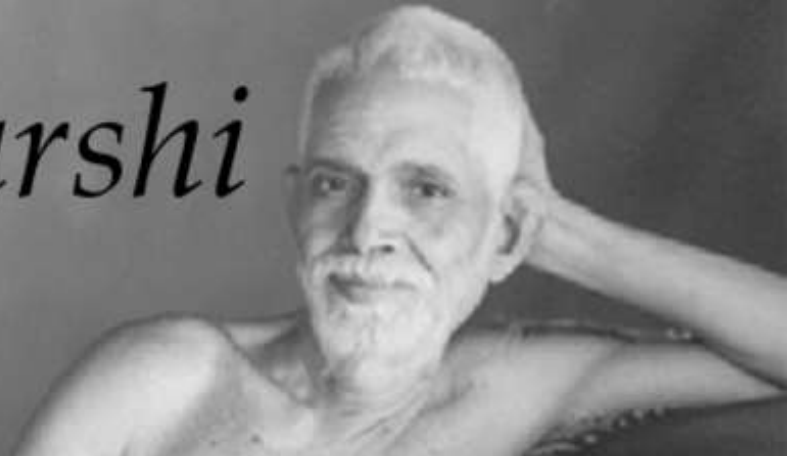


The Maharshi



MAY/JUN 2025

VOL. 35, NO. 3

The Power of Devotion Remembering Sri Arunachala Bhakta Bhagawata Nov. 8, 1912 – Apr. 10, 2000

Sri Arunachala Bhakta Bhagawata was absorbed at the feet of his Guru Sri Ramana Maharshi on April 10, 2000. Twenty-five years after his passing, the influence of his adamant and uncompromising devotion continues to draw sincere devotees to the feet of Sri Bhagavan. Sri Bhagawata used to say that he saw Sri Bhagavan before him more clearly than the sun. Undoubtedly Sri Bhagavan's grace was always inundating him, allowing Sri Bhagawata to establish Arunachala Ashrama in the West and bear unflinchingly the trials and tribulations he had to face in doing so. His every breath, until the last, was offered to Sri Bhagavan and he abided in the firm awareness that the main purpose of life was fulfilled – abiding as the eternal, unchangeable Self.

As we walk into the temple at Arunachala Ashrama, Nova Scotia, we read the following words, framed on the entrance wall: “Thou hast been building thy own temple in the cavity of the lotus of my heart so that I may worship Thee with the fruits and flowers of my breath.”

The words were written by Sri Arunachala Bhakta Bhagawata, founder of Arunachala Ashrama in New York and Nova Scotia. By the grace of his Guru, Sri Ramana Maharshi, Sri Bhagawata, by dint of his unflagging perseverance and unconditional surrender, came to experience the living presence of Sri Bhagavan Ramana at every moment in his daily life. Indeed, as he declared in his writings, his every breath was a prayer to his Master.

Now, twenty-five years after his absorption into Sri Bhagavan on April 10th, 2000, we remember his dedication and uncompromising devotion to life's goal of Self-realization, or Self-abidance, with reverence and deep gratitude.

Devotees who arrive at the ashrama having heard of the greatness of Sri Ramana Maharshi and wishing to further experience his guidance, often ask, “Who is depicted in this picture, this man with the vibhuti (sacred ash) on his



forehead?” The picture they are referring to is of Arunachala Bhakta Bhagawata, adorned with the sacred vibhuti of Siva, and brimming with joy and love for his Guru.

Sri Arunachala Bhakta Bhagawata was born on Nov. 8, 1912 in the isolated village of Sahuri in Bihar, India. “No road led to my village,” he would say. He grew up surrounded by the sacred songs and writings of Kabir, Surdas and Tulsidas, and absorbed the great truths of the *Bhagavad Gita* and *Ramayana* which were regularly sung in his home.

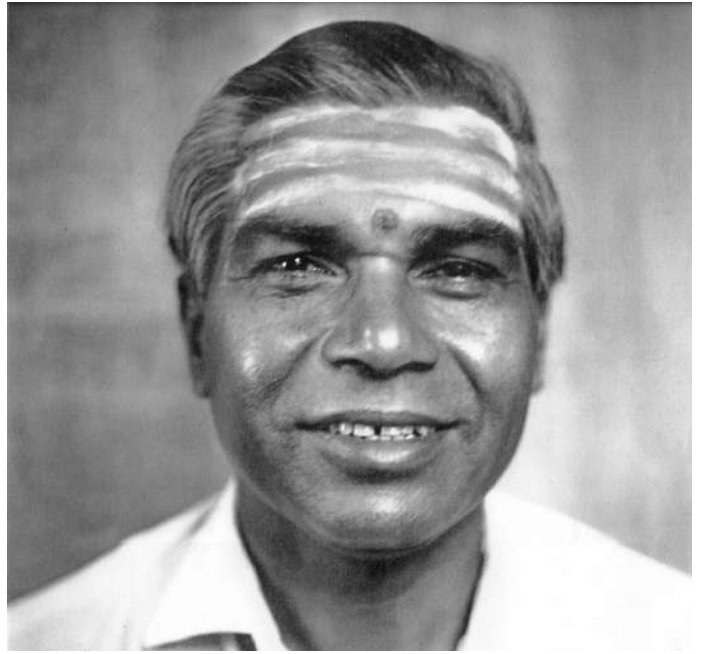
Known in his boyhood as Bhagawata Prasad Singh, he exhibited an affinity for learning, and though his parents were not lettered, the boy rapidly demonstrated his intelligence and capability at school, making rapid progress in his studies.

Showing the idealistic bent that would guide him throughout his life, he became part of Mahatma Gandhi's Non-cooperation movement at a young age and took up the struggle for "National Liberation and Self-realization". These activities led to his incarceration when he was just seventeen years old. Bhagawata used his time in prison to commit the sacred verses of the *Bhagavad Gita* to memory, imbibing the spiritual wealth that he would readily share with one all in later years.

After his release, still keen to further his education, he completed his high school in Calcutta and his BA at Patna University in Bihar. This led to a teaching position in Darjeeling. It was here that Sri Bhagawata, while reading Paul Brunton's *A Search in Secret India*, first beheld the picture of Sri Ramana Maharshi. He felt drawn to Sri Ramana immediately, and had an intense desire to visit him at the Holy Mountain, Arunachala. The year was 1941. While Sri Bhagawata was not able to visit Arunachala until the year 1960, the intervening years were very eventful and formative for him, and his love for Sri Bhagavan grew deeper and deeper with time. Sri Bhagawata was drawn strongly to the ideals of democracy and national freedom, as espoused by the Mahatma. This idealism manifested in him as a desire to see the bastion of democracy at that time, the New World, America. Without having any formal contact in America, but with an unwavering faith that somehow he was meant to be there, he set out on the sea voyage in 1947. Continuing his studies while in America, he obtained his MA in Journalism from the University of Iowa and obtained employment at the Indian Embassy in Washington, DC. The employment was short-lived and Sri Bhagawata found himself often looking actively for new employment, as his wife Yogamaya had arrived to join him from India. Their son would be born to them in 1953.

A momentous event occurred in 1954 which rekindled in Sri Bhagawata the flame of devotion to Sri Ramana Maharshi. He describes it as follows:

"On Wednesday, October 13th, 1954, I was in the guest cottage of a Quaker couple, Helen and Albert Bailey Jr., located on their farm in West Chester, Pennsylvania. The



Sri Arunachala Bhakta Bhagawata

cottage was situated in a valley near their residence. On the second floor of the cottage my wife, Yogamaya, our 15-month-old boy, and I were occupying the large wooden-framed bed that night. In the second half of the night, I saw Bhagavan Ramana sitting on the bed near my head. Although this was a dream, I saw it as clearly as I see the sun during the day, and remember it vividly. His famous figure was near my head and his legs were dangling. Arunachala Shiva Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi stayed near my head for quite a while so that I could drink deep in Him. Bhagavan simply kept on looking at me and I was filled with joy and happiness and could not turn my eyes away from Him. I do not know how long this lasted. But once I woke up I could not return to sleep and sat on the bed meditating on Him. All morning and day I kept on thinking of the darshan Bhagavan had given me in my dream. That dream enabled the sugar doll to be dissolved into the Divine Ocean of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi. Since then, I have not been the same Bhagawata I used to be."

Indeed, the sugar doll was dissolved in the ocean of Sri Ramana! His mettle was sorely tested, as employment opportunities dried up in the United States, and with no work to be found, the family returned to India in 1959.

Though materially very poor, the light of Sri Bhagavan in his heart was undimmed, and the desire to visit the sacred mountain of Arunachala remained unabated. He was drawn to Arunachala (as Sri Bhagavan sings in *Arunachala Aksharamanamalai*) like a needle to a

magnet. He was finally able to visit Arunachala with his nephew in the year 1960, 19 years after the initial flame had been kindled in Darjeeling. Oh, what a homecoming! He says that the moment he saw Arunachala, he found himself swimming in the bliss of Sri Bhagavan. Another insight that Bhagawata shared with devotees was the reason perhaps why he had not seen Sri Bhagavan while still in the body. He explained that it was Sri Bhagavan's grace, because if he had seen Sri Bhagavan while he was still in the body, he might have succumbed to the misconception that Sri Bhagavan was the body! But now it was clear to him that Sri Bhagavan was not limited to name and form but rather that he was that ever-present, immutable underlying consciousness that is the source of all.

While at Sri Ramanasramam, Bhagawata met Sri Bhagavan's great devotee, Arthur Osborne, who encouraged him to start regular satsangs to share the teachings of Sri Bhagavan in America. Though unsure if he was actually going to return to America, he agreed to the suggestion. As fate would have it, Bhagawata did return to the States in 1962, accepting employment in the Indian Mission to the United Nations in New York City.

Though Bhagawata was encouraged by the new employment, he was not certain why Sri Bhagavan would have brought him to a place like New York City. What could be the reason for transplanting this simple village boy to the center of the New World? Oh, Sri Bhagavan has reasons for everything, as events would reveal.

In November of 1965, Bhagawata started weekly meetings at the American Buddhist Society in Manhattan to share the teachings of Sri Bhagavan. The following year, in 1966, Arunachala Ashrama, Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi Center was incorporated and registered as a charity with the state and federal governments. A meeting room was rented at 78 St. Marks Place in 1967, and the weekly meetings became daily. In 1969 the Ashrama moved to a rented storefront on 342 East 6th Street, near First Avenue and remained there for the next seventeen years.

Sri Bhagawata's devotion and dedication and his firm faith in the grace of Sri Ramana Maharshi were the driving factors in the establishment of Arunachala Ashrama. Even when there were no other devotees present, the devotional songs and chanting of the sacred hymns would continue and the effects of these



continuous prayers, of course, could not be denied. Devotees were drawn to the ashrama and to the feet of Sri Ramana Maharshi.

In 1972, an ashrama was established in the Annapolis Valley in Nova Scotia, Canada. It was Sri Bhagawata's desire to establish a country ashrama "where people from Wall Street can sit on the grass", and bask in the teachings of Sri Ramana.

But it was not by merely visiting the ashramas in either NYC or Nova Scotia that one could obtain the greatest benefit, he clarified. Intense practice of the teaching was also required. He would say, "This is Arunachala Abhyasa Ashrama." Abhyasa means 'spiritual practice.' Pointing to Sri Bhagavan's photo, we would often hear him repeat to new visitors, "He teaches and we practice. He has made me His servant and servitor, his doorman and doormat."

He would also equate spiritual practice to physical labor, saying that one has to 'dig ditches' continuously, without slacking, for the effort to have effect. He would also say, "Is it just by passing in front of the medical school that one becomes a doctor? No, one has to work for it." And for all of the devotees, he was the model of continuous, unrelenting, joyous practice.

His love for *Sri Lalita Sahasranam*, the Thousand Names of the Divine Mother, was unending. He asked for and obtained permission from the authorities in India to chant these holy names, and a sacred Sri Chakra, consecrated at Sri Ramanasramam was sent and installed in the temple. He would melt at the chanting of this litany, and devotees would also be inspired to learn and

recite these praises of the Divine Mother.

His mind would be inwardly drawn during the recitation, as is demonstrated by the following incident: Once our friend Dennis was driving with Sri Bhagawata from Nova Scotia to New York. It was winter and there was a snow storm in progress. Undeterred, they set off in the car from Nova Scotia, as Bhagawata commenced the recitation of the Sahasranam. The storm increased in intensity. The recitation continued, unabated. Suddenly, the car hit an icy patch of highway and swerved out of control. There was no telling what was going to happen next. The car kept turning at full speed a full 360 degrees, with the passengers being flung from side to side. Thankfully, the careening was stopped when it hit a deep snow bank. With a great deal of maneuvering, Dennis managed to free the car from the snow bank. He turned to Bhagawata and realised to his great amazement, that throughout the life-threatening ordeal, Bhagawata's chanting of Mother's Names had continued absolutely unbroken! As if nothing had happened, he continued the chanting and the voyage continued.

Sri Bhagawata's entire life was consumed by his devotion to Sri Bhagavan and his ashrama. He wrote thousands of pages of prayers and petitions to Sri Bhagavan on his typewriter, the Hermes 3000. These prayer manuscripts, as they are called, reveal the deep intensity with which he clung to the feet of his Guru, and the love that he felt for him. He at times shared his writings with devotees, when the request was made to read from his prayers. Some of these writings have been published in the book titled *In Search of Self*, and are indeed revelatory¹:

"People say that New York City is no place for the pursuit of peace and happiness, as there are many distractions. But I have been so completely submerged in Bhagavan's grace that I have no time for anything else but to meditate on Bhagavan. That advent of Guru Ramana at Arunachala is the signal to mankind that everyone can practice his path without leaving his home or job. If we can succeed in turning our gaze inward and spend a few minutes doing it regularly every day at a fixed hour, both in the morning and night, we shall surely be launched on that wonderful path which is the summum bonum of human life. He taught the direct path of Self-enquiry and asked us to practice Who Am I? This is the path which does not require any ritualistic discipline on the part of the follower. It is immaterial to which



Sri Arunachala Bhakta Bhagawata at Hermes 3000

religion one belongs. All religions of the world teach us the same thing: how to find the Self within ourselves. The most important thing is to apply the teachings to our lives by constant practice. ...

Even without ever seeing Bhagavan physically, I find my whole life transformed by him. It is Bhagavan's grace and blessings that have brought me to the present phase of my life. My childhood dream of knowing the secrets of spiritual life has come true and from that moment in Darjeeling, Himalayas, when Bhagavan's name came into my life, I have always considered him as my Guru. But I had to wait for thirteen years until Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi gave me darshan in a dream. Since then, I have become his servitor and have been on the road to Arunachala. I don't think I could have been fortunate enough to drink the nectar of Bhagavan's teaching if I had seen him in the body. No number of lectures or book readings could have given me the insight into the Self which the very name of Bhagavan has bestowed upon me.

For me, any place and time is good for meditation. Bhagavan's grace has so overwhelmed me that I ride the crest of the wind and travel to the nth place. But where is the nth place in our wide world? That is right in our heart. If we simply withdraw our attention from the external world and turn to the heart, we shall find ourselves diving deep into the river of peace and bliss. At any time, any place and under any circumstances, we can take a few minutes

1. In Search of Self, by Arunachala Bhakta Bhagawata, published by Arunachala Ashrama, 1987, pp. 124-126

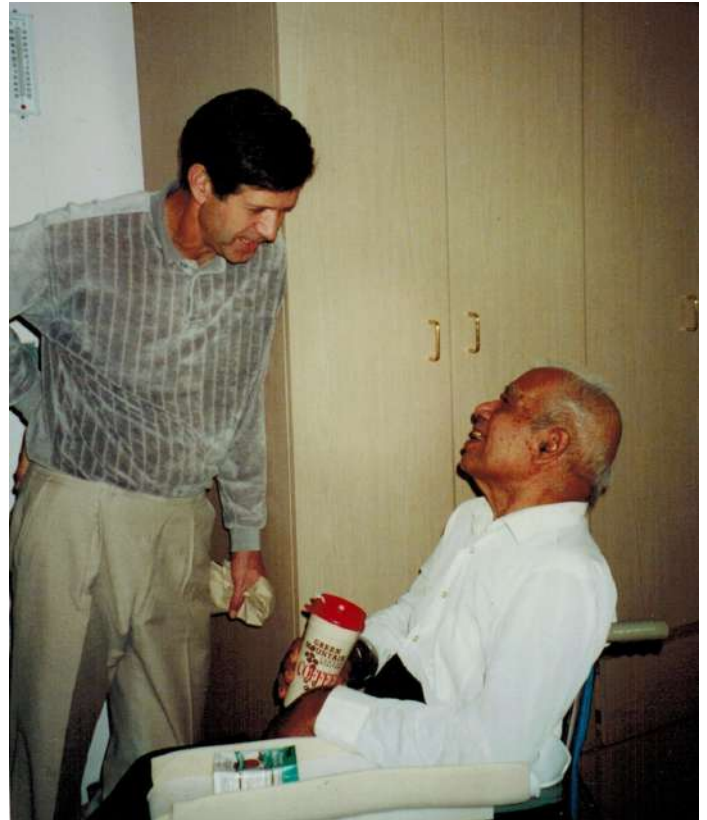
off from busy life and spend them in meditation and saturate ourselves with peace and bliss. If we chase the shadow, we shall never succeed in catching it. But if we turn our back on it, like a faithful servant the shadow will follow us wherever we go. If we pour oil on fire, we can't extinguish it. Similarly, by craving for and fulfilling our desires, we shall never be able to quench our thirst for enjoyment. Happiness is within and we have to dive deep to experience it. When we dig a well for water, we don't go digging just anywhere. We look around and select a place which has the potential for it. Then we start digging and go on doing it until we find not just a trace of water, but the source of continuous supply. So, we must start digging for the water of happiness if we want to quench our spiritual thirst.

When I begin to describe my deep experiences, words freeze and sentences lose their power to communicate. My life is now so much saturated in Bhagavan that I don't need to read books or cultivate austere disciplines. The very name of Bhagavan is the boat for me on which I can cross the ocean of ignorance. So much power floods into the heart, that I feel like opening its floodgates and letting the world be drowned in Arunachala's peace and bliss.

Nothing in my life is secret. Whatever comes to me from Bhagavan belongs to all. But when the sun rises all the buds do not blossom. Those who are ready for partaking of Bhagavan's grace shall be led to the Ashrama where the great Guru Ramana abides and will draw peace and bliss to enrich their lives. Guru Ramana is the Self in the heart and he is ever there to guide us to the truth."

The evening before Sri Bhagawata's passing on April 10th, 2000, he listened intently to the morning and evening Veda Parayana at Arunachala Ashrama, New York. Since suffering a stroke 18 months earlier, his mobility had been restricted, and he rested in a wheelchair for many hours during the day. Despite his physical limitations, his enthusiasm and friendship with devotees never waned. He was often unoccupied with his physical frailty, forgetting about the body. The light of Sri Bhagavan shone on his face, and he remained cheerful. There was no indication that the end of the earthly journey was imminent.

As he retired to bed for the night, he was told by devotees, "It is now fifty years since Bhagavan's Mahanirvana." He nodded his head in



Sri Bhagawata and Dennis Hartel, circa 2000

acknowledgement, gently closed his eyes, and peacefully entered Sri Bhagavan's abode.

Cremation of the earthly remains took place on April 14th, 2000, marking exactly 50 years since the Mahasamadhi of Sri Ramana Maharshi.

Twenty-five years after his absorption into Sri Bhagavan, the inspiration Sri Arunachala Bhakta Bhagawata embodied continues to inspire devotees and encourage them to tread the Mountain Path.

He gives us hope; although, like him, we have not seen Sri Ramana Maharshi in the body, we can still be assured that his guidance and grace are always here, available to all. Bhagawata encourages us to partake of his deep, unflinching devotion to the feet of Sri Bhagavan, the same devotion that carried him from his small village in Bihar, to the heart of the New World, New York City.

We have seen by his example that even now, one can experience the divine presence of Sri Ramana in our lives, no matter what our outer circumstances may be. And, no matter what difficulties might present themselves before us in our journey, the grace of Sri Ramana Maharshi, the Silent Sage of Arunachala, will be the beacon light that illumines and clears our path.

Thank you, Sri Bhagawata. We are ever grateful.

Dennis Hartel Returns to his Ashrama Home

Devotees of Sri Ramana Maharshi at Arunachala Ashrama expressed a grand outpouring of joy as the news of the return of Dennis Hartel to the ashrama and its family of devotees spread far and wide. After more than five years, during which time Dennis' whereabouts were unknown to us, his smiling countenance once again graces the shrine of his Master in the New York ashrama. Dennis was met at the airport by Arunachala Ashrama President Sri Mohan Ramaswami and, as providence would have it, returned to the Ashrama on the very day that marked the 25th anniversary of the samadhi of Sri Arunachala Bhakta Bhagawata (see previous article). Dennis spent much of his day making and receiving calls from devotees, enquiring of their welfare and of that of their families, renewing friendships that continue as if he had never left.

Details will come to light over time of the way our dear friend pursued his ideal to live as the poorest of the poor and serve the ideal of God in man. How



Dennis returns to Arunachala Ashrama

blessed we are to have such a consecrated soul in our midst!

Without a doubt, as devotees arrive at the ashrama and renew their friendships with Dennis and one another, their love for Sri Bhagavan and his family of devotees will grow ever-stronger. Such is the grace of the *jnani*, the ever-shining light, Sri Ramana!

Guru Vachaka Kovai

by Sri Muruganar

Translated by Dr. T.V. Venkatasubramanian, Robert Butler and David Godman

787 You should know that if, at all times, the *jiva* sees only the virtues in others, without paying attention to any shortcomings, then his life will be wholly delightful, with no scope in it for repugnance.

788 Unless a person firmly adheres to the dictum 'That which deserves to be reformed is my own mind,' by turning Selfwards and correcting himself, his mind will get defiled more and more by paying attention exclusively to the defects of others.

789 Heart, it is not because you have a sattvic nature, which is egoless and sweet like sugar, that *jnanis* shower their love on you. You should know that it is because of their benevolence, which forgives all accumulated defects, disregarding them all.

790 It is human nature to err. However, those strong ones who are mindful of their conduct should not, through overweening pride, cover up their faults but own up to them in an appropriate way. This is the proper course.

791 Since all moral and religious observances that have been laid down protect the *sadhaka* for a long distance [along the path], they deserve to be fully observed, but if they obstruct the practice of the excellent *vichara* that bestows pure *jnana*, then give them up as deficient.

792 If your desire is fulfilled in the way that you want, do not get deluded and feel proud by imagining that this has been achieved by the power of your *tapas*. Realising the truth that this is [only] due to the grace of God that has flowed towards you, you should humble yourself, feel gratitude, and have ever increasing devotion to his feet.

793 Let whatever happens happen in the way it happens. Do not entertain the slightest thought of going against it. Without embarking on any new enterprise, become one with the seer who sees the eye, he who remains peacefully merged in the Heart.

794 When the *sadhaka's* efforts result in failure, the benefit of this [effort] is to make him understand that Self-realisation can only be attained by Guru's grace, and not by personal exertion, thus preparing the *sadhaka* to seek the cool grace bestowed by the Guru.

Our Natural State by A 'Pilgrim'

This article was first printed in Vedanta Kesari in January 1947, and more recently in the book titled The Silent Power, published by Sri Ramanasramam in 2002.

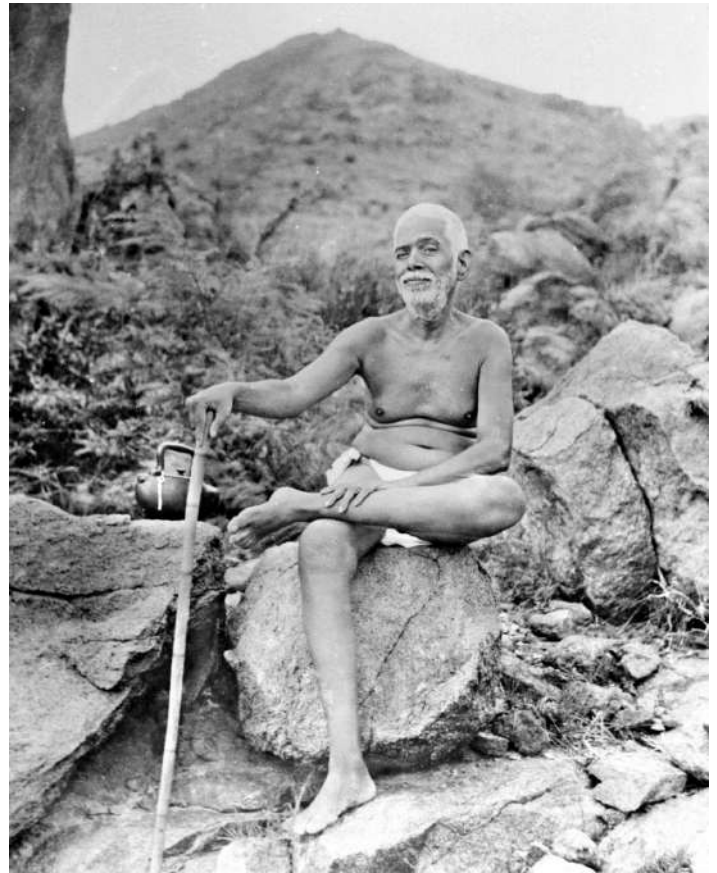
As Bhagavan has often stated, the realisation of Self is very easy, indeed! Here he expresses the same, in guiding the sincerely questioning devotee to his own pristine, natural state of Self-abidance.

I was on my long cherished pilgrimage to Bhagavan Sri Ramana. On the train I was chewing the cud of doubt. In the December and January issues of the *Vedanta Kesari*, I had read the answer Maharshi gave to the question put to him by Prof. D.S. Sarma as to whether there was a sadhana period in the life of Sri Bhagavan previous to his enlightenment. Sri Dilip Kumar Roy had put the answer in a poetical garb under the caption, "My Yoga" and Prof. Sarma had given his question and Maharshi's answer under the title, 'Sahajasthithi'. I reproduce below the answer of Sri Bhagavan:

"I know no such period of sadhana. I never performed any pranayama or japa. I know no mantras. I had no rules of meditation or contemplation. Sadhana implies an object to be gained and the means of gaining it. What is there to be gained which we do not already possess? In meditation, concentration and contemplation what we have to do is only not think of anything, but to be still. Then we shall be in our natural state.

It indeed was an intriguing situation for me. I had read in The Life and Teachings of Sri Ramana of the severe sadhana he did in the lonely rooms of the big temple at Tiruvannamalai and in the caves on the hill. Now here is Bhagavan himself denying it all! And more than that, how can illumination come without sadhana? That was something against the word of the scriptures. However, I consoled myself with the thought that at the Ashram, I might have the chance of placing my difficulties before Sri Maharshi himself.

It was one of those beautiful mornings in Tiruvannamalai. After my daily ablutions and duties I was ready for the darshan of Bhagavan. As I approached the Maharshi's room I could feel the peace



that was radiating from his room. I entered the room and then came my first shock. I expected to see something glorious, a face surrounded by a halo, etc. I didn't find any of these. Has he not said, I was reminded, in his answer that Self-realisation does not mean that something would descend upon us as something glorious? Has he not said, "People seem to think that by practising some elaborate sadhana the Self would one day descend upon them as something very big and with tremendous glory and they would then have what is called *sakshatkaram*."

None of the biographies state that Bhagavan did any sadhana after coming to Tiruvannamalai. I might have interpreted Bhagavan's period of silence and solitude as a period of sadhana, although it has been clearly stated both by Bhagavan and the writers who have written about him, that no sadhana was taking place during this period.

That winning smile that accompanied his greeting me meant more than Self-realisation. He beckoned to me to sit down and I sat there for more than two hours not knowing the passage of time. I realised then that silence is more eloquent than words. I dared not break the silence to raise my own petty doubts.

Later, though, I communicated my wish to place my

doubts before the Maharshi and the consent came by midday

When we reassembled before Sri Bhagavan at three, I was given the typescript of the question and answer to read and I read it aloud. I had framed my question thus: Question: “You have said here that you know no such period of sadhana; you never performed japa or chanted any mantra; you were in your natural state. I have not done any sadhana worth the name. Can I say that I am in my natural state? But my natural state is so different from yours. Does that mean that the natural state of ordinary persons and realised persons are different?”

Answer: “What you think to be your natural state is your unnatural state. (And this was my second shock that shook me from the slumber of my pet notions.) With your intellect and imagination you have constructed the castles of your pet notions and desires. But do you know who has built up these castles, who is the culprit, the real owner? The 'I' who really owns them and the 'I' of your conception are quite different. Is it necessary that you put forth some effort to come into the 'I' who owns these, the 'I' behind all states?”

“Would you have to walk any distance to walk into the 'I' that is always you? This is what I mean by saying that no sadhana is required for Self-realisation. All that is required is to refrain from doing anything, by

remaining still and being simply what one really is. You have only to dehypnotise yourself of your unnatural state. Then you have asked whether there is any difference between the natural state of ordinary persons and realised persons. What have they realised? They can realise only what is real in them. What is real in them is real in you also. so where is the difference?”

“Even then, some may ask”, the Maharshi continued, reminding me so vividly of those Upanishadic rishis, “Where is the conviction that one's Self is *sakshat* all right, that no sadhana is required at all for Self-realisation? Well, do you need anybody to come and convince you that you are seated before me and talking to me? You know for certain that you are seated here and talking to me.”

“When we read a book, for instance, we read the letters on the page. But can we say that we are reading only the letters? Without the page of the book where are the letters? Again, we say that we are seeing the picture projected on a canvas. No doubt we are seeing the picture, but without the canvas where is the picture?”

“You can doubt and question everything but how can you doubt the 'I' that questions everything. That 'I' is your natural state. Would you have to labour or do sadhana to come into this natural state?”

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 [events page](#).

The [Nova Scotia Arunachala Ashrama](#) is welcoming overnight guests. Guests are required to make arrangements ahead of time by contacting nova-scotia@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.

Wearing a mask while inside the temple is optional. Visitors are advised to have health insurance.

As usual, the Mandiram is open to daytime visitors for prayers and meditation. Tel: 902 824-2297

Please see our [online satsangs](#) page for a listing of other centers that are offering satsangs.

THE MAHARSHI is a free bimonthly newsletter published by Arunachala Ashrama, Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi Center, New York. To subscribe online or access all back issues, please visit “www.arunachala.org/newsletters/”. Books, DVDs and audio CDs on Sri Ramana Maharshi are also available in our [on-line bookstore](#) .

Arunachala Ashrama, 86-06 Edgerton Boulevard, Jamaica, NY 11432-2937 Tel: (718) 560-3196 / Email: ashrama@arunachala.org