

# THE MAHARSHI

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## AN INTERVIEW WITH ANNAMALAI SWAMI

*The following is transcribed from a November 1989 videotaped interview with Annamalai Swami. J. Jayaraman was the interviewer and James Hartel the videographer. Some of this interview is featured in the Guru Ramana, His Living Presence video production.*

### **Coming to Bhagavan**

I came from Tondanguruchi where I had a stall to distribute water to the needy. One day somebody showed me the book *Nan Yar (Who Am I?)*. I saw Bhagavan's picture and was instantly captivated.

I hastened to Tiruvannamalai the very same day, which happened to be a full-moon day. When I arrived at Tiruvannamalai, I chanced to meet Seshadri Swami near the Rettai Pillaiyar Koil, close to the big temple, and received his blessings. I then went to Sri Bhagavan.

When I came to the Ashram there was just a shed over the Mother's shrine and Bhagavan was seated there. I also saw Gopal Rao, who was building the Old Hall.

[Before coming to Tiruvannamalai] I had had a dream in which Bhagavan was coming down the Hill. I went up to him and washed his feet with water. On drinking that water, I felt speechless and senseless. When I came here, Bhagavan was coming from the Hill, but nothing else happened like in the dream.

I had read a little before coming here. However, it is true that Bhagavan literally taught me how to read and write. When I asked Bhagavan what bondage and liberation meant, Muruganar was astonished that I did not even know the fundamentals of Advaitic teachings. Bhagavan only laughed in reply. In the course of my work, I once overheard Muruganar sing a line from a

Tamil verse, which means, 'Even fools have become extremely wise by coming to Bhagavan'. I am sure that Muruganar was referring to me when he sang this song.

### **Major Chadwick**

When Chadwick arrived in Tiruvannamalai he mistook me for Bhagavan and prostrated before me. I then took him to Bhagavan. Also, I was asked to vacate the room I had been occupying at that time, in favor of Chadwick. Chadwick did not like this and said that if I vacated he would not stay at the Ashram. It was then agreed that the two of us would share the room.

This is how I became very friendly with Chadwick. He appreciated my hard work and sincerity. I even used to learn a little bit of English from Chadwick.

Chadwick gave me an umbrella, shaded eyeglasses and sandals to use when I was supervising or working in the hot sun. Once, when Bhagavan came by, I tried to remove all three. Then Bhagavan came near me and chided me, saying, "If you behave like this on seeing me, I will never come near you." The irony is that some others in the Ashram used to scoff at me for wearing these in Bhagavan's presence. I was in a dilemma because it was Bhagavan who insisted that I behave normally, or He would not come near me.

If you got up from your seat when Bhagavan passed by, He wouldn't be happy and would say, "So you are showing off your bhakti. Why not behave normally even when I come."

### Construction Work

I knew nothing about masonry work before coming here. Although my father was proficient in masonry, sculpture, astrology and other fine arts, I knew none of these when I came to Bhagavan. Bhagavan taught me everything.

One day, Thenamma Paati asked Bhagavan how I could apply my mind to supervise all the construction work that was going on and still be devoted to Bhagavan. Bhagavan laughed and remarked that I should have been an engineer in my previous birth.

It was in very subtle ways that Bhagavan extracted work from the devotees. During my early days with Bhagavan, he once told me, “Go and see what the mason is doing.” So I went there, asked him what he was doing and conveyed the reply to Bhagavan. After sometime, Bhagavan again asked me to go and see what the mason was doing. I complied. The mason was a little annoyed, but made the same reply. When Bhagavan asked me to go and see what the mason was doing for the third time, the mason thought that Bhagavan was mad, as he was just asking him the same question again and again. I now asked Bhagavan why he kept repeating the same question. That is when he came out with his intentions and said, “Someone can attend to the work here. You go and supervise that work.” I reflected that Bhagavan could have told me this in the first instance itself, or just ordered me to go and do it. But that wasn’t Bhagavan’s way. He was very subtle, shy, and very gentle. Bhagavan would indicate with only a few words or signs.

Bhagavan used to say, “This whole place is going to be very active with many buildings.” Some of His comments were hard to believe because no indication of such things was found then.

When the storeroom was being built, Bhagavan wanted me to make an image of Arunachala in cement. I honestly felt that I was overworked, not getting enough rest. Also, I was feeling a little dejected. A little later, Bhagavan came back and said, “I thought I could make that request, but if that’s difficult for you, don’t bother with it.” I felt badly about the thoughts I had entertained and resolved that in the future I would definitely undertake and fulfill any of Bhagavan’s requests, even if that should mean sacrificing my body. It was a solemn pledge I made to myself.

Bhagavan was very particular about doing things me-

ticulously and perfectly. On all cupboards and other furniture, the name “Sri Ramanasramam, Tiruvannamalai” had to be written very neatly, just like printed letters.

Bhagavan insisted that I should draw the image of Arunachala on the wall of the Ashram Store. When it did not come out properly, Bhagavan came and instructed me. However, it did not come out the second time as well. Bhagavan once again gave me a few hints and I managed to get it right the third time, and it can be seen at the store entrance even today. The three dimensional aspect is also visible on account of the cement being plastered accordingly. The same thing happened with the arch of the Ashram entrance. Bhagavan would encourage me to take up such work, and whenever I had difficulty, Bhagavan would come, give hints, and encourage me to do it perfectly.

One day I was feeling tired and was reclining against a wall. Bhagavan came up to me and said, “I’m afraid to even look at you.” I asked Him why that should be so. He said, “If I would just look in one direction, you would construct a structure there.” This was of course in jest but it also meant that I could understand Bhagavan’s subtle instructions and follow them meticulously. This was great appreciation showered upon me by Sri Bhagavan.

Once I was about to construct some steps when Bhagavan came and hit me three times. I had been asked to repair some dilapidated steps behind the Dining Hall. In those days money and materials were scarce. I asked Ramaswami Pillai to get three or four measures of cement. Now, in Tamil, the word ‘*padi*’ stands for both ‘measure’ as well as for ‘steps’. Bhagavan asked me, “How many *padis*?” meaning how many steps I was constructing. I thought he wanted to know how many measures of cement I was ordering. Bhagavan gave me a playful slap and said, “I’m asking about one *padi*, and you are answering about another.”

On another occasion, I was building some steps near the water tap. Bhagavan was standing there and giving me instructions. As I got up, I banged my head hard against the tap. Bhagavan asked Madhavaswami to bring *zambak* (medicinal ointment), and personally massaged my head for a long time. Though I had pain in my head, I kept reminding myself of Bhagavan’s teaching, which was to give up the ‘I am-the-body’ idea. I also thanked the tap for giving me this opportunity to receive a massage from the golden

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hands of Sri Bhagavan.

In the earlier days, Madhavaswami, Rangaswami and I used to massage the soles of Bhagavan's feet with oil, and put our heads against His feet to receive His grace after completing the massage. Bhagavan used to pretend to be asleep when we did this. However, when large crowds started coming to the Ashram regularly, we had to stop this practice of ours.

When the Dining Hall was being built, Bhagavan used to dig the earth with a huge *gaddapare* (crow-bar) and Santhamma used to mix mortar with water. I was entrusted with the mason's work. While we worked on the construction, Thenamma and Subbulakshmiamma used to do the cooking nearby. As I was not a brahmin, the women used a large white cloth as a partition between them and us. Bhagavan told them, "Why are you doing this? It's only our Annamalai. Why should you segregate him like this?" Chinnaswami, on hearing this said, "Bhagavan says 'our Annamalai,' so he has become an *ichcha* brahmin, i.e., a brahmin by the wish of Sri Bhagavan."

### Disturbing Ants

One day after lunch we noticed lots of ants in the Old Hall disturbing the devotees. Bhagavan asked me to inspect the area and do the needful. When I went and lifted a stone, millions of ants rushed out. I was jumping all over in order to avoid crushing them. When Bhagavan asked me what I was doing, I explained that it would be *jivahimsa* to kill hundreds and thousands of ants by stepping upon them or by closing the opening through which they came out. He said, "You are not doing it for yourself, it is for the sake of others." He then quoted from Chapter thirteen of *Bhagavad Gita* where Krishna says that even killing is permitted if it is for the benefit of the world. Upon hearing this, I cleared the area of ants, sealed the entrance and cemented it.

In the days when I still used to live in the Ashram, I once told Bhagavan that I didn't even desire *moksha*, but just wanted to be saved from the attractions of women. I was wondering what reply Bhagavan would give. He said that it was freedom from this desire that all great people had sought and suffered for.

### Fleeing to Polur

Bhagavan always taught *jnanamarga*, yet when we went out, no one ever talked about *jnana-marga* or

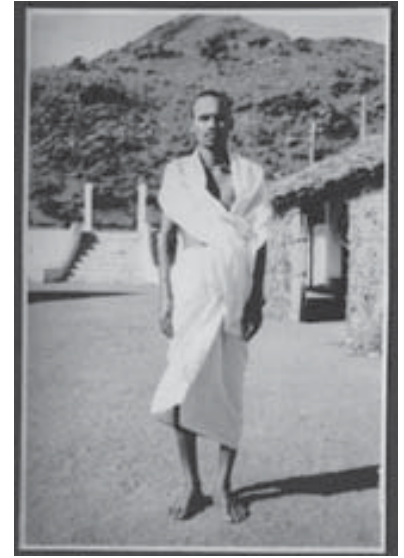
even *bhaktimarga*. And since at that time I felt that whatever *bhakti* I had, had evaporated, I was feeling that Bhagavan did not want me to stay there.

I walked without any food for two days, and was weak and exhausted by the time I reached Polur. I begged at Nair Mangalam's place and many other places with no luck. None wished to give me alms. In fact one person wondered why I had to leave a holy place like Tiruvannamalai and wander elsewhere. All these events discouraged me. I had heard that if one stood chest deep in water, it would aid in withstanding hunger. I did that in a tank just outside Polur for a while before leaving for the samadhi of Vithoba in Polur. In the afternoon on the third day, a lady took pity at my plight and offered me two glasses full of thin gruel. This helped me regain some of my strength.

I then plucked a little flower in order to toss it up to divine if I should go back to the Ashram or leave Bhagavan permanently and go out as a wandering mendicant. The flower toss-up indicated that I should go back to Bhagavan and I began walking back promptly. That's when the owner of a small roadside hotel invited me in and fed me sumptuously with great reverence. Besides, he also gave me two rupees for my travel expenses. I took this as a good omen and a vindication of my decision to return to Bhagavan.

I boarded the train to Tiruvannamalai without a ticket. However, while the ticket examiner checked all other passengers, he totally ignored me. Similarly, when I got down at Tiruvannamalai, the stationmaster, who usually checks all the tickets, let me through saying that he had already checked my ticket. I went straight to Bhagavan and narrated all that had happened. Bhagavan graciously said, "How could you go away? You have so much work to do here, and unless that is finished, how could you go?"

I was standing near Bhagavan and He gave me a



steady look of Grace. I felt that Bhagavan was quoting the song from the supplement to the forty verses which means “When you have the association of great men, where is the need for following the usual injunctions expected of a seeker, like going on a *yatra*, remaining in mouna, etc.” This song came to my mind, though Bhagavan had not uttered a word. That gave me great confidence and I declared in the presence of Bhagavan that I would stay put and do whatever Bhagavan asked of me. Bhagavan smiled at me, and gave me another look of Grace.

There are many instances when Bhagavan showed grace by his look. On seeing this Sivalinga tied to my left arm, Bhagavan repeatedly said, “You have the Lord tied to your hand. What more do you want?”

It was my father who had had this Linga tied to my arm. The Tamil religious calendar says that, upon rising every morning one should look at the sun in one’s right hand, and at a Linga in the left. As I was interested in following this injunction, it was suggested that I could have a Linga tattooed on my hand. But my father preferred a Linga itself to be tied to my left hand. Bhagavan used to repeatedly tell me, “God is in your own hands. What shortcomings can you face in your life?”

### Animals

Bhagavan was extraordinarily kind towards birds, squirrels, cows, dogs and peacocks. In fact, He showed visible partiality towards animals over humans.

Once a big dove fell down on being attacked by a vulture. Bhagavan personally attended to the bird and treated it with *zambak* and other oils. He massaged its head, and kept the dove for the whole day. The next day when He asked me to bring the dove to Him, the bird had by then recovered so much that it flew off.

I was present when the crow, towards which Bhagavan showed extraordinary kindness, died in His hands; so also Jacki the dog, and Valli the deer. When the samadhi was being built for Valli, I was very thin and could easily go inside the tiny dome to do the plastering work. Bhagavan used to stand outside and hand me *chuna* and other material, and helped me complete the samadhi.

The crow was very fortunate to die in His hands. Bhagavan was particularly interested in rituals for the samadhis of the birds and animals and wanted special pujas to be done for such samadhis with offerings of milk, etc. Many people used to witness this with awe and wonder.

Once, as Bhagavan was descending the steps near

the Valli deer’s samadhi, he saw a dog chasing a squirrel. Bhagavan tried to prevent the dog from harming the squirrel by interposing his stick in between them. In the process, He stumbled and fell down the steps, suffering bruises all over his body. Tincture was applied all over, which causes a burning sensation. Plaster was applied on all the wounds, and there are even photographs of Bhagavan with plaster all over His body. Bhagavan underwent such suffering even for animals. We all have witnessed these phases in Bhagavan’s life.

### Moving to Palakottu

I moved to Palakottu during the time when the Dining Hall was being built under my supervision. One day Yogi Ramaya was accompanying Bhagavan and told him that I had become very weak from so much hard work, and that I should be released from this strain. Bhagavan also said, “Yes, yes, he should be given freedom.”

Resolving to put an end to the tension and mental suffering, I went up the hill to meet Bhagavan and requested permission to stay in Palakottu. Bhagavan said, “Yes, Yes, that’s good for you,” and he repeated it thrice.

A little later I went into the bathroom when Bhagavan was being given an oil bath. Madhavaswami, His attendant, remarked that many sadhus are known to take *ganja* (hemp) and asked him how one would feel on consuming *ganja*. Bhagavan then suddenly got up and holding me by the shoulder, said, “It will only be like this.” I felt such a great joy when he held me that I handed over the keys of my room to Bhagavan immediately and left for Palakottu.

When I left the Ashram, I had no thoughts about where I would stay, or what I would do for food. Munagala Venkatramaiah gave me shelter at Palakottu and I cooked my own food. Bhagavan used to occasionally inquire about my cooking and made encouraging comments. For instance, if I told him that I made just one *sambhar*, he would say, “Oho! one *sambhar*! That’s very good.” Once when I had more than one eatable to offer Bhagavan, he remarked, “Just like Annamalai, Annanamalayar has Mandavapadi.” Bhagavan was comparing his receiving food at the Ashram, as well as at other places, to the idol of Annamalai in the Arunachaleswara Temple which stops at each Mandap and is offered food. Bhagavan has come to this place and even had some food cooked by me.

Whenever I was engaged in construction work at



the Ashram or at Palakottu, Bhagavan would inspect my work and instruct me. Once Bhagavan visited me when I was removing the scaffolding from my house, as I could not complete the construction for want of money. When I told Bhagavan the reason, he said, "Oho! So you have to remove this scaffolding for the sake of money?" and went away. That same evening, a lady came from Ramaswami, stayed here for a month, and donated Rs.100. This house was completed with that money, along with help from Vaikuntavasagar.

I shall tell you the story of how this house was designed. My friend Arumugham and I were planning to build a small thatched shed for me to live in. Bhagavan heard our discussions from afar and inquired about our plans from Arumugham. He then asked many leading questions related to the design of the house. Will you use mortar, lime, bricks, etc.?" he asked. "Will the house have an upper floor? Will there be a mortared top?" etc. Thus, without saying so explicitly, Bhagavan conveyed to Arumugham the design he had in mind for my house. Arumugham settled for that very plan and bought 4000 bricks the next day, along with lime-making equipment for a small lime factory. This look of Bhagavan made Arumugham a big contractor years later.

### Do Not Move Out

One day He told me very clearly and sternly. "Don't move out anywhere. Stay put here and don't move to the next house or even the next room."

After moving to Palakottu I used to come to Bhagavan every day at around eight at night, after dinner, which was served at 7.30, and stay till about 9:00 o'clock.

One night I saw Bhagavan completely enclosed in a piece of cloth, except for the nose. I used to converse freely with Bhagavan, like a son with his father. I asked him, "Does this mean that you do not like to meet me here, or is it that you don't want me to come to the Ashram at all?" Bhagavan remained silent. At about 9 o'clock I left the Hall. I was nearing the garden thinking about Bhagavan's directive to me to stay put at Palakottu when I heard Him call me. He beckoned me to him and said in a very strong and stern voice, "He who, despite the right spiritual maturity, thinks that he is different from the Lord will reach the same lower state as does a non-believer."

I felt that Bhagavan was telling me not to move out of Palakottu, not even to visit the Ashram. I have

never left Palakottu since.

### Shadow Bhagavan

Once, there were films being shown at the Ashram, including one on Bhagavan. I wanted to see the film. When I arrived and prostrated before Bhagavan, He said in a stern voice. "So you have come to see the shadow of Bhagavan. This means that you no longer have the real Bhagavan in you and have hence come to see this shadow-Bhagavan." This touched me very deeply.

One day, after this incident, I went up the hill wanting to meet Bhagavan when he returned from his walk. He again looked at me sternly and said, "Why have you come to see me? You have happiness, you have happiness." I couldn't understand his words then, but after a lot of reflection I realized that when one is away from society, one has peace, and that Bhagavan wanted me to avoid the entire society. This is how I interpreted His words.

Bhagavan also said, "Ananda is not what you get from somewhere else. If you follow somebody else's path, it will only lead you to destruction. You have to follow your own self. Go within. That alone will lead you to Ananda." So I interpreted it to mean that I should be alone.

## An Invitation

*You, your family and friends are cordially invited  
to join us in celebrating the 126th Birth  
Anniversary of Sri Ramana Maharshi in  
New York City*

**Saturday 31 December 2005**

**11:00 a.m.**

at

**ARUNACHALA ASHRAMA**

**86-06 EDGERTON BOULEVARD**

**JAMAICA ESTATES, QUEENS, NEW YORK 11432**

The program will include recitations, bhajans and  
puja, followed by prasad (lunch).

For more information call:

(718) 560-3196

## LETTERS AND COMMENTS

### Jayanti on December 18th?

Unlike previous years within memory, Sri Ramana Maharshi's Jayanti is scheduled to be celebrated in Sri Ramanasramam only five days after the Karthigai Deepam Day, on December 18th. It is usually observed a full month after the deepam day. What is the reason for this anomaly?

— Curious American Devotee

*Bhagavan was born at 1 A.M. on December 30, 1879, on the night of Ardra Darsanam, when God Siva in the nearby temple had just finished His night's procession in the street. The moon had entered the constellation of Punarvasu after passing through Ardra. Bhagavan's Jayanti is always in the month of Margazhi when the moon is in the constellation of Punarvasu. Normally Bhagavan's Jayanti would fall on the day after Ardra Darsanam because Punarvasu follows Ardra and Ardra occurs in the month of Margazhi.*

*However, this winter Ardra Darsanam falls on January 13, 2006, which is the last day of the month of Margazhi. The day after Ardra Darsanam would not be in the month of Margazhi. January 14th is the first day of the month of Thai. Hence, the chief priest at Sri Ramansramam has decided to celebrate the Jayanti on December 18, 2005, that is, when Punarvasu occurs during the month of Margazhi.*

*The decision to observe the birthday early results in several counter-intuitive consequences. Unusually, the moon will not be full on Jayanti day. Also only five days would have elapsed since the Karthigai Deepam Day, which falls on December 13, which is the full-moon day that precedes Ardra Darsanam. Finally, the Ardra Darsanam would follow Bhagavan's Jayanti by about 26 days!*

— T. S. Vaidyanathan, NYC

### Children's Ashram in Nova Scotia

The trip to the Sri Ramana Maharshi kids' camp in Nova Scotia, Canada was not what I expected. Instead of textbooks and constant indoor chanting, what we got was afternoon activities everyday, which included swimming, canoeing, hiking, mountain biking, and other forms of activities, as well as karma

yoga, which was when a particular adult that day assigned the kids a job to help the ashram in some way.

For example, one day the boys had to gather logs and pile them together for a campfire, which we had on the last day of camp, while the girls had to vacuum the whole temple. This activity of karma yoga helped us look deep inside ourselves and give back to the community in some way. After karma yoga, we always had this satisfied, quenched feeling in our gut that we made a difference today.

Another assignment which I did not expect was the play of "Bhagavan and Laksmi the Cow." In the beginning we faltered and felt that we wouldn't put on a good show for the adults, but on the day of the play, it all came together and the grown-ups were really moved by our acting.

Following the play was a camp fire which included roasting marshmallows and corn along with singing spiritual songs, including "In the Heart, Arunachala." What touched me most in this camp was how much the adults who taught us and our parents, cared for us. They were always available and offered us tips on chanting, stretching in yoga and even helped us on our game when we played cricket, which was every day!

What I remembered most about the camp was the community and how united we were. Everybody supported and respected each other. There was not even one day where someone had a major disagreement with someone else. We were all one, and that's what Bhagavan believed of all life. We are truly one.

—Siddharth Ramkumar

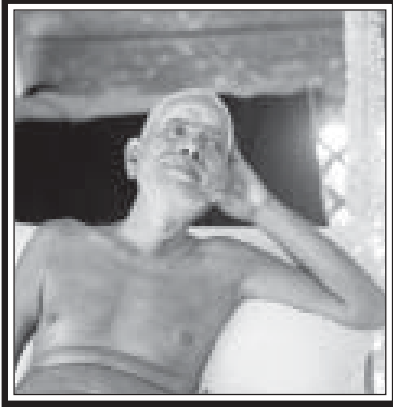
### No Desires, No Sorrow

He who has no desires has no sorrow,  
But where there is desire  
There will be ever-increasing sorrows.

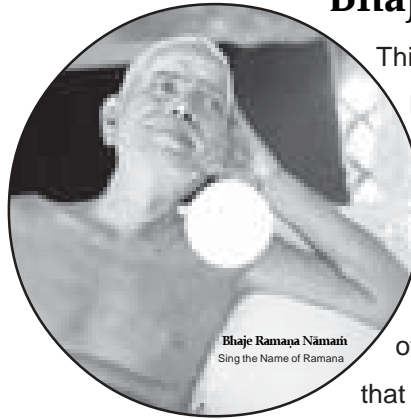
When desire, sorrow's sorrow, dies away,  
Undying bliss prevails, even here on earth.

It is the nature of desire never to be fulfilled,  
But he who utterly gives it up realizes  
Eternal Fulfillment at that very moment.

— Tirukkural 37: 368-370

**Bhaje Ramaṇa Nāmaṁ**Sing the Name of Ramana

Bhajans on Bhagavan  
Sri Ramana Maharshi

**Bhaje Ramaṇa Nāmaṁ**

This new, 71-minute CD, produced by devotees in California, with Sangeetha Swaminathan as lead singer and composer, is a treasure chest of devotion. It begins with a moving rendition of Ganapati Muni's invocation verse that Bhagavan once recommended,

followed by ten superb bhajans, and concluding with the famous "Saranagathi" song, which is so loved by His devotees.

The companion booklet contains the transliterated lyrics — mostly from Sanskrit — and their meanings. It serves as an excellent aid to easily learn and sing all these wonderful bhajans.

**CD & Booklet: \$12 - add \$1.50 for S & H**

"In the recesses of the lotus-shaped hearts of all, beginning with Vishnu, there shines as pure intellect (Absolute Consciousness) the Paramatman who is the same as Arunachala or Ramana. When the mind melts with love of Him, and reaches the inmost recess of the Heart wherein He dwells as the Beloved, the subtle eye of pure intellect opens and He reveals Himself as Pure Consciousness."

—Sri Ramana Maharshi

**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@earthlink.net)

**San Francisco Area** — Swaminathan & Sangeeta (510-979-1679 / nachiketas@hotmail.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)

**Vancouver, Canada** — Zoya Malek (604-921-9692 / zoyaonline@yahoo.ca)

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