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CATEGORIES OF INDIAN THOUGHT

DARSHAN
MANJARI SHARMA

DAYAMRITA SWAMI
TALK AT AYNY • RACHAEL STARK

THE SPIRITUAL HEART
HEATHER ELTON



MAA LAXMI • PHOTOGRAPH BY MANJARI SHARMA

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Cover: MAA LAXMI © Manjari Sharma, 2011



SRI K. PATTABHI JOIS



SRI SWAMI VISHNU-DEVANANDA

NĀMARŪPA uses diacritical marks, as per the chart shown to the right, for the transliteration of all Saṃskṛta words. While many of the articles do contain these marks, it is not a universal occurrence in the magazine. In those cases where authors have elected not to use diacritics, Saṃskṛta words remain in their simple, romanized form. Chart by Vyaas Houston.

अ a	आ ā	इ i ए e	ई ī ऐ ai ऋ ṛ	उ u ओ o अं am	ऊ ū औ au अः aḥ
क ka	ख kha	ग ga	घ gha	ङ ṅa	
च ca	छ cha	ज ja	झ jha	ञ ña	
ट ṭa	ठ ṭha	ड ḍa	ढ ḍha	ण ṇa	
त ta	थ tha	द da	ध dha	न na	
प pa	फ pha	ब ba	भ bha	म ma	
य ya	र ra	ल la	व va		
श śa	ष ṣa	स sa	ह ha		
क्ष kṣa	त्र tra	ज्ञ jña			

DARSHAN

PHOTOGRAPHIC SERIES OF INDIAN DEITIES

A photography project by Manjari Sharma

MAA LAXMI photograph on the cover of Nāmarūpa Issue 14 Volume 1, July 2011 and page 3 is © Manjari Sharma, 2011, All Rights Reserved. All behind the scenes photographs are by Dilnaaz Mehta.

*This article has been compiled by Nāmarūpa editors in haste to help Manjari Sharma raise funds for her project on Kickstarter by August 28, 2011. Time is of the essence. **Please rush here to help now** >>> kck.st/darshanphoto.*

Early morning on August 5 we received an e-mail from Barry Silver in Tokyo - phrased in his usual off the cuff style...

*From: Barry Silver
Subject: interesting project
Date: August 5, 2011 4:06:32 AM EDT
To: Robert Moses, Edwin Stern*

*... considering her need for funding, a wise choice to do Maa Laxmi first. kck.st/darshanphoto
barry*

Knowing that Barry has a great eye for subjects of interest to Nāmarūpa readers we clicked on the link and immediately got drawn into the vision and idea of Manjari Sharma. It is just great. Then we noticed that she needed to raise some funds to get this project going. So, after sending a donation, we contacted Manj (as she likes to be called) and asked if we could run this article right away, both for interest as well as possibly helping her meet her goal. The behind the scenes photos are fascinating—building the set on an apartment building roof in Mumbai.

MANJARI SHARMA'S ARTIST STATEMENT

I GREW UP IN A HINDU HOME TO parents who were quite spiritual, religious and “god-fearing” as they would call it in India. I visited countless temples, shrines, and discourses as frequently as my parents wanted. These discourses circled around unraveling the mysteries locked in chapters of mythological enigma and tales of deities, reincarnations and astrology. The roots of Hindu mythology run deep; my own experiences as a child ranged from being fascinated and enlightened to lost and still seeking.

I moved from India to the United States in order to pursue an undergraduate study in Fine Art Photography. The frequency with which I visited Hindu temples in what felt like

my previous life, gradually got replaced with visits to art galleries, museums and studios, where creativity in all mediums of expression was revered and placed on a pedestal to honor.

MOST HINDUS HAVE SEEN THE USE of painting and sculpture but rarely photography taken to the level of exacting measures with respect to showcasing deities. *Darshan* aims to photographically recreate nine classical images of Hindu Gods and Goddesses to showcase the ability of a photograph to evoke a strong spiritual response.

This project is stretching the boundaries of photography. It also highlights and culturally preserves the heritage and artifacts from one of the oldest religions in the world. The nine deities that will be photographed are Maa

Laxmi and Lord Vishnu, Maa Durga and Lord Shiva, Maa Saraswati, Lord Brahma, Lord Ganesh, Lord Hanuman and Maa Kali. The first image created as a proof of concept is Maa Laxmi, the goddess of wealth and fortune. The creation of these photographic icons requires the most laborious and detail-oriented study, and much of it involves substantial monetary investment.

I encourage you to look at this link kck.st/darshanphoto to view a three minute video showing you the making of my first image, Maa Laxmi. I am fundrasing to continue my shooting and assure you any financial contribution towards meeting my goal will be well utilized and rewarded!

I THANK YOU SINCERELY FOR YOUR interest in *Darshan*.



MAA LAXMI

HOW WAS *DARSHAN* BORN:
The History and Philosophy

Darshan is the culmination of my art and spirituality, both objects of my devotion.

One of my favorite teachers once said, "Art is all about the process." I've never forgotten that. This insight enabled me to observe the following parallel – as devotees, as students, as artists, we frequently visit what we regard as our own temples of worship. We take our aspirations and desires to these places. We hope that a piece of art or a symbol of God will speak and send us a message. This communication inspires us and helps show us our path in life. Sometimes our expectation-filled visit disappoints us, but ultimately it's our faith that keeps us going.

These parallels inspired me and this is how *Darshan* was born. While making the first image I discovered that what this project bridges is that be it photography or spirituality, both need practice, faith, and devotion

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

Darshan is a Sanskrit word that means *sight*, *view* or *vision*. My project *Darshan* aims to photographically recreate nine classical images of gods and goddesses pivotal to mythological stories in Hinduism.

WHAT IS SO UNIQUE ABOUT
DARSHAN?

What is innovative about *Darshan*? I am recreating these icons as photographs while maintaining their spiritual sanctity. Historically considered a mechanical device to keep record, photography didn't even start to find a place in galleries until the 20th century. It's no surprise then that paintings and sculptures of Hindu deities were the dominant way to experience Indian mythology. Despite my extensive exposure to Hindu temples and artifacts, I have never seen a photograph of a deity created from scratch.

Darshan is my attempt to show that photos too can evoke a strong spiritual



response. At a larger level *Darshan* is a cultural calling for me to preserve my heritage by using the medium of photography, preserving this valuable Indian tradition and retelling an ancient story in a revolutionary way.

HOW IS THE FIRST IMAGE FOR *DARSHAN* CREATED?

The first photograph created for this project is Maa Laxmi, Hindu goddess of wealth and fortune. It is my aim to create from scratch every detail required to make the images in this series. In order to create the image of Maa Laxmi, the research came first. I studied all aspects towards the making of this image – starting from the colors, to wardrobe, to proportions, sketching and construction. The whole image from head to toe was very carefully plotted out. A diverse team came together: it included set & prop builders, makeup artists, art directors, painters, carpenters, jewelry experts, and assistants. All of these people are handpicked from their respective areas of expertise. The model you are looking at was also very carefully chosen after many auditions. Maa Laxmi's expression in the photograph is one that had to be very intently studied in order to emulate. The whole production was extremely time intensive and required meticulous attention because the sense of spirituality was heavily contingent on the authenticity and detail of the image.

HOW DOES THE COST BREAKDOWN FOR *DARSHAN*?

The making of the first image of Maa Laxmi, including raw materials, a team of fourteen people, labor costs, and location and equipment rentals, cost me close to \$5000. My monetary goal is based on the production costs described above, which will be the bare minimum I will need to create four more images. However, as the execution gets more complicated, costs get heavier. For instance, the complex prosthetics involved in the making of Lord Ganesh who bears the head of an elephant and the body of a man will



increase production costs. Hence, while the goal is a bare minimum, the greater the contribution, the farther I can take this project.

HERE IS A COMPLETE LIST OF THE DEITIES I INTEND TO PHOTOGRAPH...

Maa Laxmi
Lord Vishnu
Maa Durga
Lord Shiva
Maa Saraswati
Lord Brahma
Lord Ganesh
Lord Hanuman
Maa Kali

HOW DO I ENVISION THIS FINALLY PRESENTED.

I see *Darshan* displayed as an installation of six foot tall prints. An exhibit will be designed to evoke the experience of a Hindu temple. Just as in a temple the images will be lit up and cordoned off from the viewer and the route to their darshan will be delineated such that the seeker is guided from image to image taking in the spirituality and the photography as one unified experience.

Darshan Needs YOU

No effort is spared in creating these images. It takes everything I can give in terms of time, organization, and research. And of course, much of that requires substantial monetary investment. After creating my first successful proof of concept with Maa Laxmi, the financial scope of this project is beyond me. It is now in the hands of the universe to see it through.

My goal is what I believe to be the bare minimum amount I need for the completion of four more images. This will allow me to complete the first half of this project. *Darshan* will remain just a dream if not for the generosity of supporters like you. So I encourage you to be agents of art and contribute to this offering. If you have a second please share this with a friend, check out the



rewards being offered in exchange for your generous help and I thank you for your time. 🙏

Manjari Sharma grew up in Mumbai, India and lives in Brooklyn, New York. She holds a bachelors degree in Visual Communication from S.N.D.T University, Mumbai and a BFA in photography from Columbus College of Art and Design in Columbus, Ohio.

VIDEO OF THE PROJECT ON VIMEO
<http://vimeo.com/25732686>

HOW TO PHOTOGRAPH HINDU DEITIES
ON NPR'S 'THE PICTURE SHOW'
<http://www.npr.org/blogs/pictureshow/2011/07/28/137827738/how-to-photograph-hindu-deities>

WHY ONE SHOULD BECOME AN ART PATRON. BY ADAM MARELLI
<http://www.adammarellipho.com/2011/07/manjari-sharma/>





DAYAMRITA SWAMIJI'S TALK AT AYNY

TRANSCRIBED & EDITED
BY RACHAEL STARK

The following transcript is of Dayamrita Swami, spiritual representative of Mata Amritananda Mayi Devi (Amma) in America, at a lecture hosted by Eddie Stern of Ashtanga Yoga New York and Broome Street Temple on Friday, May 14, 2011.



Dayamrita Swamiji and Ammachi

FLOWERS EVERYWHERE. ROSES. GARLANDS. A large and beautiful photograph of Amma seated in a flowing white robe, her presence at once serene and majestic, fills Ashtanga Yoga New York and Broome Street Temple while outside the sounds of spring and a busy New York City night are slowly being hushed.

Devotees of Amma, known to many as the “hugging saint,” have gathered to hear her spiritual emissary in America, Dayamrita Swami. The eager audience includes yogis, students, and a vast array of practitioners from diverse spiritual paths. The anticipatory murmurs soon come to silence as Dayamrita Swami takes his seat beside the portrait of his guru and gazes out into the audience. His voice, when he speaks, is a deep baritone and his rapport with those who have filled the room is instant.

DAYAMRITA SWAMI:
[Chanting *Om*.] We will begin with a short meditation.

Sit straight. Try to relax, slowly close your eyes. Imagine all your tensions, all your regrets from the past and your expectations for the future dissipating. Be present right now and slowly shift your attention and breathe normally.

Try to expand the chest and abdomen and let the breath ease from the body. Feel the contraction of the abdomen on the exhale...[silence...then the collective sound of breathing.]

Now, we will chant *Om* three times... As we chant the sound of *Om* feel it rise from the navel up through the throat area...Now take a deep breath, *Om*, *Om*, *Om*. Now, once again, visualize the peace and silence of *Om*. Now chant the syllable *Ma* to yourself when you breathe in and *Om* when you breathe out.

Ma is the representation of Divine Love and when you chant it, imagine that you are being filled with divine love in your heart, and when you chant *Om*—*Om* is symbolic of divine light—Visualize her [Amma’s] divine light. *Ma*, when you breathe in, is Divine Love, and *Om*, when you breathe out, is Divine Light. *Ma* is Divine Love and *Om* is Divine Light. Continue like this for some time...[chanting *Ma Om*, *Ma Om*, *Ma Om*...]

Slowly, slowly, you will notice that as the words become silent, the sounds become subtler. They become vibrations. Now visualize the Divine Mother and pray to her with Divine Prayer. Let

peace come over you as when a mother holds her child’s hand. Allow yourself to be completely lost thinking, *Divine Mother, let me be led towards you. Let this be an act of worship towards you and when I lay down, let me offer prostration at your holy feet.*

And now visualize your whole body full of light, your whole body, your whole being heading towards peace and joy and visualize this light going out to all the beings of this world. As this light becomes warm and whole, visualize this whole universe being filled with love, compassion, and joy. Let us now chant *Loka Samasta, Sukhino, Bhavantu*, which means *May all beings find this happiness*. [Chanting *Om Loka Samasta Sukhino Bhavantu. Om Shanti, Shanti, Shanti...Hari Om...*]

In order to shape my talk, I would like to know how many of you have ever met Amma before? [Several hands are raised] Okay. Many of us are confused about how to lead a life in this world... I’ve been looking at these questions that you have written and this first question, *‘What is our duty and how should we lead a life in this world?’*

Especially in this particular time when we have so many things happening in

our world and so many things going wrong, we often ask ourselves this question, “*How do we lead a happy life?*” Luckily, saints like Amma have shown us this path—the way to walk—what life really means and how we should lead our lives.

When we look at ourselves and how we perceive the body, most of us are so stuck there [in our physical selves] that we don’t go to the next level, the mental level—and of course, the third level would be the intellectual level and we often wonder what should we do about all these things that we have, these “tools” that we have and, of course, when we ask this question we wonder, “*What is the purpose?*” and “*Why are we living in this world?*” or “*Why did we come into this world as a human being?*”

Sometimes, when we look at dogs or cats or other animals, we might wonder, “*Wouldn’t I have been much better off to be born as a cat?*” [Laughter] As a cat, we don’t have too many worries or too many problems and we often think that their lives are much better than ours. You know there was a story of a great saint who told a story about the lives of animals... In one sense, animals have much better capabilities in the sensory level and control of their senses and they’re far better than human beings in many ways...

SO, THERE WAS THIS MEETING OF ALL the animals in the past—one by one, all the animals came and started discussing how they were different from human beings. First, the cat came and said, “Look, when I look at the human beings and compare myself to them, I can see things at night very clearly, and look at human beings—they can’t even see during the daytime! [Laughter] And when humans walk, they’re always tripping on something and falling down and when I fall down, I land on all my paws—but when they land, they break their bones in their bodies!” [More laughter.]

Then the dog came and said, “I can distinguish between so many smells. I also understand their subtleties; look at the human beings; they can’t even smell what is sitting there in their kitchen—the garbage in their kitchen! And when I

sleep at night or even in the daytime, I always listen to all the sounds around me and perceive them whereas the human being—when they sleep they just close their eyes and start snoring and they don’t even know what’s happening around them!” And then the elephant came and said, “Look at me, I have the capability to pick up the smallest amount of food, the biggest tree, and also I can smell things a mile away!” One by one, all the animals came and said, “Look, we are much better than human beings so we should be the ones who are ruling the world and not the human beings!”

And so all the animals agreed and they were going to attack the nearest city and as they were walking towards the city, they saw, towards the edge of the forest, closer to the city, they saw a man who was sitting silently under a tree. At the moment they saw him they were taken aback because of his silence so they went up to him and they stood around him and after some time, they understood that it was a wise old sage. He was just sitting and when he saw all the animals around him, he asked, “What is happening, why did you come?”

And the animals said, “We have serious doubts, we have questions about human beings. We think that we are far superior to human beings and we are the ones who should be ruling the world and not the human beings; so we want to take over the world.”

And the sage smiled and sat there silently and said, a couple of minutes later, “What you say is true. You have superior capabilities with your senses but there is one thing that we human beings have that you don’t have, and that is the ability to understand *who* we are and *why* we lead a life—*why we are here*. And so, I agree with all of you that you are much better in that regard but human beings have that capability which surpasses other capabilities. As long as they don’t use it though, they are far worse off than all of the animals.” [Laughter]

When the animals heard that, they realized that it’s true and they went back to the forest and started living in the forest. Essentially, humans do not

use their sense capability to understand themselves or to understand why they lead a human life. All of the resources that we have—most of our sense capabilities and our intellectual capacities—we do not use them. That’s why great beings like Amma come. They ask us to use our sense capabilities in such a way as to sublimate our sensual capabilities, to divert them and use them for the highest purpose.

MANY OF YOU MUST BE STUDENTS of yoga. Actually, this is the focus and purpose of the study of yoga. The final goal of yoga is to understand *how and what we should do to lead our lives*. And saints like Amma come here to give us this understanding. As you can see—some of you must have watched Amma—and I know some of you have not seen her...

What Amma does is that she sits for hours and embraces people. This is why she is known as the “Hugging Saint.” Usually, she sits between twelve and sixteen hours a day but sometimes, she has sat more than twenty-two hours at a stretch and not like us—not taking a break or going to the bathroom or going and having a snack... One wonders, “*How can she do that?*” We are all capable of doing that in one sense but we don’t use that capability or we don’t use that full potential although it lies within each one of us. But if we did do that, we’d be able to surpass this feeling that we are just merely the body and nothing else. And so, saints like Amma have shown us this path—that we *can* go beyond the capacity of the body.

As I said, when we watch her sitting there and she’s giving what’s known as *darshan* (*darshan* means *to seek a great saint*; it also means to go and get an embrace from Amma), we see that she sits for hours. Normally, you can imagine in a household of two or three children where there is a father and a mother—usually the mother is more patient than the father and the mother sits and listens to her children. But how long can she do that? Maybe ten minutes? Fifteen minutes? Maybe at the most half an hour and after that [she] might say, “Why don’t you just go play

your video game!?” [Laughter] “Do something else!”

What happens [to most of us] is that we lose that patience but Amma sits for hours together. In 2007, when Amma when to South America for the first time—this was in Chile—what happened was that the local people had rented a hall that could hold about 2,000 people. The program began at 10:00 AM, and at 10:00 AM more than 3,000 people were already waiting in the line. So the organizers panicked and they called us and they said, “Look, there are more than 3,000 people waiting, what should we do?” And we were also in a panic and went running to Amma and I told her, “There are three thousand people waiting outside—what will we do?” Amma said, “Don’t worry about it! I’m the one who’s giving darshan not you!” [More laughter]

As she sat, the number of people kept growing, until there were 6,000 people towards the end! People were just coming in large numbers and by 6:30 that evening, there were another 4,000 people waiting outside just to get an embrace from her. And this continued until about 5:30 the next morning! After that, she took a break and came back at 10:00 the following morning; this continued for three days!

Then, on the third day, what happened was that we went to thank the people who owned the hall because they had accommodated such a large crowd. We went out to find them and thank them and when we went there, they came to us and said, “One of the things is that for the past two days we have been watching Amma and the foremost thing that surprised us [was] that Amma has been sitting there, foregoing food and sleep, and she [has] not even gone to the bathroom! And the first day when we watched her, we realized there was something wrong! An ordinary person cannot do that! And so, either Amma is cheating or doing something where she has a double! [Room erupts in laughter] Or someone is coming in while she goes and she rests and then she comes back.

“So, what we did was to turn on all the security cameras and we watched her! And the second day, we watched

more than sixteen hours [of footage] making sure that there was no double. It was the same Amma and we were amazed to find out that it was the same person sitting there for sixteen hours.”

And so, how does she do it? That’s what we also said—that’s the million-dollar question—*How does she do it?* She does it because of love. Love for everybody. This whole universe. That is the case. When we have that kind of love, which resides in each one of our hearts—when we bring that love out—we can do so many things. Amma says that each one of us has that capacity within us, each one of us, and it’s just our spirituality that we need to evoke and make that love grow bigger and bigger in such a way that one day we understand that everybody is nothing but us!

AND SO, WHEN WE ASK THIS QUESTION, “*What is our life?*” that’s why the first step is yoga. When we learn yoga, we learn how to control the body; yoga teaches us how to control our bodily impulses and our senses. The body is much easier to control than the mind.

For example, when you have a situation where somebody makes you angry and you say, “I’m not going to become angry. I’m not going to become angry.” And the moment that person starts acting funny or behaving strangely, then immediately the reaction comes. For example, when your hand goes up, there is no way you can pull the right hand with the left hand and say, “Keep quiet.”

We have the same problem with the mind, when the mind just goes running up and down. So where you begin is through the body and that is why yoga is such a good thing. When you start controlling the body, when you control the body, naturally the mind will follow and become quiet. Ultimately, the goal is to understand that when we are steeped in this deep silence, we come to realize our own self. Saints like Amma have come to show us this path as to how to lead our lives in such a happy or peaceful manner. So when we ask the question, “*How can I lead a happy life?*” and “*What is the secret to happiness?*” of course, as we see in Amma’s life, the secret to happiness always

comes when we are selfless and we start giving to others. That is the message that Amma herself gives when she sits and she meets people one after the other for many hours.

All of us have the same problem. We can give for really only five minutes and then, fifteen minutes after that, we stop giving, or perhaps we can give up certain things in our lives but we cannot give everything up. So, this is what yoga means—to join or combine ourselves with the Divine. In the *Bhagavad-Gita*, Krishna says that the sum total of yoga is balance. So, wherever there is balance in life, that is known as *yoga*.

And then there is also the question, “What do you mean by balance?” Balance is an “evenness” in one sense. You’re not getting too much of anything—you’re not getting too excited; you’re not getting too depressed; you’re not getting too happy; you’re not going up and down. You stay where you are even so nothing affects you.

But how do you get to that state? That is the next question. That’s when we start controlling our mind through spiritual practices and our yoga practice. And this is how yoga slowly transforms the mind. And especially, as I said, when we think about our lives. We can see that everybody wants to “take” something. We always want to “take” something. No one wants to give in return. But you will see that the moment that we start giving, in that moment, we shall receive. The more we give, the more we shall receive.

THERE IS A BEAUTIFUL STORY THAT Amma always tell us. Once, there was an old lady doctor who was stranded. One day, as she was driving through the highway her car got stalled in the middle of the night and so she pulled over. She tried to call for a tow truck but nobody came and they were saying it would be “three hours” or “four hours” and there she was on a highway in a remote area. She was so afraid. She was just sitting there and so many cars passed. But suddenly one of the cars pulled to the side to have a look. And there was a huge man who got out of this car [that had pulled over] and her immediate reaction was, “Oh my God,

this man is either going to rob me or kill me or take away my car,” because the car she was driving was very expensive.

She was terribly afraid and sitting inside her car but the man came over and said, “What happened to you, what happened to your car? I see that it stalled and is not working. Can I help you?”

And the woman said, “You know, I called for the tow truck and they said it’s going to be three or four hours.”

And the man said, “It’s so late at night. It’s very cold. After one or two hours you will get really cold and it’s started snowing and it’s going to get worse. Why don’t I just look at your car? In the meanwhile, you can just go and sit in my car.”

The lady doctor saw that the man’s car was a very old and battered car and immediately her thinking was, “He’s going to take my car and run away and leave me... That’s what he’s doing.” But she just decided to do as the man said; she went and sat in his car. Meanwhile, this man repaired her car and started the car and after that, he told her, “Your car is okay. I’m a mechanic and I know how to repair cars and that’s why I stopped. You can proceed and go to your home.”

And when this lady, the doctor, went back to her home, she was in thorough remorse about the things that had happened to her and how she had misunderstood this nice person who had been trying to help her. She kept on thinking, “How can I return and repay some of the kindness that he gave to me?” The question became like a sore in her heart and she wanted to give back to *somebody*.

And then what happened was that one day she was working in this hospital and she saw a lady who had been robbed—a pregnant lady who had just been brought into delivery room. The lady was in deep labor pain. The doctor went over to this lady and asked her what was her problem and so the lady said, “I cannot go into the delivery room unless my husband gets this money to pay—I don’t have any insurance and I don’t have any money to pay the hospital.”

So the lady doctor said, “Don’t worry about it. I will deliver the baby,” and she took her and delivered the baby. A

couple of hours later she also said, “Let me go back to the billing and finance department and talk to them about your case; I’ll take care of it.”

Meanwhile, the husband of the lady came running [into the hospital] so apologetic and said, “I’m so sorry. I could not find money at the right time I had to go begging to so many people; finally I found it,” and he went running straight to the finance department to pay the money. And as he ran inside the finance department, as soon as he entered the room, the lady doctor was standing there and when they met each other, they both just stopped for a minute. The room became so silent and they met each other’s eyes and stood there for a long time.

As he was standing there and about to pay the bill, the lady doctor said, “Don’t worry about it. I know what happened and I took care of it. I didn’t know that it was your wife but *thank God* I could do this for you. Remember the favor that you did me? I will never forget that—how you fixed my car and helped me that night when no one else came?” So, Amma always says when we do something for others, it always comes back to us—multifold. Amma says that life should be a celebration of giving and not of taking. In Amma’s life, she just gives, and so that should be our life.

I’D LIKE TO ANSWER SOME MORE OF your questions: “*What has Amma said about the year 2012? It feels like everything is very urgent—that little time is left.*” Of course, it is good to have that sense of urgency. It is good to have that feeling that time is not too much—that there is little time left—but at the same moment, don’t worry too much about what’s going to happen in 2012, 2013, or 2014. Can some of you remember 1999? Remember, it was 2000, Y2K and everyone thought, “My God, the world is going to come to a standstill on January 1st, 2000!” What happened? Nothing! [Laughter] The sun rose in the East and the world was still turning round and all the planets were in position—so the same thing in the year 2012!

The human mind always wants to dwell in the future or the past—never

the present. We feel that we find so much pleasure in the anxieties of the future or in the regrets of the past. We should just let it go and not worry about what’s going to happen in 2012. Just to take an example, when you came here tonight, to this lecture, there could have been so many accidents, so many things that could have happened to you. A car could have hit you, but what made you come here? Faith—the faith that nothing is going to happen. Similarly, we should have simple faith that something is taking care of us and that nothing is going to happen in 2012 or 2013. Everything will be taken care of.

When you look at this world, even a very small ant, how does it get its food? Who created it? There is a power that has created everything even for a small ant. And so, even if such a small ant has been taken so much care of, we have also been taken care of. So, we should not worry about what will happen in 2012. That is number one.

Number two is even if we worry, we still don’t know what will happen in 2012 and things will never happen the way in which we want them to happen. Something else may happen so it’s totally foolish to think about “what’s going to happen” and thirdly, when we are tense about what is going to happen, we are not present right now and we don’t perform things according to how they should be performed. Our performance is effected because of our nervousness and because of our nervousness, we don’t perform well and things are not done well—and as for things that happen in the future, we don’t take care of them properly either.

Actually, as Amma always says, a person who is always anxious, he is truly anxious about death. What we are anxious most about is death. But when we are worried about death in the future, in the present moment we are dying. So we’re not alive at this present moment. So, Amma says, “Don’t worry about it.”

As you know, it’s not going to get better in one sense. As you can see, day by day the world is getting worse. Don’t think it’s going to be a “bed of roses,” but it’s also not as bad as you think. The world won’t come to an end. All we can

do is to pray and think about a better world and a better future. So that way we don't waste our energy.

[READING ANOTHER QUESTION]

"Why is suicide a sin?" "What if you were in a situation that is so sad that you see no other way out?" Suicide is considered a sin in the sense that—First, we should understand the meaning of *sin*. Sin is not when you do something "bad" so that you are a "sinner." A sin is something that takes you away from God. Anything that we do that takes us away from God is a sin and when things take you closer to God—that is a merit.

So, what happens when you commit suicide, Amma says, is that you are trying to escape from the situation but, on a subtler level, when you die after committing suicide, only the body is dying. The mind and the intellect that are the "subtle body" and the "causal body" which is also the cause of our ignorance—they remain. So, at the subtler levels—we suffered more than we were supposed to suffer. Indeed, in one way, in that way, suicide is not an escape. That's why suicide is considered to be a sin because it takes more time for you to evolve. If it takes you more time to evolve, that [period of] time takes you away from God. So that's why suicide is not recommended.

And if you think that there is no other way out—there is always a way out! The "no other way out" is the way out! You see that? When you say, you're stuck it's your ego that is being crushed because you think that you are doing everything. But when you leave that "I" out—take it away, everything is different. It's like children, when you see them cry. When a small child is crying hard for its mother—and you go and give the child something or tell the child, "Don't worry, your mother is coming," the child still says, "I want my mother." Then you say, "Here is a nice toy. Do you want a toy?" But the child takes the toy and throws it away and says, "I want my mother." And then, even if you give the child a candy, the child will say that it's not good and throws it away and still says, "I want my mother!" And so, the child is satisfied only with his mother. Similarly, in a life, when we say, "There is no way

out," that is the point of saturation. That's a feeling. All you do is take that "I" out. When you take that "I" out and say that, "I cannot do anything—oh God," *that is where the solution comes*. "Oh God, you do everything and I have nothing. I have no other capability so please take care of me." And at that moment, you'll see that there is a marked change when you leave that "I" behind. *That is the way out*. So you have to understand—the "I" and the "mine" are the problem. It is not because there is no way out. There is always a way out.

[READING ANOTHER QUESTION]

"Could you suggest a particular chant or invocation or prayer to help one feel their truth—with use of mala or beads?" It is said that you should receive a mantra from a realized master like Amma so that next time that Amma comes, get a mantra so that you can chant it all the time. But until then you can just chant a simple mantra like, *Om Namah Shivaya*, or *Om Namo Bhagavate Vasudevaya*, or *Sri Ram, Jai Ram, Jai, Jai Ram*, or you take any mantra for that matter. You can take a "Christ mantra" or any mantra you like and just repeat it. The whole purpose—because the mind always wants to wander away—to break the mind and gain focus; chant any word. The whole purpose of mantra is to break the mind and gather those thoughts that are running away. Until that point that you receive a mantra from Amma, just take a simple mantra and keep chanting.

[READING ANOTHER QUESTION] *"How best can we overcome manic mind-set and how best can we move past anger and loss?"* If we have a manic mind, the best thing is medicine. [Laughter] First, start with medicine. Many people think it's not good but if you feel your condition is not controllable, it's good to take medicines because I have seen that there are certain chemical reactions that happen in the body which create this [condition] or the lack of chemicals can also be creating a condition. We start controlling the mind with the help of the medicines. I'm not saying that you should take medicines life long. I'm saying that people take it for

a period of two or three months and then afterwards, they can just leave it and become more self-sufficient. So, you should start with that and also get a counselor to see if it's working.

"How can we move past anger and loss?" The easiest way is to let go, but often, we cannot just let go because that is the whole point. When we say "loss" and "anger," both of them, of course, are connected to each other. Again, the problem is we feel that it is our loss. Amma tells the story of a big business man who owned fifteen or twenty ships. What happened was one day, one of his managers came running and said to him, "One of our ships sunk." So the businessman asked him, "Which ship has sunk?" There was a ship with a political name and that particular ship had sunk. As soon as the rich man heard that, he started laughing.

The manager was perplexed and said, "What happened? Why are you laughing? You should be crying! You should have so much sorrow because the ship sank!"

And the businessman said back to him, "You know, I sold that ship yesterday to another person! [Laughter] And it's not mine anymore. If it was mine, I would have been worried, I would have been sad."

So, when there is "I" and "mine" there comes loss and then comes anger. When we lose "I" and "Mine", we can let it go. Slowly, we train ourselves and learn to think, "If I had this...." Think about the consequences of what you might have. Say to yourself, "It's better that I don't have it—because if I had it, I would suffer more. I would have more problems in life. And so, it's better that I lose it. God gave me an opportunity and God took it away."

During this big earthquake in Gujarat, in India, when we visited that place, most of the people that we found there were not sad even though they had lost their homes. We were so surprised to see the attitude of the people—they lost many of their loved ones and still, in that sense, though they were sad to a particular extent, they were not so depressed. So we asked them, "What is the reason? Why are you not sad?" They



Ammachi and Dayamrita Swamiji during kirtan.

said, “God gave it to me and God took it away.” So, if we have that similar attitude that God just gives things to us for just a particular time and then takes things back—we would not have that sense of loss—whether it be a relationship, whether it be a possession, whether it be anything. So, please remember that.

[READING ANOTHER QUESTION] “*How do we know which work is best to choose? If we have many talents?*” It’s not the work that matters. What matters most is your mind, your attitude, and the attitude with which you do your work. And so, if it’s something that you like, if you have the mindset or your attitude is to the best extent—that is what is needed. So, again, it’s not the work per se. Of course, I’m not saying that you should not use your talents! Use your talents to the fullest extent and in whatever particular way that you can. But you should also see that your talents get used in such a way that they benefit many people.

The other thing is, “*What is our karma?*” When you ask, “What is our karma?” the question really is, “What is our duty?” Just try to take what comes to you, accept what comes to you. That is more important than choosing something that you may like but may get you in trouble. It may be worse for you if you get too choosy. What happens is that if you start accepting things that come to you, you’ll see that you’ll be given more—more opportunities to grow and evolve and, in this way, you’ll be able to utilize your talent to the fullest extent.

THIS NEXT QUESTION IS, “*What is the meaning of marriage?*” You’re asking a person who never got married! [Tremendous laughter] If you had asked me what is the *purpose* of marriage, I’d have told you much better! [Pauses] In one sense, I can say that it is absolutely meaningless. But in another sense, as Amma says, in marriage you should always think that you’re not two people

but one. So that is the purpose of marriage.

“*What the meaning of marriage?*” To understand that you and your wife or your partner are not two people but one. In olden times, for example, in ancient times in India, marriage was just to have one or two children and bring them up and after marriage—people would not even have a physical relationship. The man would consider the woman an incarnation of the Divine Mother and the woman would consider the man as the incarnation of the Divine. But now, it’s just the opposite—you consider the other to be an incarnation of the Devil! [More laughter]

We have to understand, that is the point we are moving towards—when we try to understand each other—that all of us are one and not two. So that is the meaning of marriage. Most of the people cannot go to that point. It’s not about physicality. It’s also not about the “mismatching” between the husband and the wife. You always

have to understand that they are “mismatched.” There is no “match” between the husband and the wife. If you think there is, it’s just an illusion! Because no two people are the same in this world and God has created us so! Rather than dwelling on the weakness of each other—we should dwell on the strength of each other. As Amma always says, don’t substitute your weakness with the weakness of the other person. If the person is weak in something, substitute your strength and if you are weak in an area, then the other person should substitute their strength. So that’s how you should always move forward. The other thing that Amma says is that, “We should not become like beggars!” Especially not two beggars!

Nowadays, what happens in marriage is that the husband and the wife are like two beggars because both are begging for love. Both want love but both just want to take from each other and not give to each other. What happens is we should always have the understanding not to take—there should be giving. This should be the beginning of marriage. It actually becomes truly meaningful only when we give. Another question is, If the husband and wife should become one, which one should they be? [More laughter] So, it should not be “which one?” It should be “you.” Because truly there is no “you” there—there is only “I” and “How can I give?” So, again, you should always think about how can I give and not take.

AND THE LAST QUESTION IS, “*Is it okay to eat animals?*” First of all, I recommend not eating animals while they are alive! [Laughter] Secondly, we have to understand why it is said not to eat animals, or why we should be vegetarian. What you have to understand is that when we eat something—whether it is meat or fish or vegetarian food—it’s not just that we’re taking in the physical part of it. We are also actually taking in the subtle part of the food, which comes along with it.

When we eat what happens is that the physical part of the food goes into our physical body and the subtle part of

the food goes into our mind. Especially when we eat animals. The subtle part of the animal, is more animalistic—we get their tendencies. So, that’s why it’s recommended not to eat animals and to be a vegetarian. At that level we can also ask the question, “But aren’t vegetables also life?” They have a life—so why should we eat vegetables? But in the evolutionary scale—vegetables are thought to be the lowest because they don’t have a mind of their own like animals. Animals can feel, they can understand. When you look at the plants, they are at the lower level—while they have feelings and emotions, it’s not as common as animals. So that’s why when you eat vegetables, there is less effect on your mind. Fish are lower than animals because they have not evolved as high as an animal, so to eat fish, Amma says, is always better than to eat meat.

The other problem [with eating meat] is that animals are more aware. They have a sense of acute awareness. Just before they are killed, for example, they know they are going to die. As soon as they are aware of death, the fear of death comes. And when the fear of death comes, there are a lot of chemicals pumped out of the body that are very poisonous. When we eat that meat, the poison also comes to our body. That’s why it’s recommended not to eat animals in that sense. But if your doctor recommends that you do, don’t worry about it and again, fish is far better than eating animals. Of course, it’s proscribed for spiritual people who are really intent on the spiritual path to refrain even from fish and other things. Again, you don’t have to worry so much about it but always think about it.

I’ve seen people who say that once they become intimate and start understanding animals, they ask, “How can I eat animals?” Animals have their own personalities and individualities just like people. And so, it’s just like killing a human being. And so, that’s the reason, but please don’t worry. ▲

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THE SPIRITUAL HEART

*My travels in Tiruvannamalai,
India take me to the heart of the
Holy Mountain and the teachings
of Ramana Maharishi.*

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS
BY HEATHER ELTON

IN SOUTH INDIA THERE IS A LONELY hill that is revered in Hindu sacred tradition and legendary history. Arunachala, the Holy Mountain in Tiruvannamalai, rises up as some anomaly thrown up by the earth under the stress of some violent volcanic eruption in the dim ages before even the coal-bearing strata were formed. The peak is imposing, yet it offers no pretty panorama of balanced proportions. Rather, it is ungainly with sides jagged and broken, whose face is a mass of thorny scrubs and jumbled boulders. This granite mountain has been dated to the earliest time of the planet's crust, long before dinosaurs moved their ungainly forms through the primeval forests that covered our earth. Arunachala is as ancient as the planet earth itself. The Tamil traditions say that it's older than the Himalayas. It's believed to be a remnant of the vanished continent of sunken Lemuria, of which indigenous legends still keep a few records. A great seer, who lived at the foot of the mountain, spoke of the lost continent that once stretched all the way across the Indian Ocean, embracing Egypt, Abyssinia, and South India. There are similarities in the religions, societies and



monuments of the Dravidians in South India and those people who settled on the Nile. It is believed that the culture of lost Lemuria was carried westward to mingle in Egypt with that of Atlantis, which disseminated its civilization to many a distant place in the near east.

In the Hindu tradition, an early reference to Arunachala can be found in the classical text, *Rig Veda*, and has made Tiruvannamalai one of the greatest Saivaite sites in India, with a sprawling 24-acre temple complex at the base of the mountain that attracts hundreds of thousands of pilgrims. Arunachala is considered to be a manifestation of Siva. The story goes that Siva was mourning the loss of his wife Sati and, wandering nude in the forests of Daruvana, he aroused the wives of certain sages. The jealous sages cursed the god's lingam (phallus) to fall off. As it touched the earth it grew to immense size like a great shining column. The gods Brahma and Vishnu saw it when its top had reached upwards beyond the clouds and its lower end was buried deep in the earth. They decided to investigate. Taking the form of a boar, Vishnu dived into the depths of the pramaeval ocean to reach the base of the column, and Brahma, taking the form of a swan, flew up to its top. When they returned Vishnu honestly confessed that he could not find the foundations, while Brahma falsely boasted that he had reached the summit. At this moment Siva appeared, denounced Brahma as a liar and praised Vishnu for his honesty. At the request of Vishnu, Siva left part of his lingam in its *tejas*, or fire, form, on the Arunachala hill.

Once a year, in the Tamil month of Karttikai (November/December), at precisely six PM as the sun sets and the full moon rises, Saivaites light a huge cauldron with three tons of ghee mixed with camphor on top of the mountain that burns for ten days and the column of fire can be seen from miles away. This fire ceremony has been going on for thousands of years. Immense good fortune is promised to the worshipper who beholds the first flame that leaps out of the cauldron on the dark December night.



In *Skanda Purana*, Siva said: “Though in fact fiery, the dull appearance of a hill on this spot is because of grace and living solicitude for the spiritual uplift of the worlds. Here I always abide as the perfect being. Meditate then that in the Heart of the Hill surges the spiritual glory within which is contained all the world... what cannot be acquired without infinite pains—the true meaning of the scriptures’ mystic revelation – is easily got by all who either directly gaze at this hill or even concentrate their thoughts upon it, if far away. I ordain that residence within a circle of thirty miles of this hill will suffice to burn off all defects and blend a man with the Supreme Spirit.”

THERE IS AN AIR OF DEEP MYSTICISM around the temple, the hill and their environs and they have long been associated with many yogis and siddhas. More recently, Sri Ramana Maharishi (1879-1950), perhaps modern India’s greatest sage, lived here for fifty-three years. He is the great Advaita Vedanta master who taught Atma-Vichara, or Self-inquiry, as the direct path to Self-realization. He directed people to look inward rather than outward for liberation and urged them to look towards the spiritual heart (which he says lies on the right side of the body) and ask the question, “Who am I?”

Word spread about the illuminated sage of Tiruvannamalai and many Western seekers came to visit. Frank Humphreys discovered Ramana in 1911, and wrote articles on him in *The International Psychic Gazette*. Paul Brunton first visited him in 1931 and claimed him to be “one of the last of India’s spiritual supermen,” a true yogi among many fakirs in his book, *A Search in Secret India*; Somerset Maugham modeled the spiritual guru in his 1944 novel, *The Razor’s Edge*, on Ramana. The French photographer, Henri Cartier-Bresson, was there at the time of his Maha Samadhi (death). Even the enlightened Indian sage, Paramahansa Yogananda, paid a visit. However, even as his fame spread, Sri Ramana maintained his belief in the power of silence, only speaking on rare occasions,

as well as his lack of concern for fame or criticism. His lifestyle remained that of a renunciate. He considered his own guru to be the Self, in the form of the sacred mountain Arunachala.

On the importance of Arunachala, Sri Ramana Maharishi wrote in *Arunachala Mahatmyam*: “While other holy places are sacred because they are the abodes of Lord Siva, Arunachala is Lord Siva himself... It is this place that bestows *jnana* (Self-knowledge) and for those few who seek jnana, Arunachala always makes itself known through some means or other.” And so, after many years of hearing about Tiruvannamalai and Ramana Maharishi, Arunachala beckoned me from afar and I experienced a very auspicious New Year 2010 under the full moon, Blue Moon and lunar eclipse.

ARUNACHALESWAR TEMPLE

THE PAST FEW YEARS, I’VE TRAVELED to Mysore to study Ashtanga Yoga, but with the passing of the guru, Sri K. Pattabhi Jois, on May 18, 2009, I decide to have a different kind of spiritual experience in India. I want to find a place, rather than a person, to be my teacher. My experience in the past with Native American culture and expeditions into wilderness taught me that the earth could be a spiritual teacher. I fly to Chennai and, after decompressing in the seashore temple town of Mahabalipuram, travel through a South Indian landscape of green rice paddies and coconut groves to the Holy Mountain. The cars slowly diminish and the road becomes populated with rural life – shepherds herd their goats, oxen pull heavily-loaded wooden carriages, women artfully balance anything on their heads from colourful plastic water jugs to eight-foot long palm debris to be used for firewood. Sacred cows, homeless dogs and uniformed school children all jostle for space with bicycles, rickshaws, taxis and the odd lorry. I enter a world of people and animals working together in nature. Images of locals bringing their livestock back from fields at dusk look like a romantic cliché of a bygone era. Time stands still.

I phoned several hotels only to discover that Tiruvannamalai is, indeed, a thriving pilgrimage centre with few rooms available, none near the Ramana Maharishi ashram. I take a room at the Trishul Hotel, a modern Indian lodge in the hot, dusty, noisy downtown centre. Not wanting to waste a moment, I walk through mud lanes, the temple bazaars and throngs of beggars to arrive at Arunachaleswar Temple. The entrance is an impressive gopuram (monumental tower), ornately carved in true Dravidian style, that marks the point where we must leave behind all that is time-bound and limited in order to seek that which is eternal and infinite. I feel struck by how palpable spirituality is in India – the constant reminder to rise above the existential worries of everyday existence. A guard brings me back to mundane reality and reminds me to remove my shoes, as is customary when entering holy places. I contemplate whether to pay a few rupees to someone to watch my shoes, or keep them really safe and stuff them in my bag. My feet get filthy crossing the street to the temple and I wonder about the meaning of this custom.

Inside this portal to the divine, I’m awestruck by the sheer enormity of the temple complex connected by extensive corridors and inner/outer prakarams (rampart walls), and pierced on four sides with colossal towers rising sixty-six metres high. The era of its founding is unknown; the complex grew over several millennia. The gopurams were erected between the tenth and sixteenth centuries. It was later refurbished during the Vijayanagara era (fourteenth - seventeenth centuries). I pass by several mysterious lingam shrines and glimpse at a pantheon of deities associated with Siva, all puja-ed up and decorated with red bindis on their foreheads, covered in flowers and adorned in exquisite silks. On the outer edges, there are others that seem forlorn, sadly forgotten, dressed in tattered cloth as if there are too many to dress each day. Strange anthropomorphic stones are dressed up as Gods against a background of swastikas, the ancient Hindu symbol of peace. They’re not exactly beautiful,



more occultist or fetishistic, from some secret Tamil past. I vow to return in daylight to see the intricate carvings, especially the one of Lord Siva dancing in an elephant's skin. But there is a dark energy here that might be from visiting at night, or because the stone is dark grey, or from the mysterious shrines with ancient deities.

I arrive at the inner sanctum and pay twenty INR for 'Special Darshan' and am led to the front of the long queue by a priest. *Darshan* is the act of seeing and being seen by the Gods. It can be the beholding of an auspicious deity, person, or object. The experience is thought to be reciprocal and results in the blessing of the viewer and protects Hindus against demons and evil realities of mortal life. At the altar, Puja is made. Incense is burned, spirits evoked, flowers laid on a phallic Siva lingam, or 'wand of light'. I'm blessed and receive Siva's trademark horizontal line of white ash. I try to get out of the way of my own ignorance surrounding these ceremonies, and remain open to receive any blessings, or energy, that is meant for me, and trust that I will absorb what is intended.

In another hall, a group of devotees await another special darshan, this time from the temple elephant. Children shyly hold out rupees that are adeptly accepted with its trunk and promptly given to its trainer (who I later found out was quite cruel), something it has done every day for the past forty years. Children cower and squeal with delight as the trunk gently lands on their heads. Everything is symbolic of all that is human aspiring to be Divine, and all that is divine incarnating in the manifest world of shape and form. The temple has a spiritual weight perhaps accumulated from the prayers of millions of pilgrims dating back thousands of years. It's the most functional and well-used temple I've been in and I see why it's made of materials that last the stretches of time. There is something quite comforting about walking barefoot on the smooth granite floors, warm from the heat of the sun, treading the same path as millions of others, getting lost in the larger humanity.

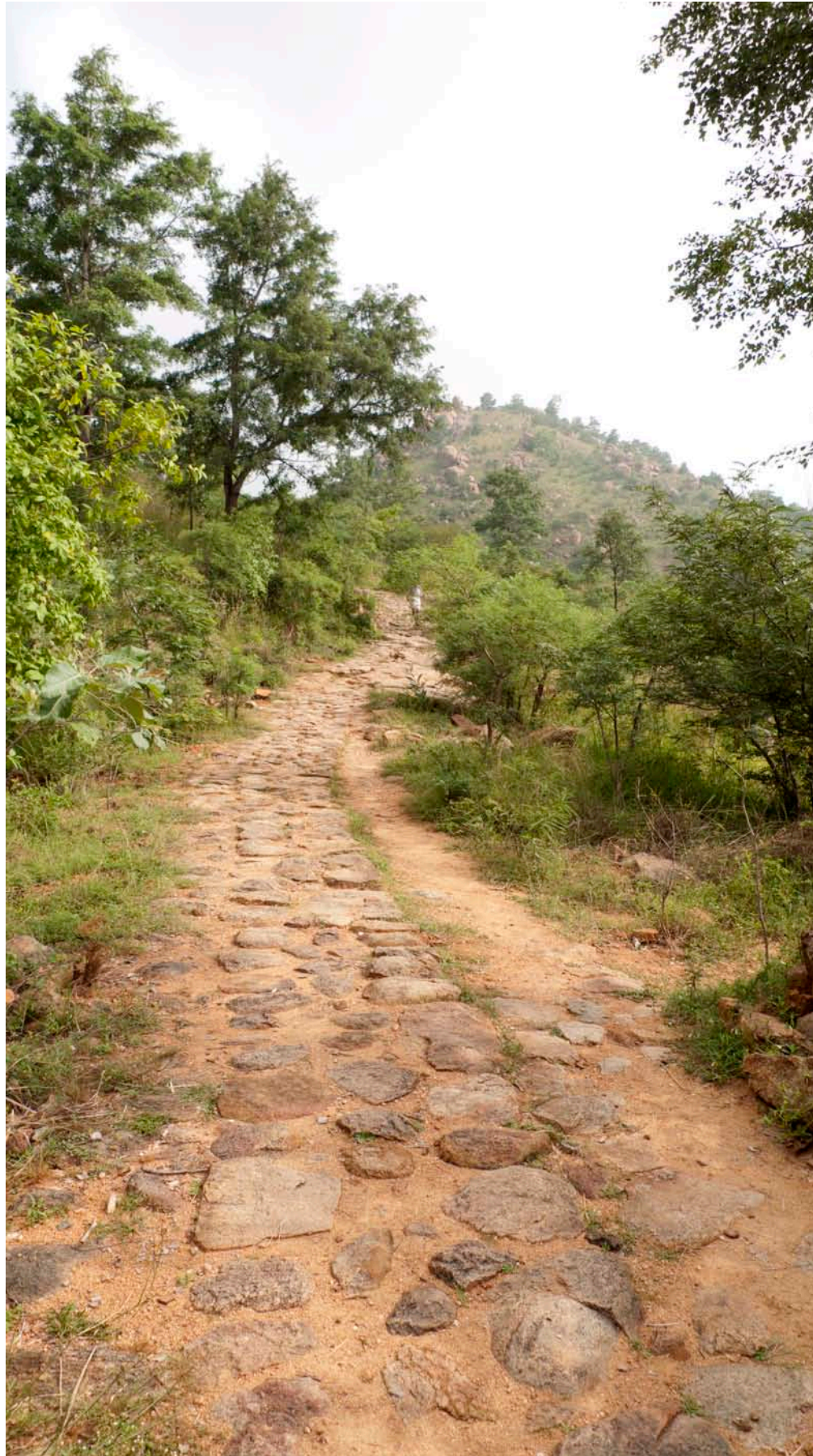


On the way out, I visit the Pathala Linga shrine beneath the Thousand-Pillared Hall, where Sri Ramana Maharshi stayed when he first arrived in Tiruvannamalai. Absorbed in Samadhi, he didn't notice the insects stinging him and vermin eating his body. Eventually, a local saint, Seshadri Swamikal, discovered him in the vault and had him removed and taken to the mountain where he remained to the end of his mortal life.

THE MOUNTAIN PATH

GET UP EARLY AFTER A NOISY NIGHT of surreal dreams, eat an idli breakfast and take a rickshaw to the Sri Ramana Maharishi ashram. It's a beautiful morning to climb Arunachala. The mountain path leads the way on a steady incline. My senses awaken to the song of birds, sweet fragrances of flowers, and gentle wandering breezes; under early morning sunlight the entire hill takes on a pink glow. My lungs fill with fresh air and I feel a true connection with nature that gives me a great sense of joy. I walk mindfully, in silence, on the path, aware of the rise and fall of each footstep, my bare feet feeling the warm stone. I am totally conscious, immersed in the moment. I think how incredible it is that Sri Ramana Maharishi walked this very path decades ago. My footsteps blend into his and the path is wrapped in an aura of silence.

Towards the top, large rock slabs provide a perfect resting place with a spectacular vista of Tiruvannamalai. I sit down on a scorched boulder and contemplate the scene. From this height, the huge Arunachaleswar Temple is like a miniature theater set, set amid straight streets and bazaars in the centre of this little township. The nine stately gate-towers rise in sculptural magnificence out of the square compound behind high enclosing walls. Year after year, Sri Ramana must have sat here watching humanity from this lofty height and the life he had left behind. The world seems more remote and I feel a sense of detachment that allows me to feel like a witness, an observer, being both in and out of the world at the same time.



A little higher up, Sri Ramana's hermitage, Skandashram, comes into view. It's an enchanting spot, sheltered by a coconut grove and set against the steep cliffs of Arunachala. Two small rooms were built into a natural cave below giant boulders. The Maharishi lived here with his mother, Alagammal, until her death on May 19, 1922. It was at the end of that year that he permanently made his home at the bottom of the Hill in what is now Ramanashram. Alagammal cooked for her son and in his presence also attained liberation. Her room is now a shrine and her Samadhi is down below in the ashram.

The construction of Skandashram was a bit controversial as it involved quarrying of stone from the face of Arunachala and wouldn't be allowed today. Not appropriate if you consider

the mountain to be Siva himself. Under the auspices of the Reserve Forest it has become increasingly difficult even for sadhus to spend time in caves on the hill. In *Tiruvannamalai: The Power and Glory of The Mountain Path*, A.D.M. Panneerselvam writes:

Here follows yet another proof to show that the Mountain itself is Lingam. No one can dare to carry on quarrying on the Hill for its (granite) stones. And Arunachala proclaimed it to the world through an incident. Once the devotees of Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi cut a stone slab from the hill and honoured their guru by seating him on it. And Ramana, the saint of the first order, had to suffer from cancer. It was a sport of Lord Siva.

A sadhu gives me a plant to chew and my thirst is quenched. The path descends steeply towards Virupaksha Cave, past a waterfall with cool, crystal water that splashes out of a crevice in the rocks. The cave is in the shape of the mystic syllable "Om." It is named after the great thirteenth century saint, Virupaksha Deva, who spent most of his life here. He supposedly lived to be 450 years old and when he was finally ready to give up his body, he transformed to sacred ash. His remains are preserved inside the cave. Sri Ramana lived in this cave from 1899 to 1916. On one of the rare occasions that he spoke, and as an explanation as to why he taught through silence, he revealed that the blazing column of light in the shape of Arunachala communicated to him in silence and commanded him to be

silent. It directed him to look within, gaze steadily into the Self with the inner eye; there liberation would be found.

An iron gate leads to a pleasant seating area where visitors can relax outside the cave. A Brahmin attendee performs his many tasks of the day. There is a small outer room with a collection of Sri Ramana's books and the entrance to the cave. Inside, I see a mound covered with flowers that I later understand to be Virupaksha Deva's ashes. I can feel heat radiating from the mound. Some places are so imbued with spiritual force that it can be felt as a pressure on the body, and this place is certainly one of them. It is very powerful. I feel sucked into the warm womb of darkness and find a cushion on an elevated platform. An unbelievable serene sensation comes over me. I feel the energy of the cave supporting me on my spiritual path. I am able to sit in silence, a practice that I've tried to do each morning for many years, but in London my mind gets very distracted.

The Maharishi spent countless hours of intense spiritual absorption here, locked within the folds of his own spiritual heart. He sat as immobile as a rock, cross-legged in meditation. It was here that he wrote his first book, *Who am I?* about Self-Inquiry, the non-dualist path to enlightenment and liberation. Its premise is similar to much Hindu and Yogic philosophy in so much as they maintain that all living beings desire to be happy, without misery, and what prevents us from attaining our natural state of bliss is the ego which perpetuates a notion of separateness, and hence, suffering. All enlightened masters have managed to see through this *maya* (delusion) to merge with the higher Self, Absolute Truth, or God.

To do this, Sri Ramana instructed people to look to the source from which every thought arises and ask the question, 'Who am I?' He knew that those who did this would come in contact with the 'spiritual heart,' which he said lies "two digits to the right from the centre of the chest," and the mind would subside and return back to its source. He came to the conclusion that the mind projects all thoughts. He said, "If we can set

aside all thoughts and see, there will be no such thing as mind remaining separate; therefore, thought itself is the form of the mind. Other than thoughts, there is no such thing as the world. The place where even the slightest trace of the 'I' does not exist is Self. Self, itself, is the world; Self, itself, is 'I'; Self, itself, is God; all is the Supreme Self. The true Bhagavan resides in your Heart as your true Self. This is who 'I' truly am."

I feel overwhelmed to actually sit in Ramana's cave and walk the same path up the mountain that he did. Visitors come and go, but these distractions don't disturb me. Occasionally, the wind carries the distant sounds of the bustling city into the cave to remind me how much humanity loves material existence. We have lost the reverence for spiritual life worshipped among the ancients. It seems our preoccupation with the external world has created all the problems that threaten our social fabric, peace of mind, and even our continued existence.

A man sits in the same position Ramana did when he meditated – in a wide lotus with arms stretched on his knees and his head slightly lifted to one side. Perhaps the spirit of the great sage is inside his body? I feel so good there is no reason to leave. I have found my teacher. A voice tells me to stay in Tiruvannamalai and climb to the cave each day as my *sadhana*, my spiritual practice. I decide to forgo my plans to tour through Tamil Nadu and do as little as possible. Do my yoga practice and climb the mountain. This is my first lesson. Walking back down the glorious mountain path my heart is bursting with joy. The path is coppery gold and the sky opal-coloured as the sun sinks into its nightly home. I wonder what kind of challenges the mountain will present to me. I hear it can be kind or make you walk through the fire.

DARSHAN & SATSANGS

BACK TO REALITY AT THE FOOT of the mountain, I find a small room in a guest house surrounded by bright green rice paddies, and a great view

of Arunachala, for £1 a night, hire an Indian push bike, and settle into rural life in Tiruvannamalai. There are very interesting people here, spiritual tourists, many in their 50s, 60s and 70s who have come here for decades. The atmosphere is spiritually charged with people practicing some form of yoga or another. Sadhus in saffron-coloured lungis and matted dreads are everywhere, sitting under giant banyan trees beside sacred tanks, begging along the streets or attending seva where they are fed at ashrams. The Ramanashram attracts a steady flow of devotees, Indian and Western, who sit in the great meditation hall, walk clockwise around Sri Ramana's samadhi, visit the excellent bookshop, and venture out to the nearby chai stalls. (These days the ashram has installed a mobile phone blocker in the Hall and some people are wary of dangerous emissions.) Women make delicious thali lunches in their homes for fifty INR; there are also excellent restaurants with internet access. People smile and it's all very shanti. Everywhere Arunachala dominates the horizon and its triangular shadow constantly falls across my path, its peak often plumed with a milky-white cloud that stretches towards the heavens.

I see a mural of Gandhi that says, "The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated." The Arunachala Animal Rescue Sanctuary is a clinic set up by Leslie Robinson, an American man in his 70s. In the past few years, the clinic has gathered up the many homeless dogs and spayed them, given them rabies shots, returned the healthy ones to the streets, and provided homes for the sick ones so they receive ongoing medical attention to the end of their days. As a result, there are 2,000 fewer homeless and starving dogs than there would have been without the clinic. Mr. Robinson does exceptionally good work. The dogs are not in cages, but are together in compounds, and even though some are in a very poor way, they wag their tails and look at me with unconditional love. It is a pure heart connection. Sri Ramana was also a great friend to the dogs.



I offer to do some karma yoga and end up helping five dogs dying of distemper. It's very difficult work. They are in pain, shaking with a nervous disorder. They are scared and can't eat by themselves and the terrible stench of urine and death is nauseating. A totally dedicated vet attends to their needs, day and night, and I do my best to alleviate their suffering by helping them to eat, and talking to them so they know they are not alone. I play music, put jasmine flowers under their noses, stroke them and send loving kindness through Reiki. What Arunachala has thrown up is a challenge to deepen my sense of *Ahimsa*, of practicing kindness towards others, and truly cultivating a sense of compassion and love.

On Christmas morning, I cycle the eight-mile circuit around the mountain and visit the temples and charismatic chai shops en route. One small temple has an interesting priest so I sit down hoping for some spiritual encounter. We banter about some Sanskrit yoga terms for about an hour or two, since I don't speak Tamil and he doesn't speak English. I show him photos on my iPhone. Then this sixty-year old priest, all Siva-ed up with three streaks of white ash on his forehead and a blood red bindi covering his agna chakra, rolls some excellent ganga as Siva worshippers do.

Suddenly, he is giving me a massage and I can feel my body tense up. But he is respectful and it feels more tantric than sexual, as if I am being tuned with the vibrations of Arunachala. Next, he tells me that the blanket we're sitting on is his bed and he wants me to come back and sleep with him that night!! He points to the mountain and says "Siva," which I interpret to mean that if I come back I could experience the sexual power of the great yogi ascetic. I laugh because I've seldom been asked out on a date in the past few years and what does the universe provide for me but some aged pundit!! He ties a Siva bracelet on my wrist and asserts that I am now his. Although it has been my practice to accept what the universe provides for me, I'm relieved when three pilgrims arrive into the temple and I can make a narrow escape. But, in India, where

illusion is so palpable and it can be difficult to discern the truth, a persistent thought arises, asking me if I'm really going to give up an opportunity to have tantric sex with Siva? Would Parvati have done that? A stronger thought insists that the experience would be nothing more than bad sex with an opportunistic sleaze bag!

ONE OF THE MOST POPULAR THINGS to do in Tiruvannamalai is to receive darshan with a local woman believed to have the light. Westerners pack out her shala, sitting cross-legged on the floor, in hope of being blessed. She is a small, mysterious woman who doesn't look particularly happy. She arrives and sits down in a chair in the centre of the room and meditates, then stands up and looks each of us in the eye, as if peering into our soul, her eyes slowly moving from one end of the room to the other and back again, then she leaves silently as she came. I see a glimmer of light under her gaze while others seem overwhelmed by her presence. I understand that the external guru inevitably points us to the guru within, but my deep discerning mind questions this willingness to imbue others with spiritual powers in this way. Sri Ramana always directed people to look inward rather than seeking outside themselves for Realization.

I attend satsang, question and answer sessions about the spiritual path, particularly the Advaita path of Self-Inquiry. Mooji, a disciple of another revered Advaita master, Papaji, is here, but in retreat with hundreds of his devotees. There are other silver-haired pony-tailed gurus driving around on Enfield Bullets. A Swiss German fellow is particularly good. He's been in India for decades, sits like a rock in perfect Siddhasana, and truly seems to be a clear channel giving such insightful responses that, for a moment, enlightenment seemed attainable. In one session, he speaks about the different forms of yoga – Hatha, Bhakti, Karma and Jnana yoga – and stresses the importance, when Hatha yogis are doing yoga, that their hearts must open and the mind must

discriminate. If not, it's cold liberation. If Jnanis don't incorporate the body, the knowledge will remain in the head. If the mind doesn't stabilize for Bhakti yogis then they won't succeed. The point is not to keep getting better and progressing – the techniques are tools that allow one to abide in the Self, to be in the present, in I-awareness. But it's not just being in the moment or the present, put having presence, which is timeless. The ultimate aim of these practices is to help you connect to your Self.

He reminds us that devotion should be a genuine yearning for *moksha* – freedom and liberation – not an endless search. From the Advaita perspective what we are looking for is already here. We already are *sat-chit-ananda*, divine knowledge, existence and bliss, if we only knew it. What we need to do is get out of the way. Peel the layers of skin from around the onion, remove the layers of delusion perpetuated by the ego that make us think we are separate from reality. The important task, he says, is to observe the mind continuously, as it takes us away from the Self and becomes entangled. The search is a gentle reminder to look in the right direction, where attention is possible. Otherwise, we'll repeat the same patterns over and over until the universe hits us on the head. Listen to deep inner guidance. Make the intent to be honest and true to our Self. Guidance will come and circumstances will arrange themselves accordingly.

The ultimate guru is your own Self. The external guru is a manifestation of your inner guru and points your attention back to your Self. If you sincerely want to abide in the Self, the universe will provide and you will realise that you create your own suffering. Ramana Maharshi said, "God, Guru and Self are one and the same... Your true nature is that of infinite spirit. The feeling of limitation is the work of the mind. When the mind unceasingly investigates its own nature, it transpires that there is no such thing as mind. This is the direct path for all."



GIRI PRADAKSHINA

GIRI PRADAKSHINA IS AN ANCIENT ritual in which thousands of Siva devotees circumambulate Arunachala as an act of bhakti (love) for Siva and ultimate union with the Self. While it can be done at any time, certain times are considered more powerful. New Year's Eve is particularly auspicious this year because it is full moon, Blue Moon and lunar eclipse. Arunachala has always been renowned as the bestower of liberation, the destroyer of the ego, the remover of the false notion 'I am the body' – as the jnana-Guru par excellence. The whole hill is sacred. It is Siva himself. Just as we identify ourselves with a body, so Siva has chosen to identify himself with this hill. It is out of compassion to those who seek him that he has chosen to reveal himself in the form of a hill visible to the eye. According to Ramana, the word *pradakshina* has a very precise meaning: "The letter *pra* stands for removal of all kinds of sins; *da* stands for fulfilling desires; the syllable *kshi* stands for freedom from future births, *na* stands for giving deliverance through jnana."

I join the throngs of saffron-clothed jnanis, or sadhus, and pilgrims walking the eight-mile circuit, barefoot, with the mountain on the right. It is a festive occasion and the path is dotted with curious shrines and miniature temples, ancient tanks and sacred lingam stones. Food stalls offer exquisite Indian treats that taste like ambrosia from the gods. Priests perform puja in the temples. Flowers adorn statues of Nandi the bull, who is Siva's vehicle, and Siva's son Ganesh. Fire is lit at altars and flames leap up towards the sky. Arunachala is the blazing wild Hill of Fire – the fire of knowledge, *jnagni* – that burns all our worldly desires to ashes. I pass my hand through the flames and pray for guidance on my spiritual path, to destroy the ego and rest in my spiritual heart, to live the truth, and to have compassion for all living beings.

The act of walking around Arunachala is considered the highest form of satsang, and even those who don't understand the spiritual implications of the act



will benefit. The Tamil poet, Sri Sadhu Om, eloquently describes the spiritual benefits of Giri Pradakshina: “A cow grazing round and round its peg, does not know that the length of its rope is thereby decreasing. Similarly, when you go round and round Arunachala, how can your mind know that it is thereby subsiding? When the cow goes round more and more, at one point it will be bound tightly to its peg. Similarly when the mind lovingly goes more and more round Arunachala, which is Self, it will finally stand still in Self-abidance, having lost all its movements [*vruttis*].”

This echoes Yogic philosophy that states that the purpose of yoga is to still the mind, as an agitated wandering mind causes suffering. In Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras*, verse 1.2 says, “Citta Vritta Nirodhah,” which means ceasing the fluctuations in the mind. Yoga is the control of the thought waves of the mind. It is the ability to direct the mind exclusively towards an object and sustain focus in that direction without any distractions.

The full moon peers down from an indigo sky, illuminating the dark ever-present silent shape of Arunachala. I am enchanted by its spiritual power. Its very presence gives me the strength to continue to walk its base. This unbeautiful mountain takes my heart and holds me captive. It imprisons me from the first moment my eyes glance at it until the last reluctant turning away of my head.

AS I FINISH WRITING ON 14 APRIL, 2010, I realise that today is the anniversary of Sri Ramana Maharishi’s death. Sixty years ago, he shed his mortal coil. In November 1948, a tiny cancerous lump was found on his arm and was removed by the ashram doctor. Soon, another growth appeared and another operation was performed by an eminent surgeon. When the doctor told him that a complete amputation of the arm was required to save his life, Ramana refused. He remained peaceful and unconcerned. As his condition worsened, he continued to be available for his thousands of visitors, even when his attendants urged him to rest.

Reportedly, his attitude towards death was serene. To those 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. Where can I go? I am here.”

By April 1950, Sri Ramana was too weak to go to the ashram hall. His devotees filed 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. Sri Ramana’s breathing became gradually slower and slower and at 8:47 PM it subsided quietly.”

The French photographer, Henri Cartier-Bresson, who was staying at the ashram prior to Sri Ramana’s passing, recounts the event: “It is a most astonishing experience. I was in the open space in front of my house, when my friends drew my attention to the sky, where I saw a vividly luminous shooting star with a luminous tail, unlike any shooting star I had before seen, coming from the South, moving slowly across the sky and, reaching the top of Arunachala, disappearing behind it. Because of its singularity we all guessed its import and immediately looked at our watches – it was 8:47 – and then raced to the Ashram only to find that our premonition had been only too sadly true: the Master had passed into parinirvana at that very minute.”

The luminous star was seen in India as far away as Madras and Bombay and millions mourned Ramana Maharshi’s passing. A long article about his death in *The New York Times* concluded: “Here in India, where thousands of so-called holy men claim close ties with the infinite, it is said that the most remarkable thing about Ramana Maharshi was that he never claimed anything remarkable for himself, yet became one of the most loved and respected of all.” Indeed,

despite the fame that surrounds him, Sri Ramana did not publicise himself as a guru, never claimed to have disciples, and never appointed any successors. Instead, he remained in one place for fifty-four years, offering spiritual guidance to anyone of any background who came to him, and asking nothing in return. He viewed all who came to him as the Self rather than as lesser beings. He considered humility to be the highest quality. He said the deep sense of peace one felt around a jnani was the surest indicator of their spiritual state, that equality towards all was a true sign of liberation, and that what a true jnani did was always for others, not themselves.

I look at the photograph of Sri Ramana on my desk, a colour portrait of him against an emerald green background. His expression is so calm and serene. It radiates pure, unselfish love. I look into his brown eyes and my heart melts. I feel the depths of his compassion and humility. He has the kindest face I’ve ever seen. It creates a yearning in me to be kind. My heart opened in the presence of Arunachala and I’m most grateful. Sri Ramana taught in silence much of his life and it is believed he still teaches from beyond. At the time of his death he comforted his devotees with the words, “Where can I go? I am here.” You know what? I actually believe him. He continues to teach from his silence. I feel his presence from beyond and it gives me a deep sensation of peace. ❖

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