

Saranagati



SARANAGATI
SRI RAMANASRAMAM

JANUARY 2018
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Dev Gogoi, by permission



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IN THIS
ISSUE

Dear Devotees,

In the middle of December following the weeks of heavy November rains, repairs around the city were being carried out. On 15th December, the Ashram's front gate was sealed shut while contracted workers for the Highway Department installed drains in front of Sri Ramanasramam. In the course of trenching out the gutter, about seventy feet of the roadside perimeter wall between the front gate and Pali Tirtham gave way, tragically resulting in the death of two sub-contract workers. Ashram devotees are asked to pray for the bereaved.

The month of December began with the Kartigai Deepam Festival in full progress. Continuous rains subsided only the day before the big day when clear skies welcomed the lighting of the hilltop beacon on 2nd December and indeed, on all of the following ten nights.

Devotees were delighted to have darshan of Arunachaleswarar and Apithakuchambal when the deities were taken in procession round the Hill on 4th December and arrived at the front gate around 9am.

In this New Year's issue of the *Saranagati*, please see *The Long Road to Bhagavan: Tracing the Pilgrim Life of Ella Maillart (Part I)*, the first in a three-part series devoted to the thrilling life of this devotee who came to Bhagavan in late 1940 and lived near the Ashram for several years (p. 3ff).

As we go to press, devotees are arriving in anticipation of the celebration of Bhagavan's 138th Jayanti on 3rd January. For videos of the event, go to <http://www.sriramanamaharshi.org>.

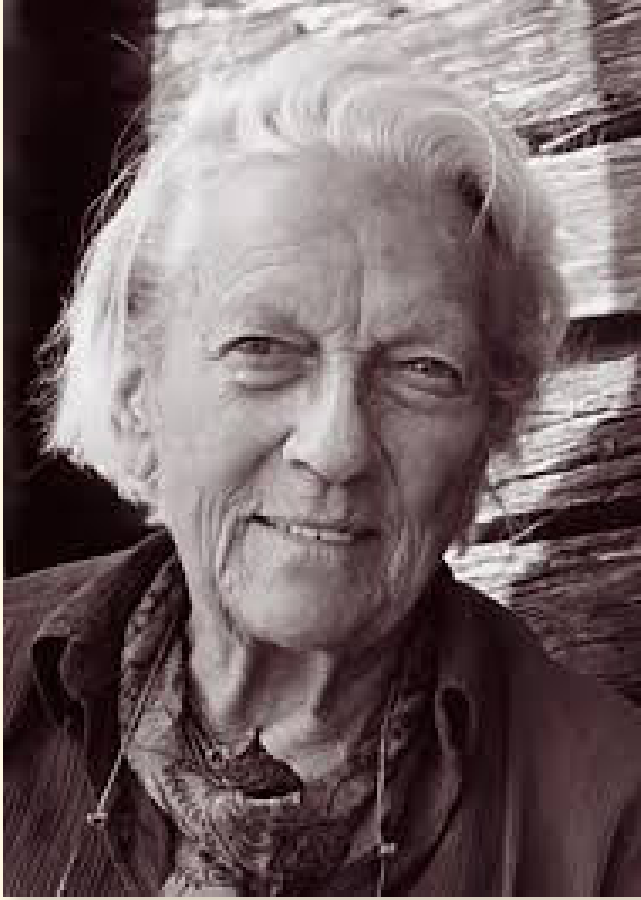
In Sri Bhagavan,
The Editorial Team

Calendar of Upcoming Events

1st January (Mon) Full Moon Day
2nd January (Tues) Arudra Darshan
3rd January (Weds) Bhagavan's 138th Jayanthi Day
14th January (Sun) Pongal
30th January (Tues) Punarvasu Day
30th January (Tues) Evening) Full Moon

31st January (Weds) Chinnaswamigal Aradhana
13th February (Tues) Mahasivaratri
26th February (Mon) Punarvasu Day
1st March (Thurs) Full Moon
6th March (Tues) Sundaram Iyer Day
16th March (Fri) Sri Vidya Homa





The Long Road to Bhagavan Tracing the Pilgrim Life of Ella Maillart (Part I)

[Explorer and travel writer, Ella Maillart (1903-1997), was a national hero in her native Switzerland. Yet, it is often not known that she had also been a staunch devotee of Bhagavan having spent the majority of the Second World War at Sri Ramanasramam. In this first of a three-part series, we look at her early years of travel before reaching India. This will be followed in the February issue with reflections on her many experiences with Guru Ramana, devotees and ashramites.]

Pilgrimage as a religious practice has been extolled throughout human history. In India, ascetics traditionally tended toward a life of wandering. Except for the four months of the monsoon (*chaturmas*), moving from place to place was a perennial exercise

for *sannyasins*. Roaming helped avoid attachment to any given location or group of people, guarding against becoming endeared to those who offered food. Even among householders, the accepted notion of what it meant to live the good life involved an element of itineracy, namely, the custom of going on *yatra*. *Yatra* means ‘sacred journey’ or ‘pilgrimage’ and is a way of periodically disconnecting from the predictable routines of daily life in order to set one’s sights on something beyond. Whilst *yatra* in India centres on venerating deities, saints and sages enshrined at holy sites, by virtue of the geographical movement it entails, it also has the effect of bringing to awareness the migratory and transient dimension of earthly life, directing one’s attention to the transcendent that lies beyond. A *yatri* is ‘one who goes’ and, in going, that which is changeless is set in relief. The movement of the pilgrim underscores the distinction between the dynamic and the static. Like the whirling dervish in motion, the world appears to spin around the dancer while that which lays at the centre of the rotation does not move.

Pilgrimage is often imbued with a sense of adventure and a foretaste of that which ‘is yet to come’. Indeed, the true pilgrimage is a journey into the unknown.

In writing on the extraordinary life of Ella ‘Kini’ Maillart, it cannot be said that the years of wandering during the first half of her life fit the classical pattern of pilgrimage: her journeys were adventure, driven by an insatiable desire for the new and curiosity about different ways of living. But in her later travels, a tone of humble self-assessment gained purchase in her reflections, hinting at existential dissatisfaction and a pervasive sense of displacement and alienation. This was no doubt what undergirded the original impulse to set forth.

To an outside observer, her incessant wandering might have appeared reckless, haphazard, even irresponsible. But in her defence, every great hero-epic exhibits the feature of wandering, not least of all, in the tales of Rama and Sita (*bhramana* means ‘wandering’) and in that of the five Pandavas. The hero’s eventual transformation and birth into a new life is almost always preceded by that archetypal moment of exile





and roving foreign, unknown lands which invariably leads them through forests, deserts and places devoid of recognisable landmarks.

Even before World War I, Ella Maillart's Europe had largely dispensed with traditional cultural forms and religious pilgrimage had fallen into disuse. Thus, Ella's wandering years began not by emulating any familiar model of pilgrimage but by an inborn longing to find something more than what her native 1920s Switzerland could offer. Having rebelled to liberate herself from familial and societal expectations, she found that having won her freedom, she did not know what to do with it; did not know what it was she was actually looking for¹. Like a fly trapped in a bottle, buzzing and bouncing around until, by chance, it happens upon the open end of the container, the impulse that moved Ella Maillart's early life was just such a slap-dash instinct. To her, it looked as though her Europe was all wrong, that she needed to discover another world, a better place from where to find herself. To her friends and family, it looked as though she wanted to escape, as though she were simply trying to 'run away', a criticism made all the more poignant by the unconvincing replies she initially gave to such questions. Later, she would meet these objections with confidence:

Escapism? [Yes, this] word could sum up my life. [...] One travels to run away from routine, that dreadful routine that kills all imagination and all our capacity for enthusiasm. [...] One travels so as to learn once more how to marvel at life in the way a child does — and blessed be the poet, the artist who knows how to keep alive their sense of wonder. [Finally,] it is always our own self that we find at the end of the journey.²

Of course, the word 'pilgrim' was not generally employed to describe Ella's itinerant life but instead, labels like 'ethnographer', 'photographer', 'correspondent', 'journalist', 'travel writer' and 'cinematographer' more readily defined the nature of her undertakings. Yet when her explorations became more intimate and personal, she could only say that she had a deep longing 'to go'. And go she did.

¹ Ella Maillart — *Double Journey*, film by Antonio Bigini and Mariann Lewinsky, 2015.

² <www.inspiringquotes.us>.



Ella at ages 11 and 12, respectively

The Early Years

Ella's childhood was not unhappy but from an early age she suffered health problems. Her Danish mother, known for her independence and love of sports, used to take her to the mountains each week to ski. Ella would later write:

I had all sorts of illnesses, was forbidden to eat many pleasant things, and in thought I lived with the hero of the books I was reading. Always drowsy in the morning, at night I could not get to sleep, but lay for hours fidgeting with a finger at a hole in the wall, afraid of the nightmares that awaited me. Soon after I was ten an important change took place. I feel there are links between my present self and that little girl.³

When Ella was ten, the family moved to Creux-de-Genthod, a lakeside village seven kilometres from Geneva. The move brought with it regular skiing in the winter months, giving her body renewed strength.

The idyllic setting, panoramic vistas and fresh clean mountain air instilled in her an appreciation for the magnificence of nature and wide-open spaces, and their power to heal. During summers, living on the shores of Lake Geneva afforded her the opportunity to sail each day. This is where she met the daughter of a French naval officer, Hermine 'Miette' de Saussure, who soon became her closest friend and companion. The two sailed together and even took up yacht racing, eventually winning competitions. They delved

³ From her *Cruises and Caravans*, written while at Sri Ramanasramam, 1942, p. 2.





Ella on Lake Geneva



Ella and Miette on the *Perlette*, 1923



Ella and the Champel Hockey Club



The Irish writer, Monk Gibbon

into every adventure book they could lay their hands on, drawing inspiration from them and dreaming of their own future exploits.

In 1919 Ella founded and captained the region's first women's field hockey club. Four years later, while still just twenty, she and Miette received a hero's welcome after a courageous voyage across the Mediterranean to Corsica on Miette's 21-foot sloop. But the two girls' ambitions were even higher — to cross the Atlantic Ocean.

In 1924, Ella represented Switzerland in the Summer Olympics in Paris, competing in single-handed sailing as the sole female competitor among seventeen nations and taking ninth place⁴. Soon afterwards, she struck out for the UK to learn the English needed to work as a deck-hand sailing in the Atlantic⁵. Teaching French by day at a boys' boarding school in the seaside resort town of Prestatyn, North Wales, she took night classes in navigation. Here she was befriended by the Irish poet and essayist Monk Gibbon, whose later memoir gave his impressions of the blue-eyed fireball that was the 21-year-old Ella Maillart:

I paled into complete conventionality beside her. If I had broken some of the traditions of the place, she broke them all with an unconcern which argued either ignorance or complete indifference. To me she seemed a refreshing antidote to a regime far too formal. She was like a gust of wind blowing through rooms that ordinarily have all their windows shut. She was not deliberately inconsiderate; she was simply spontaneous and entirely natural.⁶

⁴ Ella Maillart, official website <www.ellamaillart.ch/bio_en.php>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *Mount Ida*, Monk Gibbon, London: Jonathan Cape, 1948; reprinted, Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1983, p. 30.

Though captivated by Ella, the poet couldn't make heads or tails of her. He discreetly made her an object of study, silently observing her movements at a distance with a cautious but growing admiration. Gibbon continues:

She had thrown open a window on the outer world. Her very stance now, easy, loose-limbed, informal, showed that she had all the instincts of the free. Misfortune had overtaken her, not because she was timid, but because she had been foolish enough to imagine that one should dare all. Ardent, gay, indiscreet, secretive, ambitious, restless, independent, she had seemed to me a mass of contradictions, to be treated with distinct reserve.⁷

But the reserve Gibbon felt soon faded and turned to brotherly affection and a deep regard as he began to discern beneath the young lady's fierce independence a wise and searching soul. One day, in a book he had lent her, he chanced on a photograph of a yacht in full sail. On the back of it were some lines she had copied down:

Expend not your strength in vain struggling in the elusive world, which tempts you out of yourself; success and failure lie within and not without you; know yourself and see to bring yourself into harmony with the Will from which you cannot escape, but to which you may bring yourself into obedience and so obtain peace.

The passage had been written, Gibbon adds, "in her hasty, yet at the same time curiously precise and characteristic handwriting on the back of the first thing that had come to hand. It seemed to tell me more about her than any previous action or word. I felt as though I had drawn the curtain for a moment on her inmost mind. This was the clue to a self that the world never saw."⁸

⁷ Ibid., p. 102.

⁸ Ibid.





After this short stint at Prestatyn, Ella got a job on the *Volunteer*, a flat-bottomed Thames barge converted into a yacht, finally gaining the experience she eagerly sought on the Atlantic. She continued to hone her skills, apprenticing herself to veteran sailors under various sea conditions.

In 1925, having traced with Miette and two other women the route of Odysseus to the Ionian islands on the *Perlette*, they now prepared for a trans-Atlantic passage the following year. This expedition ultimately met with failure, however, when Miette fell seriously ill at sea. Not long afterwards, Miette got married and settled down into family life, leaving Ella to conquer the world on her own⁹.

By now, Ella was fully committed to sports and adventure, delving into salaried employment only long enough to earn the funds needed to support her true passions: “Except when I was sailing or skiing I felt lost, only half alive. Everything I saw or read was depressing.”¹⁰ And relatedly: “The usual channels of university studies or secretarial work did not appeal to me. I cherished difficult dreams through confidence in myself.”¹¹

Fresh Vistas

Ella’s insatiable curiosity and probing spirit compelled her to experiment with various vocations: participating in an archaeological dig in Crete,

⁹ Ella Maillart, official website <www.ellamaillart.ch/bio_en.php>

¹⁰ *Swiss Review: The Magazine for the Swiss Abroad*, Nov. 2015, p.19.

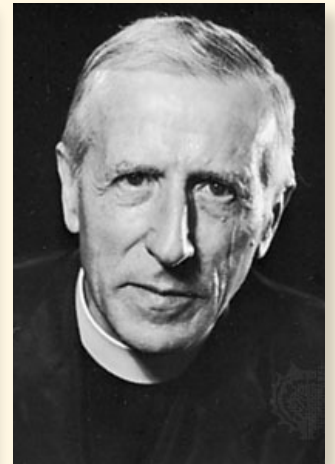
¹¹ <www.inspiringquotes.us>.



Ella races at Cowes, Isle of Wight, 1933



Peter Fleming travelling with Ella, 1935



Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

modelling for sculptors in Paris, acting at the *Dramatic Arts Studio* in Geneva and working as a stunt-woman in skiing films in Berlin.

Intrigued by accounts of Russian emigres she had met in Berlin, and wanting to learn more about Soviet cinema, Ella received a gift of \$50 from Jack London’s widow Charmain which enabled her to go to Moscow in 1930. Hosted by Countess Tolstoy, she experienced the aftermath of the revolution and was fortunate to be able to make a journey to the hidden valley of Svanetia. Her return trip took her to the Black Sea and Crimea, an excursion she chronicled in her first book, *Among the Russian Youth*. She was astonished to earn a cheque for six thousand francs when the book was published in 1932, a handsome sum during the stagnation of the early 1930s. She then set out for a six-month sojourn to Russian Turkestan, her insights and observations being published under the title *Turkestan Solo*.¹²

Ella now had a profession and a source of income and the world seemed to lay at her feet. With each passing year came new and exciting offers to travel: “Every time I took a long leave from home, I felt as if I were going to conquer the world”.¹³

Each year between 1931 and 1934, Ella successfully defended the colours of her country at the Skiing

¹² *Turkestan Solo: One Woman’s Expedition from the Tien Shan to the Kizil Kum*, G. P. Putnam’s Sons, London, 1934.

¹³ <www.inspiringquotes.us>.





World Championships.¹⁴ Then, *Le Petit Parisien*, the largest French newspaper of the day, commissioned Ella to travel to Manchuria and report on the recent Japanese occupation. In Peking, she reconnected with Peter Fleming¹⁵, the British adventurer/travel writer who was special correspondent for *The Times*. There she also met Pierre Teilhard de Chardin¹⁶, joining him each day for afternoon tea to discuss the big issues of life¹⁷.

In the meantime, Ella and Peter Fleming succeeded in getting a permit to visit the Chinese interior and the two set off on what would turn out to be a 3,500-mile journey on foot and horseback. After a forbidden trek through Chinese Turkestan, they heeded the advice of Sven Hedin, the renowned explorer, and journeyed to the very remote and almost unknown regions of the north of Tibet before landing up in Srinagar. Encountering Ella in Paris upon her return, Paul Morand provided this vivid description:

A woman dressed in lambskin boots and gloved in mittens, her skin burnt by mountain air and desert winds, exploring inaccessible regions of the earth in the company of Chinese, Tibetans, Russians and Englishmen whose socks she mends, whose wounds she heals, and with whom she sleeps in all innocence under the stars — this woman is Ella Maillart!

The Forbidden Journey was published in 1936 and won

14 Ella Maillart, official website, <www.ellamaillart.ch/bio_en.php

15 Elder brother of Ian Fleming, author of James Bond spy novels.

16 Teilhard de Chardin, the noted palaeontologist (Peking Man), was a renowned writer and thinker as well as a Jesuit priest.

17 Interview by Bertil Galland, Films Associations Plan-Fixes, 1984.

Ella international acclaim as a travel writer. It also gained her important contacts and helped her launch a career in lecturing. In the same year, on a trip to England, she interviewed Winston Churchill, then a parliamentarian on his rise to prominence in pre-war London. In June 1936, Teilhard de Chardin wrote her:

*The end of all science is only to teach us to become aware of the unity and the movement that surrounds us. Seeing is the first essential step. You have done it, what you lack to cross the wall that you feel before you is to go to the next degree: Love. Love the world!*¹⁸

The Cruel Way

1939 was pivotal for Ella and marked a change in direction, not only because of the ominous signs in Europe but because she underwent an alteration in her thinking. She began to look more closely at the motivations of her life and her writing became more personal and self-reflective.

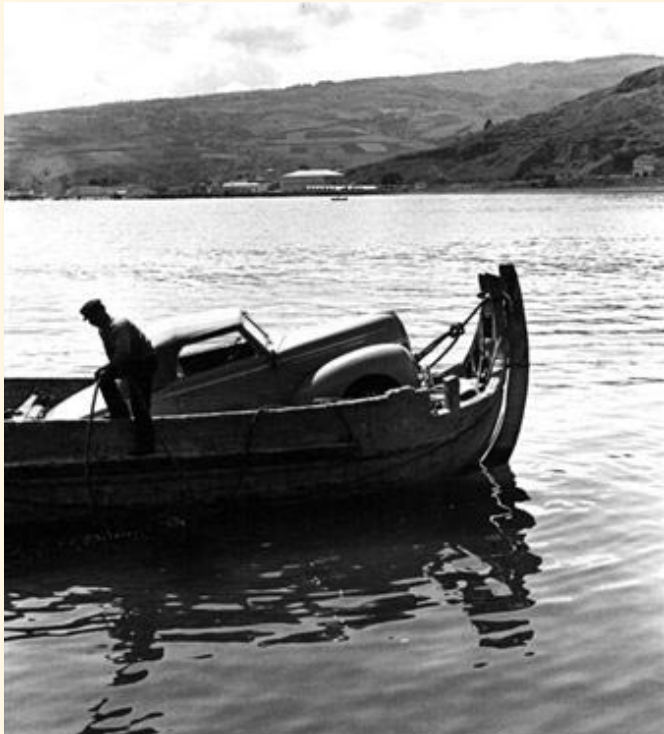
The quote from the 16th century Spanish mystic, Saint Teresa of Avila, that prefaced the account of that year captures the spirit of the life that was unfolding before her:

*You are seeking a 'New World'. I know one that is always new because it is eternal. Oh adventurers, conquerors of Americas, mine is an adventure more difficult and more heroic than all yours. At the cost of a thousand sufferings worse than yours, at the cost of a long death before the fact, I shall conquer this world that is ever young. Dare to follow me and you will see!*¹⁹

18 See Ella Maillart: *Cette Realite que j'ai pourchassée*, ("This Reality That I Chased"), Editions Zoe, Anneliese Hollmann, 2013.

19 *The Cruel Way: Switzerland To Afghanistan In a Ford, 1939*, Ella Maillart. The University of Chicago Press, 2013, prefatory quote.





Under sail with their *Ford Roadster*, Turkey, 1939

In June, Ella embarked on what was to become a lengthy journey, one that would take her all the way to the South of India. It was not just the distance—some 8,000 kilometres as the crow flies; it was not just the period of time she would be away — some six years before she saw her native Europe again. Rather, it was what she was to discover along the way. She selects the words of Thoreau to begin her account:

*Nay, be a Columbus to whole new continents and worlds within you, opening new channels, not of trade but of thought. Every man is the lord of a realm beside which the earthly empire of the Czar is but a petty state, a hummock left by the ice. Yet some can be patriotic who have no self-respect, and sacrifice the greater to the less. They love the soil which makes their graves but have no sympathy with the spirit which may still animate their clay.*²⁰

Together with the novelist Annemarie ‘Christina’ Schwarzenbach, Ella set off in a V8 Ford Roadster.²¹ The trip was unlike any of her earlier travels. Her companion, having renounced her aristocratic German family to embark on a writing career, was not accustomed to travel. Worse still, her friend’s life had degenerated owing to chronic depression and an incurable morphine

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid, p. 218.

addiction. Ella took up the cause and brought Annemarie along in hopes of curing her drug habit as well as the despair that underlay it. The ‘literary asceticism’ of *The Cruel Way* (1947), a “tale of self-actualization against the backdrop of war”²², highlighted the stark landscapes they passed through in their months together and was invariably coloured by the ‘moral torment’ of her travel companion. The hunger and poverty they encountered among the poor, Ella reflected, is “less to be dreaded than an illness of the mind.”²³

The ‘cruel way’, it would seem, referred not just to the hardships of privation on the road through deserts and lonely stretches of vacant regions, but to the barrenness of the soul that has not yet found its rest. It was the cruelty of the mental distress that Annemarie suffered each day. There was perhaps too, a growing sense of unease in Ella as she began to have intimations about something deeper, more substantial, that needed uncovering in her own life. Presaging the course her destiny was soon to take, the inquiry Ella conducted in the privacy of her notebooks during this year’s journey was deeply introspective.

Among the expedition’s gear and tackle was a state-of-the-art 16 mm colour camera and Ella shot footage along the way, documenting the lives of the tribes they encountered, cultures that were fast disappearing. In Kabul, Ella and Annemarie²⁴ went their separate ways, by which time the war in Europe was in full progress.

22 *The Cruel Way*, p. ix in Jessa Crispin’s forward.

23 Ibid., p. 14.

24 Annemarie, accompanied by other travel companions, made her way to India and sailed by steamer for Europe from Bombay in 1940. Two years later she died tragically in a bicycle accident in Switzerland.



Crossing Iran, 1939





India at Last

Reaching India, Ella processed her Kodachrome film and, with the support of highly-placed contacts in Bombay, gave a presentation of her ethnographic movie, *Nomads of the Frontier* on 17 September 1940²⁵. This earned Ella several hundred rupees of sorely-needed revenue. She subsequently made use of her colour film at various public presentations and eventually the footage was made into an award-winning documentary film and released in 2015 under the title, *Ella Maillart — Double Journey*, directed by Antonio Bigini and Mariann Lewinsky.

Ella's arrival in India in the summer of 1940 proved a relief after the hard year in the desert, and was a significant contrast to the challenge of travelling with Annemarie. The path that lay ahead of her in South India would mark a turning point in her life and, broadly speaking, bring to a conclusion the dynamic, if not frenzied, chapter of the previous two decades. It would mark the beginning of a new kind of adventure which would seem to gather in all the disparate strands, the seemingly irreconcilable

²⁵ *Ella Maillart - Double Journey*, directed by Antonio Bigini and Mariann Lewinsky, documentary film, 2015.

constituent parts of her wild and speckled life and bring them into a single congruent accord.

When she reached the southern end of the subcontinent a few months later, she would chance to meet one of the great sage-lights of the twentieth century, an experience that would transform her. Writing subsequently, she would look back over the years of wandering and put them into perspective, giving voice, perhaps for the first time, to her vocation as a pilgrim:

The world attracts us by its marvels and by its adorable beauty even before we start to feel that indeed it has a hidden meaning. We begin to study it; we go off to conquer it, looking for whatever satisfaction it could bring to our deepest desires. But none of the multiple aspects of the world can give us the fundamental answer. That can only come from God, and where else is God other than within us. Everyone has to discover this (fundamental) truth on their own. The spiritual being, hidden within us, is the living source of our deepest aspirations, and those aspirations will never be fulfilled unless (the deeper being) is liberated... India for me was the beginning of a completely new voyage that would lead me to the full and harmonious life that I was instinctively looking for. To undertake this journey, first I had to understand the 'unknown lands' of my own spirit.²⁶ —

(to be continued)

²⁶ *Croisieres et Caravanes*, 1951, Chapter XIV South India.

Events at Sri Ramanasramam: Luang Por Sumedho at the Ashram



Luang Por ('Venerable Father') Sumedho, the head of the Forest Sangha (Theravada) monastic tradition, visited the Ashram on 18 December 2017. Received by Mr. V.S. Mani, he was offered ceremonial arati at Bhagavan's samadhi. He was accompanied by Ajahn Viradhammo, the abbot of Tisarana monastery (Canada), Ajahn Pasanno, the abbot of Abhayagiri monastery (USA), Ajahn Sucitto, the retired abbot of Chithurst monastery (UK), Ajahn Khemasiri, the head of Dhammapala monastery (Switzerland) and Ajahn Asoko, as well as two junior monks. Luang Por Sumedho gave a deeply moving impromptu talk in the New Hall, emphasising the complementarity between Bhagavan's teachings and those of the Buddha. He pointed out that to recognise the similarity between the Buddha's teachings and Bhagavan's teachings, one just has to know how to translate the terminologies used by Bhagavan and the Buddha. He also praised Sri Ramanasramam as a rare place of refuge for modern-day seekers of Truth. —





Obituary: Sri Nanna Garu



Born 23 September 1934, Sri Bhupathiraju Venkata Lakshmi Narasimharaju hailed from Jinnuru, a village in the West Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh. His was a devout family of pious disposition and the boy was blessed to visit holy places from an early age. In 1957, he had a dream of an elderly man with a staff in his hand. The saint raised the young man from his bed and kissed him three times on the cheeks. For the following six months, he longed to know who the stranger was. One day while reading *The Hindu* in the village Library, he saw the advertisement of a book, *The Great Man of India* by Madras Book Publishing House. When later perusing the book, he saw the photo image of the saint in his dream. It was Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi. He made his first visit to Sri Ramanasramam in January 1959 at which

point he dedicated his life to Sri Bhagavan's service. His entire life began to turn on Sri Ramana's teachings and he began to spread the guru's message in his neighbourhood. One morning when in Ramanasramam, between sleeping and waking, Nanna Garu felt his mind 'falling once and for all into his heart'. From then on he was a changed man, now under the direction of something greater than the personality. Those who knew him began to see him as a guru instead of a mere preacher, and his renown spread throughout Andhra Pradesh. Venerated by disciples as "Nanna Garu", (*Nanna* is Telugu for 'father' and *Garu*, the honorific meaning 'venerable'), people thronged by the thousands to hear him. He traveled extensively and often visited Ramanasramam with his disciples. At 12 noon on Friday, 29 December 2017, Vaikuntha Ekadasi, Sri Nanna Garu was absorbed at the Feet of Holy Arunachala. —

Events at Sri Ramanasramam: Samudram Lake Overflow



With torrential rains in the month of November, the Samudram lake overflowed when water was released from the local dam, filled to capacity. This would be the first time the lake has reached capacity in more than ten years. Even in Bhagavan's time, it was not a frequent occurrence and readers may recall the day when the spillway was overflowing, Bhagavan and devotees left the Hall to walk down and have a look. —

The Collected Works of Sri Ramana Maharshi: The Meaning of Jayanti

11. Who is born? It is only he who asks 'Whence am I born?' that is truly born in Brahman, the Prime Source. He indeed is born eternally; he is the Lord of saints; he is the ever-new. (On celebrating Sri Bhagavan's Jayanti).

— Reality in Forty Verses: Supplement v. 11, Collected Works, p. 79

