

Saranagati



SARANAGATI
SRI RAMANASRAMAM

EXTENDED KARTHIGAI DEEPAM ISSUE
DECEMBER 2023, VOL. 17, NO. 12



D. Thiagarajan



Saranagati



EXTENDED KARTHIGAI DEEPAM ISSUE
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IN THIS
ISSUE



Dear Devotees,

The month of November brought hearty exuberance with the festival season now in full swing. Deepavali was observed in the Ashram on the 12th and five days later, the commencement of the Karthigai Deepam festival.

In this *Extended Karthigai Deepam* issue we conclude the life story of Sadhu Natanananda, the poet and editor who came up the hill to Bhagavan at Skandasramam in 1918.

In the last issue, we discussed some of the stated apprehensions people have in respect of recent developments in machine technology. In this issue, we look at Bhagavan's response to any such fears, grounding the discussion about the AI revolution in Bhagavan's teaching.

For videos, photos and other news of events, go to <<https://sriramanamaharshi.org>> or write to us at <saranagati@gururamana.org>. For the web version: <http://sriramana.org/saranagati/December_2023/> or <<https://saranagati.arunachala.org/issues/>>.

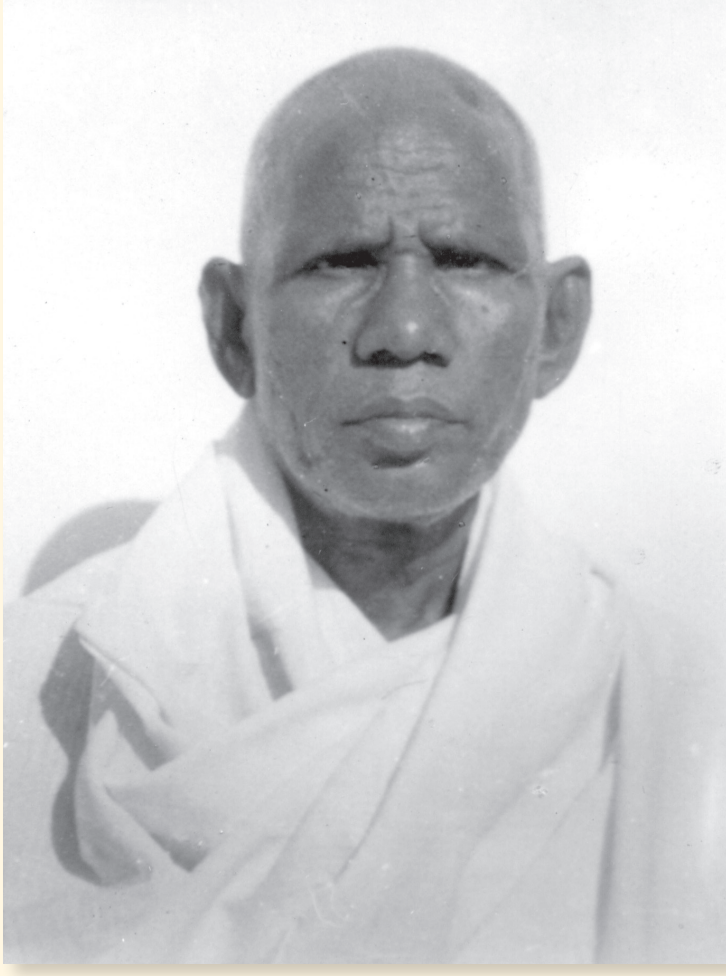
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Saranagati

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Calendar of Ashram Events

1st Dec (Fri) Punarvasu
10th Dec (Sun) Pradosham
17th Dec (Sun) Dhanurmasa commences
24th Dec (Sun) Pradosham
26th Dec (Tues) Pournami
27th Dec (Wed) Arudra Natarajar Abhishekam
28th Dec (Thu) Sri Bhagavan's Jayanthi Day

29th Dec (Fri) Swami Ramanananda Day
31st Dec (Sun) Lucy Ma Day
9th Jan (Tue) Pradosham
12th Jan (Fri) Sivaprakasham Pillai Day
14th Jan (Sun) Ramaswami Pillai Day/Bhogi
15th Jan (Mon) Sankranthi Pongal
16th Jan (Tue) Mattu Pongal



IN PROFILE

Sadhu Natanananda (pt. II)

While on pradakshina one Vyasapoornima day, Ganapati Muni, Kapali Sastri and a group of Sanskrit scholars stopped off at the Ashram to pay their respects to Bhagavan. Once seated in the darshan hall, they started discussing the teaching with Bhagavan in Sanskrit. Natanananda was in the hall at the time and happened to hear it all:

I was listening to the discussion, and I knew that they were discussing philosophy, but I could not follow the meaning. Because of this my mind began to wander and I became quite agitated wondering when the day would dawn when I would have the experiences that they were talking about. My longing was so

intense that I lost all consciousness of the body. I was not sure how long I remained in that state, but suddenly a voice brought me back to normal consciousness. All the others had left and only Bhagavan remained in the Hall. 'Why are you dejected?' said the voice, 'If you were really unfit to realise the Self in this life, then you could not have come to this place at all. That power which drew you here will make you realise the Self. If not today, it is bound to fulfil its commitment. There is no reason why you should feel dejected.' These gracious words brought me back to life, and peace entered my soul.¹

Taking Ochre Robes

In 1926, Natanananda tried to get Bhagavan to bless a set of ochre robes he set before the Maharshi, but Bhagavan who had always shown disinclination to his devotees taking sanyasa, refused to touch them. Natanananda approached Maharshi explaining why becoming a sannyasin was his only option given the obstacles born of family obligations. Bhagavan only said that if he left home to escape one hindrance, ten hindrances would rise up in their place once in the forest. Bhagavan then quoted a story about a king who said, 'if a man goes southward, he will never go to the Ganges. Similarly, one who stays home will never obtain Liberation.' But later the king said that there was no difference between domestic life and that of a hermit. Bhagavan comments:

Just as you are free from cares of home when you are here, go home and try to be unconcerned and unaffected even amid home life.²

Natanananda got similar replies on subsequent occasions when he raised the issue of sanyasa. Despite push-back from Bhagavan, Natanananda eventually put on *kashayam* and took sanyasa. It is not clear how he thought this could work out without Bhagavan's approval but no doubt, as devotees often do, he had interpreted one of Bhagavan's responses (or non-responses) as some form of tacit approval. For Bhagavan's part, he had accurately read the situation and knew in advance that Natanananda's foray into swamihood would not be permanent. In fact, it only lasted a few years, at which time Natanananda found himself compelled by circumstances to resume household duties and support his family as a school teacher.³

¹ *The Mountain Path* Oct. 1981; Kunjuswami's *Reminiscences*.

² *Self-Realisation*, Chap XXVI.

³ *Ibid*.





Bhagavan was sympathetic to Natanananda's reasons for wanting to renounce and appeared to Natanananda's wife and brother in dreams, telling them that Natanananda had his grace and that family members should help him achieve his objective as much as possible. Indeed, his family's support eventually helped him give up his job and spend more time in Bhagavan's presence.⁴

Family Dream

By Natanananda's influence, family members came to Bhagavan one by one. One time, his eldest brother went to the Maharshi and sat in his presence. While in the hall he had the following thought, "They say that this Maharshi has *Isvaramsa* (i.e., divine qualities). If so, he ought to be able to divine my thoughts and teach me Atma swarupam, the nature of the Self, without my questioning him."

He therefore did not put any question, and Bhagavan who generally never gave any instruction unsought remained silent. But for whatever reason, Bhagavan began addressing Natanananda's brother on the nature of the Atman.⁵ The latter had no explanation for this except that Bhagavan was reading his mind.

Causeless Grace

From 1929 onward Natanananda saw Bhagavan frequently, ever seeking his grace. He felt certain that without Bhagavan's grace, no true progress in the religious life could ever be possible. Even from his first exchanges with Bhagavan up on the hill, he had made this appeal. On one occasion Bhagavan responded in the following way:

⁴ Natanananda, 'The Turning Point', *Ramana-Pictorial Souvenir*.

⁵ *Self-Realisation*, Chap XXVI.

*Grace is always flowing. Grace is not an occasional thing. It is causeless and flows forever. It can be experienced by one who meditates. It cannot be described this way or that way.*⁶

Natanananda later reflected on it and wrote the following:

*What are the marks of the Guru's grace? It is beyond words or thoughts. If that is so, why is it said that the disciple realizes his true state by the Guru's grace? It is like the elephant which wakes up on seeing a lion in its dream. Even as the elephant wakes up at the mere sight of the lion, so too the disciple wakes up from the sleep of ignorance into the wakefulness of true knowledge through the Guru's benevolent look of grace.*⁷

Natanananda knew that being fit to receive the guru's grace was linked with humility and discipline, something Natanananda was working very hard to achieve in his own life. He reflected on a scene in the Ashram between Bhagavan and a sadhu, which the reader can only infer was none other than Natanananda himself:

A sadhu who found fault with another member of the ashram, once lost his patience and was getting ready to [react in a strong way]. When Bhagavan saw this, he immediately intervened and stopped the sadhu from pursuing his demonic [intention]. Bhagavan said, 'My aim is not to interfere with your freedom. As it appeared that your act was about to exceed all limits of propriety, for the sake of protecting sannyasa dharma, if not for your own sake, I had to intervene, although interference is not my nature. I am not giving you advice. As you are residing here, I am saying all this affectionately. If there is anything good in these words, accept them. Elders have said that even the words of a child should be accepted if there is merit in them.'

In this way, Bhagavan kindly explained sadhu dharma through his sweet words and calmed the sadhu. From that day onwards,

⁶ Kunjuswami's *Reminiscences*.

⁷ *The Maharshi*, Nov/Dec 2020.

Sadhu Natanananda's Upadesa Ratnavali §7

Iswara's Being Worshipped by Jivas

The smallest of the small and the largest of the large, Iswara is *chitakasha* ('all-pervading consciousness-space') and by His nature is ever serving beings and is thus worshipped by them. Because of Iswara's constant animation, vitalization and illumination of moving and non-moving beings, Jivas are said to be served by Iswara at all times, even if unawares during deep sleep and swoon. According to their karmic proclivities, Jivas beseech the Lord to fulfill their prayers and intentions. This is the meaning of Iswara being worshipped by Jivas. —





*the sadhu was totally transformed and became lucky enough to worship Bhagavan as God himself. Even when Bhagavan was performing the unavoidable act of stopping the improper act of a sadhu who had taken refuge in him, the [meekness] Bhagavan demonstrated was indeed the very apogee of humility!*⁸

Consulting the Master Directly

Over the years, Natanananda gained confidence in speaking to the Master. On one occasion, he asked Bhagavan about the right method for vichara. Bhagavan gave the following reply:

*At any time and under all circumstances one should unfailingly remember one's real nature (I AM). Remembering this while one fulfils one's obligations in the world, one will do so without the least attachment to the actions performed, or to their results. When this attitude is strengthened, the aspirant can rest assured that he is making progress.*⁹

Natanananda appends this comment with the following provision:

*This attitude should be practised by all. For instance, Bhagavan Himself was very active and did all sorts of work. He stitched leaves, he made kamandalams, he perfected staffs, he assisted in the kitchen, grinding, preparing pastes, cutting vegetables and doing actual cooking. He acted as a mid-wife to dogs and monkeys. And he did all this perfectly and without the least attachment. The proof of one's doing the actions without attachment is that one feels that it is the Lord who uses one to get things done and done so well. His whole being says: 'The Supreme has done these things through me'. Such humility is the mark of spiritual maturity."*¹⁰

Collaborating with Muruganar

Somewhere in the 1930s, the head of the Esanya mutt, Kariyanur Sri Natesa Swamigal, heard of Muruganar's abilities as a teacher and requested him to come and to stay in the mutt and teach him Manickavachakar's *Tiruchitrumbala Kovai*. From 1927, Natesa Swamigal had come regularly to visit Bhagavan where the two would sit, Bhagavan on the tiger skin, east of Mother's Shrine and confer with one another.¹¹ Muruganar went to

⁸ *Ramana Darsanam*, p. 46.

⁹ *Moments Remembered*, p. 5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.5.

¹¹ Natesa Swami had inherited this practice of visiting Bhagavan from his preceptor, Mahadevaswami, who used to send Bhagavan a bottle of oil, soapnut powder and a new *kaupinam* each year on Deepavali Day. At the time of Natesa Swami's demise in 1947, Bhagavan described him as a 'very peaceful and easy-going man' and ascribed his selection for Mutt leadership to his being



Bhagavan with Kariyanur Natesa Swamigal

stay in the Esanya mutt and each morning, gave a class to Natesa Swamigal and, in the afternoon, he would come to Ramanasramam. The text reads:

*In those days, Sadhu Natanananda was staying in the Gubai Namasivaya on the Hill. Natanananda would time his own visit to Ramanasramam so that he would meet Muruganar near the western tower of Arunachaleswara Temple every afternoon. From this spot, the two would walk together to Ramanasramam. Muruganar used to compose some verses and bring them along every day. During their walk, they would discuss Muruganar's latest composition. One day, it so happened that Muruganar composed the first four lines of a verse but try as he might, could not complete it. Natanananda read the four lines and wrote another four, completing the verse. When they reached the Ashramam, they showed the poem to Bhagavan, and told him what had happened. Bhagavan smiled at Natanananda and said, "Tomorrow, you should write the first four lines of a poem and get Muruganar to complete it for you." Natanananda did just that, and the second poem was also shown to Bhagavan. After reading it, Bhagavan said, "Good! It looks like we have twin poets here! You should name the first poem 'Muruga Natana' and the second, 'Natana Muruga'!" Everyone present was very much entertained by this incident."*¹²

Starting in the late 1920s Muruganar had begun to note a great sadhak.

¹² *Cherished Memories*, TR Kanakammal, p. 127.





Gambhiram Seshayyar

down the teachings of Bhagavan and then rendered them into four-line Tamil verses. He did not bother noting the questions that had been posed by devotees in the hall but only the answers. By the late 1930s, Muruganar had written more than 800 such verses, each containing a potent upadesa uttered by Bhagavan in the hall. In 1939 the Ashram decided to publish the collection in book form. Bhagavan then asked Sadhu Natanananda to arrange them by subject since there was no established order. When Natanananda finished his work, he showed it to Bhagavan who went through them very carefully, revising some of the verses, and even composing new ones.¹³

¹³ 'Because of the care and attention that Bhagavan put into checking and revising these verses, we can be sure that their contents have his full approval' ('Introduction' to *GVK* by David Godman)

Vichara Sangraha

Hence Natanananda was blessed to be inducted into a privileged circle of devotees involved with editing, translating and publishing Bhagavan's teachings. The process consisted in much reflection, and great care with respect to how Bhagavan's teachings were presented. More than this was the precious opportunity he had to participate in exchanges between Bhagavan and the editors while preparing a works for publication.

Natanananda put the forty questions posed to Bhagavan by Gambhiram Seshayyar in the early 1900s into a question-and-answer format. Seshayyar had repeatedly visited Bhagavan at Virupaksha and whenever the young Brahmana Swami was roused from his deep states of samadhi, which were then his wont, Seshayyar would ask him a question. Since Brahmana Swami was absorbed in silence, Seshayyar would give him pieces of paper and a pen with which to write his replies. The notes were set aside until Seshayyar's passing. Following his demise, his brother, Krishnaya collected the notes and gave them to Natanananda, who edited them and they were published as *Vichara Sangraha*¹⁴ in the Tamil *Collected Works*.¹⁵ The text's many yoga references, some of which were quite technical, came about because Gambhiram Seshayyar at the time of coming to Bhagavan was practising raja yoga, and wanted clarification on it which Bhagavan was more than competent to give.

Spiritual Instruction

Another of Natanananda's writing projects was *Spiritual Instruction (Upadesa Manjari)* compiled and

¹⁴ In the footnote that occurs at the end of the 'Publisher's Note' to *Vichara Sangraha*, it is stated that the manuscript copy given by Gambhiram Seshayyar's brother was edited by Sivaprakasam Pillai and was put into question-answer form by Natanananda.

¹⁵ T. M. P. Mahadevan, Introduction to *Vichara Sangraha*.

New Video: Sri Ramanasramam: Then and Now



A new video-film celebrating Sri Ramanasramam's Centenary can be found at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ReIjwJXIaNU&ab_channel=SriRamanasramam>. For the November In Focus, go to: <<https://youtu.be/iPvuO9mhxkk?si=r7fECJYUudEeC1q>>.





published in 1939. Extrapolated from conversations with Bhagavan that Natanananda had noted down, Natanananda later expanded on Bhagavan's answers. Though this work was not written by Bhagavan directly, Bhagavan had gone through the final draft line by line and approved of it. It has thus come to be considered part of Bhagavan's literary corpus.

Sadhu Natanananda also wrote commentaries on many of Sri Bhagavan's works such as *Ulladu Narpadu*, *Arunachala Aksbara Mana Malai*, *Arunachala Stuthi Panchakam*, *Atma Vidya*, *Appala Pattu*, and *Ekatma Panchakam*. He also wrote *Sri Ramana Stuthi* and *Upadesa Ratnavali*. Another work is his later, *Sri Ramana Darsanam: An Explanation of the Truth Behind Bhagavan's Life and Teachings*, first published in Tamil in 1957.¹⁶

Last Talk with Bhagavan

Natananda, like other devotees, witnessed Bhagavan's physical decline in the late 1940s. He recalled his last conversation with Bhagavan. Not knowing that the end was near, he approached Bhagavan to clarify in what state of being we lived. Bhagavan replied by quoting two verses from *Kaivalya Navaneetam*:

By the Lord under the sacred banyan tree. I speak the truth: You are the unchanging Witness of the gross, subtle and (causal) ignorance, the waking, dream and sleep states, and the passage of time—past, present and future, which endlessly rise and fall, like waves in the ocean of bliss. I had in my countless past incarnations mistaken the body for the Self. High or low, seeing all as a mirage. I have by the grace of My Master realised the Self as 'I' and been liberated.

Natanananda commented on Bhagavan's words, saying, "These verses clear the deep-rooted doubt even of advanced sadhakas, whether we live as the Atma or as *abankara*."¹⁷

Bhagavan's Mahanirvana

Following Bhagavan's Mahanirvana, Natanananda lived in complete obscurity. Alone, immersed in the Self, he was so low-key that no one even knew he was staying in Tiruvannamalai. When Dorab Framji tracked him down in 1967, he built a cottage for him in his compound just next to the Osborne compound where Natanananda lived till the end of his life. Though content to practise and live Bhagavan's

¹⁶ The English translation came in 2002.

¹⁷ *Moments Remembered*, Chapter 2

teachings withdrawn from any active social life, he was gracious enough to assist seekers interested in Bhagavan's *atma vicara*.¹⁸ When prompted by a visitor, he would sum up the teaching in a few words:

*Man's original state is Awareness. He is neither the body nor the senses nor the mind. Awareness is as subtle as ether. Even though Awareness seems to be within the body, like the lotus-leaf on the water and the insect in the mire, it is not bound by it. Also, just as ether is the basic element which pervades earth, water, fire and air, Awareness pervades the body and the mind and yet is not in any way affected by them. For this Awareness there is no birth nor death, nor bondage nor release. Awareness is your true nature. This is what Bhagavan tells us emphatically.*¹⁹

On another occasion, Natanananda said, "real wisdom lies in seeking the awareness that seeks". He elaborates:

*Knowing the one who knows is the calm consciousness, the only real, non-dual ekam (the One) and chit (the Awareness), who is everything and who is not anything but without whom nothing is. To announce this fact, He remains as different gods in various religions. That is why saints see in all things, the only Truth, who is none other than Awareness. Therefore, 'one who is incapable of perceiving you as the non-dual awareness within, with the eye of wisdom, though blessed with sight, is in reality blind.'*²⁰

On other occasions Natanananda was fond of quoting Bhagavan when he said:

*Whosoever sees me with the same eyes as mine and the way I see my 'Self' is the one who has had my darshan truly.*²¹

Radical Devotion

Natanananda remained fierce in his devotion to Bhagavan right up until the end. It had not been his intention but his allegiance to Bhagavan was so thoroughgoing that he sometimes frightened people.

Once when a devotee known for spreading the good news about Bhagavan's life and teaching came to meet Natanananda, he reacted sternly to any effort at informing the world of Bhagavan's greatness:

What nonsense to think that you are going to spread our master's fame. The only way you can do that is by becoming the truth yourself. Put the teachings into practice right here right now. That's the best way to serve the guru. Our master IS the teaching. The best way to express your devotion to Bhagavan is by putting his teaching into practice.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Kanakammal.

²¹ Ibid.





Natanananda chastened another listener this way:

*Why postpone realisation? When one knows fully that even this body is not one's own and that in fact one has not taken a body at all, where is the question of a next birth. And for whom? Having come to Bhagavan, one must make sure that this is the last birth. The Path of Vichara is not for all. It is the most difficult one, since there is no room for any sort of compromise in it. One has to strive hard and constantly too. To deserve to be a follower of Ramana's path one should have the fundamental discrimination that one is not the body. If one swerves from atma vichara, one gets engrossed in loka vichara. Atma vichara needs strenuous effort and the moment one swerves from it one gets drowned in loka vichara. It is like this: to have light alone one must make the effort of lighting a lamp—to have darkness no effort is required. The absence of light is darkness. To have come to Bhagavan is proof enough that one is positively going to end the cycle of births and deaths in this life itself.*²²

The Lost Article

One time *The Mountain Path* editor asked Natanananda to give him an article for the upcoming souvenir. Natanananda fulfilled the request and wrote up a brief article and handed it over for inclusion. Unfortunately, the article went missing. Based on the assumption that Natanananda would have another copy, the editor sheepishly went to him to borrow it. But hearing the news, Natanananda accepted that his article had been lost indeed but was not the least disturbed, but the editor did not fully understand that he had no other copy:

Look around you. My environment gives you an idea about me. Look at my room, there is nothing here—no books, no clothing, no utensils, nothing. You must have come to know that I have

²² *The Mountain Path*, January 1979, p. 50.

*written many verses on Bhagavan. However, do you see any book here, even though they were all printed? The moment I wrote my adoration about my master either in verse or prose, I would place it at my master's holy feet. As far as I was concerned my job was done. After Bhagavan dropped the body, a few people asked me to write for them just like you have. I complied by writing and submitting it to the management. There ended my responsibility. (Heeding the pleas of the Ashram editor, Natanananda wrote the article afresh from memory. It was included in the Ramana Pictorial Souvenir published in 1967.)*²³

Final Days

The final moments of Natanananda's life in 1981 are not known with certainty. One published account suggested that Natanananda had fallen ill and that devotees were present at the moment of his departure. This just does not seem to have been the case. Sadhu Om and Michael James visited Natanananda the evening before to discuss a publication correction. They found him in good health, apart from the usual complaints of old age. (He would have been in his early 80s). It was Dorab Framji's gardener who discovered Natanananda the next morning in the same spot on his semi-enclosed veranda sitting upright just as he had been the evening before. Thus, he had been doing Bhagavan's work right up till the end. Dorab was in Chennai at the time and rushed back, having given instructions that everything be arranged for a samadhi at the rear of the compound. With 100 kg of salt and the usual ingredients for establishing a samadhi, Natanananda was given the burial rights due a sadhu of standing. —

(series concluded)

²³ *Ramana-Pictorial Souvenir*, 'The Turning Point', Natanananda.

Public Talk: The Dynamic Silence of Sri Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi



In June 2023 at Tapovan Hall, Chinmaya Heritage Centre, Chetpet, Ashram President Dr. Venkat S. Ramanan gave a talk on the occasion of Sri Swami Chinmayananda's 108th Jayanti Celebrations (part of the Memorial Talk Series 2023-24). The programme was entitled 'The Dynamic Silence of Sri Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi'. The Ashram President quoted Swami Chinmayananda who referred to Bhagavan Sri Ramana as *the highest reality and the cream of all the scriptures in the world, there for all to see how a master can live in perfect detachment though in the Mortal form. He lived as the beauty and the purity of the infinite.* For video footage, please go to: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5mBJKCLiLA>. —





Events at Sri Ramanasramam: Karthigai Deepam 2023

Punyakalas like Karthigai Deepam are born of auspicious planetary conjunctions. Deepam Day takes place when the moon is conjunct with *kritika nakshatra* and the sun is in *vrihbhaka* (scorpio) in the month of Karthigai. The Purana says that those beholding the Deepam flame during this conjunction will be blessed by the Lord. This year's conjunction fell on 26th November. The Maha Deepam cauldron atop the Holy Hill is the centre of the main event



Permits to climb the hill were only given to 2,400 pilgrims. The restriction for climbing the Hill was for security purposes so as not to have a crowd larger than what the hilltop can safely accommodate. A total of 14,000 police came from around Tamil Nadu to ensure crowd safety around the city and to prevent excess numbers of vehicles entering. Drones and CCTV cameras were employed to monitor crowds in multiple areas simultaneously.



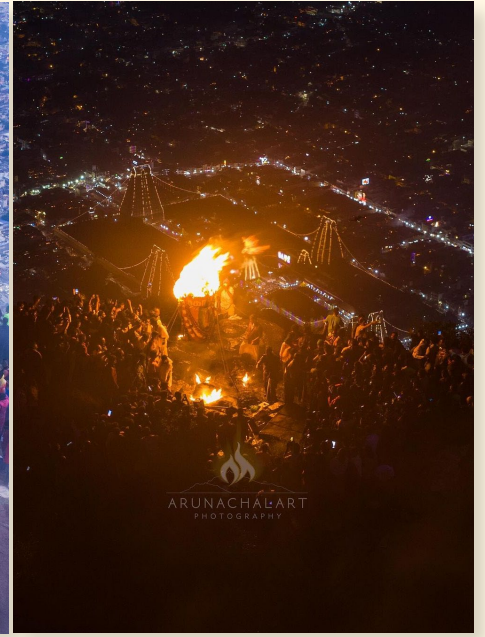
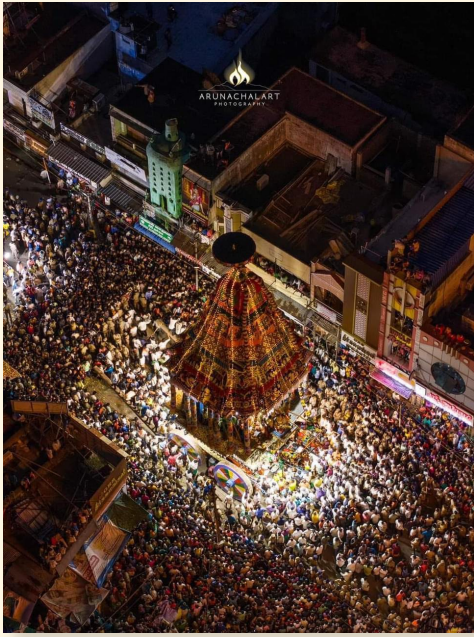
of Karthigai Deepam night and for the following ten days of the burning of the hilltop flame. At 1.6 metres in height and 90 cm in diameter (70 cm at its bottom) and made of copper, it is ample enough to hold sufficient ghee to burn the whole night. The following day on each of the eleven days, the vessel is refilled with ghee and is lit again for a total of eleven nights.



Rainy weather did not deter pilgrims from coming to Tiruvannamalai where they hoped to get a brief glimpse of the hilltop flame through the misty clouds.

Having begun at Arunachala Temple on 17th November with the traditional flag-hoisting, the Karthigai festival culminated with two events on 26th November, namely, with Bharani Deepam at 4 am in the main shrine of the temple and at 6 pm, with the Maha Deepam lit on top of the Holy Hill.



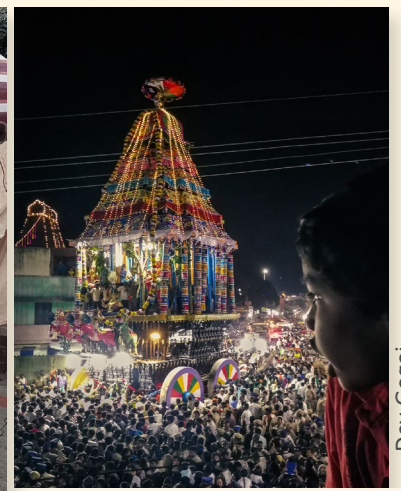
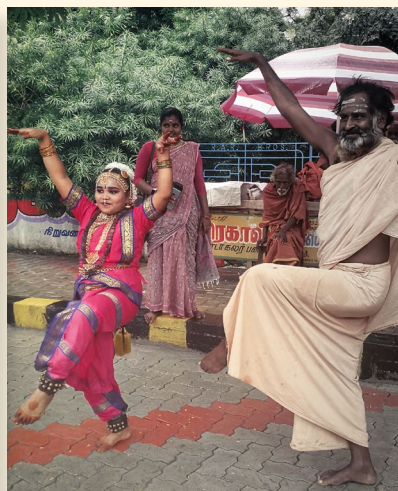


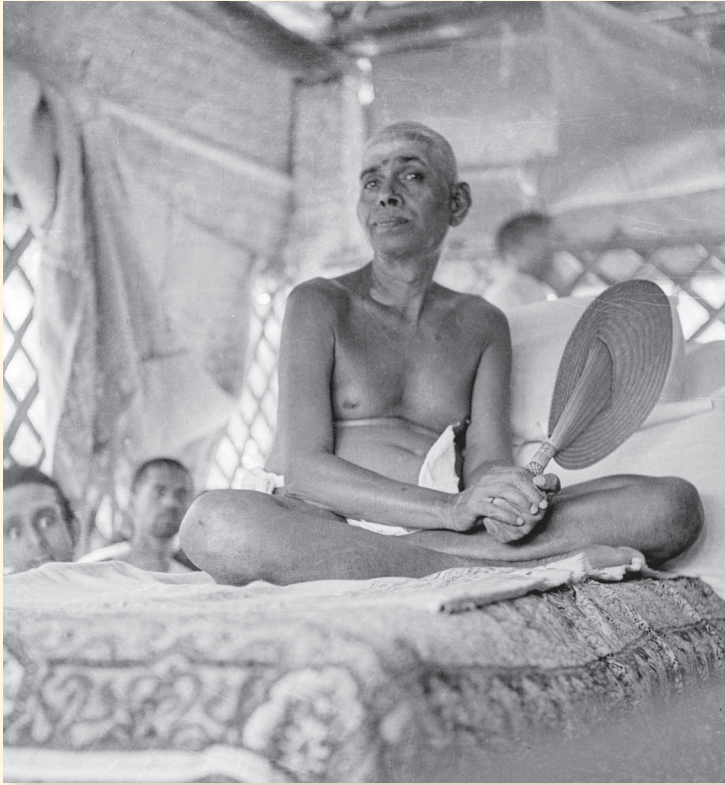
Events at Sri Ramanasramam: Karthigai Deepam 2023

At Sri Ramanasramam, special veda parayana programmes were conducted each day throughout the ten days of the festival and the *Krishna Yajur Veda* was recited in *ghanam* mode each day by more than 65 vedacharyas.

On Maha Deepam evening, devotees gathered in Bhagavan's Samadhi Hall for *abhishekam* followed by an elaborate *alankaram* and *arati*. After *arati*, priests and purohits went in procession, bearing the Ramana Mahalingam puja flame to join devotees gathered round the photo of Bhagavan

placed just at the entry to Bhagavan's *sannidhi*. As monsoon cumulus swirled about the summit, it was not known whether the flame to be lit a few minutes later would be visible or not. At 6 pm the crowd at Ramanasramam became animated as the first rays of light from the flame atop the Holy Hill could be discerned. Ashram priests in turn lit the flame before Bhagavan's photo amid enthusiastic chants of *Arohara, Arohara!* Devotees then recited *Arunachala Stuti Panchakam* and *Ramana Sat Guru*. —





RAMANA REFLECTIONS

Ramana Devotion Amid the AI Revolution (pt. II)

In the last issue we looked at emergent properties in machine intelligence and how their arising represents a pivotal moment in human history. Emergent properties in machine intelligence refers to novel behaviours or capabilities that arise unpredictably because of complex interactions within AI systems. Transcending the sum of individual components, this is a stage in AI development that had previously been thought to be years away.¹ If we are indeed at the

¹ If emergent properties in machine intelligence are indeed a real thing, then we would be better off using MI to designate machine intelligence instead of AI since machine intelligence would now not merely be mimicking (human) intelligence but would be genuine intelligence.

stage where machines are exhibiting problem-solving abilities that aren't explicitly programmed, in other words, where machines begin to teach themselves, it is anyone's guess where this will lead.

Academic articles from just a year or two ago may not have relevance for the current conversation among AI experts who themselves have been caught off guard by recent developments.

Part of what makes the idea of emergent properties in machine intelligence so hard to accept is that it would indicate that machines can do things that we had previously believed were only possible among humans. If we are already stunned by the kind of changes that we are experiencing as a planet, AI promises to compound the picture. The more significant dimension of our concern in respect of AI may be related to the loss of enchantment regarding definitions of ourselves as human beings. Our resistance to AI may in part be born of something other than the apprehension we have about its social and cultural impact. If we have a vast set of assumptions about the personality and the individual self that are, from Bhagavan's point of view, born of ignorance, machine intelligence brings home ever more sharply the illusory nature of ego. We are reluctant to acknowledge the extent to which we cling to misconceptions, calling them I, and then map the language of Bhagavan's Self onto that. We love names like 'Atman' and 'the Self' in part because they seem to give the ego a back door by which to make itself into something enduring and substantial. Magical thinking allows us to imagine that the personality² and our hopes, dreams, and longings can be seen as lasting, whereas they are transient, arising in time along with other functions of the mind and passing away with the body. Some of the changes AI is bringing may in fact pose social, cultural and psychological challenges but the perceived threat that is most tangible and immediate is the threat to our egoic sense of self.

Ego as Conceit

Linguists have pointed out that in various languages, the verb 'to conceive' and the noun 'conceit' are from the same root. Conceit which traditionally refers to a

² According to developmental psychology, personality formation takes place during the first three years.





personal world-view wherein we are at the centre of things is related to the creative functioning of the mind and our ability to generate thoughts, ideas, and images. Human cognitive abilities such as problem-solving, emotional understanding, complex reasoning, abstract thinking, and language mark us as unique in the created order—at least till now. But ongoing advancements in AI and cognitive sciences are blurring the lines between artificial and human intellects. We cling to the capacities of the human mind and imagine them as Self. If *maya* has been traditionally thought of as related to that which is created,³ it applies most accurately to the egoic I and the I-am-the-body idea. Our conceptual life gives birth to an inner world which we in turn inhabit and call ‘myself’. Bhagavan tells us this is a hallucination. There is no ego. When we hear him utter these words, we nod in assent but in reality, we cling to the ego as Self. The True Self, Bhagavan insists, cannot be clung to, is not an object. The personality for its part cannot be clung to simply because it is not real, is not enduring over time, and is rather only created by thought.⁴ Bhagavan tells devotees in the hall:

*The mind is a unique power (sakti) in the Atman whereby thoughts occur to one. On scrutinizing what remains after eliminating all thoughts, it will be found that there is no such thing as mind apart from thought. So then, thoughts themselves constitute the mind.*⁵

Confusing Bhagavan’s Self with the idea of an eternal ego and the personality would seem to involve magical thinking. To be sure, the Self never dies but our mistake is in imagining that all I call myself is in fact *the Self*.

Darshan Forever

There is a scene in the New Hall towards the end of Bhagavan’s earthly journey when there was a lot of consternation about Bhagavan’s health as he had been diagnosed with late-stage cancer and was refusing

3 It was the 20th century scholar, Ananda Coomaraswamy who defined *maya* as ‘art’, namely that which is created. In Pali, *māna*, usually rendered as ‘pride,’ is associated with *maññati*, i.e. to conceive, to imagine, to think; *asmi-māna* means the pride that says ‘I am’, and the word ‘conceit’ straddles both the meanings of ‘pride’ and ‘conception.’ *Visuddhimagga*, footnote 18, p. 361.

4 *Samskaras* and karmic accretions accumulated over countless births are likewise not enduring but arise in time and will be dispensed with in time. They are not the Self, Bhagavan tells us.

5 *Talks*.

further treatment. Following the inauguration of the New Hall in March 1949 work was going on by *stapathis* to fashion a stone image of Bhagavan. Bhagavan had given indications that he did not want to live in the New Hall. He complained that if he stayed there, the monkeys and squirrels would no longer have access to him. When urged to seat himself on the large stone sofa carved from a single block of black granite, Bhagavan commented with light-hearted satire, “Why don’t you get the stone Swami to sit on the stone sofa?”⁶

One day following this incident, a lady devotee with her two children came into the New Hall and prostrated before him: “Bhagavan, you must not leave the body. You must continue to give us darshan.”

Bhagavan smiled and said: “Yes, yes, see there.” He pointed to the sculptor at work on the stone statue. “They are chiseling a Bhagavan who will give you darshan forever.”⁷

Then Bhagavan turned to the others in the hall and said: “Now people have become my gurus. I have been telling them to give up their I-am-the-body idea (*debatmabuddhi*) but instead they want me to cling to the body. I should not leave this body in order that I am able to give them darshan forever. To have darshan forever, she too must never die. Nor her children. They must have darshan forever. So, none shall ever die.”

Bhagavan is not wanting to cause this lady any hurt feelings, but he is giving her and the other listeners in the hall a potent upadesa regarding a fundamental misunderstanding. If we are clinging to this body and world by virtue of sense experience, societal conditioning and the perpetual anxiety surrounding mortality and loss, we will want to ‘have darshan forever’. And not just darshan. We will want everything to remain the same—forever. There should be no unwanted changes whatsoever. But the tradition warns us repeatedly, that *the unexpected is bound to happen, while the anticipated may never come*.⁸ If change is going to come anyway, then we should find someone or something to blame for it, right? We resist

6 *Ramana Smrti*, p. 187.

7 See the *Mountain Path*, April 1969, p. 91; see also November 2020 *Saranagati*, p. 9, where R. Narayana Iyer comments on Bhagavan’s words above: “The truth [of the statement] was grimly portentous, and [stated] in Bhagavan’s own unique way.”

8 Nisargadatta, *I Am That*, Chapter 53.





change, forgetting that in our outer form, we are made of change and in our inner essence, of changelessness. And yet, it is understandable that we don't like change. The ground moving beneath our feet thrusts right up into our faces the threat of old age and loss—that is, the loss of productivity, of cognitive abilities, of loved ones and ultimately, one's own life. Perhaps this is why we cling to the life of the mind and the proliferative chain of compulsive thoughts because they give us the illusion of constancy. We bank our hopes for happiness on this contrived constancy whereas true happiness and true constancy belong to something much deeper within us. Bhagavan comments:

Happiness is inherent in man and is not due to external causes. One must realise his Self in order to open the store of unalloyed happiness.⁹

AI unwittingly points up the truth of Bhagavan's words. It exposes our deepest illusions and shows that our understanding of Bhagavan's Self is not very deep. We secretly cling to the hope of inhabiting these physical forms indefinitely. But when Bhagavan says you are not the body, he is not just referring to the physical form. But we are neither body-consciousness, namely, the body's attendant mental functions which include all mental and emotional states, memory, imagination, and other features of cognition which are born of, and embedded within, culture, language and socialization. Additionally, there are samskaras, inherent dispositions and genetic and epigenetic proclivities inherited from our ancestors or from past births as well as the resulting reactive chain of endless thoughts in the mind. How could any of that be the Self?

The formless nature of the Self is illustrated by Sadhu Natananda in his Sri Ramana Darshanam, where he gives an analogy of the Self with the following metaphor of an electrical grid:

Electricity cannot be seen because of its formless nature. However, it indicates its presence by the luminosity of bulbs. Similarly, the Supreme Self, which is undivided and non-dual, cannot be seen objectively because of its transcendental nature. However, it reveals itself in the inner organ of the mind through the inner consciousness 'I'. When a bulb is broken, the electricity shining through the bulb withdraws from that light into itself and remains in its natural state. In the same way, when the inner organ ceases,

⁹ Talks, §3.



the Supreme Self, shining as consciousness through it, remains in its natural state as pure being.¹⁰

If Bhagavan's Self were dependent on human intelligence, then the Self would not be much, after all machines can do it too. But Bhagavan's Self is something quite far beyond mere intelligence and the thinking mind. With the assumption of ourselves as body and body consciousness, we imagine that AI is a threat to the Self. But this is just not the case.

Consider what solar astronomers tell us about our star, the Sun which, like the other 200 billion trillion (10^{23})¹¹ suns in our universe, has a life cycle. Our sun will move into the 'red giant phase' in five billion years.¹² During this period the Sun will expand out beyond the circumference of the earth's orbital path. This means that the earth's atmosphere, its oceans, and the entire planet will be swallowed up and disappear in a solar conflagration. Bhagavan Ramana might then ask, Will the Self be swallowed up and disappear in the conflagration? Bhagavan comments:

These are only physical matters. Is that the essential object of our interest? Are you not the Self? Why trouble yourself about other matters? Take the essence and reject learned theories as useless.

¹⁰ Sri Ramana Darshanam, Sadhu Natananda, p. 67.

¹¹ There are thought to be as many as two trillion galaxies in our universe, each with approximately 100 billion stars.

¹² When the Sun consumes all the hydrogen fuel at its core, it will start burning helium and will expand into a red giant.





*They who think that physical disappearance counts in freedom are mistaken. No such thing is needed. You are not the body, so what does it matter if it disappears? Achievement of the Real alone matters. The loss of the 'I' is the main point, and not the loss of the body.*¹³

The same logic applies when pondering any dystopian view of an AI-driven world following the advent of superintelligence. Will what science fiction writers call the digital apocalypse touch the Self, we might ask? Digital apocalypse or no digital apocalypse, the Self alone IS, says Bhagavan. And the Self is not a function or subset of machine intelligence.

Machine intelligence, while sure to have positive as well as negative effects, has one unintended benefit, namely, helping us see more clearly the nature of our egoic misunderstandings. If we have been taking comfort in seeing the ego as Self,¹⁴ machine intelligence upsets this convenient self-deception, forcing us to take Bhagavan's teaching to the next level. Here we begin to see the dissociative nature of the ego as an inability to face the reality within. In its place we learn to give ourselves over to things in all their complexity allowing new channels of awareness to open up in us and free us of the old dispensation, namely, the idea of an ego in a body in a world.

¹³ Talks, §32.

¹⁴ ChatGPT itself comments: 'While an AI language model doesn't have a true self or ego, it can be used to demonstrate how the mind creates a sense of self through language and thought. By recognizing the limitations of the mind and the false sense of self it creates, one can move closer to recognizing their true nature as pure consciousness.' From "Discussing Advaita Vedanta, Zen, Science & Modern Civilization with ChatGPT", March 2022.

Not Mind, Not a Thing

As for future generations, what are we to say about them? If we operate under the illusion that we can control the fate of our children, the fact is their fate is out of our hands. We berate ourselves for passing on to them a world that is less than perfect. But is this not just more magical thinking? Are we in control of the world, asks Bhagavan? Everyone, including our children, inherit the world they are born into. If according to older generations, ours is increasingly looking like an alien world, for youngsters today it is the only world they know. If, out of concern for them, parents and grandparents find themselves resisting the pace of transformation, they can take solace in how resilient their children and grandchildren are in the face of it, better suited to the 21st-century's dynamism and rapid change than their elders. Bhagavan comments:

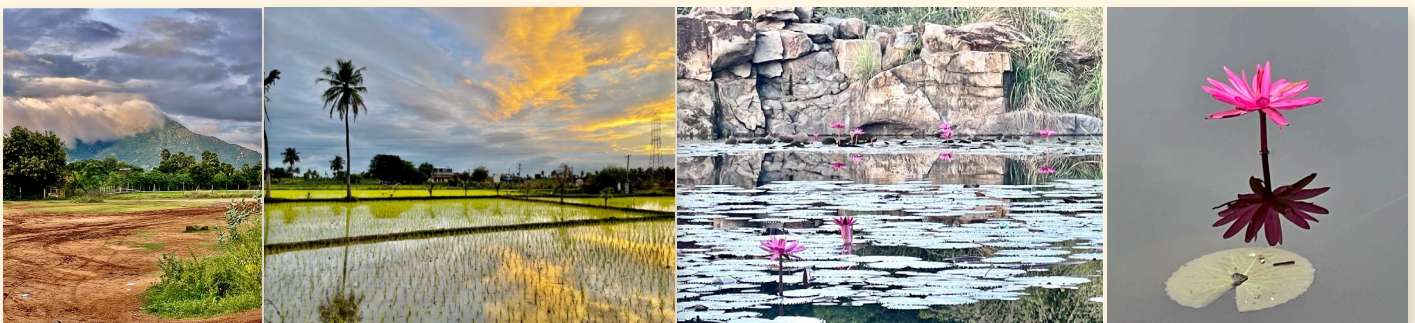
*The only reality is the Self from where the ego appears and runs through thoughts which manifest themselves as the universe and in which mothers and fathers, friends and relatives appear and disappear. They are nothing but manifestations of the Self so that one's parents are not outside the Self. Hence there's no reason to mourn.*¹⁵

In the AI era, departing generations seem to be looking back to the simplicity of the 20th century in a kind of cultural life-review, bewildered by the pace of change in the current century. But Bhagavan asks us to face sober-mindedly whatever conditions present themselves to us at any given point in time.

As storytellers, humans narrate their story to know their place in it. They invariably become heroes in the story which may not be fanciful thinking. After all,

¹⁵ Talks, §16.

Events in Tiruvannamalai: Deepam Rains at Arunachala



Dr Carlos Lopez





Bhagavan might tell us, the realm of heroes for any human life is the Self at its centre.

Regarding the story of AI, we should avoid catastrophizing it. We should also avoid trivializing it. Rather we trust in Bhagavan and hand any concerns about the future over to him. This does not necessarily mean we are forbidden from expressing our apprehensions. But we learn to acknowledge and accept what comes to us in the unfolding mystery of life, holding each thing in reverence and letting ourselves be transformed under Bhagavan's beneficent care. If we cannot see the world as it is, but are ever seeing it as *we* are,¹⁶ we learn to change our vision in order to change the world. We follow Bhagavan's lead in cultivating EQ, namely, intuitive wisdom born of sadhana and self-inquiry, over IQ, namely, second-hand informational knowledge, and make emotional and psychological resilience gained in the spiritual search the focus of our personal development. As social, collaborative beings, we give up the idea of insulating ourselves perfectly from tech's encroachment into the inner life of the heart. Bhagavan's teaching is not about circling the wagons against the world as if the world were an ever-

16 Anaïs Nin quoted by David Brooks in his *How to Know A Person*, p. 55. The author points out that *constructionism* in neuroscience highlights the way we 'actively construct our own perception of reality' (p. 57). In other words, we 'photoshop' the world interiorly, creating a simulation of it, calling it 'world'.

present danger. Rather, we make use of the light of awareness from Bhagavan's inquiry to scrutinize that which comes to us and in knowing it, find ourselves enabled to make the needed adjustments.

We follow Bhagavan in *paying attention to a speck of dust as if it were the whole world, while at the same time, learning to dismiss the world as a speck of dust*. We respond with empathy to the suffering around us without imagining that we must carry the world on our shoulders. We learn to let go and give ourselves over each day in an ongoing surrender. We address the crisis of connection stemming from excessive device use, becoming intentional about face-time encounters and intensifying the quality of connection within. We seek ways to defuse any device-driven social anxiety and the need to digitally isolate as well as uproot any limiting beliefs we might hold in respect of the nature of our ultimate essence. We strengthen the search that has been the preoccupation of Ramana devotees over the decades, and indeed, of spiritual seekers down through the centuries, namely, the search for the Self. We recall the *Isavasya Upanishad* which says, *he who perceives all beings in the Self alone, and the Self in all beings, does not entertain any hatred on account of that perception*. We recall Rumi's insight that *we are not a drop in the ocean but the entire ocean in a drop*. We recall the scene in 9th-century Tang dynasty China when a Buddhist monk asks his master for a pointer in seeking the Self. The master replies cryptically:

Events at Sri Ramanasramam: Annamalaiyar Giripradakshina



Arunachaleswara and Apeetakuchambika *utsava* deities were taken in procession around Arunachala Hill as is the custom on the second day after Maha Deepam. They arrived to Ramanasramam around 9.20 am on the morning of the 28th November. Ashram devotees waited as the entourage approached. The Ashram staff made offerings and *aruti* was performed. For footage of Arunachaleswarar's stop at the Ashram gate, see. <<https://www.youtube.com/shorts/HYR01mtxgKY>>. —





It is not mind, It is not Buddha, It is not a thing.

So, then what is *It*, we implore. What is this elusive Self? The “answer”, Bhagavan tells us, lies with the question itself which is the only portal we have for accessing It.

Conclusion

When we look out at the world it appears daunting. This is because we have no way of distinguishing between the apprehension veiling our vision, on the one hand, and on the other, *things as they really are*, which in most cases, are actually benign. The world may sometimes appear chaotic and fragmentary, as if it were seeking to overwhelm us. But the world is just the world; it is our vision that is distorted. The culprit is not tech innovation in the 21st century *per se* but the ignorance that took charge of our hearts in the ancient past. The key to unravelling the cycle of confusion is not in waiting till we become more knowledgeable but identifying and accepting the world and everyone in it as they are.

We greet the growing mistrust we see in the world by cultivating trust for the individual right before us. Whatever resistance to conditions we manifest, we greet each episode with compassion. Whether war in Europe, armed conflict in the Middle East, climate change around the globe, dystopian predictions flooding the internet or the apparent decline in traditional culture and institutions, our task remains the same, namely, training in humility vis-a-vis Bhagavan’s teaching.

In recent years, meditators in Bhagavan’s Old Hall have reported occasional intense discomfort, as if the weight of one thousand worlds were pressing down on every cell of the body, as if the four corners of the psyche were besieged with anguish and pain. Terrifying

as such episodes can be, they may be par for the course. More remarkable is how quickly they disappear without a trace. The meditator’s job, it would seem, is overriding the impulse to wiggle free from such experiences but to try and remain present and attentive, calling on Bhagavan for assistance in surrendering to them.

With rising mental health challenges reported around the globe, we might imagine that such events have a collective root, that is, the pain registering in the heart of a meditator in Bhagavan’s Old Hall is somehow related to the difficulties people are facing everywhere. Greeting such instances in a spirit of non-resistance could play a small role in a collective catharsis, something we are all participating in, each in our own way, making an unintended contribution toward becoming a stronger, wiser, more resilient and faith-filled humanity.

When a devotee in the hall asked Bhagavan why there is so much sorrow in human life, Bhagavan said that it is God’s will. ‘But why should God will it so?’, he asks. Bhagavan replies:

It is inscrutable. No motive can be attributed to that Power—no desire, no end to achieve can be asserted of that one Infinite, All-wise and All-powerful Being. God is untouched by activities, which take place in His presence.... If the mind is restless on account of a sense of the imperfect and unsatisfactory character of what befalls us..., then it is wise to drop the sense of responsibility by regarding ourselves as ordained instruments of the All-wise and All-powerful, to do and suffer as He pleases. He carries all burdens and [by so doing, He] gives us peace.¹⁷ —

(series concluded)

¹⁷ *Talks*, §28.

Events at Sri Ramanasramam: New Ashram Guest House



The new Ramanasramam guest house situated in Osborne Lane was inaugurated on the morning of 9th November. Named ‘Sonadri: Swami Ramanananda Centenary Building’, the new three-storied complex houses twenty-one double rooms with a parking facility on the

ground floor. Each floor has an optional family room which consists of two double rooms linked by a shared door. —





Obituary: Sri Pothe Swami



Pothen Subramaniam, familiarly known as Namby Mama, was one of eighteen siblings born to a pious Brahmin family in Kerala in 1952. He had a hereditary priestly role and served in the famous Padmanabhaswamy temple in Trivandrum. In mid-life after his temple obligations were concluded, he lived as an itinerant sadhu, traveling and visiting pilgrimage sites all over India. A kind, quietly helpful, soft-spoken man, he was a regular visitor to Sri Ramanasramam and sometimes sponsored chanting programmes such as *Bhagvata Saptaha*, opposite the Ashram. In the third week of October this year, Pothe Swami suffered a brain haemorrhage while in Hosur and was hospitalized in Bangalore. Some days later he suffered a heart attack and was left unconscious. When a few days prior to falling ill someone presented him with ochre robes, he expressed the desire to take *sanyasa diksha*. While hospitalised, a *sanyasin* of repute presented him with another set of robes. A family member who was also a senior *sanyasin* arrived later and even though Pothe Swami was not fully conscious, knowing his wish, gave him *apat sannyasa*. Pothe

Swami was brought to Tiruvannamalai on 1st November. His last spoken words were, 'I know I am not this; I don't care about quitting this'. Swami was absorbed at the Feet of Arunachala at 3.30 am 2nd November at the age of 71. —

Obituary: Smt. Pattammal

Smt. Pattammal had Bhagavan's darshan at the age of eight. Later, her sister's husband had the good fortune of bringing food to Bhagavan from Echammal. Pattammal's father-in-law had the darshan of Bhagavan and Seshadri Swami and one of her relatives who spent a few months in the ashram with Bhagavan later named his son 'Ramanan'. For many years Pattammal had the annual darshan of Deepam atop Arunachala. Recalling the Tamil adage *Tiruvoodal kandaarkeku maru udal illai*, i.e., 'there is no more birth for those who witness the Tiruvoodal festival', she compelled her husband and three children to go to Tiruvannamalai in January 1973 to witness the festival. Perhaps it was this divine impulse that persuaded her husband to spend the last few months of his earthly life in Ashram accommodation in 2015. Pattammal lived up to the ripe old age of 98 and in later years, her only wish was to leave the body in the vicinity of Sri Ramanasramam. She chanted Tamil Parayanam daily until she was absorbed in Arunachala on 10th November 2023 during the auspicious Pradosha Kalam. Smt. Pattammal is survived by two sons, Sri. T V Chandramouli of Sri Ramanasramam and Sri. T V Ramakrishnan, and her daughter, Smt. Banumathi Sivaraman. —



Obituary: Sri Michael Brickmann



Michael Brickmann was a regular visitor to the Ashram, staying the month of September each year. Born in Los Angeles in 1951, he lived his life as a meditator and artist, studying year-round under Tibetan meditation teachers in Bodh Gaya. While in Bodh Gaya during the summer of 2021, he developed brain cancer (glioblastoma) and flew back to the US for treatment. His acceptance of his condition was inspiring for those in his presence. After being devoutly cared for by Katie Fabac, a mentee, during the final years of his life, Michael passed away in a hospice in Santa Barbara on 9th November 2023. Once commenting on the meditation and inquiry process, he wrote the following: *What a pity to remain distracted in the ever-changing instead of remaining in the ever un-changing. Even in the midst of the ever-changing, remain in the un-changing; Do not fixate on the objects of mind; abide in the nature of mind (the Self)*. Michael is survived by his brother, sister and niece. —

[Editor's note: We are sad to announce the loss of two additional devotees, Sharanya' Balachadran's mother, Lalita, who passed away on the 20th November and Murugeya (Pankajakshi's grandson) on 8th November. Saranagati hopes to publish brief accounts of their lives in the upcoming January issue.] —

