

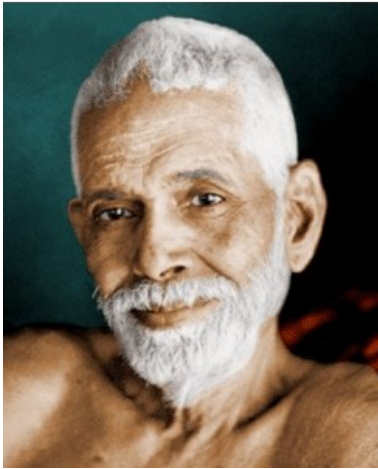


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Sri Ramana Maharshi



Sri Ramana Maharshi (December 30, 1879 - April 14, 1950), born Venkataraman Iyer, was a Hindu sage. He was born to a Tamil-speaking Brahmin family in Tiruchuzhi, Tamil Nadu. After having attained liberation at the age of 16, he left home for Arunachala, a mountain considered sacred by Hindus, at Tiruvannamalai, and lived there for the rest of his life. Although born a Brahmin, after having attained moksha he declared himself an "Atiasrami", a Sastraic state of unattachment to anything in life and beyond all caste restrictions]. The ashram that grew around him, Sri Ramana Ashram is situated at the foothill of Arunchala, to the west to the pilgrimage town of Tiruvannamalai.

Sri Ramana maintained that the purest form of his teachings was the powerful silence which radiated from his presence and quieted the minds of those attuned to it. He gave verbal teachings only for the benefit of those who could not understand his silence. His verbal teachings were said to flow from his

direct experience of Consciousness (Atman) as the only existing reality. When asked for advice, he recommended self-enquiry as the fastest path to moksha. Though his primary teaching is associated with Non-dualism, Advaita Vedanta, and Jnana yoga, he recommended Bhakti to those he saw were fit for it, and gave his approval to a variety of paths and practices.

LIFE

Family Background

Sri Ramana was born in a village called Tiruchuli near Aruppukkottai, Madurai in Tamil Nadu, South India on Arudra Darshanam day, into an orthodox Hindu Tamil (Iyer) family, the second of four children of Sundaram Iyer and Azhagamal, and named Venkataraman at birth. His siblings were Nagaswamy (1877-1900), Nagasundaram (1886-1953) and sister Alamelu (1891/92-1953). Venkataraman's father was a respected leader.

Childhood

Venkataraman seemed a normal child with no apparent signs of future greatness. He was popular, good at sports, very intelligent but lazy at school, indulged in an average amount of mischief, and showed little religious interest. He did have a few unusual traits. When he slept, he went into such a deep state of unconsciousness that his friends could physically assault his body without waking him up. He also had an extraordinary amount of luck. In team games, whichever side he played for always won. This earned him the nickname 'Tangakai', which means 'golden hand'. When Venkataraman was about 11, his father sent him to live with his paternal uncle Subbaiyar in Dindigul because he wanted his sons to be educated in English so they would be eligible to enter government service and only Tamil was taught at the village school in Tiruchuzhi. In 1891, when his uncle was transferred to Madurai, Venkataraman and his older brother Nagaswami moved with him. In Dindigul, Venkataraman attended a British School.

The Awakening

In 1892, Venkataraman's father Sundaram Iyer suddenly fell seriously ill and unexpectedly died several days later at the age of 42. For some hours after his father's death he contemplated the matter of death, and how his father's body was still there, but the 'I' was gone from it. After leaving Scott's Middle School, Venkataraman went to the American Mission High School. One November morning in 1895, he was on his way to school when he saw an elderly relative and enquired where the relative had come from. The answer was "From Arunachala." Krishna Bikshu describes Venkataraman's response: "The word 'Arunachala' was familiar to Venkataraman from his younger days, but he did not know where it was, what it looked like or what it meant. Yet that day that word meant to him something great, an inaccessible, authoritative, absolutely blissful entity. His heart was full of joy. Arunachala meant some sacred land, every particle of which gave moksha. It was omnipotent and peaceful. Could one behold it? 'What? Arunachala? Where is it?' asked the lad. The relative was astonished, 'Don't you know even this?' and continued, 'Haven't you heard of Tiruvannamalai? That is Arunachala.' It was as if a balloon was pricked, the boy's heart sank."

A month later he came across a copy of Sekkizhar's Periyapuram, a book that describes the lives of 63 Saivite saints, and was deeply moved and inspired by it. Filled with awe, and a desire for emulation, he began devotional visits to the nearby Meenakshi Temple in Madurai, and associated with this bhakti, later reported fever like sensations. Soon after, on July 17, 1896, at age 16, Venkataraman had a life changing experience. He spontaneously initiated a process of self-enquiry that culminated, within a few minutes, in his own permanent awakening. In one of his rare written comments on this process he wrote: 'Enquiring within Who is the seer? I saw the seer disappear leaving That alone which stands forever. No thought arose to say I saw. How then could the thought arise to say I did not see.'

After this event, he lost interest in school-studies, friends, and relations. Avoiding company, he preferred to sit alone, absorbed in concentration on the Self, and went daily to the Meenakshi Temple, ecstatically

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devoted to the images of the Gods, tears flowing profusely from his eyes. Venkataraman's elder brother, Nagaswamy, was aware of a great change in him and on several occasions rebuked him for his detachment from all that was going on around him. About six weeks after Venkataraman's absorption into the Self, on August 29, 1896, he was attempting to complete a homework assignment which had been given to him by his English teacher for indifference in his studies. Suddenly Venkataraman tossed aside the book and turned inward in meditation. His elder brother rebuked him again, asking, "What use is all this to one who is like this?" Venkataraman did not answer, but recognized the truth in his brother's words.

The Journey to Arunachala

He decided to leave his home and go to Arunachala. Knowing his family would not permit this, he slipped away, telling his brother he needed to attend a special class at school. Fortunately, his brother asked him to take five rupees and pay his college fees on his way to school. Venkataraman took out an atlas, calculated the cost of his journey, took three rupees and left the remaining two with a note which read: "I have set out in quest of my Father in accordance with his command. This (meaning his person) has only embarked on a virtuous enterprise. Therefore, no one need grieve over this act. And no money need be spent in search of this. Your college fee has not been paid. Herewith rupees two."

At about noon, Venkataraman left his uncle's house and walked to the railway station. At about three o'clock the next morning, he arrived at Viluppuram and walked into the town at daybreak. Tired and hungry, he asked for food at a hotel and had to wait until noon for the food to be ready. He then went back to the station and spent his remaining money on a ticket to Mambalappattu, a stop on the way to Tiruvannamalai. From there, he set out, intending to walk the remaining distance of about 30 miles (48 km). After walking about 11 miles (18 km), he reached the temple of Arayaninallur, outside of which he sat down to rest. When the priest opened the temple for puja, Venkataraman entered and sat in the pillared hall where he had a vision of brilliant light enveloping the entire place. He sat in deep meditation after the light disappeared until the temple priests who needed to lock up the temple roused him.

He asked them for food and was refused, though they suggested he might get food at the temple in Kilur where they were headed for service. Venkataraman followed, and late in the evening when the puja ended at this temple, he asked for food and was refused again. The temple drummer who had been watching the rude behaviour of the priests implored them to hand over his share of the temple food to the strange youth. When he asked for water, he was directed to a Sastri's house. He set out but fainted and fell down, spilling the rice he had been given in the temple. When he regained consciousness, he began picking up the scattered rice, not wanting to waste even a single grain.

Muthukrishna Bhagavatar was amongst the crowd that gathered around Venkataraman when he collapsed. He was so struck by Venkataraman's extraordinary beauty and felt such compassion for him that he led the boy to his house, providing him with a bed and food. It was August 31, the Gokulastami day, the day of Sri Krishna's birth. Venkataraman asked Bhagavatar for a loan of four rupees on the pledge of his ear-rings so that he could complete his pilgrimage. Bhagavatar agreed and gave Venkataraman a receipt he could use to redeem his ear-rings. Venkataraman continued on his journey, tearing up the receipt immediately because he knew he would never have any need for the ear-rings.

On the morning of September 1, 1896, Venkataraman boarded the train and traveled the remaining distance. In Tiruvannamalai he went straight to the temple of Arunachaleswara. There, Venkataraman found not only the temple gates standing open, but the doors to the inner shrine as well, and not a single person, even a priest, was in the temple. He entered the sanctum sanctorum and addressed Arunachaleswara, saying: "I have come to Thee at Thy behest. Thy will be done." He embraced the linga in ecstasy. The burning sensation that had started back at Madurai (which he later described as "an inexpressible anguish which I suppressed at the time") merged in Arunachaleswara. Venkataraman was safely home.

Early Life at Arunachala

The first few weeks he spent in the thousand-pillared hall, but shifted to other spots in the temple and eventually to the Patala-lingam vault so that he might remain undisturbed. There, he would spend days absorbed in such deep samadhi that he was unaware of the bites of vermin and pests. Seshadri Swamigal, a local saint, discovered him in the underground vault and tried to protect him. After about six weeks in the Patala-lingam, he was carried out and cleaned up. For the next two months he stayed in the Subramanya Shrine, so unaware of his body and surroundings that food had to be placed in his mouth or he would have starved.

From there, he was invited to stay in a mango orchard next to Gurumurtam, a temple about a mile out of Tiruvannamalai, and shortly after his arrival a sadhu named Palaniswami went to see him. Palaniswami's first darshan left him filled with peace and bliss, and from that time on his sole concern was serving Sri Ramana, joining him as his permanent attendant. From Gurumurtam to Virupaksha Cave (1899-1916) to Skandasramam Cave (1916-22), he was the instrument of divine protection for Sri Ramana, who would be without consciousness of the body and lost in inner bliss most of the time. Besides physical protection, Palaniswami would also beg for alms, cook and prepare meals for himself and Sri Ramana, and care for him as needed.

Gradually, despite Sri Ramana's silence, austerities, and desire for privacy, he attracted attention from visitors, and some became his disciples. Eventually, his family discovered his whereabouts. First his uncle Nelliappa Iyer came and pled with him to return home, promising that the family would not disturb his ascetic life. Sri Ramana sat motionless and eventually his uncle gave up. It was at the temple at Pavalakkunru, one of the eastern spurs of Arunachala, that his mother and brother Nagaswami found him in December 1898. Day after day his mother begged him to return, but no amount of weeping and pleading had any visible effect on him. She appealed to the devotees who had gathered around, trying to get them to intervene on her behalf until one requested that Sri Ramana write out his response to his mother. He then wrote on a piece of paper, "In accordance with the prarabdha of each, the One whose function it is to ordain makes each to act. What will not happen will never happen, whatever effort one may put forth. And what will happen will not fail to happen, however much one may seek to prevent it. This is certain. The part of wisdom therefore is to stay quiet." At this point his mother returned to Madurai saddened.

Soon after this, in February 1899, Sri Ramana moved further up Arunachala where he stayed briefly in

Satguru Cave and Guhu Namasivaya Cave before taking up residence at Virupaksha Cave for the next 17 years, using Mango Tree cave during the summers (except for a six month period at Pachaiamman Koil during the plague epidemic). In 1902, a government official named Sivaprakasam Pillai, with writing slate in hand, visited the young Swami in the hope of obtaining answers to questions about "How to know one's true identity". The fourteen questions put to the young Swami and his answers were Sri Ramana's first teachings on Self-enquiry, the method for which he became widely known, and were eventually published as 'Nan Yar?', or in English, 'Who am I?'

Mother's Arrival

In 1916 his mother Alagammal and younger brother Nagasundaram joined Sri Ramana at Tiruvannamalai and followed him when he moved to the larger Skandashram Cave, where Bhagavan lived until the end of 1922. His mother took up the life of a sannyasin, and Sri Ramana began to give her intense, personal instruction, while she took charge of the Ashram kitchen. Ramana's younger brother, Nagasundaram, then became a sannyasi, assuming the name Niranjanananda, becoming known as Chinnaswami (the younger Swami). During this period, Sri Ramana composed The Five Hymns to Arunachala, his magnum opus in devotional lyric poetry. Of them the first is Akshara Mana Malai (the Marital Garland of Letters). It was composed in Tamil in response to the request of a devotee for a song to be sung while wandering in the town for alms. The Marital Garland tells in glowing symbolism of the love and union between the human soul and God, expressing the attitude of the soul that still aspires.

Mother's Death

Beginning in 1920, his mother's health deteriorated. On the day of her death, May 19, 1922, at about 8 a.m., Sri Ramana sat beside her. It is reported that throughout the day, he had his right hand on her heart, on the right side of the chest, and his left hand on her head, until her death around 8:00 p.m., when Sri Ramana pronounced her liberated, literally, 'Adangi Vittadu, Addakam' ('absorbed'). Her body was enshrined in a samadhi, on top of which a Siva lingam was installed and given the name Mathrubutheswara [Siva manifesting as mother]. After this, Sri Ramana often walked from Skandashram to her tomb. Then in December 1922, he came down from Skandashram permanently and settled at the base of the Hill, where Sri Ramanasramam is still located today.

The Later Years

The Sri Ramanasramam grew to include a library, hospital, post-office and many other facilities. Sri Ramana displayed a natural talent for planning building projects. Annamalai Swami gave detailed accounts of this in his reminiscences. Until 1938, Annamalai Swami was entrusted with the task of supervising the projects and received his instructions from Ramana directly.

Sri Ramana was noted for his belief in the power of silence and relatively sparse use of speech. He led a modest and renunciante life, and depended on visitors and devotees for the barest necessities. However, a popular image of him as a person who spent most of his time doing nothing except silently sitting in samadhi is highly inaccurate, according to David Godman, who has written extensively about Sri Ramana. According to Godman, from the period when an Ashram began to rise around him after his mother arrived into his later years, Sri Ramana was actually quite active in Ashram activities until his health failed.

Final Years

In November 1948, a tiny cancerous lump was found on the Maharshi's arm and was removed in February 1949 by the ashram doctor. Soon, another growth appeared, and another operation was done by an eminent surgeon in March, 1949, with Radium applied. The doctor told Sri Ramana that a complete amputation of the arm to the shoulder was required to save his life, but he refused. A third and fourth operation were performed in August and December 1949, but only weakened him. Other systems of medicine were then tried; all proved fruitless and were stopped by the end of March when devotees gave up all hope. During all this, Sri Ramana reportedly remained peaceful and unconcerned. As his condition worsened, Sri Ramana remained available for the thousands of visitors who came to see him, even when his attendants urged him to rest. Reportedly, his attitude towards death was serene. To devotees who begged him to cure himself for the sake of his devotees, Sri Ramana is said to have replied, "Why are you so attached to this body? Let it go.", and, "Where can I go? I am here."

By April 1950, Sri Ramana was too weak to go to the hall, and visiting hours were limited. Visitors would file past the small room where he spent his final days to get one final glimpse. Swami Satyananda, the attendant at the time, reports, "On the evening of 14 April 1950, we were massaging Sri Ramana's body. At about 5 o'clock, he asked us to help him to sit up. Precisely at that moment devotees started chanting 'Arunachala Siva, Arunachala Siva'. When Sri Ramana heard this his face lit up with radiant joy. Tears began to flow from his eyes and continued to flow for a long time. I was wiping them from time to time. I was also giving him spoonfuls of water boiled with ginger. The doctor wanted to administer artificial respiration but Sri Ramana waved it away. Sri Ramana's breathing became gradually slower and slower and at 8:47 p.m. it subsided quietly.

Teachings

Sri Ramana's teachings about self-enquiry, the practice he is most widely associated with, have been classified as the Path of Knowledge (Jnana marga) among the Indian schools of thought. Though his teaching is consistent with and generally associated with Hinduism, the Upanishads and Advaita Vedanta, there are some differences with the traditional Advaitic school, and Sri Ramana gave his approval to a variety of paths and practices from various religions.

Sri Ramana warned against considering self-enquiry as an intellectual exercise. Properly done, it involves fixing the attention firmly and intensely on the feeling of 'I', without thinking. It is perhaps more helpful to see it as 'Self-attention' or 'Self-abiding' (cf. Sri Sadhu Om - The Path of Sri Ramana Part I). The clue to this is in Sri Ramana's own death experience when he was 16. After raising the question 'Who am I?' he "turned his attention very keenly towards himself" (cf. description above). Attention must be fixed on the 'I' until the feeling of duality disappears. Although he advocated self-enquiry as the fastest means to realization, he also recommended the path of bhakti and self-surrender (to one's Deity or Guru) either concurrently or as an adequate alternative, which would ultimately converge with the path of self-enquiry.

Aksharamanamalai

Many of Ramana Maharshi's followers asked for a hymn to sing while on their rounds for alms. They felt this would help distinguish them from other hermits. After much persuasion, Sri Ramana Maharshi composed Sri Arunachala Aksharamanamalai (The Marital Garland of Letters) in praise of Lord Shiva, manifest as the mountain Arunachala. The hymn consists of 108 stanzas composed in poetic Tamil, praising the formless Shiva as Arunachala and the different aspects of life and salvation that it symbolizes.



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