



**TAT Profile: Ramana Maharshi**  
**by Damien Markakis**

*TAT Profiles are a guide to the life and thought of individuals, past and present, who have contributed to the advancement of human awareness.*

Ramana Maharshi and the Yogic Path of Discriminative Wisdom

Why would people from every walk of life, both from the occident and the orient, have traveled out of their ways at great inconvenience and expense to visit the inhabitant of a cave in Tiruvannamalai, India? Why would statesmen, writers, and peasants alike all make the oftentimes long journey into the sweltering climate surrounding the sacred hill known as Arunacala? Why would such prominent figures as Carl Gustav Jung, Somerset Maugham, Arthur Osborne and Paul Brunton all venture into the heart of the vast Indian sub-continent with the sole purpose of meeting a Hindu renunciate by the name of Ramana Maharshi? . . . a man who has been referred to "as the most saintly of modern Hindu ascetics and mystics."<sup>1</sup> The objective of this essay is to explore the life and spiritual teachings of this great sage, and in the process to speak directly to each of these questions.

## Life

In a small Indian village south of the sacred city of Madurai, there lived a rural lawyer named Sundaram Aiyar and his wife Alagamma. A visiting ascetic who had once been mistreated by this man's ancestors had cast a curse on the family which was to insure that one offspring in each generation would renounce the world and become an ascetic. This couple's second son was named Venkataraman (of which "Ramana" is an abbreviation). He was born on December 30, 1879, a day dedicated to the celebration of Lord Siva's victory over the demon Andhaka (a Hindu myth meant to symbolize the conquest of light over darkness).

Raised in the security of a middleclass, Brahmin family, the boy led a normal, uneventful childhood in the secluded village of Tirucculi, South India. He demonstrated a keen interest in outdoor sports, but was indifferent towards his studies in school. While being blessed with an extraordinarily retentive memory and an alert mind he, curiously enough, was an abnormally deep sleeper. Stories have been recounted of his friends actually striking him while he was asleep without being able to awaken him. Another relevant event in his life was the death of his father when he was twelve. His father's passing apparently caused a noticeable change in the son's nature by making the latter more reflective in a profound sense. Other than these factors, his childhood development through the fifteenth year left no clues as to Ramana's impending spiritual destiny.

During his sixteenth year, a great spiritual awakening was to radically transform his view of life. The first premonition of this mystical unfoldment came accidentally one day while the boy was speaking to an elder relative who had just returned from visiting Arunacala, a noted sacred hill nearby. The mere mention of this spot kindled an intense curiosity in Ramana, who soon afterwards began reading his first piece of religious literature, the Periyapuranam (a tale of the lives of the sixty-three Saiva saints). He became fascinated and overwhelmed by these accounts which pointed the way to realization of the Divine. The spiritual experience that transformed his life was soon to follow unexpectedly during 1896, when he was seventeen:

*It was quite sudden. I was sitting alone in a room on the first floor of my uncle's house. I seldom had any sickness, and on that day there was nothing wrong with my health, but a sudden violent fear of death overtook me. There was nothing in my state of health to account for it, and I did not try to account for it or to find out whether there was any reason for the fear. I just felt "I am going to die" and began thinking what to do about it. It did not occur to me to consult a doctor or my elders or friends; I felt that I had to solve the problem myself, there and then.*

*The shock of the fear of death drove my mind inwards and I said to myself mentally, without actually framing the words: "Now death has come; what does it mean? What is it that is dying? This body dies." And I at once dramatized the occurrence of death. I lay with my limbs stretched out stiff as though rigor mortis had set in and imitated a corpse so as to give greater reality to the enquiry: I held my breath and kept my lips tightly closed so that no sound could escape, so that neither the word "I" nor any other word could be uttered. "Well then, " I said to myself, "this body is dead. It will be carried stiff*

*to the burning ground and there burnt and reduced to ashes. But with the death of this body am I dead? Is the body I? It is silent and inert but I feel the full force of my personality and even the voice of the 'I' within me, apart from it. So I am Spirit transcending the body. The body dies but the Spirit that transcends it cannot be touched by death. That means I am the deathless Spirit."*<sup>2</sup>

Ramana claimed that this whole enlightenment experience took barely half an hour, and produced results which would normally have been achieved only after a lengthy striving towards liberation. The normal process of working with a physical Guru was completely omitted in his evolution. That he was able to attain the peak of spirituality without any arduous study or training was, in his own estimation, the consequence of a highly unusual karmic destiny. Rare indeed is one who could offer such profound mystical proclamations without having previously heard of the philosophical notions of Brahman, samsara, and so forth:

*. . .that pure Awareness is what I am. This Awareness is by its very nature Sat-Chit-Ananda (Being-Consciousness-Bliss).*<sup>3</sup>

Ramana emphatically stated that this experience was Absolute (meaning fully conscious Identity with Self), and that "there was no more sadhana, no more spiritual effort, after this."<sup>4</sup>

Having undergone such a radical awakening produced a noticeable change in Venkataraman's attitude towards the phenomenal world. Unable to find meaning any longer in his high school studies and the superficialities of worldly existence, he soon left home unexpectedly to travel to Tiruvannamalai, a spiritual power point to which he had felt magically attracted for some time. For seventeen years he resided within the confines of the local temple grounds and a nearby cave at Arunacala practicing an extreme asceticism and samadhic absorption that manifestly demonstrated that: "he was living in timeless Reality. He did not even feel the bites of ants and other insects. The blood and pus that oozed out of his back and thighs stained the wall and the floor. Ramana remained unaffected and unconcerned because what happened to the body could not touch the Self."<sup>5</sup> This complete absorption in the Self characterized this phase of his mystical career. During this early era he attracted the devotion of two yogis who would occasionally put several questions to the now-matured sage concerning philosophy and the spiritual life. Although still silent, he would answer through writing and gestures. These questions and answers were recorded and published later in the booklets entitled, "Self-Enquiry" and "Who Am I?" These works contain the essence of his realization and the suggested methods for practicing the meditational technique of "self-enquiry" which he so strongly advocated.

## Teachings

Carl Jung had spoken of Sri Ramana as "a true son of the Indian earth. He is genuine and, in addition to that, something quite phenomenal. In India he is the whitest spot in a white space."<sup>6</sup> Jung spoke highly of this man's Realization as being typically Indian, with its emphasis on the identification of the Self with God. To understand the yogic path of self-enquiry is important in studying the Maharshi's teachings because he was a jnana yogi of the highest order. Jnana yoga

has been described as "the path of intellectual discrimination; the way of finding God through analysis of the real nature of phenomena. . . a difficult path, calling for tremendous powers of will and clarity of mind."<sup>7</sup>

The term "jnani" refers to those sages who have emerged out of that school of Indian philosophy known as Advaita Vedanta. The importance of developing an appreciation of this classic school of Hinduism becomes apparent when we discover that "it was the purest Advaita that Sri Bhagavan taught."<sup>8</sup> The most noteworthy exponent of Advaita (meaning "non-dual") Vedanta was Shankara, a spiritual giant of Hinduism around the 7th century A.D., whose philosophy is concisely summarized by these three aspects:

1. "the sole reality of Brahman (the Absolute)
2. the illusoriness of the world
3. the non-difference of the soul from Brahman"<sup>9</sup>

A solid background in the Upanishadic scriptures of Indian philosophy would certainly enhance one's appreciation of Ramana Maharshi's teachings, because they lay the foundations on which all of Advaita Vedanta is based. The Upanishads are the "concluding portion of the Vedas, the oldest and most authoritative scriptures of India. Often called Vedanta, these teachings are the basis of India's many religious sects and are regarded as the highest authority of religious truth."<sup>10</sup>

Ramana Maharshi embodied the fullest power of the Hindu tradition of which he was a part. He did not, at any point, iconoclastically refute his spiritual heritage like a Krishnamurti. He found all the tools necessary to achieve and convey the nature of spiritual liberation within the esoteric vehicle of the Advaita Vedantin school. He was noted for his emphasis on a method of self-analytical meditation called vichara (self-enquiry). The crucial and fundamental question was always "Who am I?" In the following response is presented an answer to this spiritual riddle which reflects the essence of the meditative process whereby Ramana systematically and directly viewed the difference between the illusory and the Real nature of the mind and the universe: "Who am I? – The gross body which is composed of the seven humours (dhatus), I am not; the five cognitive sense organs, viz. the senses of hearing, touch, sight, taste, and smell, which apprehend their respective objects, viz. sound, touch, colour, taste, and odour, I am not; the five conative sense organs, viz. the organs of speech, locomotion, grasping, excretion, and procreation, which have as their respective functions speaking, moving, grasping, excreting, and enjoying, I am not; the vital airs, prana, etc., which perform respectively the five functions of in-breathing, etc., I am not; even the mind which thinks, I am not; the nescience too, which is endowed only with the residual impressions of objects and no functionings, I am not. If I am none of these, then who am I? After negating all of the above-mentioned as 'not this', 'not this', that Awareness which alone remains – that I am."<sup>11</sup>

Bhagavan ("One with God") repeatedly emphasized throughout his discourses that this method of trying to go directly to the root-source of the mind was the only completely effective method of "killing the ego" and obtaining an Absolute state of awareness. He viewed religious-

devotional observances, rituals, invocations, mantras and breath control (pranayama) as being indirect methods of furthering one's spiritual progress. While being important aids to many who find value in their use, they are inefficient in comparison to the "direct style" of jnana yoga. Ramana's tolerance for working with people on all levels of understanding is, however, reflected in his comment that "all the yogas – karma, bhakti, and jnana – are just different paths to suit different natures with different modes of evolution and to get them out of the long cherished notion that they are the Self." <sup>12</sup>

Paul Brunton, a prolific esoteric writer in his own right, was directly responsible for discovering and introducing this "sage of Arunacala" to the West. The former's book, *A Search In Secret India*, has a couple of chapters devoted exclusively to personal experiences with the Maharshi while visiting the latter's ashram. If not for Brunton's writings, Bhagavan might have remained an obscure, local spiritual guide.

Ramana stated emphatically that there was a level of consciousness "behind" the normal human mind that was both Eternal and Absolute. This principle reflects another classic theme of Vedanta, which maintains that there are four states of consciousness:

1. waking,
2. dreaming,
3. sleeping, and
4. turiya (the highest level of spiritual Realization underlying all three of the former mental states).

Shankara originally formulated an explanation by analogy of the notion that the world, as we subjectively perceive it, is an illusory projection of the human mind. This traditional example was frequently referred to by Ramana: A man sees a coiled rope at dusk, and mistakenly concludes that it is a snake. The next morning at daybreak he returns to see that the supposed serpent is in reality only a rope. He projected qualities onto the rope which it did not, in reality, possess. In this analogy "the Reality of Being is the rope, the illusion of the serpent that frightened him is the objective world." <sup>13</sup> This philosophical idea of the world as illusion (maya) is meant to reflect the notion that all of phenomenal existence is only the creation of the mind. (A comparative footnote: this attitude is echoed by the Yogachara and Madhyamika schools of Mahayana Buddhism – the posing of the spiritual question, Who am I?, and the whole self-enquiry process are somewhat similar to Zen attempts to solve a koan. Until the final enlightenment experience, this question remains a mind-boggling riddle).

There is a great paradox between the Maharshi's "preparation" for Awakening and what he advocated for others. He explained that his transformative experience was spontaneous and unexpected. Although he did not submit to the process of any arduous training beforehand, he was quick to note that such an occurrence was due to a highly unusual karmic destiny, not typical of the average seeker. He repeatedly emphasized the need for determined and persistent effort:

*. . . unless the bond of the mind is cut asunder by prolonged and unbroken meditation, "I am the Self, the Absolute," it is impossible to attain the transcendental State of Bliss, which is identical with the annihilation of the mind. So long as subtle tendencies continue to inhere in the mind, it is necessary to carry on the enquiry, "Who am I?"<sup>14</sup>*

He affirmed that one must be prepared to make a long-term commitment to fight through the parade of obstacles that will inevitably attempt to stymie one's progress. Regular meditation discipline was endorsed as a means of creating an ongoing current of awareness which would enable one to remain relatively detached from the samsara-bound workings of the mind.

Various interpretations of Ramana's vichara (self-enquiry) method have been offered as a means of making an abstract meditation process more translatable to the reader. In essence, the goal of the process is to enable one to distinguish between the Real and the unreal through "an intense activity of the entire mind to keep it poised in pure self-awareness."<sup>15</sup> After the mind rejects objects, one after another, as transient and unreal, That which survives the elimination is Real. "By this process of abstraction we get behind the layers of body, mind, and intellect and reach the Universal Self."<sup>16</sup> By tracing the ego (the "I" sense) back to its source, the yogi strives to dis-identify from the mental images and projections of the normal waking state. Application of this meditation process initially leads to one-pointedness of mind. We are still identified with the stream of thought consciousness, but at least our minds have begun to focus intently on one thing. With relentless concentrative discipline we begin to observe with dispassion the distractions by things of the world (including sense objects, desires and tendencies) which have previously occupied and enslaved our awareness. Their hypnotic spell can and must be broken.

Ramana's teachings revolve around the question of whether the ego or "I-sense" really exist. His analysis of this dilemma can be summarized in this manner; if the ego and the mind are composed merely of thoughts and through investigation we conclude that thoughts are transient projections of the mind onto an underlying and more real mental state of pure, apperceptive awareness, we cannot help but give serious consideration to the Advaitin notion that ". . . for one who can hold to the view that there is only the One Self all outer activity appears a dream or cinema show enacted on the substratum of the Self, so that he will remain an impassive witness."<sup>17</sup>

At first impression one could easily be misled to believe that the Maharshi was strictly an impersonal and intellectual spiritual guide. However, the bhakti (devotional element) was quite active in him at times, and he used to sometimes weep spontaneously while reading certain mystical texts. Ramana vividly described the emotional dimension of his early spiritual life in these terms:

*I used to go and weep before those images and before Nataraja (Shiva) that God should give me the same grace He gave to those saints. But this was after the "death" experience. Before that the Bhakti for the sixty-three saints lay dormant, as it were.<sup>18</sup>*

Unlike many contemporary Hindu teachers, the Maharshi discouraged his disciples from becoming fascinated with the siddhic (supernatural) powers such as telepathy, levitation, astral projection, or other "miraculous" yogic practices. He advised against indulging in any of these

psychic "gymnastics." Some yogis might develop such powers of mind through destiny, or incidentally as part of their mystical unfolding. According to Ramana, these psychic practices could easily become diversionary sidetracks from the real problem of trying to discover one's real Self.

In evaluating the realization of a spiritual teacher we are naturally led to investigate his description of enlightenment. Is this mystical experience a final, once-in-a-lifetime episode, or can there exist varying degrees of an ever-expanding awakening? The Maharshi spoke of two levels of immersion in the Self (Brahman):

1. nirvikalpa samadhi – "a complete absorption in the Self with resultant oblivion to the manifested world; often compared to a bucket of water lowered into a well. . . , in the bucket is water (mind) which is merged with that in the well (the Self); but the bucket (ego) still exists to draw it out again.
2. sahaja samadhi – pure uninterrupted Consciousness, transcending the mental and physical plane and yet with full awareness of the manifested world and full use of the mental and physical faculties. . . often compared with the waters of a river merged in those of the ocean." <sup>19</sup>

### Observations on Direct Enquiry as a Meditation Technique

Arthur Osborne, a long-time student of Ramana, observed that most meditators are intellectually and experientially quite far from understanding the doctrine of Advaita Vedanta, or practicing the sadhana (spiritual discipline) of self-enquiry. Because of its abstract nature and rigorous mental demands, its appeal has always been, and will always be limited to a ripe few individuals. To construct a written account of this yogic system that will inspire both the head and the heart presents a major problem because it is notoriously hard to expound on. The Maharshi's spiritual teachings can be difficult to apply on a practical level because of their highly abstract nature. This problem confronts anyone trying to work with a system having an Advaita Vedantin foundation.

Controlling the outgoing (extroverted) mind of the senses is fundamental to any yogic system. If we are an intuitive-intellectual type of personality, the path of jnana yoga might possess a tremendous appeal. Whereas, if we are emotionally oriented, the highly abstract nature of a jnana yoga method might strike us as being cold and lifeless.

Sooner or later we have got to learn to directly study and experience the fact that we have no control over our minds. We cannot control our own thoughts for even a minute without having our awareness ricocheting off on an endless series of tangential diversions. Genuine application of jnana yoga confirms the fact that we are slaves to sensory input projected onto our minds. Unless we have diligently studied the mechanics of the mind through meditation we will never know how fragmented and dissipated our mental focus actually is. The analogy of the mind as being like an uncontrollable monkey swinging from branch to branch (from sense object to sense

object) is a classic example of Indian philosophy's attempt to convey the fickle and sensory-grasping nature of all human awareness. The senses are constantly bombarding our consciousness with an endless array of impressions which immediately impinge upon our awareness, with predictably negative results.

Ramana Maharshi claimed that ultimately the mind and the ego do not exist (in the sense that we usually view them). For him, only the Self was Real. Now this position might sound tantalizing to our ears, but we are confronted by the seemingly insurmountable task of trying to actually become that realized awareness. The only viable alternative is to begin a rigorous disciplining of our chaotic minds as a starting point for spiritual practice. We cannot successfully just jump into a direct-enquiry analysis of consciousness without previous training in mental concentration. The distinction between indirect versus a direct method of meditation (as previously discussed in this essay) is very real in fact, but one should realize that the concurrent use of both methods might be necessary for a period of time until an unshakeable power of mental energy is harnessed which will enable one to relentlessly pursue an intense self-analysis of one's mind without surrendering from fatigue at the first sign of resistance from the relative ego(s). Vichara (self-enquiry) must become a continuous, unbroken mental current "for the ego will try to make a truce with this current of awareness and if it is once tolerated it will gradually grow to power and then fight to recover supremacy."<sup>20</sup>

Concentrative ability (often called "samadhi power" in the Hindu tradition) is the fundamental meditation skill whose importance cannot be overemphasized.

Those of us who might be telling ourselves that we know how to regulate our thinking, had better take another long, hard look at the deeply-engrained, mechanical and uncontrollable nature of awareness.

Ramana Maharshi died in 1950 at his ashram in Tiruvannamalai. An important consideration is, did he transmit his Realization to any of his disciples before his mahasamadhi (final absorption in the Self at the time of death)? If so, are they teaching in the West or elsewhere? These questions remain unanswered, although there is no doubt that this venerable teacher left his presence felt on many individuals. In any case, his stature as one of the greatest esoteric teachers of this century remains an unchallenged fact. The profound qualities of his spirituality will always stand as a monumental contribution to the Indian mystical heritage.

---

### Footnotes

1. T.M.P. Mahadevan, Ramana Maharshi – The Sage of Arunacala (London, 1977), p. 3
2. Arthur Osborne, Ramana Maharshi and the Path of Self-Knowledge (New York, 1973), p. 18
3. Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi, Words of Grace (Tiruvannamalai, 1971), p. 2

4. Mahadevan, p. 24
5. Ibid., p. 24
6. Ramana Maharshi, *The Spiritual Teaching of Ramana Maharshi* (Boulder London, 1972), p. vii
7. Vedanta Press brochure, (Hollywood, 1978), p. 6
8. Osborne, p. 82
9. Mahadevan, p. 120
10. Vedanta Press brochure, p. 3
11. Ramana Maharshi, *The Spiritual Teaching of Ramana Maharshi*, p. 4
12. A. Devaraja Mudaliar, *Day By Day With Bhagavan* (Tiruvannamalai, 1968), p. 237
13. Osborne, p. 88
14. Ramana Maharshi, *Words of Grace* (Tiruvannamalai, 1971), p. 14
15. Lex Hixon, "Ramana Maharshi and Buddhist Non-Dualism", *The Laughing Man* (San Francisco, 1976), Vol. I, Number 1, p. 78
16. Mahadevan, p. xi
17. Osborne, p. 63
18. Mudaliar, p. 349.
19. Osborne, p. 45.
20. Ibid., p. 152.

### Bibliography

1. Mahadevan, T.M.P., *Ramana Maharshi – The Sage of Arunacala*, London, George George Allen & Unwin, 1977
2. Muhaliar, A. Devaraja, *Day By Day With Bhagavan*, Tiruvannamalai, Sri Ramanasramam, 1968
3. Ramana Maharshi, *Talks With Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Vol. I-III. Tiruvannamalai, Sri Ramanasramam, 1972
4. Ramana Maharshi, *The Spiritual Teaching of Ramana Maharshi*, Boulder & London, Shambhala Publications, 1972

5. Osborne, Arthur, *Ramana Maharshi and the Path of Self-Knowledge*, New York, Samuel Weiser, 1973
6. Osborne, Arthur, ed., *The Collected Works of Ramana Maharshi*, New York, Samuel Weiser, 1959
7. Cohen, S.S., *Reflections On Talks With Ramana Maharshi*, Tiruvannamalai: Sri Ramanasramam, 1971
8. Sadhu, Mouni, *In Days of Great Peace*, N. Hollywood, Wilshire Book Co., 1952
9. Ramana Maharshi, *Words of Grace*, Tiruvannamalai: Sri Ramanasramam, 1971
10. Prince, Raymond, M.D., "The Convergence of East and West: A Study of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi and Arthur Osborne," *Newsletter-Review of the R.M. Bucke Society*, Vol. VI, No. 1 and 2 Spring, 1973, Montreal, p. 38-61
11. Hixon, Lex, "Ramana Maharshi and Buddhist Non-Dualism", *The Laughing Man*, Vol. I, No. I, 1976, p. 76-80

A detailed list of virtually every book ever printed about Ramana Maharshi may be obtained by requesting a publication listing from: Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi Ctr., Inc. 342 East 6th Street, New York, N.Y. 10003

Also, his ashram in India publishes a quarterly magazine, "The Mountain Path," which provides an excellent overview of his philosophical ideas.  
Sri Ramanasramam, Tiruvannamalai 606 603, South India