

Sunday Morning Reading

The Journey of My Heart Passages from the Diary of a Pilgrim to Sri Ramanasramam

On arriving at Sri Ramanasramam on December 5, 1982, I was given room number 16 in the guest compound across from the Ashrama. Beside me was the room of Ramaswami Pillai, who had come to Bhagavan in the 1920s. Throughout my first night at the Ashrama I often heard Ramaswami burst into songs of devotional fervor.

December 6, 1982

Ramaswami Pillai was leaving his room after yet another outburst of song. I accosted him saying, "Swamiji, I enjoy your bhajan any hour of the day or night! 1 a.m. or 1 p.m.!" He laughed and gave a humble pranam, moving his head from side to side. He began to walk away. I asked him to wait and brought him the portrait of Sri Bhagavan done by my friend back in New York, Madeline Iorio. To me Madeline's drawing was especially beautiful, capturing the feeling of Bhagavan's overflowing love. From the way the Swami scrutinized it, I could tell he had some trouble seeing. "What is this...," he asked, "a drawing of a person?" I explained it was a picture done by a devotee in New York City but, also hard of hearing, he had trouble following me. He seemed to think it needed some work and said, "It's all right. If a person thinks of even a stone as God, he realizes Him – from Form to the Formless. But stick to the Formless - the forms will change, go away." The Swami's words went straight to my heart. Did he know that during this visit to Sri Ramanasramam I was feeling the absence of Viswanatha Swami and other friends so keenly? He handed back the picture and I placed it on my head. Yet I wondered about this man who, with sight and hearing limited, spoke so appropriately to my need.

December 9, 1982

Following pradakshina, on my way to lunch, I dropped into Ramaswami's small room. I had been moved out of room 16 and put in the German Cottage at the end of the guest compound. "I miss hearing you sing," I told him.

"Can you hear me where you are?" he asked.

"No, but before I could hear every word!"

Then he said, "I don't sing always. Inspiration must come. One may do stotra daily. Also, if you ask me to sing I can, but it will not be so sweet." He explained he had been feeling weak.

Ramaswami asked me whether I had received some initiation, and practice some mantra. "Yes, from Sri Bhagavan, in a dream."

"Oh, did He tell you to keep it a secret?" he asked with interest. "Was it to take His Name, or (that of) Arunachala...?"

"No, it was to practice Self-enquiry."

"And, can you do it?"

"Not very well."

"No matter. You must persevere...."

Taking note of my photo of Sri Bhagavan, Ramaswami remarked, "I see you keep this with you. In samadhi the eyes may be closed and there is no thought. However, samadhi is also experienced with eyes open. Sri Bhagavan was always in samadhi. One may look into his open eyes and experience, with

eyes open, the same state. In that state, all the senses are alert yet are not travelling outward. The mind is calm and one is aware. One may engage in some activity in that state. A child may be about to fall and you could catch the child. Still, with a calm mind, activity is no hindrance.”

About pradakshina he said, “Now, because of problems with my legs, I must take a rickshaw, but to walk is better. The moment I think of it I go, sometimes in the middle of the night!”

December 9, 1982

afternoon: Kunju Swami and I sat for a talk on the porch of a new guest house on the west side of the Ashrama. He asked me what practice I do and I described our routine in the New York City Ashrama and my present employment. He then said, ‘Keep your mind calm at the feet of Bhagavan. Take no thought about the Ashrama (i.e. Arunachala Ashrama) and have no concern for its growth. If Sri Bhagavan wills, it will grow. You need not worry about it. The body is itself an ashrama - for that ashrama only a small hut is necessary.’ So saying, he took my leave.

Sri Ramanasramam, December 14, 1982

This evening Ganesan took Paul and me to meet Sri Balarama Reddiar. He spoke of the beauty of a mother’s selfless love. He told us, “For spiritual life, infinite patience is needed - not just for one lifetime but for many lifetimes.... The sense of time should disappear.”

December 16, 1982: This morning I departed for pradakshina at 5:15 a.m., well before dawn. However, I soon discovered hundreds of people had the same idea, for it is the first day of the new Tamil month. I felt as one with the stream of women dressed in their most festive saris and men in their fresh dhotis. Many women appeared to walk the entire eight miles with a child in their arms! In the dark before dawn, the temples and lingams were lit up with images bedecked with flowers, turmeric, etc. The faces of the villagers, filled with faith as they gazed upon the images, impressed themselves on my heart. Dawn broke on the dirt road to Adi Annamalai. In the tiny rural hamlet fresh rangoli (white-powder designs) were at each door, and at the center the women had placed bouquets of fresh, bright yellow flowers, resembling daffodils. Naturally, the recitation of Mother’s Names (Sri Lalita Sahasranam) formed the background from which I viewed all these charming sights. The cup of tea I stopped to have at Adi Annamalai tasted like the sweetest nectar. During this pradakshina I went around almost all the Siva Lingams.

Returning, I found Ramaswami Pillai sitting outside in the sun. I took him some homeopathic pills for his congestion which he accepted like a meek child and sat with him for a while. He inquired about my parents’ occupations and the size of our family; whether I lived in a house or apartment; whether I was married. When I told him I was single, he said, “It is all right. When a person is unmarried he remains fresh. After marriage reality takes over, imagination is absent. Then, the partner becomes a possession, a part of one’s self. Also, there may be fear of losing the person - though not in Hinduism, especially among Brahmins. Yet, tastes change. When a person is a child he may want a tricycle, then a bicycle. Later, that will have no meaning and he’ll want a motorcycle. So, it is with the mind.”

Ramaswami went on to speak of the beauty of selfless love which springs from a pure and one-pointed mind: “In its pure state the Self is indivisible, it cannot be split. You see, Sri Bhagavan’s teaching is totally separate from religion. In religion there is still ego - ‘I am a Hindu’. For Westerners, they need not become Hindus. Within their own religion, in the context of their own society, they may practice it. In reality, Sri Bhagavan’s teaching is not religious - it is more scientific than religious. Religion is not required to turn the mind back on itself.”

He also spoke about attachment, especially the strong attachment of a child to its mother. As a boy, Ramaswami’s strong attachment to his mother prevented him from dying and taking another birth: When he had become very sick the thought of his mother helped him survive. “Even great saints may ultimately have to serve their parents,” he commented.

He spoke at length on the uniqueness of Sri Bhagavan's teachings and about how, once a person is established in the Self, sacrifice is no longer painful but becomes a great pleasure. Then he said, "I think I'm exhausted - not physically tired - but my supply has run out." He joined his palms and as I saluted him he gently chanted, "Om, Om, Om." I took his leave.

December 18, 1982

In Ganeshan's room at 5:00 a.m. I had found Kunju Swami sitting on a folding chair. With a broad smile he motioned me to take the chair beside him. Ganeshan finished his ablutions and we three took off, going around behind the shrine for the path leading out to Palakothu. Walking beside Kunju Swami I began to feel lighthearted as a child. His very presence uplifted us.

We followed a path quite near to the base of the mountain, obviously familiar to Kunju Swami as one taken with Bhagavan. The tall trees gave way to low lying bushes and thorns and a panoramic view of Sri Arunachala in its majesty opened up before us. We talked while walking.

Kunju Swami expressed concern that I had not worn sandals.

"I need all the merit that I can get!"

"Then you are a true dacoit!" he replied.

Ganesan explained that Kunju Swami uses the term "dacoit" especially with reference to devotees of Arunachala Ashrama who, coming for short periods of time, plunder all of the wealth of Sri Bhagavan and Sri Arunachala, and then take it home with them.

I said that I was thinking of extending my stay, although I had my work to return to in New York.

Kunju Swami said in an ecstatic mood, that during Sri Bhagavan's time some with exceptional devotion, living away from Tiruvannamalai, would begin to find excuses to extend their stay. In such cases, Bhagavan would send Kunju Swami with the devotee to the station to make sure he got on the train.

"Sri Bhagavan was particular that women going on pradakshina should be accompanied," Kunju Swami said. But rather than say, "Don't go alone," he would ask, "Who is accompanying you?" After a woman devotee had left, he would ask, "Who went with her?"

We passed the spot where only the foundation of S. S. Cohen's home in Palakothu remains, and Kunju Swami described how Cohen would cook some rice and vegetables in the early morning and then go to Bhagavan. Half he would take at noon and the other half at dinner. In the afternoon Bhagavan would walk about Palakothu and inquire about everyone's welfare like a father. All would be delighted at his solicitude and personal care for them.

One day Bhagavan asked Cohen what he had eaten. "Oh, nothing much, Bhagavan, a little rice and vegetable," he replied like a poor man. "Rice and vegetable! How fortunate!" was Bhagavan's rejoinder. "When we were on the hill we had only rice, sometimes even without salt, and now you are eating like a king!" In this way Bhagavan would encourage and console them.

During his walks to Palakothu, Bhagavan would sit on Cohen's stone verandah. Cohen began to feel bad that Bhagavan had to sit on the hard stone. One day he put out a chair and Bhagavan never returned. So considerate to all, he never wished to cause inconvenience or to receive special attention. Cohen lamented this as his life's greatest mistake.

December 18, 1982

Kunju Swami recounted how he was given the mission to accompany the Princess Prabhavati to Kerala following her marriage. She spent a month in the home of friends; Kunju Swami lived in a mutt. At the end of the planned time period the princess wished to extend her stay. In the meantime, Kunju Swami decided to go on yatra to various holy places in Kerala. When news of Kunju Swami's intent

reached Bhagavan, Bhagavan expressed annoyance that Kunju Swami had neglected to do the job for which he had been sent, i.e., to look after the princess.

Immediately on hearing this, Kunju Swami moved into the house where the princess was staying and stayed as long as she wished. “Thus, Bhagavan was always kind and considerate to women,” Kunju Swami remarked, “but we (men) received his reprimands!”

Kunju Swami said the person who goes round Arunachala barefoot is indeed blessed according to Hindu mythology. When the person goes to heaven, the bruises on his feet will be worshipped by all the deities of heaven! Moreover, when they bend over to touch the bruises with their heads, their crowns will bloody the pilgrim’s feet even more! The pilgrim will then be doubly blessed! “Therefore, you’re not selfless for wishing to walk around Arunachala barefoot. On the contrary, you’re selfish!” Kunju Swami concluded laughingly. So saying we took our seat on a flat rock, one of the few places before Gautama Ashram where Bhagavan would customarily stop when going by the inner path.

Far from the road or any visible habitation, Kunju Swami remarked that on the hill Bhagavan would tell them, “This is our kingdom; that (i.e., the town) is their kingdom.” On the hill the devotees could sing, dance and act with complete freedom. In Bhagavan’s presence, day and night they enjoyed an extraordinary feeling of intoxication. He alone had to bring them back to the world from time to time.

Once a devotee asked Kunju Swami, jokingly, “What would you do if Lord Siva appeared before you right now as a column of light and offered you heaven?” Kunju Swami replied without hesitation, “I would refuse it. The happiness of heaven could in no way equal the happiness of being in Bhagavan’s proximity here on earth!”

He further said that on the day of Sri Bhagavan’s Mahanirvana the devotees’ minds were filled with grief, yet within a day they discovered that, when speaking of Bhagavan, they would feel the same infectious joy that they felt in his physical presence! Bhagavan, though no longer in the body, continued for them as before!

Being with Kunju Swami on the hill and talking of Bhagavan, I felt I too am Bhagavan’s direct disciple, enjoying the same happiness his presence imparted to his most intimate companions! Ganesan then commented that coming out on the hill and talking of Bhagavan, he finds that for him the Ashram and all its related concerns disappear; moreover, the worries related to the body disappear. I said this was my experience too, for I had not even taken note of the fever I’d developed in the afternoon.

Among his devotees, Sri Bhagavan established the rule while going round the hill, that once they reached Eesanya Mutt they must be quiet. Bhagavan was so particular never to create trouble or disturbance to anyone that he would have the devotees split up and take different routes back through the town. He himself would walk with a towel over his head to avoid notice. All would regroup behind the temple of the town. Bhagavan would make sure they were all there, and they would return up the hill together, to their “Kingdom”.

Bhagavan did not have a rigid ethical code. Kunju Swami was very young when he first came to Bhagavan. At times Kunju Swami and a friend, for fun, would see how many times they could run from Skandashram to Virupaksha Cave and back. Chinnaswami would object: “This boy is so irresponsible! It is his duty to bring us food from the town. What if he falls and breaks a leg!” Bhagavan would tenderly say, “It is not he who is doing it... It’s his age that is doing it!” In speaking of a misdeed, the strongest word Bhagavan would use was “mischief”.

Kunju Swami described Bhagavan’s state of mind as “all-knowing”, yet without an element of personal will; that is, he did not “read” minds nor would he give any indication or display of this ability. It was simply his natural state.

The thoughts and past deeds of all were immediately apparent to him. About this facet Bhagavan once commented, “It is true I know the innermost thoughts of you all, but if I brought them all to light would any of you stay here?” Kunju Swami narrated this with a laugh.

Bhagavan's complete and total disregard for siddhis set him apart from virtually all other saints, Kunju Swami noted. It seems on one occasion Bhagavan said he had experienced his body dissolving into the five elements, yet called it back. "There has never been a saint so unique as Bhagavan, who remained so human, so simple and so ordinary to all appearances," Kunju Swami exclaimed in ecstasy, "and I don't think there could ever be another one like him again!"

Since our talk continued after sunset we returned to the Ashram by the road and Ganesan filled me in on a few details about our venerable friend. As a boy Kunju Swami was found to be very intelligent, possessing a prodigious memory.

At one time he wished to take up a study of Vedantic texts and told Bhagavan, "Not for myself, but for the sake of others!" He had the gift of eloquence and could easily quote from any number of scriptures. Bhagavan, however, forbade him pursue this study. In subsequent years when Bhagavan saw Kunju Swami talking to devotees he would now and then chide him by asking, "Are you doing it for yourself or for others?!" Thus, Kunju Swami came to understand that it was he himself who was helped when he spoke with others of Bhagavan's teaching and life. Therefore, I must thank you for helping me remember Bhagavan, Ganesan concluded!

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 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."

January 4, 1983

Once again Ramaswami Pillai and I enjoyed an openhearted talk while children, one after another, came to his door to receive a few pennies from his hands.

The children called him "Tatha" or grandfather, and he said, "The first time I was called 'tatha' I was not shocked, but surprised! I looked in the mirror and saw I had no teeth and white hair. Since coming to Bhagavan I have no feeling of aging. I am the same. And on the contrary, as one meditates the mental process is reversed. Mentally, one becomes younger and stronger. [This no doubt was borne out in his case, as he lived a hundred years! - editor]

January 5, 1983

Paul and I began our Evening Recitation at 6 P.M., and while reciting "Sri Arunachala Pancaratnam," Kunju Swami and Ganesan walked into the room. The chanting flowed of its own accord, and I felt merged in the light of Arunachala Siva!

After a period of silence, Kunju Swami proceeded to immerse us with his gracious and consoling words, all aimed at encouraging us. He complimented us on our recitation and said it should be taped.

"Though we moved closely with Bhagavan," he continued, "and he always acted normal, just as one of us, Bhagavan invariably had a far-off look. I believe that look was for such as you who live at a distance. You are special recipients of His Grace. Those who live near take it for granted; those far-off remain thinking of Bhagavan. We (he and Ganesan) are the frogs; you are the bees!" He said this in reference to verse 10 of "Sri Arunachala Patikam:"

Lord of my life! I have always been at Thy Feet like a frog which clings to the stem of the lotus. Make me instead a honey bee which from the blossom of the heart sucks the sweet honey of pure Consciousness. Then shall I have deliverance.

"Bhagavan not only taught us vichara marga," Kunju Swami resumed, "He taught us how to live. He taught us not to drink until the end of the meal; to have fruit last of all; not to mix cold water with a drink or with hot water, but to let it to cool naturally. We observed all his actions and learned all these things. In so many ways, Bhagavan taught us how one can live happily anywhere in the world.

"Also, Bhagavan stressed that all devotees should know how to cook simple food, and he emphasized the importance of limiting the quantity of intake. 'Even too much sattvic food becomes tamasic,' Bhagavan would say. He wanted devotees to be self-reliant and not depend upon others for their basic needs. In Palakothu, all the sadhus cooked for themselves and Bhagavan would take a personal interest in their diets. But our purpose should not be to think of food, but to think and talk of Bhagavan."

"Bhagavan himself was a great cook! Not only was he highly skilled in preparing food, he also was a spiritual cook of souls, He baked our egos and served them to Arunachala! His "Song of the Poppadum" gives us some understanding in this matter.

I expressed my desire to cook a meal for Swamiji and he declined the offer so graciously that I almost didn't mind his not accepting it. He said that by watching me serve he could tell I was a good cook, and the very thought of my offer gave him the same satisfaction as eating whatever I would have prepared for him.

January 8, 1983 - Our Trip to Madras

The pleasant taxi ride which Paul, Ganesan and I were enjoying on the way to Madras became a nightmare when at Chingleput our driver took a drink or some narcotic. However, good fortune was the result of our misfortune for we were forced by circumstance to spend the night in the home of the President's [Sri T. N. Venkataraman's] daughter, Lakshmi.

Lakshmi's sublime devotion to Sri Bhagavan made a sweet and very deep impression on me. She was elated and enraptured to be visited by Bhagavan's devotees. The devotion with which she one-pointedly served all and the way she later kept me up during the night to talk of Bhagavan deeply inspired me. Her dedicated and devoted presence uplifted us all immensely.

I entered Lakshmi's kitchen and saw on her shrine the two cutting knives I had brought to India. "I brought these for you," I said.

Looking at me with her deep, dark eyes she replied, "Your presence is the greatest gift for us." Extremely fatigued, I looked away and she caught my eyes again, "Do you understand?" she said most tenderly, pressing my arm with her hand.

Lakshmi served dinner in the traditional manner: she remained standing and waited on all, refusing to eat herself. She seemed to know the want of each. Her food was delicious and mild. It had the mark of being prepared by a devotee, for it was so light and pleasing.

At night Lakshmi and I stayed up to share some of our experiences before falling asleep. She seemed never to tire of offering little services! She placed water by my side just in case I became thirsty in the middle of the night; she offered to rub my temples with oil, thinking I must have had a headache after our going about Madras during the day in the heat. In fact, while I thought I was drifting off to sleep I heard her voice: "Oh, how I feel like staying up with you to talk! Please, tell me something about yourself, your Ashram and Bhagavan!" I opened my eyes and found her leaning close to me in the dark!

Lakshmi was nine years old when Bhagavan left the body and is the eldest daughter of the family. "Bhagavan must have been like a father for you," I said.

“Bhagavan was everything to us,” she exclaimed, her eyes shining in the dark, “Even though we were playful children, he was our mother, father, brother, sister, grandfather – everything!”

“I must have been an Indian in my former birth,” I mused, “because when I am here with devotees like you I feel so happy and light.”

“Where is India and where is America?” she cried out, putting her face nearer to mine, “We are all only with Bhagavan, wherever we may be!”

That night Lakshmi confided openly about the hardship she and all her sisters experienced on leaving Sri Ramanasramam after their marriages. Maybe in the end they will all return there, I thought.

The next morning, she insisted that I sit with her again in the kitchen as she prepared dosas for us. Though her cooking was so light and delightful she apologized for it, saying, “I am not at all talented.”

She served us with so much kindness and love that upon our leaving I saw her eyes rimmed in tears. In her life I could see and feel a cool, gentle breeze of devotion issuing from a heart filled with the holy presence of Bhagavan. Only by Bhagavan’s grace can we meet such pure and humble souls.

On returning to Ramanasramam and meeting Ramaswami Pillai I told him of our visit to Lakshmi’s home. “Lakshmi!” he exclaimed, “She is the ideal girl!” Then he went on to describe how Muruganar and other devotees would invariably run to Bhagavan’s Samadhi when they heard that Lakshmi was singing.

January 11, 1983

In my room this afternoon, Ramaswami was once again spoke of the greatness of Self-Enquiry. "There, you have so many activities (meaning me as an individual). That is why you do not rigorously practice Self-Enquiry. But once your activities are less, the method will come to you very naturally. At that time you will be surprised at how natural and effective it is, and you will regret that you didn't take to it earlier." These words were unsettling to me. "How can I most effectively practice Sri Bhagavan's teaching?" I asked myself again and again. During meditation His Name quelled my thoughts and I felt at peace.

January 16, 1983

This morning the temple drummers awoke me at 4 a.m. and when I realized that the images of Sri Arunachaleswara and his consort were coming around the hill I quickly jumped into slacks and shawl and ran up to the road. The images wended their way through pitch blackness, illumined only by bright torches and accompanied by horn and drums. At the Ashram, offerings were made and, during the arati before the Ashram gate, I took a photo. This caught the eye of a man nearer to the offering plate than I. He motioned for the priest to come to me; he gave me the vibhuti which I received with reverence. I remembered how Bhagavan, on such an occasion, remarked, "The son is beholden to the Father," and I felt that somehow Sri Arunachaleswara, the Father, knowing my extreme need of His grace, singled me out among the hundred or so people at the roadside to receive the sacred ash.

Paul and I recorded the Vedic recitations of Kittu and Appichi in Muruganar's (Paul's) room. After the taping was finished, we presented them with letters of appreciation and gifts. We read out our letters to them which described the inspiration we gain by listening to their recitation of the Vedas and the Sri Chakra Puja year after year, and how we derive from them the inspiration to carry on our lives in Sri Bhagavan's Name. Kittu spoke with such humility and sincerity: "Here we are very gratified and happy that you listen to and appreciate the Vedic recitations. There are so many here, so many sit quietly, yet we find no one who does the practice as all of you from Arunachala Ashrama do.

Kittu described how he and Appichi were boys in the first Veda Patasala founded by Major Chadwick. They would recite before Bhagavan in the Old Hall in the mornings at 5 a.m. and again in the afternoon. During the day, Bhagavan would walk out toward the goshala and the Veda Patasala and inquire after their welfare. Thus they received his grace in a personal way. When Kittu saw we had

presented him with a dhoti he reminisced how each year Major Chadwick would present all the boys in the school with fresh clothes.

Appichi wished to hear us recite a few names of "Sri Lalitasahasranam." Paul and I happily obliged.

Kittu and Appichi took our leave. As they slowly walked, side by side, across the yard in front of the Old Hall I followed their path intently with my eyes and wished to always remember the image of these two humble, lifelong servants of Bhagavan.

Around 6 p.m Kunju Swami and Natesan came to Muruganar's room to recite "Sri Arunachala Akshara Mana Malai." Kunju Swami then spoke movingly of Bhagavan and His relation with Sri Arunachala: "'Arunachala, Arunachala' repeated within Bhagavan's mind from his youth. He wrote, 'From the age of innocence it had shone within my mind that Arunachala was something of surpassing grandeur.' Sri Bhagavan's Arunachala-sphurana was the cause of his seeming absent mindedness at school. Sri Arunachala, within, was pulling his mind to the center. People say that Bhagavan had no teacher, but he himself has written, 'Making me free from faults and endowing me with virtues, accept me as Thy devotee, O Arunachala, that shinest as the Guru!' Normally, when a person receives a pencil or pen he will first write his own name. Bhagavan, however, would always write 'Arunachala'-Arunachala was his Name! Arunachala is none other than the Supreme Self. This he proclaims in "Navamanimalai" and again in "Sri Arunachala Pancharatna," verse 1: 'Although Siva is motionless, He dances before the Mother (Shakti) who stands still in the Court of Chidambaram. But know that that Shakti is withdrawn into His unmoving Self and He stands in His grandeur as the towering Arunachala.' And in stanza 2, "When one inquires into the meaning of Arunachala which is lustrous like red gold and bestows liberation, one finds that the word 'Aruna' means Sat, Chit and Ananda (existence, consciousness and bliss)."

January 19, 1983 - Sri Ramanasramam

Today I met again with Ramaswami Pillai and we talked for two hours.

"Do you think it is important that we live with few possessions?" I asked him.

"You must not make an effort to live with or without possessions. You must live with the conditions that prevail. The mental state alone is important. However, you must not have or be a slave to any want. Really, you only should have what is necessary for keeping body and soul together, and in good health. Also, you should not associate with all kinds of people."

Then he again spoke of the path of Self-Inquiry: "In the path of surrender, the ego can very easily remain. However, Bhagavan has said that real surrender can come only when we know, 'Who am I?'"

"You have convinced me that I must try to do Self-Inquiry in a serious way," I replied.

"I shall miss Paul and you," he said. "As a boy, I would beg our guests, 'Take me with you!' I would run down the road after them, crying, until I felt satisfied. During Bhagavan's time I would have to accompany devotees to the train. I especially loved those devotees."

This afternoon at 5 P.M., Kunju Swami, Natesan and I climbed the hill. Rather than follow the path to Skandasrama, we took the path to the left and sat together on a rock. Kunju Swami told me, as if a deep voice from within me spoke, "When a person follows the path of devotion, obstacles will arise." In his own life, the moment he saw Bhagavan's picture he had a great desire to come to Bhagavan. At that time, his teacher, a man with whom he was studying Kaivalya Navaneeta and other works, vehemently opposed his going to Bhagavan. He even threatened that some ill would befall him if he went to Bhagavan. In course of time, the teacher had to go away and Kunju Swami without his knowing, came to Bhagavan. Ultimately, the teacher also came, realized Sri Bhagavan's greatness and entrusted Kunju Swami lovingly to Bhagavan's care.

"If your lakshya (aim or goal) is Bhagavan alone, everything else will fall into place," Kunju Swami emphasized, "but there will be obstacles. If your lakshya is something small or trivial, it may be missed, but if your aim is the Mountain - which is so great - you cannot miss it. Be like the Mountain - calm, immovable!"

"Now, a worldly example: we have Sri Ramanasramam. While all sorts of things may happen in the Ashram, it is not run by any individual. Sri Bhagavan's divine shakti alone runs the Ashram. Similarly, in any of Bhagavan's Ashrams, no single individual runs the Ashram. Regardless of whoever may leave, Sri Bhagavan will continue His work and the Ashram will also continue.

"In this context, your attitude toward all humanity should be one of brotherhood and of natural and spontaneous friendliness. You should not hate or harbor a single bad thought for anyone, nor should you allow a single thought about whether or not someone likes you. It is completely immaterial.

"Whoever comes or goes, an Ashram established in the Name of Sri Bhagavan and Sri Arunachala must grow! There is not the least doubt about it!"

"I have admired Bhagawat," he continued, "I wondered what tapasya he must have done to attract such people as you. And to send you all here! (It is remarkable!) Yet, whatever happens you must remember your Lakshya of Sri Arunachala and be calm with your mind at the feet of Bhagavan."

January 20, 1983

Ramaswami shared with me a few details about his personal life. He came to Bhagavan at the age of 25. At the age of 31 or 32 he was living in a temple in a village when he became mad with ecstasy. He said, "It was evening about 6 o'clock when I had that first experience. I was surprised, not shocked. There was Consciousness-as though I was being told, 'This is what you sought.' It lasted only a few minutes at first. Later, the experience would return. 'What is the meaning of this coming and going of this experience,' I thought, 'I want it when I want it!' Then, I got it. I was in that state for three months. I was like a mad fellow wearing a dirty loin cloth and I didn't bathe. I wouldn't enter into any houses. If I got some hunger I would beg for food.... 'Happy' is not the word to express that state; 'Ecstatic' is also inadequate. That experience is still there with me, like an undercurrent. Some devotees came and took to Bhagavan. At that time, I got the confirmation that it is 'That'. I came with only one loincloth and ate in His presence. When I arrived, he was sitting on the sofa, and it somehow appeared to me as if he was sitting there waiting for me."

"...if I am Bhagavan's devotee, to deal with me is more dangerous than to deal with Bhagavan! I may forgive, but Bhagavan will not...."

"Your business is with the thinker-not with thoughts. Whenever your attention is given to thoughts, you must return it to the thinker."

Ramaswami turned his attention to my picture of Bhagavan and said, "You may become calm and peaceful by looking into Bhagavan's eyes. In the Hall we would sit and gaze on his eyes; he would not blink. It is something like a child sucking from the mother's breast. The child is not exactly awake-it is blissful. It ingests the milk without swallowing. The mother's love is so great; the milk flows in a current to the child. In this same manner, we receive the current (of grace) from Bhagavan's eyes. Bhagavan's grace is so great, you cannot escape it!"

January 20, 1983 - Afternoon

With bananas and puffed rice in hand I ran up to the Ashram for an ox cart pradakshina with Kunju Swami, Ganesan and Paul. Climbing aboard, the four of us sat cross legged: Ganesan first, then Kunju Swami, me, and Paul at the back. Side-by-side we bumped blissfully down the road.

Kunju Swami explained how it could be that many of Bhagavan's direct disciples, apparently out of their mind at the time of death, would be alert and clear in their recollection of Bhagavan. Moreover,

they would reassure Ganesan that Bhagavan's grace was with them and they experienced the awareness of Him within.

The mere contact with Bhagavan was sufficient to awaken Divine Knowledge in a person. Kunju Swami said, "Knowledge of the world is a separate thing, which may be affected at the time of death. The inner awakening might not be apparent during one's life due to the person's vasanas. Particularly in one's last days many vasanas may have to come forth. The mind may become irrational, but it is the finite mind."

Kunju Swami reassured us, "Don't think that because you didn't see Bhagavan in the body that same inner awakening has not occurred to you. It is written, even to think of Arunachala assures one of liberation! But, for thinking of Arunachala, YOU do not get the credit!" He was speaking in a playful, exuberant vein. "No! Arunachala makes the person remember Him. Such is the power and greatness of Arunachala that even the most ignorant person, once having known of it, will have to think at least once a day of Arunachala."

Kunju Swami continued his encouraging overflow: "Once a person has come to Bhagavan, he cannot escape! In the "Marital Garland of Letters" Bhagavan wrote, 'I had but thought of you as Arun, and lo! I was caught in the net of your grace. Can the web of your grace ever fail, Oh Arunachala?' In Tamil, the emphasis here is on the fact that the net of Bhagavan's grace 'cannot' be escaped!"

"I am very happy and content to be caught in the net of His grace," I said. Kunju Swami laughed.