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My Childhood with Sri Bhagavan by Smt. Rajalakshmi

Translated by Sri A. Padmanabhan

Smt. Rajalakshmi, the granddaughter of Venu Ammal, had the great good fortune of Sri Bhagavan's company from the tender age of three. In this interview, recorded at Sri Ramanasramam, Rajalakshmi talks about her experiences with Sri Bhagavan, the divine instructions received from him, and her interactions with his devotees. Rajalakshmi's son, A. Viswanathan, was also present during the interview. Both mother and son passed away in 2018 (please see the article entitled "Two Lights that Illumined Our Lives" in the Jan/Feb 2018 issue of the 'The Maharshi'). We are fortunate to have a window into her experiences.

Question: (Q): At the outset, please tell us about your grandmother, when and how you first met Sri Bhagavan, and incidents related to him.

Rajalakshmi (R): My name is Rajam, (Rajalakshmi); Sri Bhagavan called me Raji. I saw him when I was 3 years old, I remember sitting and talking with Sri Bhagavan.

Q: How and when did you start staying with your grandmother, Venu Ammal (Venu Patti)? (*Venu Ammal, who passed away in 1923, was the sister of Echammal. - Ed.*)

R: My parents lived in Tiruvannamalai. My father's name was Ramasesha Iyer – people called him Ramudu; he was working in the Taluk Office here. He lived here for 10 years.

My mother was the only daughter of Venu Ammal. My mother died when she was 16 years old, two and one-half years after I was born. Both my father and I used to stay with Venu Ammal.

I was here in Tiruvannamalai until I was 4 to 5 years old. My father used to come every Sunday as he was working in places in and around Tiruvannamalai.

Q: Then you used to play with Sri Bhagavan?

R: I used to play with Sri Bhagavan in the tank bund and at that time he taught me two stanzas: “Anāmalaiyāi aḍiyēnai...” (*Here, R. recites verse 7 of 'Arunachala Nava Mani Malai' then chants verse 5 of the same:*)

“Annamalai! As soon as Thou didst claim me, my body and soul were Thine. Can I then lack anything? I can think only of Thee hereafter, not of merit and demerit, O my life. Do as Thou wilt with me, then, my Beloved, but grant me only ever-increasing love for Thy (dear) Feet!”

“Lord, who art Conciousness Itself, reigning over the famous Sonagiri, forgive all the grievous faults of this poor self and by Thy merciful glance, benign as the rain clouds, save me from being lost once more in the dreary waste, or else I cannot cross the terrible ocean of birth and death. What can match a mother's care for her child? Deal with me then (like a loving mother).”

And Sri Bhagavan used to enjoy shaking his head,

singing and teaching me. Sri Bhagavan taught me the letters of the Tamil alphabet in the Ashram, as well as math.

After joining school (I started schooling from 4th standard as Sri Bhagavan had taught me Tamil, math, etc.), Sri Bhagavan also taught me Telugu and Sanskrit, writing in the notebook that I have shared with you.

Q: Did you learn Sanskrit in school?

R: I learned Sanskrit only from Sri Bhagavan. I started by writing *Sad Darsanam* also in the book, and Sri Bhagavan would correct it. After that I used to go to Sanskrit classes in the evening, and learn from Vaidyanatha Iyer and Sundara Ganapatigal who came to the Ashram, learning *Raguvamsam*, slokas, etc.

Sri Bhagavan wrote and gave me *Upadesa Saram* first. I used to write *Upadesa Saram* in Sanskrit and show it to Sri Bhagavan, and I memorized it and recited it fully within a week. He always said that I should write only in the source language and not in others: Sanskrit compositions in Sanskrit, Telugu compositions in Telugu, etc.

He used to ask me to write Nayana's works that had come to him, like *Ramanadaskam*; I used to write them in my notebook and give it to him. Sri Bhagavan said that writing anything once was equivalent to reading it 10 times.

Every day from 3 p.m., I would do my homework in Sri Bhagavan's presence, chant slokas and write them. When it was 5 p.m. he would ask me to go home as it would be getting late.

Jackie would accompany me home. (*Jackie was a dog who lived in the Ashram and was greatly devoted to Sri Bhagavan. Bhagavan in turn showered his grace upon Jackie. A small samadhi was built in the Ashram for Jackie as suggested by Sri Bhagavan. – Ed.*)

Q: Where did you stay in Tiruvannamalai?

R: Our home, rented, was in Thaalaigiri Street first - this is where I was born; then in Sannidhi Street, first



Srimati Rajalakshmi

in Narasimha Rao's home who is related to us.

I used to chant *Ulladu Narpadu*, *Upadesa Undiyar*, etc; Sri Bhagavan would correct me if something was missing. I would chant *Upadesa Saram* at the end and then go home.

On Sundays, I used to bring around 10 friends and play kummi, kolattam, etc. in front of Sri Bhagavan. All the children called Sri Bhagavan "Thatha" (Grandfather); Sri Bhagavan used to comment that he had so

many granddaughters.

"See!" Chinnaswami used to say "They are all Ashram granddaughters; that Raji is the first granddaughter and the others come after her."

Q: Your friends were from which school?

R: They were all from the local government girls school. Others from the Sanskrit school also used to come.

We used to chant *Mudakaratha Modakam*, and *Kathayā nijayā* (from *Chatvarimsat – 40 Verses in Praise of Sri Bhagavan*), etc.

Q: Can you tell us about your calling Sri Bhagavan as "Thatha"?

R: Someone from the Ashram scolded me, saying not to call Sri Bhagavan as "Thatha".

Sri Bhagavan intervened and told him, "She has been calling me 'Thatha' since her childhood, so to her I am always 'Thatha'. You have come recently but she has been here since she was a small child calling me as 'Thatha'."

Q: Tell me about how you used to address Chinnaswami?

R: I called him 'Chinnamama'. He was very affectionate to me.

In 1953, when I came with my son, Chinnaswami, now advanced in years, was lying down near the tank. He enquired about me and about my sons. He asked me to call his attendant a few times but the

attendant was not listening. I went out and saw that the attendant was reading a magazine. After I got his attention, Chinnaswami scolded him and asked him to find out if any food was available to give to me. I offered to go myself and went to the kitchen. I asked them to give me some of the food cooked for Chinnaswami as he had asked me to eat. The kitchen staff hesitated.

I requested the kitchen staff to just give me a spoonful as otherwise I would have had to lie to Chinnaswami. So, they gave a spoonful of sambar to taste. It was too salty. I asked them, “Why it is so salty?” I thought it might upset Chinnaswami. The kitchen staff said that he would not complain as he liked it very salty.

I came back and told him I had eaten and that I had enjoyed the food. After a few days, he passed away. The same happened with Athai (Chinnaswami’s sister, Alamelu). I went and saw her also and she too passed away after a short while.

Q: Can you share about your experience with the kolattam sticks?

(Kolattam sticks are thin, colorful wooden sticks stylishly designed that girls carry in both hands as they dance in a circle and maintain rhythm with the sticks of their dance partners - Ed.)

R: I didn’t have kolattam sticks of my own as my Venu Patti couldn’t afford them. I told Sri Bhagavan about it. Sri Bhagavan made a nice pair of kolattam sticks for me. I kept it as a precious gift and never used to share them with others. Sri Bhagavan used to tell me to share them with all as they were meant for all the girls to play with, and that I could share and collect them back after playing. I had a nice copy of *Upadesa Saram* handwritten by Sri Bhagavan (like print) and I had lost it sharing it with someone. So I told Sri Bhagavan that I did not want to share the kolattam sticks and lose them like the copy of *Upadesa Saram*. He told me, “*Upadesa Saram* is now inside you; so why bother if the printed copy is with you or not?” (Like that, I did not want to give away my kolattam sticks.)

Once, I was travelling from Puduppaadi to Tiruvannamalai on my own, along with my youngest son who was 3 months old. I didn’t know the route. An older couple with a child was going to Kovilur with me in the bus. We were to go to Arani and take

a bus from Arani to Polur and from there take the train to Tiruvannamalai.

We reached Arani but there was no bus from Arani, so we slept under the awning of a hotel, without food, overnight. We took the bus the next morning and reached Polur, in order to board the train to Tiruvannamalai. At Polur, I was worried how I could go alone to Tiruvannamalai with the child. As I thus was thinking, I saw Gopala Rao (also called Khadar Gopala Rao, as he had a Khadi Vastralayam) and Rama Rao in the same compartment! They enquired how and where I was coming from and where I was going with such a small child.

They helped me carry the luggage and my child, then took us to a restaurant to have dosai to eat (as I had not eaten dinner). On reaching Tiruvannamalai, they took me to Arunkundram Duraisamy Iyer’s wife’s house. (Arunkundram Duraisamy Iyer was taking care of the Nandhavanam – the flower garden; his wife had a rented place). They did not take me to my Venu Patti’s house as Venu Patti lived in a very small room. I showered, had lunch and went to the Ashram. Since the Old Hall was crowded, I kept the child behind the hall under the sunshade on the unpaved ground, went inside and did namaskaram to Sri Bhagavan. I came out and was standing there. Seeing me, Kalyanaraman (Jeyam Mama) came out and started talking to me. Seeing this, Sri Bhagavan also came out. He did not see me at first and later enquired from where I had come. I said that I had come from Karki. He asked me why I had left the child on the unpaved ground. He held his walking stick towards the child. The child firmly held the stick. Sri Bhagavan asked the child why he needed the stick as only old men like him needed it!

As this was happening, all others came out. Sri Bhagavan was standing and telling all the others about me as a child - how he gave (me) a small child *Upadesa Saram* and how I had memorized all the 30 stanzas in a week, and how I chanted them. It was not I, it was Sri Bhagavan who had made me learn them in no time. *(To be continued.)*



Early Days With Bhagavan

by G. Ramaswami Pillai

Sri Ramaswami Pillai's devotion to Sri Bhagavan was evident in every word and counsel he gave to devotees who would ask his advice on spiritual matters. A beautiful video of Sri Ramaswami, from a 1989 interview at Sri Ramanasramam, demonstrates this clearly, and can be seen [here](#).

His early days with Sri Bhagavan are described in the following article.

From boyhood, I was spiritually inclined. Although coming from a meat-eating family, I turned vegetarian while still a boy. I was mainly a worshipper of Siva but learned about Christ and Buddha too and revered them. Twice I visited the great Muslim shrine at Nagore and I understood that Allah was only another name for God. My one ambition in life was to see God face to face. This was granted to me while still a schoolboy, in March 1917, when I first went to Skandashram and set eyes on Bhagavan. Reclining on the couch, he looked indescribably majestic. Since then he has been God in human form for me, my God, Guru and All. I did not ask for anything, I was filled to overflowing by just seeing him. He turned on me that look of heart-melting grace that he so often bestowed on newcomers. After a few days I had to return home. There I learnt *The Marital Garland of Letters* and spent my time reciting it either mentally or aloud and even writing it out. After finishing school I went to college. Then I returned to my village, and although I had no desire for married life, my parents got me married. I had no children, however, and was soon able to give up married life and go and live with Bhagavan at his Ashram.

Bhagavan had lived in various caves and temples, but Skandashram was the first to be known as an ashram. He stayed there for seven years with his mother, his younger brother Niranjanananda Swami, who was to be the future Sarvadhikari, and a few sadhus. It was here that ashram cooking was first started. This was due to the presence of his Mother. It was her presence that made it into an ashram. After her death Bhagavan abandoned it and went to live beside her shrine at the foot of the Hill, where the present

ashram has grown up. This shows her to have had greater importance than commonly supposed.

During his years at Skandashram Bhagavan still spoke little and seldom. It did not matter; his gaze was dynamic, penetrating, gracious, soul-stirring, ego-killing. In later years he spoke far more but his silences were still tremendous. It was on my second visit to Skandashram that I first made pradakshina. A visitor from Madurai whom I knew, wanted to go around the Hill with Bhagavan and I joined them. At that time the lower slopes were still forested and we took the forest path for a good part of the way before coming out on the road. The next day I had a sudden urge to go around by myself. I started out as before but soon lost my way on the forest track. As I started I had noticed that one of the ashram dogs was following me. Now it ran in front and began to lead. At once it flashed on me that this was Bhagavan's work. With tears of gratitude and joy I followed my guide. He took me by the same path as the previous day until we came to the road and then disappeared, and I saw him at the ashram when I got back. At the time I told nobody about this. It was my first experience of my spiritual relationship with Bhagavan and I was more than ever convinced that he would guide me through the unknown paths of life. Such an incident may appear trivial to the reader, but when it actually happens it strengthens one's faith in Bhagavan who alone can help one by his infinite grace in opening one's inner vision.

For a whole year at Skandashram, Bhagavan took only one meagre meal a day. I was on a visit there the day he broke this fast. I had decided to stay the night even though there was no food for an evening meal for the rest of us. I didn't feel hungry. At about 7:30 one of the devotees, Ramanatha Brahmachari, came back with some pieces of broken coconut and some rice that he had been given at a ceremony he had attended in town. Bhagavan suggested that we should boil it up on the charcoal stove we had there and share it, as was the usual custom. He told us to see whether there was any sugar or sugar candy left from gifts by earlier visitors to flavour it with. We looked but there was nothing at all. It was dark and raining outside and we could not go into town for anything. I

was near to tears that Bhagavan should ask for something – so rare an event – and we should not be able to provide it. At that very moment the door opened and two students came in with a bag of sugar candy and a bunch of bananas that they had brought to present to Bhagavan. The meal was cooked and eaten, the two visitors also being invited. Bhagavan remarked that we had asked for sugar candy and got bananas also, which could be cut up and served like a pickle with the food. After eating he said that it had been just a year, 365 days exactly, since he began to limit himself to one meal a day and that from now on he would eat in the evening also. That was how things happened with Bhagavan. He did not work miracles; things just happened right. Miracles are generally thought of as deliberate acts willed by a person, but happenings like these are the result of spiritual forces already and always at work. The Jnani is God Himself in human form. He never wills anything but things happen in his presence and the ignorant attribute them to him. His state is pure awareness. It is a matter of experience. One may get a glimpse of it in his presence.

It was in 1922, when the present ashram at the foot of the hill first started, that I became a permanent resident. At first there was only a thatched hut over the Mother's shrine and a second small hut that served as a kitchen. There were only a few of us then. There were no ashram servants in those days; we did all the work ourselves, and Bhagavan along with us. Puja was performed twice a day, as it still is. We spent our time doing ashram work, chanting sacred songs, walking around the hill, meditating and reading spiritual books. Earlier Bhagavan had been more silent and aloof; later, when crowds began to come, he was necessarily more distant, but at this time he took part in everything, guiding and helping in every activity of the growing ashram. He was our Lord and Guru and was always with us. Devotees used to bring us provisions when they were needed and we never felt any want. We used to share things as they came. Sometimes there was even more than we could dispose of on the spot. We even used to make tea and coffee when the ingredients were available. Though this was an idyllic state in itself, the essence of it was our striving for Realization.

Having attained a human birth, that is the only goal worth aiming at, for it is unalloyed, eternal Bliss and Peace.

We can dwell on the name or form of Ramana, or neither. Repeating the name “Ramana” inwardly is itself a good sadhana for those who do not use Self-enquiry. Or by concentrating on him intensely and constantly we may find in him the fire of Knowledge which will burn up our ego and convert us into him so that we realize our identity with him who is the Self of the Self. The state of bliss thus attained through merging into the Guru is called Guru Turiya. It is a matter for experience and cannot be explained in words. The ego is only an accretion, a shadow, a ghost, an unstable outcome of the combination of *chit* and *jada*, consciousness and matter. It is the source of all mischief in our state of ignorance. Nothing is lost by its destruction. It obscures and conceals the true Self which is identical with pure Consciousness. This false ego is to be dissolved by steady enquiry into it or by the grace of our most gracious Sat-Guru Bhagavan Sri Ramana. — *From The Mountain Path*, Jan. 1966.

Guru Vachaka Kovai – The Garland of the Guru's Sayings

செம்மா தவத்திறனாச் சிந்தை கடைப்பிடிக்க
எம்மா னியம்புறுதி யிவ்வளவே - சும்மா
விருத்தலே யன்றிமற் றெண்ணலிலை யாதும்
கருத்தினாற் செய்யுங் கடன்.

cemmā tavattiraṇāc cintai kaṭaiṇṇiṭikka
emmā niyampurṭi yivvaḷavē – cummā
viruttalē yaṇṇimar reṇṇavilē yātum
karuttiṇār ceyyum kaṭaṇ.

What our Master clearly teaches
By the way of great, good, powerful tapas
Is only this and nothing more:
BE STILL.

Apart from this, the mind has no
Task to do or thought to think.

— Sri Muruganar, *Guru Vachaka Kovai*, v. 773
trans. by Prof. K. Swaminathan

Yoga Vasiṣṭha

Sri Bhagavan often related to devotees stories from 'The Yoga Vasiṣṭha'. He also translated some verses from this text into Tamil, which were incorporated into his 'Reality in Forty Verses: Supplement'.

In this excerpt, the Sage Vasiṣṭha is speaking to Rāma about the unreality of the body. This has been translated by Swami Venkatesananda in a text entitled 'Vasiṣṭha's Yoga'.

Rāma: In the inspiring account of Bhuṣuṇḍa that you have narrated, you made mention of a body which has three different pillars, nine gates, etc. Pray tell me: how did it arise in the first place, how does it exist and who dwells in it?

Vasiṣṭha said: O Rāma, this house known as the body has not been made by anyone, in fact! It is only an appearance, like the two moons seen by one suffering from diplopia. The moon is really only one, the duality is an optical illusion. The body is experienced to exist only when the notion of a physical body prevails in the mind; it is unreal, but since it appears to be when the notion arises, it is considered both real and unreal. Dreams are real during the dream state, though they are unreal at other times; ripples are real when they are seen to exist, not at other times. Even so, the body is real when it is experienced as a real substance. It is only an illusory appearance, even though it appears to be real.

The notion of 'I am this body' arises in relation to what is truly a piece of flesh with bones, etc., because of a mental predisposition; it is an illusion. Abandon this illusion. There are thousands of such bodies which have been brought into being by your thought-force. When you are asleep and dreaming, you experience a body in it. Where does that body arise or exist? While daydreaming, you imagine you are in heaven, etc. Where is that body? When all these have ceased, you engage yourself in diverse activities, playing different roles. Where is the body with which you do these? When you besport with your friends and enjoy their company in self-forgetful delight, where does that body abide? Thus, O Rāma, the bodies are but the products of the mind; hence,

they are regarded as real and unreal. Their conduct is determined by the mind; they are non-different from the mind.

Vasiṣṭha continued:

'This is wealth', 'This is body', and 'This is a nation' – all these are notions O Rāma, which are the manifestation of the energy of the mind and which are otherwise illusory. Know this to be a long dream, or a longstanding hallucination, or daydreaming, or wishful thinking. When by the grace of God or the self you attain awakening, you will see all this clearly. The existence of a world independent of you or the mind is but the jugglery of the mind; it is nothing but the recognition of a notion as it were a substance.

If a man resolutely seeks the source of the notions, he realizes consciousness; otherwise, he experiences the illusory world-appearance again and again. For by continually entertaining such notions such as 'This is it', 'This is mine' and 'This is my world' such notions assume the appearance of substantiality. The permanency of the world is also an illusion: in the dream state what is really a brief moment is experienced by the dreamer as a lifetime. In a mirage only illusory 'water' is seen and not the substratum; even so, in a state of ignorance one sees only the illusory world appearance and not the substratum. However, when one has shed that ignorance, the illusory appearance vanishes. Even the man who is normally subject to fear is not afraid of an imaginary tiger; the wise man who knows that this world is naught but a notion or imagination is unafraid of anything. When one knows that the world is nothing but the appearance of one's self, of whom need he be afraid? When one's vision is purified by enquiry, one's deluded understanding concerning the world vanishes.

When those who are in the dread of death seek
refuge at the feet of the deathless, birthless Lord
Supreme, their ego and attachments die; and they,
now deathless, think no more of death.
– Ulladu Narpadu, Invocatory verse 2

The Maharshi Newsletter

In the January-February issue of *The Maharshi* newsletter – its 29th anniversary issue – we published two letters by Dennis Hartel who has been a guiding light in our community since the early 1970s. In the first letter, Dennis described to all his friends his fresh calling to a life of solitary contemplation. In the second letter, he shared his insights into the life of a devotee and servant of God.

Dennis Hartel, with the collaboration and support of Dr. Anil Sharma and other devotees, began *The Maharshi* newsletter in 1991 and its publication has continued until the present day. After prayerful reflection, we are aiming to continue publication of *The Maharshi*, with the focus to remain on the teachings of our Guru, Sri Bhagavan. Dr. Anil Sharma has agreed to oversee this venture in the interim, aided by Ranjani Ramanan and Evelyn Kaselow Saphier. Many friends continue their work behind the scenes for the publication of *The Maharshi*.

Ramana Satsangs in the USA and Canada

Regular satsangs with recitations, songs, readings and meditation are conducted in or near large cities.

Some of them are weekly. If you would like to attend any of these, please contact the individuals below for more information.

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

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

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

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

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

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The state we call realization is simply being oneself, not knowing anything or becoming anything. If one has realized, he is That which alone is, and which alone has always been. – Sri Ramana Maharshi

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