executed solely by his brother. We who were there at the time cannot help but have a different opinion. Whenever the temple architect was unable to decide on a matter relating to the construction, the Sarvadhikari would send him to Bhagavan. Bhagavan would keenly listen to all the details, discuss the matter and then advise him accordingly. He took interest in every step.

Sages like Bhagavan are of a different order than the regular sadhus and swamis we often see. He could have close family members living with him without being affected in the least. Take the instance of Bhagavan's mother. She once came and visited him on the hill in 1914, and during that visit she fell ill. When her condition turned critical, Bhagavan composed four stanzas supplicating Arunachala to save her life.

Sri Rama also looked after the welfare of all his subjects, including his near relatives. Sri Rama, or a Bhagavan, can do this without fall into the snares of Maya. They are above Maya, but they still serve mankind.

Bhagavan wished to save his mother from future births and give her liberation. Her faith in him was firm. She believed that only her son, the Maharshi, could save her, and in her old age refused to leave him even for a single day. He sat by her and guided her to illumination during the final hours of her life.

See how natural everything was. Bhagavan's mother came, his brother came, and his sister would often visit. On occasion, he even looked after his brother's son, T. N. Venkataraman, when he was just a small boy. He would attend to the boy's needs just like any other uncle would. But did he think he was an uncle, a son, or a brother? No. He knew he was the Self alone.

Buddha once found himself in similar circumstances. His mother had died when he was young, so his mother's younger sister raised him. She also married his father, thus becoming his stepmother. After



Niranjanananda Swami, Mother Alagammal and Bhagavan in Skanda Ashram

Buddha's enlightenment, his stepmother wanted to join his Sangha. Buddha at first refused to have a woman in the Sangha. His trusted disciple, Ananda, quietly moved near him and said, "How can you refuse the request of the very person who lovingly cared for you and raised you?" Buddha then softened his stand and accepted her, as well as some other members of his family.

There is no doubt that Bhagavan had a special affection for his mother, and he also showed a particular interest in the affairs of his brother's family. He never said that he was a renunciate detached from his family members. He had affection for his relatives in the same way he had affection for others, whether a child, a man, a monkey, or a cow. His actions were spontaneous and natural, and by watching him we learned how to live in the world. His example was the greatest teaching, and his divine presence far outweighed a lifetime of strenuous sadhana. Just to think of him, or sit in his presence, used to raise us to higher levels of beatitude.

Children's Ashrama Report

July 23 to July 27, 2007

‘A nother week full of surprises... I wonder how that’s going to be!’ Those were my only thoughts on my way to the Nova Scotia, Arunachala Ashrama Children’s camp.

I was greatly blessed by Bhagavan to have been able to go to this Children’s camp for the past two years and all I can say is it was FANTASTIC! It was a great way to start off my summer because it gave me a chance to think about things other than textbooks and tests. It was so nice because all we did was learning. Sounds pretty boring right? How about if I put it this way, all we did was learn in fun ways, like through plays, hikes, songs and through trips.

One of the activities I would never forget in my life is the hike up the mountain behind the Ashrama. Just closing my eyes and thinking about the view from the top gives me goose bumps. It was amazing because one minute you’re at the bottom of the mountain thinking ‘I can’t do this, I’m going to fall’, all the while singing Arunachala songs. Then the next minute you find yourself at the top seeing God’s beautiful creation. What did I learn from this? We should always remember that God is always beside us helping us step by step, and we should really believe in Him. Trust me it’s true, the way I learned this is through experience and I’m sure the other campers did too.

Another one of my favorites was the trip to the Keji National Park. It was really fun even though the ride there did get a bit tiring. “CANOEING” is all I have to say and I’m pretty sure the campers of ‘07 will know what I’m talking about. Well, for those of you that don’t, just imagine seeing one team falling into the water two times! Yes, the wonderful team which included Kevin, Jon, Alexi, and Patty fell into the water twice. But we all, including them, had a lot of fun getting each other wet and shouting, some of us more than others.

Well now that you heard about what I liked best, I will tell you what our day was like. We wake up, get ready and go down to have breakfast. Then we run to the temple making sure no car is driving by when we cross the street. We then get ready for meditation, which Darlene lead this year. It was cool getting to know different meditation techniques and finding out which one suited us best. Then off we went to do our “mini”-pradakshinas around the temple, slowly meditating. After all that quiet, slow activity we were in for some LOUD surprises. We had singing and

yoga. But I most remember the laughing yoga, that is where everyone had to lie on someone’s stomach and start laughing. Unfortunately, it didn’t work out as planned, but we had a lot of fun. After that it was time for Karma Yoga, which was helping the community unselfishly. Some of the chores we had to do were helping in the garden, picking veggies, cleaning the shoe room, and anything else the parents were able to think of. While we are finishing up our chores we hear the bell and we dash towards the door all excited to get our bellies filled up with the delicious food that our parents cooked. After eating, we relax and play cards, which was one of the most popular relaxing activities at the camp. Later, we got ready to go on our trip that was planned for that day, for example the hike or the Keji trip. After coming back home we wash up, eat dinner and go straight to the temple to sing the songs we learnt, while our parents listen. We also taught our parents the songs so they could join us. And after a little meditation the children went straight to the house to play Capture the Flag, while our parents stayed a bit longer to do some more meditating.

On Tuesday night I had the opportunity to help the children create a masterpiece, combining all our creations of Arunachala into one whole big Arunachala Mountain. On the last day we put on our fancy costumes and make up because it was the “PLAY DAY”. Throughout the week we practiced a play focusing on our theme, which was Ramana’s relationship with Arunachala. It was a great success and we all enjoyed it. On that same day, we went outside at night and did the traditional dancing and singing around the campfire. We also roasted corn on a bonfire. After that, most of the campers went on the annual, somewhat scary, night walk in the forest. Some of the people had planned tricks to spook everyone. Me personally, I did not go but hearing the others’ stories I can tell it was quite a hike. When they all came back safely, not being eaten by any bears or any other animal, we all started playing Capture the Flag and went to sleep which was also fun because all the girls slept together and all the boys slept together in tents next to the guest house.

All I have to say is THANK YOU to everyone including, Darlene, John, Kevin, and Sophia the dog. We were disappointed that Dennis Hartel, Arthur, Geeta and the others were not there this summer. I can also never forget the other people like all the parents, campers and other dogs that helped us have the time of our lives. THANK YOU & I’M LOOKING FORWARD TO SPEND MY SUMMER WITH YOU NEXT YEAR.

Vaisally Thiruchelvan
Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Letters and Comments

Sadly, I must report that I won't be attending the Advent at Arunachala program on Sept. 8. I am recovering temporarily from a 'terminal illness' called life. I feel moved to share my experience of His Grace.

I went to the Doctor to get a therapeutic prescription for a shoulder impingement. The Doctor insisted on my having an X-ray. The film showed nothing in the shoulder. The surprise was the nodules in my left lung. The drama began...I ended up in the Emergency Room. One test led to another. I had a high white blood cell count, an enlarged lymph node and shortness of breath. The CAT scan report from the Mass. General Hospital came back confirming 2 lung nodules and a primary differential of cancer. I was being told that it looked bad and I probably had lung cancer. As it turned out, I think I had a bronchial infection, which is clearing up with antibiotics, and the nodules in the lungs are most likely benign. I still have to go to a lung specialist. But it has been an amazing experience of 'Reality' and 'Grace'.

But here is the story I want to share: I was admitted into the emergency room. They put me on a little bed with a curtain around it in the middle of the hectic summer ER hubbub. I was sitting on the bed reading *Ramana Puraanam* when the Doctor came in to tell me that the CAT scan did not look good and cancer in the lungs was a real concern. I asked a number of questions and checked in with myself to see what I was feeling. I knew I had to stay inside myself and not get pulled out. "Who am I" arose from within.

It seemed for a while that I was one with that part of me that is... always. Amy had fallen away. I remained. I felt spacious and glowing and peaceful. After the Doctor left, I looked down at the open book in my lap and read: "The world is a moving picture show of (sights and) sounds, driven along with a great hubbub by a whirlwind..."

I witnessed the faces of the nurses — one was my friend — and of the Doctor and I sensed the heaviness of their discomfort and worry. I felt a calm in the center of a storm. I saw the suffering of everyone and realized it was because we are identified with something so fleeting as our physical identities. There was compassion and love filling me up where I was expecting fear. This went on for at least a week.

But one night I did experienced a serious fear of dying. I let it be and felt it fully. And then it passed and once again I experienced my Self "Here" with or without me. So many things came up that I normally would react to. And I asked myself who is reacting to this. And I remembered where I was when that part had fallen away.

Amy is making a comeback, but hopefully I will never again take her very seriously, with His Grace.

Whatever it was or is, I have been quite ill and seem to be recovering but not enough for the journey to New York. Honestly, I am grateful for the journey I am on.

Note: I want to order more books when you have time. I am hoping there are many I have not yet read. I will be thinking about all of you on the 8th

Namaste, Amy

Ramana Satsangs

Satsangs with recitations, songs, readings and meditation have been going on in a few places near or in large cities. Some of them are weekly. If you would like to attend any of these, please contact the individuals below for more information.

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

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

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

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

Miami, Ft. Lauderdale Area — David & Janet Robinson (954-755-4758 / arunahill@gmail.com)

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

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

Washington, D.C. Area — Prakash & Mamtha Adiseshan (703-257-5589 / adiseshan@worldnet.att.net)

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

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