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Sri Kunju Swami's Recollections Meeting Sri Bhagavan and First *Upadesa*

Sri Kunju Swami's first visit to Sri Bhagavan was in 1919. He was irresistibly drawn by the power of Sri Bhagavan's presence and was bound to him with an unbreakable bond of devotion. He was an attendant of Sri Bhagavan for twelve years, from 1920 until 1932, and resided in the Ashram until his absorption in Arunachala in 1992 at the age of 96. Sri Kunju Swami unstintingly shared the experiences that he had in the presence of Sri Bhagavan with visiting devotees. This interview was recorded in 1989 by Jim and Dennis Hartel; J. Jayaraman conducted the interview. The full interview in Tamil is available on the Arunachala Ashrama [YouTube Channel](#).

From childhood I never had any illness. Wherever I was made to sit, I would stay there without moving, like a madman. My father was quite worried about this. Once, he took me to a tank to give me a bath. There I observed some Brahmins doing japa. Upon seeing them, I also wanted to take up japa. Being a non-brahmin, I knew I wouldn't be given initiation into japa, but my longing was very strong. That night in my sleep I was initiated into the *Panchakshari Mantra* (Om Namah Shivaya) by the Lord. I was delighted, and did my japa relentlessly. Eventually, I attained *japasiddhi* and acquired some powers. For example, when I attended a *kathakalakshepa* (religious discourse), I could repeat it verbatim on my return, to the astonishment of everyone. Even though the discourse would be in Tamil, a language that I didn't know, I was able to repeat the discourse verbatim, like a tape-recorder. Noticing this capacity of mine, my father took me to an exposition on the Puranas. I could soon repeat any of these too with effortless ease. Such memory would last for one week, and I became an object of awe and veneration.

Once a sadhu, a devotee of Sri Bhagavan, came to my

house. Noticing my powers, he said very firmly, "Such occult powers may produce a sense of wonder in others, but they will never confer *moksha* upon the one who possesses them." He explained that such powers would vanish after some time and, as such, they are impermanent. Upon being asked to indicate the right course of action, he advised that a study of Vedanta was best and he agreed to help me. He started teaching me to read *Kaivalya Navaneetam*. While I was learning these vedantic texts, another sadhu, also a devotee of Bhagavan, came and said that mere study of such texts would not be sufficient and suggested the practice of *atma vichara*. He took us to his village where he was expounding on the *Yoga Vasistha*.

The *Yoga Vasistha* has a story of the King Sikhidvaja who remained in *samadhi* (a state in which one has a direct experience of the Self) for one thousand years. It also said that *muktas* (those who have obtained liberation) lived in such a state of *samadhi*. I felt that although this sadhu spoke a lot about *samadhi*, and that these scriptures emphasized the state of *samadhi*, this sadhu himself was never in *samadhi*. He was always engaged in teaching, talking, or in some other

activity. I wondered if *samadhi* was a mere concept or if there was anyone who actually lived in this state. When I put this question to the sadhu, he told me not to have any doubts, that the scriptures are not mere theory, and that there was a *jnani* right then in Tiruvannamalai who had attained realization at the age of 16. He hadn't read any vedantic texts yet he had attained that highest state and was always in *samadhi*.

Meeting Sri Bhagavan

The moment I heard this, I was thrilled. The name 'Ramana Maharshi' was nectar to my ears, and my whole body quivered with joy. The urge to go and see him welled up in me. Without delay I set out for Tiruvannamalai. Bhagavan was living in Skandashramam then. I was overjoyed to see the *Sadguru*. I narrated all that had happened in Malayalam, the only language I knew then, and it was a boon for me that Bhagavan could follow and converse in that language fluently.

At that time, I had stopped doing japa or studying vedantic scriptures, but I had not yet experienced *samadhi* and was very unhappy. After patiently hearing me out Bhagavan quoted a verse from *Kaivalya Navaneetam* that says, "If you realize who you are there is no cause for sorrow." I did not know what was meant by "know who you are". Seeing me blinking in ignorance, Bhagavan proceeded to tell me that the mind is made up of mere thoughts and that knowing oneself is to find the source of all thoughts. So saying, he pointed to his Heart. Until then, I had been concentrating only on the *bhumadhya* (between the eyebrows). However, when I turned my attention to the Heart, I was soon led to *samadhi*. I knew that Bhagavan was looking at me. In five minutes, I had the great experience and was thrilled. It was then time for lunch. After lunch also, I came to Bhagavan's presence. Then by a single look Bhagavan put me into *samadhi* again. Thenceforth, I would immerse myself in that blissful state again and again, oblivious to the body. In fact I occasionally used to pinch myself to check whether I had a body or not! I spent a happy 18 days like this at Skandashramam.

Devotees used to offer food to Bhagavan from which all of us were also given a share. I started feeling guilty that, instead of offering food to the guru, we



Sri Kunju Swami

were eating out of his share and that this was not proper. It occurred to me that if I returned to my own home, I would have my own room where I could practice in peace as I felt that I had become established in *samadhi*. Besides, this would absolve me of the sin of causing my guru loss of food. I went back to my village, but as time passed the intensity of meditation lessened. When I noticed I could no longer be in *samadhi*, I understood that the *samadhi anubhava* (experience of *samadhi*) is by the grace of the guru, and not my own attainment. I felt that I shouldn't have come away from Bhagavan and that, had Bhagavan used the same logic, he would have gone back to Tiruchuzhi.

When I returned to Skandashramam Perumal Swami was attending to Bhagavan's personal needs like bringing hot water for him, etc. Perumal Swami taught me how to look after Bhagavan's needs and entrusted me with that job. While I was attending on Bhagavan I told him how the intensity of *samadhi* had lessened once I was back in my village. Bhagavan very graciously quoted from *Kaivalya Navaneetam* that the *samadhi anubhava* occurs to everyone and anyone by the mere presence of the guru or by reading his works. But it would not be

permanent. Bhagavan further explained that the state of *sthitaprajna* (firmly abiding in wisdom) has to be attained by *sravana*, *manana* and *nidhidhyasana* (listening, reflection and meditation). Again he quoted from *Kaivalya Navaneetam* where it is said that just as one would dig the ground, plant a pole and pack the dirt back in order to secure the pole, one must practice incessantly in order to make the experience of *samadhi* permanent.

Again quoting *Kaivalya Navaneetam*, he said that as long as the duality of the knower and the known remains, one must practice. So while I was serving Bhagavan, by his grace, I was learning meditation as well.

Sri Bhagavan's Upadesa

My former teacher had impressed upon me that one must hold onto the guru's first *upadesa* (spiritual instruction) firmly. I had also read that in some books. So I was eagerly waiting for Bhagavan to give me the first *upadesa*, but he was silent all the time. When I asked for an *upadesa* Bhagavan did not reply. It was winter then, and there would be an urn in front of Bhagavan with burning charcoal to give off some heat. Bhagavan put a pot on that fire, and added some *ragi* (millet) and water to it. I thought that Bhagavan was making *kayakalpa*, an elixir for longevity. It turned out that he was making gruel for the four puppies that used to live in Skandashramam then.

There is a scriptural injunction that one should not act on one's own without the guru's instructions. So I kept quiet, awaiting his instructions. Bhagavan walked past me to the four puppies and removed the blanket covering them. The puppies were excited and were running to get the gruel. As the gruel was still very hot, Bhagavan needed more time. I saw all this but did not offer to help, as I was waiting for instructions from him. Bhagavan then asked me to hold all the four puppies and then let them go one at a time. They all came to him one by one, had the food, were satisfied, and went back to rest. I was keenly observing and listening to all that Bhagavan said. First he said, "Hold the four." And then, "Let them go one by one."

After some time the puppies answered their call of nature right there. Bhagavan went and cleaned up the place once or twice. The third time, Bhagavan told

me, "Go and wipe it up." I considered this incident to be my first *upadesa*, and I interpret it thus: Regard the four Vedas as the ultimate. Let them go one after another. This also means let go of the *vasanas* (latent tendencies) one after another. Finally, he asked me to wipe it clean. That meant to wipe out all *vasanas*. This is how I got my first *upadesa*. And since I have been alert, I have been able to give the right interpretation also.

I used to go to Kovilur Math where the chief was Mahadevswami. In his math the practice was not to refer to oneself as "I" but as "this frame" or "this body" or some such thing. Also, one had to do lot of prostration before the *mathadhipati* (head of the math). I did not prostrate because I felt that I should prostrate only before my own guru, Ramana. On my return from the math one day, Bhagavan asked me details of my visit. While I was narrating, Bhagavan interrupted me and asked, "Did you prostrate?" I said, "No, I do not want to prostrate before anyone except my master."

Again at the math, they were astonished that I was not referring to myself as "this fellow" or "this frame" as was the custom. They even commented that this Tiruvannamalai Swami (meaning me) is so arrogant that he refers to himself as "I". One day, on my return from the Kovilur Math, Bhagavan asked me if I had prostrated before the chief and I gave him the same reply. Bhagavan laughed and said, "Is this body, seated on the couch that you see now, Bhagavan? Is he confined to this body?" Bhagavan then quoted a Sanskrit verse which said that when one performed prostrations to anybody, anywhere, it would always reach the guru within oneself. From that moment onward, whenever I prostrated before anybody, I always considered it an offering to my guru.

Again when the topic of not referring to oneself in the first person arose, Bhagavan's enlightening reply was, "Why don't you tell them that when you refer to 'I' it's not the 'small I' but the 'BIG I' meaning THE SELF? The small I refers to the body alone, and is defective, but when you refer to the I as the Self, then it is perfectly alright." I was very happy to get this instruction from Sri Bhagavan. The explanations from Bhagavan solved the problems for me at the math. *To be continued...*

The Eyes of the Maharshi

by Mouni Sadhu

Mouni Sadhu (M. Sudonski) was an ardent spiritual seeker who was drawn to Sri Bhagavan after reading Paul Brunton's A Search in Secret India. He had the opportunity to visit the Maharshi in 1949 and recorded his experiences in the company of Sri Bhagavan in his book In Days of Great Peace. Sri Bhagavan's glance of grace is described in the following extract from the book.

During the *darshan* in the hall, there is usually no one between me and Maharshi's couch, which means that I can contemplate his eyes with no obstacles between, their gaze being generally turned in my direction and usually looking straight ahead. At first I lacked the courage to look intently into the face of the Sage.

Perhaps this shyness was the last vestige of those worldly habits which do not permit a well-behaved person to gaze insistently into the eyes of another. There may also have been another reason: My intuition was whispering that those eyes saw infinitely farther than ordinary human eyes, which meant that the whole content of my being was wide open before their gaze. Some time was needed to get rid of this feeling of shyness, which in the Roman Catholic world makes confession before a priest so difficult for some people.

But the effort had to be made, and in a few weeks all obstacles disappeared and a mute, yet a thousandfold more efficacious 'confession' became a daily practice in my inner contact with Maharshi. I had to learn 'utter frankness', for without this quality there cannot be any direct spiritual approach to the Master.

The eyes of Maharshi always seem to be the same, for I cannot see in them any modification of expression due to emotion or thought. But that does not mean that they are devoid of the shining glow of life! On the contrary, light and life are constantly flowing through them with a majesty and intensity unimaginable to those who have not seen them. The large dark pupils are always full of resplendent light. Even in his photographs this extraordinary intensity of light in his eyes is noted by every careful observer, even though he may not know the one they represent. A stream of peace, powerful yet sweet, flows from these eyes. They glow with a perfect understanding

of all the weaknesses, defects and inner difficulties of those who look into them. Personally, I have also noticed in them a slight, almost imperceptible, smile of indulgence for the whole surrounding world and all of us here, who are representatives of the 'great illusion'. And when I look almost by chance into the eyes of some of the people in the hall, I see that they do not reflect in the slightest degree even a fragment of the light which is shining through Maharshi's eyes. In comparison they seem to be almost lifeless, and I am not able to get rid of this impression – at least for the moment I am unable to control it – though I know that making such comparisons is wrong, and that I should not pass judgement on others. Everyone is just what he is able to be, neither more nor less, and life is the same in each one of us. Yet, although I accept the truth of it in theory, I cannot help feeling this difference whenever I look into the eyes of the Saint and then happen to gaze into those of others. This thought, although wrong and unjust, slips into my mind as it were and abides there until I invite it to leave by means of the well-known 'Self-inquiry' or 'Vichara'.

The Highest manifests Himself in everything and every living being, however low its level may seem to us. He is present in the plant and in the insect, in the snake, in the animal and in man. The difference is only in the degree and perfection of His manifestation. It is obvious that we are able to perceive only an infinitesimal part of the manifested absolute; the higher forms of His revelation are beyond the reach of our limited consciousness. And yet there must be something just on this last boundary of our perceptive faculties, which reflects in all perfection the gaze of God.

A strange new and powerful current awakens in my consciousness. It is with a kind of expectation that I am trying to hold all my attention above the ocean of changing thoughts.

I seem to hear a whisper: 'Persevere and you will find the answer.' Suddenly light comes. It is like a lightning flash of tremendous power. I am dazzled, terrified for a moment in the face of the reality seen. Of course, there is no hope of being able to convey this vision to others in words. But now I am entitled to say:

'I know who looks through Maharshi's eyes.'

Arunachala Ramana, In Thy Name I Wander

by Arunachala Bhakta Bhagawat

The founder of Arunachala Ashrama, Sri Arunachala Bhakta Bhagawat, experienced the continuous grace of Sri Bhagavan in his life. His devotion to Ramana Maharshi was such that for him there was nothing of greater importance in the world. He wrote that Sri Bhagavan was more real to him than even the sun and stars.

Despite the worldly difficulties that often beset his path, Sri Bhagawat's faith in Sri Bhagavan never faltered, and he wrote thousands of pages of 'prayer manuscripts' addressed to his guru, writings that praised the Master to whom he had dedicated his life, and to whom he turned for refuge.

The book In Search of Self, published by Arunachala Ashrama, contains Sri Bhagawat's selected writings from the period 1962-1986. Sri Bhagawat's unbridled joy and devotion leap out at us at every instance and drive us inward, to the feet of Sri Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi. It is from this publication that the following excerpt is taken, in which Sri Bhagawat petitions Sri Ramana for the building of his Ashrama in the New World.

For long I have been wandering in Thy Name. It is the greatest thing in my life to roam the streets of this metropolitan city in search of help, which would engage me full time in Thy service. Yet this desire remains unfulfilled. I seldom think of giving up the assignment and retire to the solitude of my home. The more I wander and receive discouraging replies, the more determined I become in Your Name. I run into all sorts of people and their attitude makes me carry on the work of Thy Center.

Like the dreamy-eyed boy I chalk out many plans and then set out to translate them into action with the help and assistance of those who are familiar with the American mind. But the moment they see me and learn that the only riches I possess are enshrined in Thy Name, they lose interest and give me a long list of reasons why this endeavor can't succeed. They are professionally trained to think in terms of solid riches which would enable them to prepare background material with facts, figures and photos. They find in me a beggar who is mad after his Bhagavan, and who



Sri Arunachala Bhakta Bhagawat

wants to live and work in the Name of his Arunachala Ramana.

From year to year, month to month, week to week and day to day, I live and sleep in Thy Name. You are the goal towards which I have been walking all my life. Now when You are so near me, how can I give up the endeavor that is the very breath of my life? You are the only one that matters to me right now. When I have come to Your Feet, You don't wish me to suspend the effort and take shelter behind the plea of a difficult or impossible task. Many a time when I have sat silent without doing anything to promote the cause which is dearest to my heart, someone drops in and asks me why I am not doing something. Then I can't advance the same plea that I have been hearing all the time: that it is very difficult to do a thing like this in the metropolitan city. I pick up my begging bowl and go out again into the world in search of those who are destined to share my aspirations and dreams. I go to people with the thought that some of them may be inspired to recognize Thy hand and bind me with them in our devotion to Arunachala Ramana. Whenever I feel tired and troubled and wish to call off the begging, a call from within challenges my devotion to Bhagavan. Immediately the faith is rekindled and I hit the lonely trail and move on the

road to Bhagavan's Ashrama. I hear from within that this city is destined to have a full-fledged center and I must go on with faith in Arunachala Ramana and the Ashrama will take shape.

It is not I who is anxious to build Arunachala Ashrama here. It is the direct hand of Bhagavan that keeps me here and makes me do *tapasya* in His Name. It is a great gift from my Guru, Grace and God, Arunachala Shiva Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi, that inspires me to devote all my time to His Lotus Feet. How could it be possible to go begging without His Grace? There must be something in it that, in spite of all the rebuffs and rebukes from those whose help I anxiously seek, I am all the more inspired and strengthened to continue the begging. Sometimes on the physical plane I become disgusted, but Bhagavan tells me to offer everything to Him. I needn't take the despair and disappointment to heart, because it isn't I who am doing these things: it is Bhagavan working through me. This is my firm faith and no amount of worldly advice is able to swerve me from the path on which Arunachala has launched me.

These words are being written not because I want them to be recorded for posterity, but because I have been filled with His Grace so much that I can't contain it without putting these thoughts into words. Whatever I think or do, it is dedicated to the Ramana who resides within me as the Heart. I repeat this prayer all the time: "Arunachala! I have no will of my own. Thy Will is my will." This is the crux of the entire teaching of Bhagavan. If I can immerse myself in it all the time, there is nothing in the world that is difficult to achieve.

When the iron is smelt in the fire all its impurities are removed. In the same way when a devotee goes through trials and tribulations his inner strength is tested and he is made pure so that he can withstand the temptations of the world. In the course of my wanderings, the more I seek help from the physical world the more it becomes evident to me that no physical world exists or moves without the Grace of God. So the best thing for me is to depend on that Source which is the inspirer of all ideas and objects. There should not be a single moment in my life without Arunachala Ramana.

I wander about like the drunken person who does not care what the world thinks of him. As he is oblivious

to the physical world in his inebriated state, so am I drunk in the Name of Arunachala Ramana. In my happiness I go to people and talk to them about the plan which would enable seekers of truth and happiness to congregate at a central place and immerse themselves in the Divine Bliss. That is something intangible and no one wants to delve into the realm of the abstract. It is too much for them to be detached from their existing preoccupations and plunge themselves into a spiritual world. This does not mean that they don't have the desire to benefit from it, but that they are content with their lot. I sometimes ponder over their refusal and feel discouraged and decide that I should devote myself more to solitude than to the din and bustle of the everyday existence.

How can I describe the ineffable joy in my Heart? This is a state which can only be experienced. Since happiness flows from Him to me, I am wandering in His Name so that I may be established in that indescribable state of mind. I don't know what awaits me in the future, but this much I believe that I am being led by Arunachala Ramana, and if it is His Will to see the center grow in this metropolitan city it will come to pass some day. But I can't go on the road all the time or keep myself shut in a solitary cell. So I move about in the world as I am being inspired and I learn a great deal in my search.

"OM SARVAM SRI RAMANARPANAMASTU" (everything is offered to Bhagavan Ramana), so all despair and disappointment are also offered to Him. But I don't remember this truth all the time, or there would be no regrets. At all times I should have the awareness of Arunachala Ramana and all my problems will be automatically solved. I must remember that I wander in His Name not because I want to do so, but because that is His Will. What can be a better time than now to settle down at a definite place and carry on bhajan and kirtan of Arunachala Shiva Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi. He will surely give me the opportunity of dedicating my life to His Lotus Feet. Bhagavan is the Heart and I drink deep in the Heart and am blessed all the time. Every action is offered to the Silent Sage of Arunachala, and I wander about in His Name. O Arunachala Ramana! Why should I worry about my future when my life is safe in Thy Hands?

Amrita Nadi

by Suri Nagamma

In 1943, a pandit who came to the Ashram went on talking to Bhagavan for four full days about the *Amrita Nadi*¹ and its significance. Bhagavan was nodding his head saying that the *Nadi* would act like this and like that. Having heard their discussions, I felt aggrieved that I had had no experience of any such *nadi*. After the visitor had left, I met Bhagavan while he was returning from the gosala side and said, “You have been discussing at length about the *Amrita Nadi*”, but before I could finish my sentence, he said with some impatience, “Why do you worry about all that?” I ventured to say, “You have been discussing it for the last four days and so I thought I could know something about it from you.” Bhagavan replied, “You thought so, did you? He was asking something based on the Sastras and I replied to him accordingly.

Why should you worry about it? All that you should do is to follow the enquiry ‘Who am I?’” So saying, he walked away.

Two days after that when someone in the hall again raised the topic regarding *Amrita Nadi*, Bhagavan coolly said, “Yes, that is an idea.” I asked, “Is the *Amrita Nadi* an idea only?” “Yes, what else is it but an idea? Is not the body itself an idea?” Saying this, Bhagavan looked at me with compassion. That was enough for me. His teaching went home – all my doubts disappeared and my usual sadhana became firm and purposeful. As a result of God’s grace earned in the course of innumerable births I have been, in this birth, privileged to be at the lotus feet of Sri Bhagavan – to listen to his teachings and meditate on them. What more do I need?

1. In Yogic terminology, the *nadi*, or subtle pathway, of *amrita*, nectar or immortality.

3. ‘The world is true!’ ‘No, it is a false appearance’ ‘The world is mind!’ ‘No, it is not!’ ‘The world is pleasant!’ ‘No, it is not!’ What avails such talk? To leave the world alone and know the Self, to go beyond all thought of one and two, this egoless condition is the common goal of all.

4. If Self has form, the world and God likewise have form. If Self is without form, by whom and how can form (of world and God) be seen? Without the eye, can there be sight or spectacle? The Self, the real eye, is infinite.

— Ulladu Narpadu, v. 3, 4

Updates

Due to continuing health restrictions, Arunachala Ashrama, New York remains closed to visitors until further notice. Please visit our [web page](#) for the latest information. The Ashrama has been having regular satsangs online which can be found on our [upcoming virtual events](#) page. Devotees’ digital offerings are shared on the Ashrama’s [Peace Portal](#).

The Nova Scotia Arunachala Ashrama will remain open to daytime visitors but will not have any overnight guests until further notice. Please visit our [web page](#) for the latest information.

For a listing of other centers that are offering virtual satsangs at this time, please see our [online satsangs](#).

For Ramana Satsang locations in the USA and Canada, please see [this listing](#).

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