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My Childhood with Sri Bhagavan by Smt. Rajalakshmi

Sri Bhagavan's glance of grace fell upon Smt. Rajalakshmi at the tender age of 3 years, when she met her God and guru in the company of her grandmother Venuammal, sister of Echammal. Sri Bhagavan's grace became the guiding force in her life and that of her family. In this, the second part of an interview conducted at Sri Ramanasramam in 2008, Rajalakshmi describes how as a child she used to "cook" for Sri Bhagavan, as well as her interactions with his devotees. Rajalakshmi's son, A. Vishwanathan, who was also present during this interview, visited Arunachala Ashrama in New York in 2017 before his passing. Sri Anantha Padmanabhan, the translator of this article, had a chance to meet him and to discuss Rajalakshmi's life-long devotion to her guru. She begins by describing how she "fed" Sri Bhagavan:

Sri Bhagavan used to select and give me small pebbles for me to play cookery. I used to play at cooking several dishes with them and feed them to him. Sri Bhagavan was telling others how I used to play, naming the various pebble dishes and feeding him. Sri Bhagavan would also pretend to eat them and I don't remember if he actually swallowed them or spat them out. Venu Patti used to scold me, asking why I was feeding Sri Bhagavan with stones. He would tell her that it was real to me, as a child – eggplant curry, payasam etc., even though to Venu Patti it might not have seemed so.

One day I wanted to sit next to Sri Bhagavan in the dining hall to have lunch. Venu Patti was serving eggplant curry and I asked for more. Venu Patti said, “Āsa āsa parama dhukham, nirāsa parama sukham (Desires lead to sadness, desirelessness leads to happiness.); so don't have desire for all these things.” I was only 10 years old. Then she went to serve Sri Bhagavan. Sri Bhagavan said to her the same words she had said to me. Venu Patti told Sri Bhagavan that the lesson was only for me and not for him. Sri Bhagavan told her that it applies to all including Sri

Bhagavan and he refused to accept more eggplant curry! “You refused the child and the same applies to me also,” he said.

Sri Bhagavan had lost his mother (Thayar) in Vaikasi (April-May) and my mother passed away in Thai masam (January). Sri Bhagavan used to say that he and I were the same as Sri Bhagavan's mother and my mother were gone!

Thayar (Sri Bhagavan's mother) also had been very considerate. She used to tell my Patti to go home quickly as my pregnant mother was alone at home. Thayar and all were then living at Virupaksha cave.

She used to scold Venu Patti telling her, “See, one day your daughter is going to give birth on her own as you are here all the time.” As it happened, Venu Patti was away at the Ashram, then went to the temple for annābishekam, and by the time she reached home, my mother had given birth to me with the help of the maid servant! Thayar's words proved true!

On a different occasion, at Pachaiamm Temple, when Sri Bhagavan was there, lots of rice and groceries had been donated. Sri Bhagavan asked that

they be cooked and Sri Bhagavan himself set up firewood ovens with stones for cooking. Patti and others were worried that so much food was to be cooked and wondered who was going to eat it. Sri Bhagavan told them to just wait and see. As Sri Bhagavan had said, lots of people came to the temple and they all ate the prasadam and nothing went to waste.

A. Vishwanathan (V): Can you tell us about Kavyakanta Ganapati and your experience with him?

Rajalakshmi (R): This happened when I was a little child. It was at Virupaksha Cave when Ganapati Muni was with Sri Bhagavan. My mother was suffering from a big boil on her chest and was very sick. The local hospital could not diagnose the problem and Venu Patti was set to take her to Vellore Hospital. Before going there, she went with my mother (Balu) to see Sri Bhagavan, and Nayana was also there. Nayana did japa for one hour with karpooram (camphor) on a vibuthi plate and asked Venu Patti to smear the vibuthi (holy ashes) on my mother's body. Patti did the same and during the night the boil gave way and my mother became much better. This was told to me by Venu Patti.

When Nayana was in the Nama Shivaya Cave here, he had given me mantropadesam. After that I did japam (of the mantra).

Question (Q): Tell us about your experience with Seshadri Swamigal eating at your home.

R: I was 10-11 years old and I used to eat “pazhaya sadham” (leftover rice from the previous day soaked in water) and go to school. I was eating one day and Seshadri Swamigal came and asked to be served the same and insisted on the old rice. If we didn't listen he might have thrown the rice, so I gave him that.

After eating he offered to drop me at the school. Many times he had walked me to school. He used to sleep outside Chinna Kurukkal's house, three houses from where we lived, so many days, if he saw me, he would accompany me to school or back. Or if he saw me coming from the Ashram he would come with me. “Don't go alone,” he would say.

I used to call him “Mama” and he would ask me about my studies, if I chanted slokas, etc.

Q: Was he always shabbily dressed?

R: His dress was not torn but always dirty. If some

one gave him a new garment, in two days it would have become dirty. It was not possible to see him with good clothes on this body, but everybody admired and respected him as Swami. None would be harsh or indifferent to him. He used to sit and eat at the Moola Mandapam and tell me that I should eat without spilling (any food).

Once, I am not sure if I was going on Giri pradakshanam or not, when I was a child, I would hold Sri Bhagavan's stick while walking. When my feet hurt, I used to complain to Sri Bhagavan. Ramaswami Pillai or Kunju Swami would carry me. I remember walking with Sri Bhagavan and holding his stick. Probably I was 4-5 years old, I think.

Q: Did you keep in touch with Sri Bhagavan after getting married?

R. Yes, I always wrote letters. In January 1939 I was in Karki near Pune; while visiting my father in Tirupathur, I went to Tiruvannamalai to see Sri Bhagavan with my husband for the first time after marriage. Dandapani Swamigal asked me how my in-laws were, and recalled my days with Sri Bhagavan as a playful child to all my in-laws.

In 1941, during the Jayanthi time (Dandapani Swami and Muruganar were there; we always saw Muruganar.), I visited the Ashram with all my in-laws and introduced them to Sri Bhagavan. Sri Bhagavan himself could identify all the in-laws.

Sri Bhagavan always told me to chant or do all my practices inside (mentally) as my in-laws were not used to Sri Bhagavan and his teachings. I always practise what Sri Bhagavan taught me to think or chant inside (inwardly).

V: How did K.V. Ramanan Mama spend time with you in his younger days?

R: K.V. Ramanan Mama was the son of Chellammal, Echammal's (adopted) daughter. He was a 6 month-old child when his mother passed away. She gave birth here (in Tiruvannamalai) and after that she left as it was the time of the plague. It must have been 1923-1924.

This child (Ramanan) was brought here. Echa Patti and Gnanambal Patti, who is also a great devotee of Bhagavan, used to bring food here for Bhagavan.

So I used to play with Ramanan when he was 6-7 years old. He was studying here at the Victoria School only.

All of us had the practice of circumambulating the Kambathu Nayanar (a deity) on the way to school. On one such day, he (K.V. Ramanan) finished the circumambulation, was washing his legs in the tank and he slipped into the tank. As this was happening, his Chithi (step-mother) had a premonition of his fall and she came to the place immediately!

Some unknown “paradesi” (sadhu) had taken him out and put him on the ground. She took the child home. At home, Echa Patti was angry to hear about the fall, scolded him and gave him a few smacks. In those days, if one fell, they used to mildly smack the child who had fallen down; that used to be the practice.

Q: Later that day in the evening, when Ramanan

Mama (then 6 years old) came to Bhagavan at the Ashram, Bhagavan asked him, “How deep was the Sivagangai thirtham?” He asked him like that!

R: "Since you fell down in to it!"

Q: No one had told Bhagavan. He asked on his own how deep the Sivagangai thirtham was. The “paradesi” who had came there to save him was perhaps Bhagavan himself in disguise!

R: Yes yes, it must be Bhagavan.

V: Did you know those pattis (senior ladies) in the kitchen...

R: Yes Lokammaa Patti, then, Subbulakshmi Ammal. I know all of them well.

Q: Did you also go to kitchen and assist in cutting vegetables etc.?

R: Oh, yes I used to. They used to spread a large palm leaf mat and sit around it. Bhagavan also came.

Once, there was a lot of eggplant from somewhere outside. Bhagavan asked them to cut it and make “vathal”(sun-dried egg plant slices).

So, we all cut the eggplants, removed the stalks and the skin around the stalks and kept that heap to be discarded. Bhagavan came and saw that being wasted.

The stalk was thick as many of the eggplants were over-ripe. Bhagavan removed the thick outer skin of the stalk and kept the thin inner part and cut them and the skin into small pieces. He cooked a portion of the leftovers and asked all the others to do the same for all the leftover stalks and skin.

So all cut the stalks and the skin into small pieces. That day that was made as a side dish, 'Koottu' (a gravyish vegetable dish). That itself came to a large quantity (gestures the large quantity by hands).

Bhagavan would insist not to waste even the interwoven layers of the skin of the banana flower (a banana flower will have many layers of thick skin that protect layers of florets; the skin is generally not

used). He would ask to cut them into small pieces and make the 'Koottu' side dish. No one else would touch that skin, but Bhagavan would instruct us to cook it somehow. Bhagavan would insist on not wasting anything!

On another occasion, I was travelling to Tiruvannamalai with my small child, Sathya to visit my sister-in-law who had lost her son. I came to offer

condolences and to help her. It was dark at the bus stand near the railway station. I was wondering how I could reach her place. As I was worried, I saw Ramana Padhananthar and Kunjuswami at the bus stand, who just happened to be there! They asked me what I was doing there at this odd hour. Sri Padhananthar was in dhoti and Kunjuswami in a sanyasin's orange dhoti. Padhananthar told Kunjuswami that she too had grown up in the ashram as a child and took me in a vehicle safely to my destination.

The next day I went to the ashram and Sri Bhagavan asked me if I had had a safe escort the previous night! It is all Sri Bhagavan's Grace!



*Rajalakshmi with Sri Bhagavan, Echammal, Venuammal
T.N. Venkataraman and K.V. Mama.*

Ulladu Narpadu, Forty Verses on Reality by Sri Ramana Maharshi *An Introduction and New Recording*

When asked by Sri Muruganar about the nature of Reality and the means to attain it, Sri Bhagavan poured forth his grace in his composition *Ulladu Narpadu* or *Forty Verses on Reality*. These verses have been a beacon light for all devotees as a direct, simple and clear expression of the teachings of Sri Bhagavan.

In these beautiful terse verses, Sri Bhagavan leads us ever inward, to be established as the Reality that we, as he explains, at every moment, always are. No one is incapable of the realization of Reality, as we are all aware, without any doubt whatsoever, that we exist. This is the key. Our being is proof of the Reality and indeed IS the Reality. And, this Reality is present even in the absence of the body, which is mistakenly understood to be our self. In deep sleep, for example, when there is no body, no mind, and no world, the fact that our existence continues unbroken is within the experience of all, on a daily basis.

Is it possible to even imagine that one does not exist? No. That Reality is ever-present and ever-attained, says Sri Bhagavan. And Muruganar concludes that this *Ulladu Narpadu* is the light by which it is revealed.

Sri Bhagavan explains the first two invocatory verses in “Talks”, Talk number 567. The verses and meaning are given below, followed by Sri Bhagavan's explanation.

உள்ளதல துள்ளவுணர் வுள்ளதோ வுள்ளபொரு
ளுள்ளலற வுள்ளத்தே யுள்ளதா-லுள்ளமெனு
முள்ளபொரு ளுள்ளலெவ னுள்ளத்தே யுள்ளபடி
யுள்ளதே யுள்ள லுணர்வாயே - யுள்ளே

Ulla-dala duḷḷa-vunar ulladō vuḷḷa-porul
Ulla-laṛa vuḷḷatē uḷḷa-dāl – uḷḷa-menum
Ulla-porul ullālevan ullattē uḷḷa-paḍi
Ulladē ullal uṇar-vāyē – ullē

Invocation

Could there be a being-consciousness existing apart from that which (eternally) is? Since that Reality exists in the Heart, free of thought, who could meditate upon that Reality called the Heart? You

should know that to remain within the Heart, as it is, is truly to meditate (upon the Heart). (1)

மரணபய மிக்குளவம் மக்களரணாக
மரணபவ மில்லா மகேசன் - சரணமே
சார்வர்தஞ் சார்வொடுதாஞ் சாவற்றார் சாவெண்ணஞ்
சார்வரோ சாவா தவந்நித்தர் - பார்வைசேர்

Marāṇa-bhaya mikkuḷa-vam makkaḷara ṇāga
Marāṇa-bhava millā magēsan – chara-ṇamē
Sārvar-taṇ sārvoḍu-tāṇ savuṭṭrār sāveṇṇaṇ
Sārvarō sāvā davar-nittar – pārvai sēr

When those who are in 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. (2)

Commentary by Sri Bhagavan

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

The second stanza is in praise of God with attributes. In the foregoing, to be as one's self is mentioned; in the present stanza, surrender to the Lord of all. Furthermore, the second indicates (1) the fit reader (2) the subject matter (3) the relationship and (4) the fruit. The fit reader is the one who is competent for it. Competence consists in non-attachment to the world and desire to be liberated. All know that they must die some time or other; but they do not think deeply on the matter. All have a fear of death: such fear is momentary. Why fear death? Because of the ‘I-am-the-body’ idea. All are fully aware of the death of the body and its cremation. That the body is lost in death is well-known. Owing to the I-am-the-body notion, death is feared as being the loss of one's self. Birth and death pertain to the body only; but they are superimposed on the self, giving rise to the delusion

that birth and death relate to the self. In the effort to overcome birth and death man looks up to the Supreme Being to save him. Thus are born faith and devotion to the Lord. How to worship Him? The creature is powerless and the Creator is all-powerful. How to approach Him? To entrust oneself to His care is the only thing left for him; total surrender is the only way. Therefore he surrenders himself to God. Surrender consists in giving up oneself and one's possessions to the Lord of Mercy. Then what is left over for the man? Nothing – neither himself nor his possessions. The body, liable to be born and to die, having been made over to the Lord, the man need no longer worry about it. Then birth and death cannot strike terror. The cause of fear was the body; it is no longer his; why should he fear now? Or where is the identity of the individual to be frightened? Thus the self is realised and bliss results. This is then the subject matter: freedom from misery and gain of happiness. This is the highest good to be gained. Surrender is synonymous with bliss itself. This is the relationship. The fruit is to reflect on the subject matter and gain knowledge which is ever-present, here and now. The stanza ends with 'the immortal ones'."

We are indeed indebted to Sri Muruganar that he asked Sri Bhagavan the questions that lead to the composition of this work. The first verse was composed on the 21st of July 1928 and the final verse was completed on Aug. 8th. How did it come about? Let us see what Sri Bhagavan says, as recorded in *Day by Day* by Devaraja Mudaliar on 7-12-45:

"Dr. Syed thereupon asked Bhagavan when *Reality in Forty Verses* was made by Bhagavan. Bhagavan said, "It was recently, something like 1928. Muruganar has noted down somewhere the different dates. One day Muruganar said that some stray verses composed by me now and then on various occasions should not be allowed to die, but should be collected together and some more added to them to bring the whole number to forty, and that the entire forty should be made into a book with a proper title. He accordingly gathered about thirty or less stanzas and requested me to make the rest to bring the total to forty. I did so, composing a few stanzas on different occasions as the mood came upon me. When the number came up to forty,

Muruganar went about deleting one after another of the old collection of thirty or less on the pretext they were not quite germane to the subject on hand or otherwise not quite suitable, and requesting me to make fresh ones in place of the deleted ones. When this process was over, and there were forty stanzas as required by Muruganar, I found that in the forty there were but two stanzas out of the old ones and all the rest had been newly composed. It was not made according to any set scheme, nor at a stretch, nor systematically. I composed different stanzas on different occasions and Muruganar and others afterwards arranged them in some order according to the thoughts expressed in them to give some appearance of connected and regular treatment of the subject, viz., Reality." (The stanzas contained in the old collection and deleted by Muruganar were about twenty. These were afterwards added as supplement to the above work and the Supplement too now contains 40 verses)."

Initially, the first invocatory verse was written as a 2 line verse (*kural venba*). The great scholar-devotee Ganapati Muni noticed this and expressed concern that this was different from the rest of the verses which consisted of four lines. At his request, Sri Bhagavan then re-wrote the first verse in a four-line format. As this first verse referred to the formless self of all, Ganapati Muni then said that it would be preferable to have another verse which referred to a God with name and form, as was the tradition for all similar works. He suggested the name Mahesan, which appeared in another verse. Accordingly, Sri Bhagavan modified the second verse into its current form, highlighting the path of self-surrender.

New Recording

Sri J. Jayaraman, resident of Sri Ramanasramam and well-known to devotees of Sri Bhagavan, has recorded a new version of *Ulladu Narpadu*. Arunachala Ashrama has, for those wishing to hear or chant this divine upadesa, created a presentation which includes Sri Jayaraman's recitation, along with the Tamil text, transliteration and translation of each verse. This can also be found on the Ashrama's You Tube Channel, which contains many inspiring videos of Sri Bhagavan.

May the grace of Sri Bhagavan, so beautifully revealed in *Ulladu Narpadu*, ever shine!

Shelter in (Our Own) Place

The phrase “shelter in place” has become well-known to us all as the effects of the COVID-19 virus are felt worldwide.

It seems that every facet of our daily life has been affected, as public health advisories are put into effect for our own safety and that of others. As we see the mounting death toll in many hard-hit countries, our hearts are melted by the out-pouring of grief that has enveloped them; and as we see that the effects of the virus are not hindered by geographic boundaries, we watch daily with mounting concern the increasing toll in our own villages, towns and cities.

Sri Ramanasramam has been, as advised, closed to visitors in an effort to lessen the propagation of the virus. The Ashrama in New York has also been closed to visitors since March 26th for the same reason. Devotees continue to keep in touch via phone and email and are using digital platforms for virtual satsangs and for sharing inspiring messages, as seen on the Ashrama's “*Peace Portal*”.

So, while our daily life has changed swiftly and in a manner that has not been experienced previously by many generations, there is still, despite the outward turmoil, the silent, steady call of Sri Ramana Arunachala to *shelter in our own place*. And our own place is what? It is that place which is *iyalpu*, the natural state of all, accessible to all at all times. This is our state of silence in the heart. and is our real nature. To rest in that is to “shelter in our own place”.

It is known to all of us that the body is born, grows, and dies. None of us can escape this cycle, even the jnani. However, since death is inevitable for the body, which Sri Bhagavan says is another name for death, what is the recourse left to us? The only recourse we have, says Sri Bhagavan, is to turn inwards and effect subsidence of the mind, which severs our identification with the body and the ever-changing phenomena, and reveals our existence as consciousness, *sat-chit-ananda*. This is stated clearly in verse 28 of *Upadesa Undiyar*: “Having known one's nature, one abides as Being with no beginning and no end in unbroken consciousness and bliss.”

Also appropriate to this moment in which our outer life is being impacted by this great natural calamity,

is a conversation with Sri Bhagavan which took place on Oct. 23, 1936 and has been recorded in *Talks*:

“D.: There are widespread disasters spreading havoc in the world, e.g. famine and pestilence. What is the cause of this state of affairs?

M.: To whom does all this appear?

D.: That won't do. I see misery around.

M.: You were not aware of the world and its sufferings in your sleep; you are conscious of them in your wakeful state. Continue in that state in which you were not afflicted by these. That is to say, when you are not aware of the world, its sufferings do not affect you. When you remain as the Self, as in sleep, the world and its sufferings will not affect you. Therefore, look within. See the Self! There will be an end of the world and its miseries.

D.: But that is selfishness.

M.: The world is not external. Because you identify yourself wrongly with the body you see the world outside, and its pain becomes apparent to you. But they are not real. Seek the reality and get rid of this unreal feeling.”

The present circumstances, in fact, remind us strongly that whatever we experience in this life, is bound to go and will not stay with us. That is, no matter what wealth, fame, talents, etc., we pursue, the happiness experienced from them will also be impermanent. That happiness which is our real nature is the true happiness, and we are that consciousness, says Sri Bhagavan.

So, as we all experience the effects of the current circumstances, as we laud and are thankful for the efforts of all who are working tirelessly for the good of many, as we continue to extend a hand of support or service or encouragement to others to the extent of our capabilities, let us remember Sri Bhagavan's advice to surrender to that Lord of all who sustains the universe:

Place your burden at the feet of the Lord of the universe who accomplishes everything. Remain all the time steadfast in the heart, in the transcendental absolute. God knows the past, present and future. He will determine the future for you and accomplish the work. What is to be done will be done at the proper time. Don't worry. Abide in the heart and surrender your acts to the divine.



Remembering Dr. Vasu Dev Sharma

Dr. Vasu Dev Sharma attained the feet of Sri Bhagavan on the morning of March 5, 2020 in Ottawa, Canada at the age of 81. Sri Vasu Dev started visiting Arunachala Ashrama, NY in the early days when it was located on East 6th Street, meeting with Sri Bhagavat while hearing of the greatness of Sri Bhagavan. Since that time, whenever Sri Vasu Dev was in NYC, he made it a point to visit the Ashrama and join the devotees for functions such as the Advent Celebration. He also visited Arunachala Ashrama in Nova Scotia and dove deep into the practice of *atma-vichara* and self-surrender. In Ottawa, Sri Vasu Dev was a member of the Sri Ramana Maharshi Satsang Group, and often hosted Satsangs at his residence, assisted by his son Arvind and his daughter-in-law Renu. He would not miss an opportunity to bring flowers and fruits for the puja and prayers or to share with fellow devotees inspirational readings from the works of Sri Bhagavan. His life of

selflessness left an indelible impression on his family, including his three granddaughters who, at the funeral ceremony, shared how they have been inspired by their grandfather's example.

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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