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REALIZATION

Mountainous Sage

Ramana Maharshi's silent message is still heard around the world

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Once as a child I asked my father "Are there rishis like Agastya, Vishwamitra and Vashishta living today? Can we find them residing in forests?" My father took my question seriously. "Ramakrishna Paramahansa was a great sage who lived in recent times and had seen Devi. He lived in Calcutta, his disciple was Swami Vivekananda. You must read about them. A great sage, Ramana Maharshi, lives today in Tiruvannamalai. He is a Jivanmukta. He has attained freedom from rebirth."

After a few days, we journeyed to Tiruvannamalai (100 miles southwest of Chennai) and had darshan, sacred sight, of Ramana Maharshi. I remember that it was a crowded day and only vaguely recollect the ashram and people we saw.

Many years later, in 1992, I was in Trondheim, Norway. I went to visit a friend, and she introduced me to her friend, Sol. When I entered Sol's house on the fiord, I saw peaceful eyes

looking down on me and felt a thrill. There was the photo of Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi. Sol was devoted to him as were many non-Indians I met in Europe.

At that moment, I regretted not having had darshan of Sri Ramana Maharshi again when I was older. He attained Mahasamadhi on April 14, 1950. At the exact moment he left his body, witnesses saw a bright shooting star moving towards Arunachala, the sacred hill above his ashram. I could have gone many times to have his darshan. Young people do not attach importance to spiritual aspirations, and that opportunity lost was lost forever.

What was his message? It is very simple. He said "Know Thyself." Read his many books in English and Tamil. Again and again it is the same message, "Know Thyself." He taught, "A conscious bliss ensues when one abides as the Self, by inquiring 'What is the true import of I?' This bliss is spontaneous, indestructible and limitless." His method is called vichara, Self-pondering inquiry.

Devotees found him the embodiment of compassion. One said, "The most striking feature of his physical structure, which even the casual visitor ought to observe, is his ever-shining eyes. They can be compared to powerful electric lights that shed always a shower of cool and gracious looks upon everybody who came before him."

Being with Bhagavan: Ramana did not travel; those who desired wisdom had to come to Arunachala, just as Ramana

himself had done. Many are the popular stories told about these visits. Once the great Tamil saint, Yogaswami of Jaffna, Sri Lanka, came to visit Ramana. They sat together for half an hour. Neither uttered a word. Later, in Jaffna, Yogaswami told his devotees, "We said all there was to be said."

Not all visitors were so enlightened. Once a group of devotees, professional men from Chennai, came in a specially chartered bus to demand the total removal of the ashram management and the institution of a new system. They marched into the hall and sat before the silent Ramana. He did not speak, and they dared not initiate a conversation. Finally, they left the hall in frustration and returned to Chennai. Afterwards Bhagavan playfully offered, "I wondered what they came here for. Did they come to reform themselves or to reform the ashram?"

The English novelist and playwright Somerset Maugham went to the ashram in 1936. When he entered the ashram after a tiring journey, he fainted. He was taken to a hut and remained unconscious. When he opened his eyes, he saw Ramana Maharishi. "He bore himself with naturalness and at the same time with dignity. His mien was cheerful, smiling, polite. His eyes with a gentle benignity rested on my face. His body was absolutely still. He smiled and said, 'Silence is also conversation.' " Somerset Maugham's famous *Razor's Edge* is a story of a seeker who finds such a satguru.

Paul Brunton wrote, sitting silently before Ramana, "One by one, the questions which I prepared with such meticulous accuracy dropped away. It does not seem to matter whether they are asked or not, I know only that a steady river of

quietness seems to be flowing near me, and that a great peace is penetrating my being." Brunton's book, *A Search in Secret India*, brought Ramana to the attention of the world.

Among the many renunciates to visit him was Dilip Kumar Roy, who asked about the need for a guru, as Ramana was often described as having had no guru. "I might have had at one time or another," Ramana replied. "Guru is God or the Self. First a man prays to God to fulfill his desires. Then a time comes when he does not pray for the fulfillment of a desire, but for God Himself. So God appears to him in some form or another, human or nonhuman, to guide him as a guru in answer to his prayer."

When Ramana Maharishi was still observing total silence, Sivaprekasam Pillai, a very learned gentleman, asked, "What is the nature of consciousness?" Ramana wrote on his slate, "It is sat chit ananda (being, consciousness, bliss) in which there is not even the trace of the 'I' thought. This is also called mauna (silence) or atma (Self). That is the only thing that is. If the trinity of world, ego and God are considered as separate entities, they are mere illusions, like the appearance of silver in the mother of pearl. God, ego and world are really Sivasvarupa (the form of Siva) or Atmasvarupa (the form of spirit)."

In an enlightened person, Ramana once explained, "the existence of the ego is only apparent. He enjoys unbroken transcendental experience. This ego is harmless; it is like the skeleton of a burnt rope--though it has a form, it is of no use to tie anything with."

Boyhood Realization: Venkataraman Aiyer was his childhood name. He was like any other boy. What was being kindled in him nobody knew. He went to school, played with friends, swam in the village tank and always won in any competition or game. He was also devout. He went to Tiruparankundram and used to go around the temple in pradakshina with a Muslim classmate whose name was Sab Jan. "God's creation is alike. There is no differentiation in creation. God is the same, the apparent differences in God are created by men," the youngster told his Muslim friend.

In his boyhood years, he was prone to abnormally deep sleep. He recounted, "The boys didn't dare touch me when I was awake, but if they had any grudge against me they would come when I was asleep, carry me wherever they liked, beat me, paint my face with charcoal, and then put me back, and I would know nothing about it until they told me the next morning."

One day when Venkataraman was alone in his home, the fear of death overwhelmed him. He explained, "The shock drove my mind inwards, and I said to myself mentally 'Now death has come. What does it mean?' I dramatized the occurrence of death. I lay with my limbs outstretched stiff as though rigor mortis had set in, and imitated a corpse. 'Well then,' I said to myself, 'this body is dead. It will be carried to the burning ground and burnt and reduced to ashes.' But with the death of this body am I dead? Is the body I?" Suddenly the fear of death vanished, and he became absorbed in the Self. Venkataraman's life changed.

His father died when he was 12, throwing the family into hardship. One day when he was 16 he was writing his grammar lessons. Suddenly he put away his books and sat down to meditate. His brother heckled him, "What use is all this to such a one?" Venkataraman recognized the truth of this remark and decided to leave the house. He took three rupees and boarded a train, not knowing its destination.

Three days later he arrived at the great Siva temple of Tiruvannamalai below Arunachala Hill. He entered a trance-like state of tapas in a nearby cave. Day by day his austerities increased. So deep was his meditation, so removed from body consciousness, that ants had eaten into his skin; the scars could be seen throughout his life. Nearly a year later, his uncle Nellaiappan found him. Venkataraman would neither speak nor hear what was said. Nellaiappam notified the boy's mother, who arrived shortly. Initially rebuffed by her son, she and her younger son were later allowed to stay.

More traditional devotees did not like Bhagawan's mother and brother staying with him. Once Seshadri Swamigal, an ascetic in Tiruvannamalai, joked about it, calling Ramana a householder. In India, Hindus believe that renouncing family life is the first step in the quest for the truth of the Self. So, many people thought it odd that the yogi's mother lived in the ashram. Today the ashram administration remains in the family; Sri T.N. Venkataraman, current president of the board of trustees, is Ramana's nephew. When his mother died, Ramana said, "She did not pass away. She was absorbed," and a samadhi shrine was built for her. Around her tomb grew the ashram, which has become a pilgrim center for international devotees.

Abode of peace: The ashram is not a desolate place now. There are auto rickshaws waiting outside the gate to take any devotee anywhere he wants to go. There is a branch of the post office close by to handle the heavy mail the ashram receives and sends every day--when he was alive, a letter addressed "Maharshi, India" would reach him. As I enter the precincts of the ashram, I sense the all-pervading shanti. The office rooms are on the right. We go straight to a big hall where a few ladies are stringing garlands and softly talking. A German lady comes in with a little girl. The other women greet the child with smiles and give her a few flowers. She is delighted.

One of the women tells me that this woman from Germany has moved near the ashram because she wants her little daughter to grow up in this atmosphere. She is fortunate. The child will absorb the values of peace, worship and meditation. She must have been only six years old, but she was gentle and seemed so content for her age.

They do puja for Maharishi. Ramana did not believe in rituals. He did not believe in orthodoxy. He mocked his mother for being so orthodox even in food habits. She didn't take onions because it was not sattvic food. Bhagavan teased her by saying, "Mind that onion! It is a great obstacle to Moksha."

The flowers are blooming at the back. We go to the hall where Ramana Maharishi gave darshan to his devotees. In his later years he wanted to be accessible to all. There is pin-drop silence. People are sitting on the floor with closed eyes. Is it easy to control the mind? But in this room devotees seem

tranquil, and there is peace on their faces.

The ashram in India has an Internet home page at <http://www.rtanet.com/ramana/index.htm> with information about visiting the ashram and links to related organizations in the US, Canada, UK, Sweden and Russia. The mailing address is: Sri Ramanasramam, Tiruvannamalai, 606 603, India.

The ashram has published many good works of Ramana's teachings, and a beautiful pictorial biography. There are a number of books in various languages--over a hundred separate titles. Nearly fifty years after his great departure, the ashram work is increasing through the dedication of its staff.

Many flowers: Ramana left no formal successor, but his teachings today guide many, many thousands around the world. Some read his books and visit the ashram; others follow a teacher who perpetuates Ramana's wisdom. Visitors to Tiruvannamalai may encounter the beggar saint, Yogi Ramsuratkumar, who counts Ramana among his teachers. He has neither home nor home page, but his devotees may be reached via Institute of Indian Thought and Culture, 118 Big Street, Triplicane, Chennai, 600005, India.

A list of "Advaita groups," not all of which are directly related to Ramana, is at [http:// www.sentient.org/amber/](http://www.sentient.org/amber/). Notable among them is the Society of Abidance in Truth (SAT) of Master Nome, located in California. Their home page is at <http://www.SATRamana.org/>; address is: SAT, 1834 Ocean Street, Santa Cruz, California 95060 USA.

"What is destined to happen will happen, do what you may to prevent it," Ramana wrote on his slate. " Whatever is destined not to happen will not happen, try as you may. The best course, therefore, is to remain silent."

"The mind is a form of energy. It manifests itself as the world. When the mind sinks into the Self, then the Self is realized; when the mind issues forth, the world appears and the Self is not realized."

--Sri Ramana Maharshi