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Sri Kunju Swami and the Steadfastness of Jnana Selected Verses from *Kaivalya Navaneetam*

Sri Kunju Swami came to Sri Bhagavan as a young man and was blessed to stay in the divine presence of his guru while following his guidance in a spirit of total surrender. In reply to some of his sincere inquiries, Sri Bhagavan referred to the advaitic work Kaivalya Navaneetam (The Cream of Emancipation), stating that it contained the answer to his questions. Composed by Swami Tandavaraya in the form of a dialogue between the guru and disciple, the author of this work states that he has condensed the ocean of milk of Vedanta into the cream of pure knowledge, navaneetam, to be shared by all.

Sri Bhagavan's initial upadesa to Sri Kunju Swami has been described by Swamiji himself in an interview published earlier in *The Maharshi*. In that interview he recalls how he visited Sri Bhagavan in Virupaksha Cave in 1920, and took the first utterances of Sri Bhagavan as Upanishadic *Mahavakyas*. During his first visits too, he asked Sri Bhagavan some questions about the attainment of peace and how to make that peace permanent and abiding. In response, Sri Bhagavan referred to the Vedantic text titled *Kaivalya Navaneetam*.

Earlier, Kunju Swami had learned *Kaivalya Navaneetam* from a sadhu who had advised him of the need to grasp the import of Vedanta if the goal of liberation was to be attained. Accordingly, Kunju Swami agreed to study the text.

He describes that event as follows¹: “The Swami was delighted at this and decided to teach me Vedanta the very same day, as the day was auspicious. On palm leaves, he wrote six verses in Malayalam from *Kaivalyam* and asked me to return the next day about the same time. The poems dealt with the need to discriminate between the permanent and impermanent. I memorised all of the verses on the way home.”

The verses were the following (numbered as they appear in the text.)²

2. I worship ever-shining Pure Consciousness, which manifests as Brahma, Vishnu, or Mighty Shiva, according as He creates, preserves or withdraws (the universe), and also as the countless individual beings; yet It remains ever-free and perfect, as the blazing sun over the ocean of Bliss.

6. All the ancient sages drew from the boundless ocean of milk, namely Vedanta, and filled their pitchers, their works[sic]. I boiled them all (on the fire of the Master's words), churned them (with the churn of enquiry into the self) and I present this *Cream of Emancipation – Kaivalya Navaneetam* – to all.

8. The sages say that there are four prerequisites for realisation of the Truth: (1) viveka: discrimination between the temporary (therefore unreal phenomena) and the permanent (therefore the reality, i.e., the noumenal); (2) indifference to the enjoyment of

1. Reminiscences, *Sri Kunju Swami*, translated by K. Subrahmanian.

2. The Cream of Emancipation (*Kaivalya Navaneetam*), translated by Sri Ramananda Saraswati.

pleasures here or hereafter; (3) the group of six qualities and (4) the longing for liberation.

9 & 10. The six qualities are *sama*, *dama*, *uparati*, *titiksha*, *samadhana* and *sraddha*. Of these, *sama* is control of mind; *dama* is control of the senses; *uparati* is cessation of activities (relating to caste, creed, family, etc.); *titiksha* is control of passions, and includes endurance; *samadhana* is, according to the sages, the settling down of the mind to reflect on the Truth as revealed (by the scriptures and the sages); *sraddha* denotes faith in the Master and the scriptures. Such are the meanings of the six terms of this category.

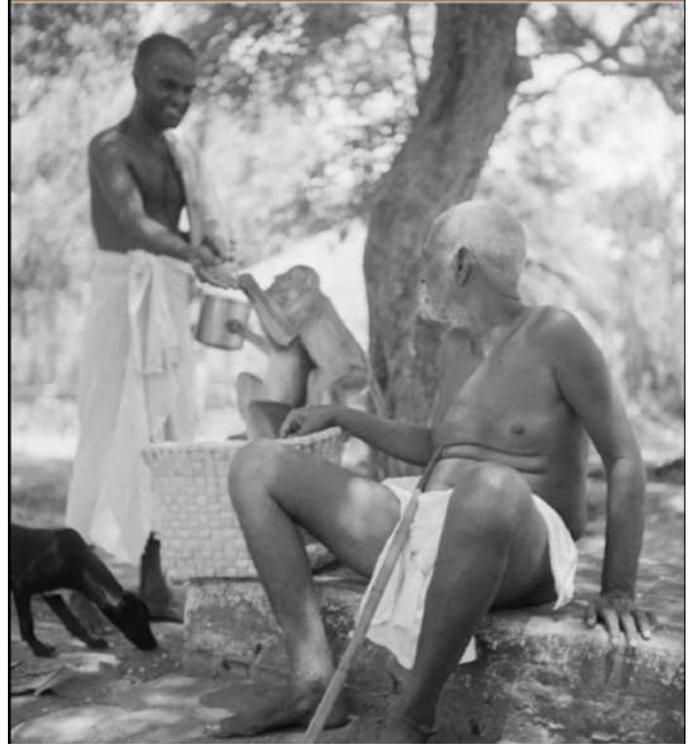
11. No one can achieve anything in the world without being properly equipped for the task. For the same reason, only those who are qualified with these four categories of prerequisites can gain illumination. A novice cannot get it so readily. If so gained, it follows that the person has been successively purified in countless incarnations in the past.

“I told my father what had taken place and also recited the poems. In fifteen days, I had memorised one hundred verses.” [It is to be recalled that Kunju Swami was blessed with a prodigious memory even as a child. - Ed.]

Also during his first visit to Sri Bhagavan Sri Kunju Swami states: “I thought it was a great opportunity for me to talk to him freely. I told him about my interest in giving discourses, doing japa and studying Vedanta. I told him that I had not been getting any peace, but the moment I heard about him, I was filled with peace. I told Sri Bhagavan in Malayalam about how the Swamiji who had taught me Vedanta tried to obtain samadhi.³ Sri Bhagavan listened to everything with a smile. I asked him, ‘What I should do to get mental peace?’ Sri Bhagavan replied, ‘You have read *Kaivalyam*. It is clearly stated that if you realise your Self, you will be freed from the cycle of birth and death and be freed from all trouble.’

The verse Sri Bhagavan referred to is as follows:

தன்னையந் தனக்கா தாரத்
தலைவனை யுங்கண் டானேல்
பின்னையத் தலியவன் றானாய்ப்
பிரமமாய்ப் பிறப்புத் தீர்வ
னுன்னைநீ யறிந்தா யாகி
லுனக்கொரு கேடு மில்லை
யென்னைநீ கேட்கை யாலே
யீதுப தேசித் தேனே. 20



Sri Bhagavan and Sri Kunju Swami

20. If he comes to see the individual self and its substratum, the Overself, then he becomes the substratum, i.e., Brahman, and escapes rebirths. Should you know your Self, no harm will befall you. As you asked, I have told you this.

Sri Kunju Swami continued:

“When asked how to realise the Self he said that I should first know who I am. When asked how I could find out who I am, he said, ‘Find out where thoughts start from.’ When asked how I should do it, he said, ‘Turn inward and merge the mind in the heart.’ After saying this, he fell into his natural silence. Thinking that I should also be like him, I sat in silence. Sri Bhagavan’s gracious looks were on me.

My mental agitation vanished that very moment and I attained a peace and joy that I had not experienced earlier.”

Kunji Swami stayed with Sri Bhagavan for 18

3. The Swami had announced that he would attain samadhi on a particular day while being placed in a tomb while still alive. When the day came for this much heralded event, the Swami entered the tomb. However, he hastily exited his samadhi site after a brief period and disappeared into the crowd.

days. The bliss that he experienced continued uninterruptedly in Sri Bhagavan's presence. The thought occurred to him to return home. Why? He felt that perhaps he could continue in uninterrupted meditation at home, free from any responsibility of chores, etc. In addition, he was feeling uncomfortable in staying at his guru's ashrama, partaking of the limited quantity of food that was available without offering any substantive work in return. So both Ramakrishna Swami and he took leave of Sri Bhagavan, determined to rest in silence in their homes.

Of course, his family was very happy to see him return. Even if he did not communicate with them and stayed in silence, they experienced relief. However, Kunju Swami noticed that the agitation-free state of mind that he had experienced spontaneously in Sri Bhagavan's presence diminished over the next few days and then disappeared. He was at a loss as to what to do. To whom could he express his disappointment? That experience that he believed was permanent, that joy that flowed so freely in his heart at Virupaksha Cave, the goal, the attainment for which the Masters of yore strove tirelessly for years and lifetimes, had disappeared. Not unexpectedly, Ramakrishna Swami was experiencing the same loss of unbounded peace that had been vouchsafed to him in the presence of the guru. After speaking with each other, they decided to return to Sri Bhagavan's holy presence. It was in his presence that the turbulent mind had subsided. Foolishly thinking that this state would continue uninterruptedly even away from the gracious guru, they had returned home.

Therefore, they again took leave of their respective families, who of course attempted to persuade them to stay. However, realizing that their freedom lay at the feet of Sri Bhagavan, they started out again for the Holy Hill.

Sri Kunju Swami describes the great opportunity he obtained to render service to Sri Bhagavan.⁴

“We set out in a couple of days as planned and reached Tiruvannamalai. We felt delighted when Bhagavan gave us a smile of welcome. During my earlier visit I had felt uneasy dining as a guest of the guru without doing any service to him, which I thought was not proper. This time, however,

Bhagavan gave me a rare opportunity. Perumal Swami who used to help with daily chores such as preparing hot water for his bath, washing his daily wear, massaging his feet with medicinal oil before bedtime, had to leave Bhagavan after my arrival. He deemed me fit to take his place. He must have reckoned that, trained in pious ways from childhood, I would not breach the observances of tradition and hence entrusted me with his jobs. Had I returned to Tiruvannamalai a couple of days later I would have lost the opportunity. I now recalled Bhagavan's words of consolation to his grieving mother when Annamalai Swami, whose duty all this had been, passed away. At that time Bhagavan had said, ‘Here is this boy [referring to me] now come to serve in Annamalai's place.’ Just a few days after he uttered this Bhagavan had taken me to serve him. Thrilled at the prophesy coming true, I remained holding firmly at heart the holy feet of Bhagavan. I could not cease wondering how Bhagavan, out of his grace, thus took me captive. The sense of wonder evoked by this has not lost its freshness even today in 1992, seventy-two years later. Incidentally, Ramakrishna Swami was asked to look after the outer affairs of the ashram and to serve Bhagavan during my absence. One day I ventured to ask Bhagavan why those exalted states which I had first experienced in Bhagavan's proximity began to wane and then were altogether gone when I left him and reached Kerala. By way of answer to my query, Bhagavan asked me to read verses 83 to 93 in the *Tattuva Vilakka Padalam*, [The Exposition of the Truth Section] of *Kaivalya Navaneetam*, wherein lay the answer to my query.”

Sri Kunju Swami's experience in this regard is not unique. In fact, perhaps we have experienced the same. Having visited a place of pilgrimage, or a saint's hermitage or a beautiful natural setting, we may find that the peace of mind we experienced there dilutes and diminishes after our return to our day to day life. Let us now see the verses that were recommended by Sri Bhagavan as the answer to Sri Kunju Swami's question:

83. On hearing this, the disciple, loyal to the instructions of the Master, discarded the five

4. Reminiscences of Kunju Swami (Enadu Ninaivugal), translated by P. Ramasamy, Sri Ramanasramam.

sheaths and the blank, realised the Self as “I am Brahman,” went beyond that and remained as perfect being.

84. At the glance of the Master who was grace incarnate, the worthy disciple sank into the ocean of bliss and merged as the undivided whole, as pure consciousness free from body, organs and all else, with mind made perfect, and he became the true Self, unaware while awake.

85. After the blessed disciple had remained in that state for a long time, his mind gently turned outward. Then he saw his glorious Master before him. His eyes were filled with tears of joy. He was full of love and fell at the feet of the Master. He rose up, came round the Master, and with folded hands spoke to him:

86. “Lord, you are the reality remaining as my inmost Self, ruling me during all my countless incarnations! Glory to you who have put on an external form to instruct me! I do not see how I can repay your grace for having liberated me. Glory! Glory to your holy feet!”

87. The Master beamed on him as he spoke, drew him near and said lovingly: “To stay fixed in the Self, without the three kinds of obstacles obstructing your experience, is the highest return you can render me.”

88. “My Lord! Can such realisation as has transcended the dual perception of ‘You’ and ‘I’ and found the Self to be entire and all-pervading, fail me at any time?” The Master replied: “The truth that “I am Brahman” is realised from the scriptures or by the grace of the Master, but it cannot be firm in the face of obstructions.

89. Ignorance, uncertainty and wrong knowledge are obstacles resulting from long-standing habits in the innumerable incarnations of the past which cause trouble, and then the fruits of realisation slip away. Therefore root them out by hearing truth, reasoning and meditation. [sravana, manana and nidhidhyasana]

90. Checked by incantations, [sthambhana] fire will not scorch. Likewise defective realization will not put an end to bondage. Therefore, devote yourself to hearing the truth, reasoning and meditation, and root out ignorance, uncertainty and wrong knowledge.

91. Ignorance veils the truth that the Self is

Brahman and shows forth multiplicity instead. Uncertainty is the confusion resulting from lack of firm faith in the words of the Master; the illusion that the evanescent world is a reality and that the body is the Self, is wrong knowledge. So say the sages.

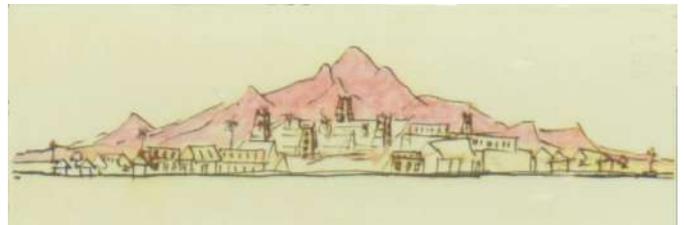
92. Hearing the truth is to revert the mind repeatedly to the teaching: “That thou art.” Reasoning is rational investigation of the meaning of the text, as already heard. Meditation is one-pointedness of mind. If every day you do these, you will surely gain liberation.

93. The practice must be kept up as long as the sense of knower and knowledge persists. No effort is necessary after that. Remaining as pure, eternal consciousness, untainted like the ether, and thus liberated while alive, one will live forever as That – after being disembodied also.

The above verses, recited by Sri J. Jayaraman, complete with Tamil text and translation can be listened to [here](#).

Thus, the method of remaining steadfast in *jnana* once the state has been granted by the grace of the guru was clarified by Sri Bhagavan in response to Sri Kunju Swami's inquiries. He referred to the text of *Kaivalya Navaneetam* due, no doubt to its profundity but also due to the fact that Sri Kunju Swami was already well-versed in its contents. In addition, the text reveals the best way to repay the guru for his infinite grace which had guided the devotee to the highest state. ‘To stay fixed in the Self, free of any obstruction, is the highest return that you can render me.’ Therefore, it is abundantly clear that Sri Kunju Swami repaid the grace of his Master in this manner, sharing his love of Sri Bhagavan freely with all who approached him.

May this divine guidance, given to Sri Kunju Swami, encourage us also to strive to remain steadfast in devotion to Sri Bhagavan, unshaken by the winds of samsara, knowing that we have reached the safe haven of his feet.



The Story of Nandanar

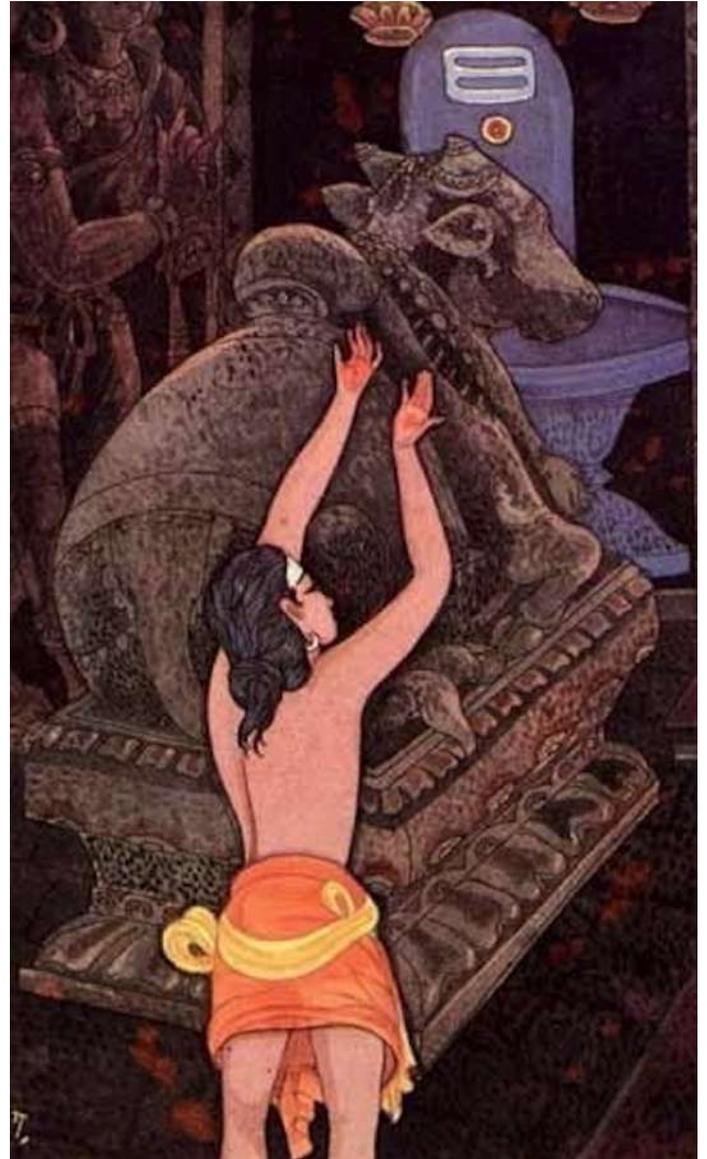
The original story of Nandanar is found in both the Tamil *Periya Puranam* and the Sanskrit *Siva Bhakta Vilasam*.

The devotee Nandanar was one of the sixty-three Saivite saints who, though born in a low-caste family, attained the feet of the supreme Siva by his singular devotion. His story was adapted into a play by Gopal Krishna Bharati in the 19th Century. In this play, Nandanar sings plaintively, “*Aiye, mettak kaṭinam, umadaḍimai aiye mettak kaṭinam*” (It is very difficult, very difficult indeed to explain...) Sri Muruganar, Bhagavan’s great devotee, adapted this in the composition *Atma Vidya* to read, “*Aiye, ati sulabam, anma viddai, aiye, ati sulabam.*” (Lo! Very easy is Self-Knowledge. Lo! Very easy indeed.) This was the *pallavi* (refrain) of the composition, and the *anupallavi* (sub-refrain) composed by Sri Bhagavan, stated that the Self is indeed so real that compared to it, a fruit in one’s hand appears unreal!

We are pleased to present here the original story of Nandanar from the *Periya Puranam*. The translation has been done by R. Rangachari and is published by Sri Ramanasramam.

“The famed city of Aadhanur was situated in the region of Kaanaad, well-watered by the river Kollidam. On the outskirts of this place, amidst his fellows of the ‘lowly class’, lived Nandanar, deeply devoted to the glorious feet of Lord Siva every conscious moment. He subsisted on the grant given to him by the town residents for doing the usual services. He was indeed unmatched in his love for the Lord who has the crescent moon for his wreath. His thoughts were ever pure and did not stray into other paths through forgetfulness. He failed not in the customary duties and services that devolved on him by birth in his class. To all the neighbouring shrines of the Lord bearing the sharp trident, he gave the hide to cover the drums and the thongs to fasten them tight, and the strings for the veena and the yaazh played before the Lord for his worship. Apart from these offerings he would stand outside the gateway of each shrine and sing and dance in great devotion.

Once, he betook himself to Thirup-pungoor,



Sri Nandanar praying that Nandi move aside in order that he may have darshan of the Lord. Photo: Ramalingar Pani Mandram

overcome by the love of the gracious feet of the Lord there – Sivalokanaathar. The image of the great bull Nandi in the temple obstructed his view of the Lord within. So great was his longing to behold the Lord directly from without, that the Lord made the bull step aside and let him have the desired vision. Thus earning the grace of the Lord who pilots all souls across the sea of births and deaths, he adoringly left the shrine, with the leather thongs dangling across his back and, seeing a hollow nearby, made of it a tank to be useful to the devotees. Then he circumambulated the temple in the right way, prostrated himself again before the Lord, bade him ‘farewell’ and returned to

Aadhanoor, his heart dancing in joy!

In due course, there arose in him a great longing to behold the Lord at Thillai (Chidambaram). The first night he could not sleep, but in the morning he thought that it would not be proper for him, born in the lowly class, to behold that Lord close, and he resolved to abide by the Lord's will. Still, his longing grew apace each day! He began to say, 'Well, well, I will set out.' When he could not endure this any longer, he started on the road and reached Thillai. He hoped that the bondage of birth would be destroyed like dust caught in the blaze of the Lord's grace!

Reaching the outskirts, he beheld the sacrificial smoke rising to the skies from within the city and the cloud-kissing tops of the mansions; straightaway, he remembered his lowly birth and was afraid to go nearer. 'There will be the hallowed three thousand servitors of the Lord within, with the smoking altars in each mansion. How can I dare to cross those courtyards?'

He stood by the high walls of the temple-city and began to skirt them, all his limbs and heart melting in love for the Lord; his hands stretched high in adoration.

Circumambulating the walls night and day, despairing of ever beholding the Lord of the Blue Throat from his courtyard, Nandanar fell asleep from sheer weariness. Even in his sleep, the thought of his lowly birth was uppermost. The gracious dancing Lord now chose to allay all the sorrow of his devotee. With a gentle smile playing on his lips, he appeared to Nadanaar and spoke:

'To get rid of this birth, you may enter the flaming fire and emerge hallowed in the company of those wearing the three-stranded sacred thread.' At the same time, the Lord commanded his 'high' servitors to arrange the fire! All the three thousand gathered before the Lord of the Assembly in great fear and resolved to do his bidding. With overflowing regard, they approached Nandanar and exclaimed, 'Oh Master, we have come here unto your gracious presence to prepare the 'fire-bath' for you, at the Lord's behest.

At these words, the great devotee sent out a heartfelt adoration exclaiming, 'Ah, I have been saved.' The high servitors chanted Vedic hymns. The fire was lit outside the southern wall of the temple.

Knowing this, Nandanar went around it with the Lord's feet firmly planted in this heart. He lifted his hands in adoration, and meditating on the dancing feet of the Lord, plunged into the flames. Straightaway, he left off the common 'illusory' body and emerged a hallowed sage with shining sacred thread and matted tresses looking like Brahmaa himself seated on the lotus. The celestial drums beat a thunderous roar; the heavenly denizens broke out in glee and showered the kalpaka flowers on Nandanar. All the sacred servitors of Thillai too folded their hands in adoration; all other devotees were beside themselves with joy. Then the sage, who had come to be known as 'the devotee who would go to the Lord on the morrow' (*Thirunaalaip-povaaraam marai munivar*) approached the inner precincts to adore the Lord, first worshipping at the grand tower in godly company. In the presence of the Lord, he suddenly merged in the divine form and no one could see him thereafter. The high servitors were amazed; the sages broke out into praise. Thus did the Lord out of his grace cut asunder the bonds of all karmas of the devotee and made him delight forever in the bliss of his lotus feet."

Nandanar – the Film

The movie titled *Nandanar* is a classic of the Tamil devotional genre. The movie was released in 1942. It was produced by S.S. Vasan, with the lead role of Nandanar played by Dandapani Desikar.

This film was viewed by Sri Bhagavan at Ramanasramam on Sept. 2nd, 1946, during the Golden Jubilee Celebrations. This was the first viewing of a motion picture by Sri Bhagavan as well as for many of the devotees present that day. This film has been recently posted in its entirety and may be seen on Sri Ram Mohan's Youtube channel by clicking here for [Part 1](#) and here for [Part 2](#).

With the help of a generous friend, english subtitles have been added, allowing a wider audience to revel in the profound devotion of this great saint, Nandanar.

The Significance of Kartigai Deepam

The festival of Kartigai Deepam was celebrated on Dec. 6th, 2022 at Sri Ramanasramam. Devotees' hearts filled with joy as the beacon of light appeared on the summit of Sri Arunachala and the grace of Sri Bhagavan and Arunachala was felt by all.

The significance of seeing the deepam on Arunachala is given in two verses composed on the 24th of November, 1931 on Kartigai Deepam day. The first verse, *Arunachala Tattuvam*, (The Significance of Arunachala), was written by Sri Muruganar:

“The appearance of Annamalai (Arunachala) in front of Brahma and Vishnu and their utter distress at not being able to know it symbolizes the Heart Center (the Self), which shines itself, while the intellect and ego are nonplussed seeking it.”

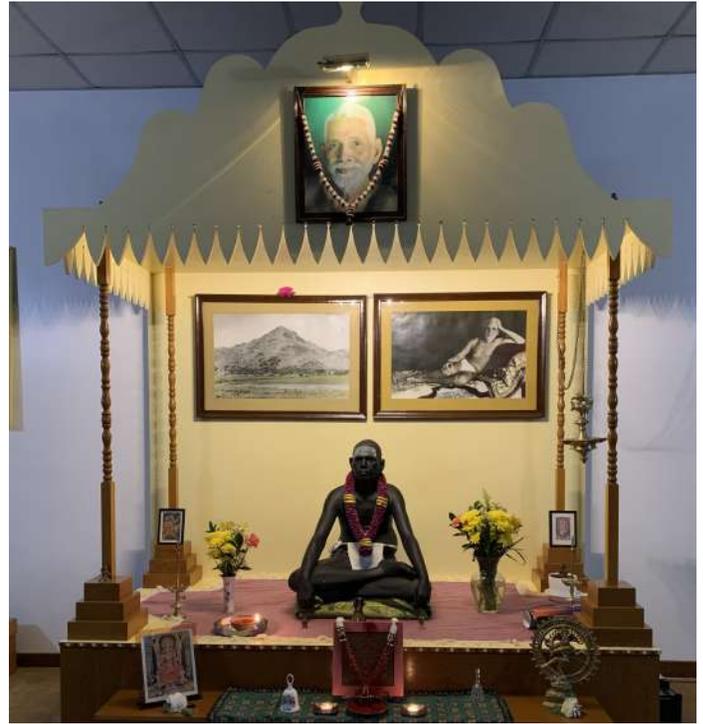
This refers to the traditional story of Shiva appearing as an infinite column of light in front of Brahma and Vishnu, who were unable to find the beginning or the end of it and returned disheartened after their quest to do so.

The second verse, *Deepa Darsana Tattuvam*, (The Significance of the Beacon), was written by Sri Bhagavan in reply to the above verse:

“Getting rid of the ‘I am the body idea’, turning the mind inwards, and merging it in the Heart to realize

the real, non-dual and effulgent Self, is the real significance of seeing the beacon on Annamalai, the center of the universe.”

Devotees at Arunachala Ashrama in Nova Scotia gathered at Sri Bhagavan's shrine on Deepam day to recite *Aksharamanamalai* and revel in the beacon light of the Holy Hill.



Deepam at Arunachala Ashrama, Nova Scotia

Updates

For the latest information regarding Arunachala Ashrama, New York, please visit our [home page](#). The Ashrama has been having regular satsangs online which can be found on our [upcoming virtual events](#) page

The Nova Scotia Arunachala Ashrama (see our home page) is welcoming overnight guests. Guests are required to make arrangements ahead of time by contacting novascotia@ashrama.org

Guests will be responsible for cooking vegetarian food during their stay and ensuring that their rooms have been cleaned and their linens and towels are laundered and replaced before they leave.

We do request that you postpone your visit to the ashrama if you are having signs of cough, cold, fever, etc. During your stay, should you develop signs or symptoms of illness, you will be asked to isolate away from the ashrama.

As usual, the Mandiram is open to daytime visitors for prayers and meditation. Visitors will be required to wear masks while inside the temple. Tel: 902 824 2297

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

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