

Saranagati



SARANAGATI
SRI RAMANASRAMAM

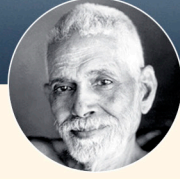
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Dev Gogoi



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IN THIS
ISSUE

Dear Devotees,

The month of February continued with positive signs in respect of COVID infections in Tamil Nadu. To be sure, thousands of mutations have been identified in India and the N440K variant is spreading in South India. But it is not clear if these variants pose serious dangers. Hospitalizations are low and infection rates have not risen. The Ashram is continuing an incremental return to normalcy and opening hours have expanded slightly. The new hours are from 8-11am and 3-6pm.

In this issue, we continue the amazing life story of Dr G. S. Melkote, the Gandhian freedom fighter who was active in India's struggle for independence. Dr Melkote experienced the unique blessing of not only treating Bhagavan but also being treated and healed by him. Imagine, this great physician curing and being cured by the greatest of all physicians (see p. 3).

For videos, photos and further news of events, go to <http://www.sriramanamaharshi.org> or write to us at saranagathi@sriramanamaharshi.org.

In Sri Bhagavan,
The Editorial Team

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Calendar of Events Celebrated at Home

3rd March (Weds) Sundaram Iyer's Day
11th March (Thurs) Mahasivaratri
19th March (Fri) Sri Vidya Homa
23rd March (Tues) Punarvasu
28th March (Sun) Full Moon
13th April (Tues) Telugu New Year

14th April (Weds) Tamil New Year
14th April (Weds) Nirvana Room Day
19th April (Mon) Punarvasu
21st April (Weds) Sri Rama Navami
26th April (Mon) Full Moon
9th May (Sun) Sri Bhagavan's 71st Aradhana





IN PROFILE

Dr G. S. Melkote (part II)

At Ramanasramam in the summer 1939, Dr Melkote wanted nothing more than to continue to stay in the Ashram with Bhagavan. But he felt the strong pull of duty. During his medical career, he had become sought after as a health care practitioner. When he was referred by his Professor Dr Major Naidu, Sarojini Naidu's husband, he treated the Nawab Sir Nizamath Jung. The latter was so impressed with Dr Melkote that he invited him to live next door to him and to take up his medical practice from there.

Thus, Madina Bagh in Narayanguda was to be Dr Melkote's home for the next fifty years. With its spacious

forty rooms, Madina Bagh was not only the doctor's residence but the vastness of the facility allowed him to establish a veritable hospital within it. It functioned around the clock, replete with a maternity section, a surgical theatre, a dispensary for treating patients and staff quarters.

As a Gandhian intent on India's independence, Dr Melkote also made use of Madina Bagh as a headquarters for the independence activities in Hyderabad State. He could thus serve the community, whether rich or poor, Muslim or Hindu in a medical capacity as well as provide lodging for activists, even those sought by British police. Heroes of the Indian freedom struggle such as R. R. Diwakar, S. Nijalingappa, N. S. Hardikar, B. V. Keskar, D. P. Mishra, Sardar Venkatramiah, Ashok Mehta, and Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay enjoyed his hospitality. His wife, Vimala, who looked after the needs of her many guests day in and day out became immersed in the freedom movement herself.

By the summer of 1939, Dr Melkote's work in treating Bhagavan was over. He could leave the Ashram with the satisfaction of having assisted Bhagavan in healing his eczema and simultaneously having been healed by Bhagavan of a life-threatening infection. Dr Melkote was now healthy and strong again and so took leave to resume his work.

That September, war broke out in Europe which engulfed Britain and would harden British resistance to the independence movement in India. But war or no war, the All-India Congress Committee led by Mahatma Gandhi demanded an end to British rule.

The Quit India Movement

In 1942, the Quit India struggle was launched at the Bombay session where Gandhi called for 'An Orderly British Withdrawal' from India. Within hours of Gandhi's speech, the British authorities responded with stiff resolve and imprisoned virtually the entire leadership of the Congress without trial.

Meanwhile in Hyderabad, the State Congress President, Swami Ramananda Tirtha came to hand over a letter to the Nizam of Hyderabad urging him to cooperate and join the Indian Union. Fearful that he

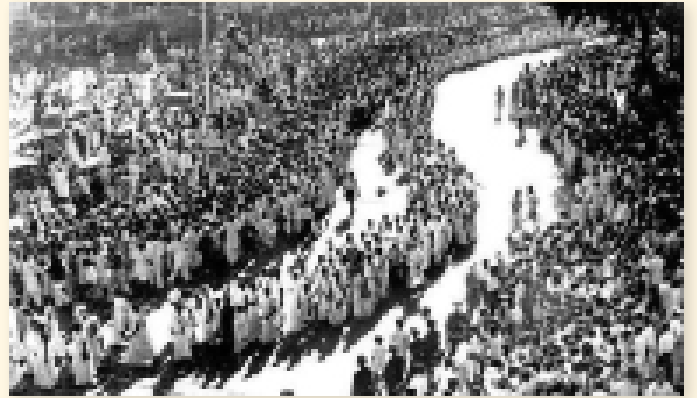




might be intercepted, a copy of the letter was secretly dispatched to Dr Melkote. When the State Congress President reached Nampally Railway Station he was arrested, and Dr Melkote alone remained to sign the letter. For this act, Dr Melkote was immediately arrested along with his wife and both were jailed for 45 days, as were his two brothers. While in prison, his father fell critically ill and the stricken man's sons were not released from prison even temporarily to be with their father who was sinking fast. When their father passed away in Mysore, the news reached Dr Melkote at his jail cell in Hyderabad. Permission to attend the funeral was conditional on declaring in writing that he would not involve himself in further freedom movement activities. Dr Melkote flatly refused. Just in time, another solution was found, and Dr Melkote reached the funeral to see his father's mortal remains engulfed in the flames of the funeral pyre.

Meanwhile the houses of independence leaders were ransacked, excepting Dr Melkote's Madina Bagh. Some explained that as Madina Bagh belonged to Nizam Jung, the British and local police would not attack it. But Dr Melkote had an alternative explanation, namely, it was due to Bhagavan's protection.

Once released from prison, Dr. and Mrs. Melkote returned home just in time to receive visits from leaders on the run. During the campaign, a mass of people gathered on a beach at Bombay, ignoring government restrictions, to witness Aruna Asaf Ali hoist the Indian flag. Due to violent police intervention, chaos erupted, and in the turmoil, she escaped. The British served a warrant of arrest, 'dead or alive'. After about eight days of travel under extreme circumstances, Aruna Asaf Ali reached Hyderabad and sought refuge at Dr Melkote's house. When Mrs. Melkote saw her at the doorstep, she didn't recognize her, so changed was her appearance following the ordeal. Local police got tips that she was somewhere in Hyderabad, so Madina Bagh was the first place they looked. Though her medical condition was mild, Dr Melkote admitted her in one of the hospital rooms with a notice board saying, "Patient Serious—Do Not Disturb!" A routine search turned up nothing owing in large part to the local police who were sympathetic to the cause.



The Quit India Movement, August 1942

War raged on in Europe and most of the Quit India movement's leaders spent the remaining three years of the war in prison. The forceful response of the British had the support of the Viceroy's Council, the Hindu Mahasabha, the All-India Muslim League, the Indian Imperial Police, the Indian Civil Service and the princely states. The only outside support for the movement came from distant shores. Roosevelt pressured Churchill to give in to some of the Quit India campaign's demands in the spirit of the Atlantic Charter where US offered war help to Britain contingent on Britain's promise to decolonize India after the war. But for the time being, the Quit India campaign was crushed.

A temporary truce between the British Government and the Congress party brought the release of those imprisoned around India. After a temporary lull in the struggle, the freedom fighters regrouped.

End of the War

After the war, when Dr Melkote's medical practice was in full swing, he met Dr B. L. Narasimha Rao. This professional association soon became a lifelong friendship. Years later, Dr Narasimha Rao was deputed to undergo special training in tropical diseases at Calcutta, while his wife and two daughters remained in Hyderabad. Within a few days of leaving for Calcutta, however, Mrs. Narsimha Rao passed away and not long after that, Narasimha Rao also passed away. This left the two young girls orphaned. Dr. and Mrs. Melkote took them in, eventually adopted them and raised them along with their own children at Madina Bagh.





Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru

Mrs. Syed's Dinner Invitation

If Dr Melkote made every effort to get to Ramanasramam as often as possible, dramatic episodes in his life during the independence years alternated with the grace and wholesome experience of being in the company of Bhagavan. It is hard to imagine the doctor blending so easily into the peaceful conditions of life in the Ashram with so many demands being made on him elsewhere. And yet, it was the refuelling in Bhagavan's presence that strengthened his resolve to fight on.

On one visit, a devotee chronicled how he and Dr Melkote were blessed to be involved in an unusual circumstance concerning Bhagavan and one of Bhagavan's close devotees. As it would happen, Dr Syed's wife got the strong urge to have Bhagavan come to their house for dinner. She prayed about it and one day as Bhagavan started for his walk up the Hill, the couple came before him and made their appeal. Bhagavan only laughed and continued his walk. Back at home, each blamed the other for their failure. Dr Syed told her, "The truth of the matter is that your devotion is deficient. That is the reason why Bhagavan refused."

This stung her deeply and the woman sat up late in the night with the determination to pray all night or as long as it took in order to win Bhagavan's assent. Somewhere in the early morning she inadvertently dropped off and had a dream wherein Bhagavan came to her and explained why he could not accept the invitation. He asked her:

How can I leave the Ashram and come to your house for food? I must dine along with others, or they won't eat. Besides, as you know, people are coming from distant places, facing a lot of trouble to see me and to have food with me. How can I leave all these guests and come to your place? Feed three devotees of mine and it will be the same as feeding me. I shall be fully satisfied.

In the dream, she saw who the three were: Dr Melkote, Swami Prabuddhananda and Voruganti Krishnaya. When Dr Syed heard his wife's dream, he invited all three to his house for dinner. It was only with some reservation that the three accepted. They privately conferred with one another and openly confessed their hesitation, not least of all, the fact that it was contrary to social convention for Brahmins to eat in a Muslim household. But Dr Melkote treated the words spoken by Bhagavan in Mrs. Syed's dream as coming directly from Bhagavan's own lips. Even if Bhagavan had not detailed in the dream who the three should be, the goodly doctor accepted on faith that it was Bhagavan who had set it upon Mrs. Syed's heart who they should be. Thus, he argued, they could not refuse the invitation. The others conceded but were nevertheless afraid of letting the plan be known.

The next day when the lunch bell rang, the three went before Bhagavan and made their pranams. Strangely Bhagavan did not ask them why they were taking leave. Equally strange was the fact that on their way out just before the Ashram dinner was served, they saw Chinnaswami who made no inquiry about their leave-taking. Upon arrival at the Syed's home, their final fear was placated when they saw how clean the house was and how excellent was Mrs. Syed's food, all prepared in pure devotion to Bhagavan.

At the conclusion of the meal, Mrs. Syed offered each of them betel leaves, an honour that a Muslim housewife would normally only confer on her husband or a fakir. The three then understood that they were fakirs in her eyes, namely, stand-ins for the Maharshi.

On the way back from the dinner to the Ashram, Dr Melkote had tears in his eyes. When they reached the Ashram, they were again amazed that no one seemed to notice their absence nor inquired why they were not at dinner. Krishnaya commented, "How wonderfully does Bhagavan protect those who obey him!"

Indian Independence

In August 1947, India got her independence and at long last, the British Raj did leave. But for Dr Melkote and his Congress colleagues, their work was not over. Across the nation great effort was being expended in the hopes of bringing about a peaceful transition of power. Hyderabad, however, was denied this privilege,

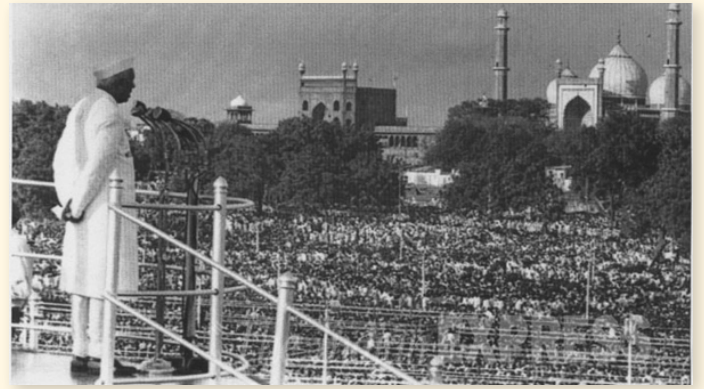




as the Nizam refused to accede to the Indian Union. State Congress President, Swami Ramananda Tirtha, who was then one of those living at Madina Bagh was arrested along with Dr Melkote and others. Protests led to atrocities and thousands lost their lives. Killings in broad daylight were a daily occurrence. Dr Melkote was asked to coordinate activities in various camps surrounding the Hyderabad State seeking a negotiated peace as well as in the central Government in Delhi. Here he began a period of intense travel moving between the various camps and Delhi. He now came into close contact with Nehru, Sardar Patel, Rajendra Prasad, B. C. Roy, G. B. Pant, G. L. Nanda, U. N. Dhebar, Pattabhi Sitaramayya, C. Rajagopalachari and other Congress leaders. His multiple talents and formidable communication skills proved invaluable in negotiations and played their part in shaping a democratic post-independence India.

The Nizam's Accession

In August 1948 while at the railway station en route to Delhi, his train was delayed. On the opposite platform, he spotted a train heading for Tiruvannamalai. After a 90-minute delay, he could not resist the temptation any longer and simply picked up his bags, crossed the platform and boarded the train for Tiruvannamalai. Once at the Ashram, Dr Melkote profusely apologized to Bhagavan for not being able to visit more often. To the doctor's surprise, Bhagavan told him that his presence was required in Delhi and that he should proceed immediately. Just as he got ready to leave the Ashram for Chennai, someone going by car offered to take him. Reaching the Congress office, he was given a telegram with instructions to proceed to Delhi without delay. Dr Melkote was put on a flight to Delhi and once there, was taken to Sardar Patel, the Home Minister. Patel immediately sent him back to the airport to fly on to Bombay and Poona where he should meet Major General J. N. Choudhury, Commander of the Indian Army in Poona. Sardar Patel foresaw the futility of further negotiations with Nizam's Government and was convinced that any further delay would complicate the situation. The operation to free Hyderabad was termed 'Operation Polo' and Dr Melkote accompanied Major General Choudhury to Hyderabad. The Indian army



Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru addressing the newly independent nation on 15th August, 1947, from the ramparts of the Red Fort in Delhi.

faced little resistance and successfully entered Hyderabad on the 17th of September, 1948. The Nizam signed the documents of surrender and accession to the Indian Union. Thus, at last, peace reigned in the doctor's native city and further bloodshed was avoided.

By now, Dr Melkote had not only earned the respect of the leadership of the Hyderabad State but of the leaders of the nation as a whole.

In 1949, Pandit Nehru visited Madina Bagh as did Sardar Patel. In the years that followed, Dr Melkote was elected and re-elected various times to the National Parliament in Delhi where he served as an MP. He chaired numerous associations and founded educational institutions all the while maintaining his medical practice.

Conclusion

In 1982 Dr Gopaliah Subbukrishna Melkote went to Udaipur to participate in a yoga seminar when he fell sick and was taken home where he became bedridden. When his condition deteriorated, he left Madina Bagh for the last time and was hospitalized. He passed away peacefully on the morning of Holi, the festival of colours, 10th March, 1982. Holi festivities were stopped and all roads in and around Madina Bagh were silent. He was given a State funeral with a 21-gun salute. The President of India, the Prime Minister, the Speaker of the Lok Sabha and a host of other personalities condoled his passing.

Admirers started a women's college in Hyderabad in his memory and in Raichur District, Karnataka, which had elected him for his first term to the Lok Sabha, a rural polytechnic was set up in his name. On 27th December 2007, the park in Narayanguda near Madina Bagh was built and dedicated to his memory. —





From our Archives: The Ashram Bull, Nandi

Two days after India's independence in August 1947, Nandi was dedicated to the renowned Meenakshi Temple. Born and brought up in Ramanasramam, Nandi was received by temple authorities with full honours at Madurai station and was immediately taken for procession around the temple's four streets. All were impressed by his magnificence, his immense physical stature and demeanour. On festival days, Nandi served as the drum-bull with temple drums hanging from his back during processions. Chinnaswami who spent much of his youth in Madurai along with Bhagavan was proud that one of Ramanasramam's very own was serving in this historic temple on the southern bank of the Vaigai River. Dedicated to Meenakshi, 'the fish-eyed Goddess' (derived from the words *meena* 'fish' and *akshi* 'eyes'), Meenakshi Temple is the centre of this ancient city and appears in 6th century texts. It is a major pilgrimage site for devotees of Lord Siva, though Vaishnavite themes are evident throughout as Vishnu is widely considered to be Meenakshi's brother. —

Announcement: The Demise of Martin Wolff

As we go to print, we learn of the demise of Martin Wolff, the beloved devotee of Arunachala Ashram, NY, on full moon day, 26th February US time (27th IST). An obituary of Martin's life will appear in the upcoming April issue. —





RAMANA REFLECTIONS

The Lever and the Fulcrum

The Neuroanatomy of the Strategic Mind (Part II)

Before picking up from the last issue on the preponderance of the strategic mind in the digital era, we should remind ourselves of the extraordinary historical circumstances we find ourselves in. Experts tell us that the predominance of the strategic mind came about over many centuries of civilization's development. If human activity is trending towards greater complexity and connectivity, we note the unprecedented changes in recent centuries, e.g. worldwide urbanization beginning in the early 19th century, industrialization, automation and mechanization

enabled by the steam engine beginning in the mid-19th century, the subsequent development of the combustion engine and the advent of communication technologies in the late 19th century, the movement toward a globalised economy in the mid-20th century and the arrival of the silicon chip, digitization and high-speed communications in the late 20th century.

The theme of far-reaching change came into sharper focus during the COVID lockdown when we found ourselves face to face with yet another bifurcation point in humanity's historical unfolding. The lockdown underscored the presence of a movement that is sweeping us ever more dramatically into the future. When we at last transition into the post-COVID era, hyper-digitalization almost guarantees that we will never return to the former way of doing business.

If the corporate office setting began to fade from the public landscape during the COVID lock down, experts tell us that this is to be the trend for the foreseeable future, i.e. toward working online from home, doing boardrooms virtually, and serving on planning and think-tank committees by video conference. Zoom symposiums supported by A.I. will be the 'office' of the post-COVID era as the public sphere continues its inexorable decline—month by month—ever more virtual, ever more remote, ever more technological. Historians argue that the sea change humanity underwent over the last few hundred years will pale in comparison to what we are about to go through—are already going through.

This is the context from which to continue the first segment on the increasing inclination toward the strategic mind. Born of the abovementioned historical conditions, we seem to be caught up in changes as immense in scope as any generation has ever had to face. Whether we recoil in the face of such change or revel in it, the world as we know it is passing away—and at high-speed. Change is stressful, so we will need some of Bhagavan's practicality: conditions are as they are; our job is to intelligently assess the nature of the storm and put our resources to work in navigating it. Key will be making sure we keep the big view in sight, that is, the clarity, vision, and understanding of Bhagavan's teaching, which is relevant in any historical circumstance.





Attentional Wandering

In the first segment, we borrowed language from neuropsychology to better understand what direction our response to the increasing dominance of the strategic mind may need to take. We ended the segment alluding to neuropsychological studies surrounding the adverse effects of intensive device use, among them, a finding that intensive device use stimulates left-hemispheric denotative consciousness and atrophies right hemispheric intuitive awareness.

Neuropsychological language becomes relevant here as a whole set of issues surrounding changes to the internal environment of the mind and brain come to the fore, not least of all attentional deficits. Closer to home are studies that suggest that *attentional wandering* is correlated with cardio-vascular disease, depression, and anxiety—three epidemics in the 21st century.

This study echoes a line from *Talks* when Bhagavan was asked what the measure of progress in the spiritual life was, to which he responded: ‘the absence of thoughts in the mind’ (*Talks* §618).

What Bhagavan seems to be describing here is a healthy right-hemispheric global function, free from attentional wandering. If cardio-vascular disease is the number one medical cause of death and if depression and anxiety are rampant in the contemporary world, we will do well to take Bhagavan’s suggestion and find ways to train attention and recover a healthy balance between strategic and global awareness functions.

The Harvard neuropsychologist Richie Davidson did a study at his lab at the University of Wisconsin, Madison involving hundreds of subjects—among them, some Tibetan monks—and found that attentional wandering was widespread but that seasoned meditators were relatively free of it. He also showed in related studies that attention is trainable, which should come as no surprise to sadhakas and Ramana devotees. But even Ramana devotees may be shocked to discover how unruly their minds are in the hyper-digital era.¹

One of the tests used by Dr Davidson was monitoring subjects’ breath for thirty minutes and having them press an electronic button at every ninth breath. Here was a simple measure of the subject’s

¹ Dr Richie Davidson in public talk at Upaya Zen Center.

ability to remain focused on the breath-counting for an extended period. Those with meditation experience performed quite well while others did not. This is a test any of us can perform at home, though even meditators may be surprised how difficult it can be, especially following periods of intensive device use.

Unlike Bhagavan’s generation, most of us in the hyper-digital age would not be able to successfully perform this simple exercise but would find thoughts intruding already by the second or third breath. We may even lose count before reaching the fifth breath. It can be frustrating, even bruising, to discover that we have no real way of regulating our minds. If on the other hand, we are able to perform this exercise for extended periods without undue intrusion by thoughts or losing our count, then we are probably enjoying a healthy balance between the strategic and global awareness functions and are not using our devices compulsively.

But why do digital technologies increase attentional wandering?

Among other things, intensive device use may cause elevated cortisol levels in the blood. Cortisol is a stress hormone that arouses alertness under stressful conditions where the adrenal glands are activated to ensure maximal response in an emergency. Attentional wandering could be one of the side effects of elevated cortisol levels over extended periods of time.

The New York neuropsychologist, George Bonano spent the last 35 years of his career studying stress and anxiety disorders and found that from a purely neurological point of view, anxiety is nothing other than fluctuating attention. Effective treatment, he says, boils down to stabilized attention. He would ask subjects to maintain their attention on unappealing images shown on the screen without averting to some other visible or thought object. Training the ability to stabilise attention on the thought objects that arise in the mind is key to overcoming anxiety. If we can do this freely, then we are guaranteed to be free of chronic anxiety.

Bhagavan, being of the predigital era, didn’t have to contend with devotees suffering chronic anxiety or stress disorders endemic to the digital age. But he knew about attentional wandering and flitting attention and offered his own antidotes.





Purification of the Mind

Creating space within the thinking mind as it pertains to attentional wandering, Bhagavan tells us, hinges on purification of the mind which ultimately means reducing thoughts in the mind and seeing the non-self nature of the strategic mind. It means abandoning thought as a refuge.

But how do we do this practically?

Bhagavan's principle method was *vichara*, i.e. inquiring into the nature of the strategic mind. We investigate the longing to take refuge in thought. Upon discovering through inquiry that the strategic mind is not our home, apprehension increases due to not finding anything substantial or lasting to take hold of. The intensity of this fear is the cause of further clinging to the strategic mind as a home, hence a recurring cycle. The transition from obsessive thinking to interior stillness depends on detaching from concepts and allowing our attention to pitch its tent in *field awareness* which has no centre but contains and imbues the whole.

The Uncreated Light

If the Self is the uncreated light that illumines all things, the strategic mind's light is not its own but is borrowed from the Self. Compartmentalized, dissociated and disconnected, the strategic mind imagines it can stand apart from the Self, that it can know the Self as an object. But there is no such privileged place of reference. Just as we saw in the first segment that there is no place for Archimedes to set his fulcrum except on the very earth he proposes to move, the Self cannot be a mere object in the universe (nor in any *model* of the universe), but is rather the *container* of the universe. Nothing lies outside It, not even the knower. The strategic mind's modelling of the Self through system-thinking is born of a methodological

blind spot. It names, theorises, and speculates about the Self as an object of thought but cannot inhabit the Self. The strategic mind only knows the Self as a representation and imagines that its representation is the thing-in-itself.² In other words, it confuses the map with the territory. Because the strategic mind's representations are *all it knows*, it assumes they are *all there is*. In classical language, this is called *maya*, namely, taking the world of representations (appearances) as reality. The strategic mind or the thinking mind (*manas*) is one of the sense faculties (*indriyas*), a *tool* of consciousness. But it is not pure consciousness itself. The trouble begins when the tool mistakes itself for the source. Bhagavan's inquiry is designed to expose the confusion and reveal the strategic mind's tool-nature. Inquiry confirms what Bhagavan always said about the ego, that it is insubstantial. But it is not enough to know this *theoretically*, Bhagavan tells us. He wants us to know it *experientially*:

*When the mind comes to the end of its resources and stands baffled before the unanswerable question, then a higher power takes charge of the mind and the Self stands revealed.*³

Once seeing directly that representations are not the absolute, we begin to bridge the gap between representational consciousness and global awareness.

Searching Where It Cannot Be Found

The reader may recall an oft-quoted story of Nasruddin when one late night his neighbour found him on his knees under the streetlamp in front of his house frantically searching for a key. When asked where he had dropped it, the Mullah said, 'I dropped it inside the house, but it is very dark in there; out here there is more light.'

We laugh at this story, but it underscores the fool's errand we are all on in our spiritual search in the age of compulsive thinking. To be sure, the realm of the strategic mind is bright, lucid, clear, and tangible whereas the path that leads to the Beyond is hidden from view, cloaked in darkness. Confining our search to the realm of the strategic mind, however, is looking for Bhagavan where he cannot be found. In traditional language, identification with

² The thing-in-itself (Kant's *Ding an sich*) are objects as they are.

³ 'The Bhagavan I Know', Voruganti Krishnaya, *Ramana Smriti*, p. 182.





the strategic mind (or with the body, the personality, one's achievements or anything else) is called egoism. In former times, it was viewed as evil—a demon or a devil. But Bhagavan did not see it that way. When he saw narcissistic delusion manifesting in a devotee, rather than rebuke them, he exhibited patience and compassion. He knew that rather than a demon or a devil, our egoism more resembles a wound, born of ignorance. He did not condemn ego unduly because he understood intuitively that judgement and condemnation only drive the narcissistic impulse deeper into the unconscious, thereby increasing its destructiveness. For him, ego was not something to be killed—after all, he said, the ego is non-existent—but something to be *seen through*.

It was thus natural for Bhagavan to treat all people equally. He knew that each of us is similarly disadvantaged by our confusion, but simultaneously endowed with the same perfect inheritance. He knew that none were inherently more equipped spiritually than any other because spiritual progress centres on overcoming this singular misconception. Social status or higher learning are no guarantees and in fact, to the extent we are identified with our social standing or learning, we are trapped in identification with the strategic mind.

Bhagavan's Re-emerging Silence

Now it should be said that vichara is an operation that begins in the strategic mind. How ironic. But even Bhagavan likened the ego to the stick used to stir the funeral pyre, which will itself eventually be consigned to the flames. Inquiring into it reveals its true nature as a mere servant and not the king, restoring the balance needed to open a pathway to the Self. Of course, exposing the strategic mind with mere words and ideas does not count as inquiry and cannot on its own deliver us from its snares. Whatever we say *about* the strategic mind is merely conceptual, born of its realm, nothing more than one more piece of knowledge in its repertoire. In other words, seeing the strategic mind's trick is not the same as being free of identification with it. Herein lies the limitation of any spirituality of words: words originate in the strategic mind. How can words



take us beyond words? Bhagavan himself insists that we should not look for our freedom in words:

There is no need for endless reading. One should know one's Self with one's own eye of wisdom. The Self is within the five sheaths; but books are outside them. Since the Self has to be inquired into by discarding the five sheaths, it is futile to search for it in books. There will come a time when one will have to forget all that one has learned.⁴

In the hyper-digitalised era where Silence has lost its 'voice', our only hope is that in recognising the problem (even through words and ideas), we might be inspired to make incremental adjustments in the way we conduct our lives and slowly carve out a space for Silence to re-emerge. The intention on its own is already a small victory, after all, we are not trying to get the strategic mind or the digital world to go away, but to bring ourselves into a harmonious relationship with them.

The compulsion to obsessive thinking is very strong. To overcome the compulsion, we repeatedly endeavour to shift our attention away from thinking, a thousand or more times on the meditation cushion. If we fail over and again, each time we steadfastly redouble our efforts. We practise patience in the face of perpetual failure and the consequent discouragement, and trust that someday, some way, our capacity for attention free of compulsive thinking will slowly develop. If such work is uncomplicated, it is nevertheless very challenging given the strength of habit-forces in the mind. Each time we stumble, we pick ourselves up again.

Being free of the compulsion to think is what Bhagavan called Silence. For Bhagavan, Silence was

⁴ *Who Am I?* § 23.





not the absence of spoken words per se (*material silence*) but the absence of compulsive thoughts and chatter in the mind (*inner silence*).

Conclusion

We recognise that digital devices are here to stay and are an integral part of 21st-century living. But we guard against device addiction and use our devices in a balanced manner. If the mind is insistent during the appointed times of digital rest, we take it as a sign that we need to intensify active training of attention

through meditation, recitation, puja, pilgrimage, walks in nature and digital fasting. We may also need to ensure that our socialising is more grounded in face-to-face interactions rather than exclusively virtual ones, at least as much as possible in the covid era.

In the 20th century, it was said that the thirty centimetres separating the head from the heart is the journey of a lifetime; in the 21st century, the age of neuroscience, we say that the eight centimetres separating the left hemisphere from the right is the journey of a lifetime.

This is the journey Bhagavan is calling us to, namely, the short distance from the conceptual mind to the intuitive mind. The journey means giving up the impulse to compulsive thinking and the certainty thinking seems to confer on us. In exchange, we access a deeper knowing of the Heart that does not lend itself to words.

From denotative thinking to intuition, from object awareness to global awareness, from theoretical knowledge to Self-Knowledge, from concept to insight, from the worldly to the sacred, from the mundane to the transcendent, from the head to the Heart, from ego to Self, we learn *to walk by faith and not by sight*.⁵ We learn to trust in the unseen, to be free of involuntary words, concepts and thoughts in order, at long last, to take rest in Bhagavan's Silence. —

(series concluded)

5 2 Cor 5:7.

From Sri Ramanasramam Gardens: The Ashram Palmyra



The Ashram gardens hold many secrets. Just north of Pali Tirtham, resides a special palmyra, a descendant from one of the famous Vedapuram palmyras. Readers will remember Vedapuram (near Cheyyar in Tiruvannamalai District) as the site of a great miracle in the time of Jnanasambandhar. The ancient text reads:

When Sambandhar reached Vedapuram, he encountered a great servant of the Lord. Talapalaka, as he was known, had a palmyra grove. But contrary to expectation, all his palmyras turned out to be male and hence barren of fruit. He became a laughingstock

of the local Jains who ridiculed him: 'If your Lord is as great as you say, let these male palmyras bear fruit.'

Talapalaka approached Sambandhar in all humility and apprised him of the situation. Moved to pity, Sambandhar meditated on the gracious form of the Lord: 'May all these palmyra trees attain fruit by your Grace'. He began to sing the Lord's praises in ten verses. As the singing was in progress, the trees began producing fruit in the presence of the detractors. They ripened then and there to the amazement of all who stood by. The Lord's devotees shouted 'Hara Hara Mahadeva Sambho Sankara.' Some of those who had taunted Talapalaka about his faith scattered to far off regions while others took Siva Diksha from the young sage. —

