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EDUCATIONAL INSIGHT

# SRI RAMANA

## India's Unassuming Sage

❖ By Sudarshan Ramabadran and ❖ Anandhi Ramachandran  
❖ All Sidebars Are by the Editors



BY SUDARSHAN RAMABADRAN

**T**IRUJNANA SAMBANDAR, A TAMIL SAIVITE SAINT who is among the most popular of the 63 Nayanars, recounts how during his travels he was exhorted to visit the Arunachaleswara Temple (also called Annamalaiyar Temple), in Tiruvannamalai. Upon entering the sacred edifice, he spontaneously sang, “Whoever thinks of Annamalai (Lord Siva) with complete devotion at all times throughout his life attains mukti.” Fourteen centuries later, Tiruvannamalai remains a must-visit destination for spiritual seekers, especially on full-moon day, an auspicious time to circumambulate Lord Siva seated in the heart of the town. Pilgrims walk barefoot around the mountain along a nine-mile path.

This is also the realm of siddhas and spiritual luminaries. Notable among them was Sri Ramana Maharshi, born as Venkataraman to Sundaram Iyer and Azhagammal in Tiruchuzhi, near Madurai, on December 30, 1879—the night of Ardra Darshanam, an annual festival commemorating the cosmic dance of Lord Siva. Sri Ramana, a proponent of Advaita Vedanta, enabled millions to explore and discover the true purpose of existence through the practice of self-inquiry.

For thousands of years, India has told its unusually internal stories to the world. It has remained a source of attraction because spiritual knowledge—jnana—has been fundamental to the continuity of the country and its populace. Sri Ramana was the embodiment of jnana. He never traveled within India or abroad, as his was an inner journey, and the outer world did not fascinate him. Yet, he attracted millions to his ashram and his teachings. If

one were asked to name an Indian savant in recent times who could teach through silence, “Sri Ramana” would be the overwhelming response.

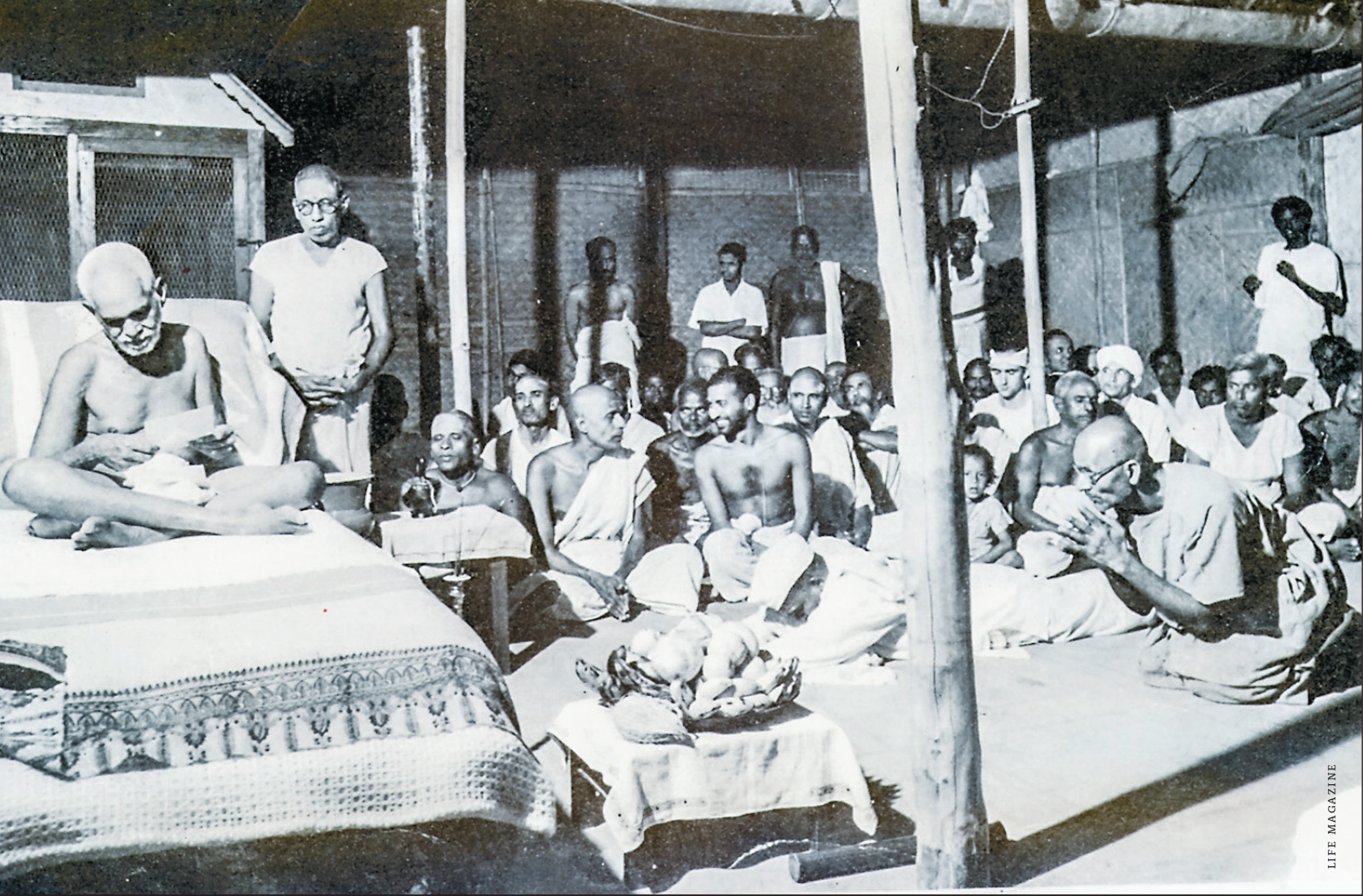
Arthur Osborne details in his book, *The Teachings of Ramana Maharshi in His Own Words*, how people from India and abroad visited him “seeking spiritual guidance, consolation in grief, or simply the experience of his presence.” Through my research for this article and my interactions with seekers, listening to them pour their heart out about him, one thing is clear—he was a spiritual giant operating from the experience of direct knowledge.



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**Soul of light:** Left: art by Dutch artist Pieter Weltevrede; right: the Adi Arunachaleswara Temple in Tiruvannamalai with Arunachala hill behind.





## Part 1: Biography of a Sage (1879–1950)

BY ANANDHI RAMACHANDRAN, CHENNAI

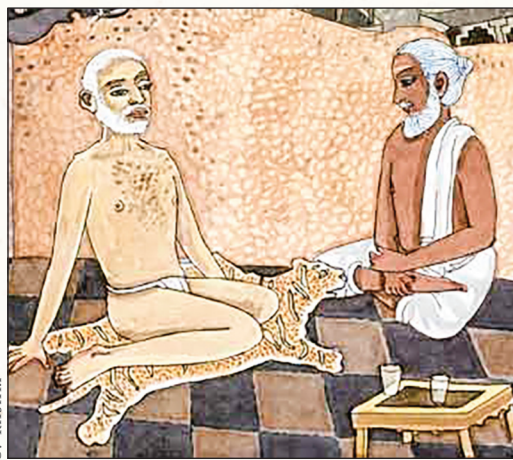
ONCE AS A CHILD I ASKED MY FATHER, “ARE THERE RISHIS LIKE Agastya, Vishwamitra and Vashishta living today? Can we find them residing in forests?” My father took my question seriously. “Ramakrishna Paramahansa was a great sage who lived in recent times and had seen Devi. He lived in Calcutta, his disciple was Swami Vivekananda. You must read about them. A great sage, Ramana Maharshi lives today in Tiruvannamalai. He is a Jivanmukta. He has attained freedom from rebirth.”

After a few days, we journeyed to Tiruvannamalai (100 miles southwest of Chennai) and had darshan, sacred sight, of Ramana Maharshi. I remember that it was a crowded day and only vaguely recollect the ashram and people we saw.

Many years later, in 1992, in Trondheim, Norway, I went to visit a friend, and she introduced me to her friend Sol. When I entered Sol’s house on the fiord, I saw peaceful eyes looking down on me and felt a thrill. There was the photo of Bhagavan. Sol was devoted to him, as were many non-Indians I met in Europe.

At that moment, I regretted not having had darshan of Sri Ramana

Maharshi again when I was older. He attained Mahasamadhi on April 14, 1950. At the exact moment he left his body, witnesses saw a bright shooting star moving towards Arunachala, the sacred hill above his ashram. I could have gone many times to have his darshan.



Young people do not attach importance to spiritual aspirations, and that opportunity lost was lost forever.

What was his message? It is very simple. He said “Know Thyself.” Read his many books in English and Tamil. Again and again it is the same message, “Know Thyself.” He taught, “A conscious bliss ensues when one abides as the Self, by inquiring, ‘What is the true import of I?’ This bliss is spontaneous, indestructible and limitless.” His method is called *atma-vichara*, Self-pondering inquiry.

Devotees found him to be the embodiment of compassion. One said, “The most striking feature of his physical structure, which even the casual visitor ought to observe, is his ever-shining eyes. They can be compared to powerful electric lights that always shed a shower of cool and gracious looks upon everybody who came before him.”



**Life in the open:** Clockwise from left: for most of his life, Ramana sat in an open courtyard as thousands of visitors came for his blessings; earliest photo of him, taken in 1902 when he was twenty-two; meeting with Yogaswami of Sri Lanka, during which not a single word was spoken.

### Being with Bhagavan

Ramana did not travel; those who desired wisdom had to come to Arunachala, just as Ramana himself had done. Many are the popular stories told about these visits. Once the great Tamil saint, Yogaswami of Jaffna, Sri Lanka, came to visit Ramana. They sat together on the floor for half an hour. Neither uttered a word. Later, in Jaffna, Yogaswami responded to devotees’ curiosity about the conversation, “We said all there was to be said.”

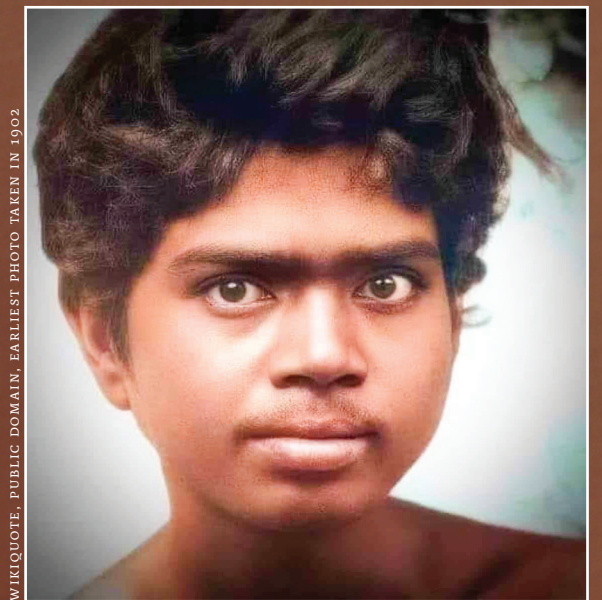
Not all visitors were so enlightened. Once a group of devotees, professional men from Chennai, came in a specially chartered bus to demand the total removal of the ashram management and the institution of a new system. They marched into the hall and sat before the silent sage. He did not speak, and they dared not initiate a conversation. Finally, they left the hall in frustration and returned to Chennai. Afterwards Bhagavan playfully offered, “I wondered what they came here for. Did they come to reform themselves or to reform the ashram?”

The English novelist and playwright Somerset Maugham went to see Sri Ramana in 1936. Upon entering the ashram after a tiring journey, he fainted. He was taken to a hut and remained unconscious. When he opened his eyes, he saw Ramana Maharshi. “He bore himself with naturalness and at the same time with dignity. His mien was cheerful, smiling, polite. His eyes with a gentle benignity rested on my face. His body was absolutely still. He smiled and said, ‘Silence is also conversation.’” Somerset Maugham’s famous *Razor’s Edge* is a story of a seeker who finds such a satguru.

Sri Ramana was intensely focused on whatever was happening, his mind attentive to every detail, whether he was walking, eating or petting the cow. His motherly nature was legendary, as reflected in his care of visitors, feeding them without fail, and refusing to eat until they had been served. Visitors remarked about his frugality, saying he would stoop to retrieve a single grain of rice, and spoke of his almost military punctuality.

Among the many renunciates to visit him was Dilip Kumar Roy, who asked about the need for a guru, as Ramana was often described as having had no guru. “I might have had at one time or another,” Ramana replied. “Guru is God or the Self. First a man prays to God to fulfill his desires. Then a time comes when he does not pray for the fulfillment of a desire, but for God Himself. So God appears to him in some form or another, human or non-human, to guide him as a guru in answer to his prayer.”

When Ramana was still observing total silence, Sivaprekasam Pillai, a very learned gentleman, asked, “What is the nature of consciousness?” Ramana wrote on his slate, “It is *sat chit ananda* (being, consciousness, bliss) in which there is not even the trace of the ‘I’ thought. This is also called *mauna* (silence) or *atma* (Self). That is the only thing that is. If the trinity of world, ego and God are considered as separate entities, they are mere illusions, like the appearance of silver in the mother-of-pearl. God, ego and world



WIKIQUOTE, PUBLIC DOMAIN, EARLIEST PHOTO TAKEN IN 1902

### Teachings in a Nutshell

Ramana Maharshi’s teachings, as presented by Arthur Osborne, are rooted in the profound simplicity of self-inquiry (*atma-vichara*) as the direct path to Self-Realization. At the heart of his philosophy is the idea that the true Self (Atman) is eternal, pure consciousness, beyond the mind and body. Realizing this Self is the ultimate goal of life, dissolving the illusory sense of individuality (ego) that causes suffering.

The method of self-inquiry revolves around the question, “Who am I?” When thoughts arise, one should trace them back to their source—the “I”-thought, or the ego. By persistently questioning the nature of this “I,” the “I” eventually dissolves, revealing the Self as pure awareness. This practice bypasses elaborate rituals, intellectual debate, and ascetic practices, offering a direct and accessible path to liberation.

Ramana emphasized that the ego, or the false sense of individuality, is the root of all ignorance. The mind, identified with the body and external objects, creates dualities such as subject and object, which obscure the ever-present reality of the Self. Liberation (*moksha*) arises when the mind ceases to project these illusions and abides in its source—the Self. He described this state as “silence” (*mauna*), a wordless awareness that transcends intellectual comprehension.

Osborne highlights that for Ramana, the world, body and mind are not ultimately real but are transient manifestations of the one reality—pure consciousness. The world appears to exist only because of the mind, which is itself a reflection of the Self. When the mind is stilled, the world is seen for what it is: a projection, like a dream.





are really Sivasvarupa (the form of Siva) or Atmasvarupa (the form of the soul)." In an enlightened person, Ramana once explained, "the existence of the ego is only apparent. He enjoys unbroken transcendental experience. This ego is harmless; it is like the skeleton of a burnt rope—though it has a form, it is of no use to tie anything with."

## Boyhood Realization

Venkataraman Iyer (Ramana's childhood name) was like any other boy. What was being kindled in him nobody knew. He went to school, played with friends, swam in the village tank and always won in any competition or game. He was also devout. He went to Tiruparankundram and used to go around the temple in pradakshina with a Muslim classmate whose name was Sab Jan. "God's creation is alike. There is no differentiation in creation. God is the same, the apparent differences in God are created by men," the youngster told his Muslim friend.

In his boyhood years, he was prone to abnormally deep sleep. He recounted, "The boys didn't dare touch me when I was awake, but if they had any grudge against me they would come when I was asleep, carry me wherever they liked, beat me, paint my face with charcoal, and then put me back, and I would know nothing about it until they told me the next morning." His father died when he was 12, throwing the family into hardship.

In July of 1986, at age 16, Venkataraman, alone in his home, was overwhelmed by the fear of death. He explained, "The shock drove my mind inwards, and I said to myself mentally 'Now death has come. What does it mean?' I dramatized the occurrence of death. I lay with

my limbs outstretched stiff as though rigor mortis had set in, and imitated a corpse. 'Well then,' I said to myself, 'this body is dead. It will be carried to the burning ground and burnt and reduced to ashes.' But with the death of this body, am I dead? Is the body I?" Suddenly the fear of death vanished and he became absorbed in the Self. Venkataraman's life changed. Later in life, he called his death experience *akrama mukti*, "sudden liberation."

On August 29 of that year, while writing his grammar lessons, he suddenly put away his books and sat down to meditate. His brother heckled him, "What use is all this to such a one?" Venkataraman recognized the truth of this remark and decided to leave the house. He took three rupees and boarded a train, not knowing its destination.

Three days later, he arrived at the great Arunachaleswara Siva temple of Tiruvannamalai, below Arunachala Hill. He entered a trance-like state of *tapas* in a nearby cave. Day by day his austerities increased. So deep was his meditation, so removed from body consciousness, that ants had eaten into his skin; the scars could be seen throughout his life. Nearly a year later, his uncle Nellaiappan found him. Venkataraman would neither speak nor hear what was said. Nellaiappan notified the boy's mother, who arrived shortly. Initially rebuffed by her son, she and her younger son were later allowed to stay.

More traditional devotees did not like Bhagavan's mother and brother staying with him. Once Seshadri Swamikal, an ascetic in Tiruvannamalai, joked about it, calling Ramana a householder. In India, Hindus believe that renouncing family life is the first step in the quest for the truth of the Self. So, many people thought it odd that the yogi's mother lived in the ashram. Today the ashram's



**A sacred town:** Clockwise from left: Aerial view of the famed Annamalaiyar Temple (a.k.a. Arunachaleswara), one of five elemental temples to God Siva; Skandashram, where Ramana lived for years during his time of sadhana, before Ramanasramam was founded; an Indian stamp commemorating his life.

administration remains in the family.

When his mother died, Ramana said, "She did not pass away. She was absorbed," and a samadhi shrine was built for her. Around her tomb grew the ashram, which has become a pilgrim center for international devotees.

## Abode of Peace

The ashram is not a desolate place now. There are auto rickshaws waiting outside the gate to take any devotee anywhere he wants to go. There is a branch of the post office close by to handle the heavy mail the ashram receives and sends every day. When Ramana was alive, a letter addressed "Maharshi, India" would reach him. As I enter the precincts of the ashram, I sense the all-pervading shanti. The office rooms are on the right. We go straight to a big hall where a few ladies are stringing garlands and softly talking. A German lady comes in with a little girl. The other women greet the child with smiles and give her a few flowers. She is delighted.

One of the women tells me that this woman from Germany has moved near the ashram because she wants her little daughter to grow up in this atmosphere. She is fortunate. The child will absorb the values of peace, worship and meditation. She must be only six years old, but she is gentle and seems so content for her age.

They do puja for Maharshi. Ramana did not believe in rituals. He did not believe in orthodoxy. He mocked his mother for being so orthodox even in food habits. She didn't take onions because it was not sattvic food. Bhagavan teased her by saying, "Mind that onion! It is a great obstacle to moksha."

**“Realization is not acquisition of anything new, nor is it a new faculty. It is only removal of all camouflage.”**

The flowers are blooming at the back. We go to the hall where Ramana Maharshi gave darshan to his devotees. In his later years he wanted to be accessible to all. There is pin-drop silence. People are sitting on the floor with closed eyes. It is seldom easy to control the mind, but in this room devotees seem tranquil, and there is peace on their faces.

## Many Flowers

Ramana left no formal successor, but his teachings today guide many thousands around the world. Some read his books and visit the ashram; others follow a teacher who perpetuates Ramana's wisdom. "What is destined to happen will happen, do what you may to prevent it," Ramana wrote on his slate. "Whatever is destined not to happen will not happen, try as you may. The best course, therefore, is to remain silent."



## Timeline

Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi's journey to Skandashram was a significant chapter in his life of spiritual renunciation. The story begins when, at the age of 16, Ramana had a profound "near death" experience in Madurai. This awakening inspired him to leave his family home and travel to the sacred Arunachala Hill in Tiruvannamalai in 1896.

For the next several years, Ramana immersed himself in intense meditation, initially residing in the Thousand-Pillar Hall and Patala Lingam of the Arunachaleswarar Temple. His sadhana during this time was so deep that he became oblivious to physical needs, often sitting in silence, absorbed in the Self. From the temple, Ramana moved to various caves on Arunachala, including the Virupaksha Cave, which became his primary residence for 16 years (1900–1916). This cave, named after a 13th-century saint, offered seclusion for meditation and attracted a growing number of devotees who sought Ramana's guidance.

In 1916, he moved to Skandashram, a small stone hermitage (see photo above) further up Arunachala Hill, named after Skanda (a name for Lord Murugan). At Skandashram, he was joined by his mother, Alagammal, who had renounced worldly life to serve him. Here, Ramana's teachings flourished, and the ashram became a center for seekers, combining the serene beauty of Arunachala with the simplicity of Ramana's presence.

Alagammal passed away in 1922, and her samadhi was built at the foot of Arunachala. Following her death, Ramana relocated to the site of her shrine, which later became Ramanasramam, marking the end of his time at Skandashram. Today, that humble structure remains a tranquil place of pilgrimage, accessible by a steep trail, offering a glimpse into Ramana Maharshi's austere early life of contemplation and the legacy he left for spiritual aspirants.





LIFE MAGAZINE, 1950

## Part 2: Ramana's Philosophy: Be as You Are

BY SUDARSHAN RAMABADRAN

The question that kindled interest in Sri Ramana as a young boy and encouraged him to engage in his profound internal journey was "Who Am I?" (*Naan Yaar?* in Tamil). Today, if one were to do a search on Ramana Maharshi online, this question would often accompany his name.

Sri Ramana did not propound a new philosophy. Instead, he continued the legacy of Sri Veda Vyasa, Adi Shankaracharya, and countless other rishis, helping seekers realize their spiritual potential. When Bhagavan was asked if his teachings were the same as Shankara's, he responded, "Bhagavan's teaching is an expression of his own experience and realization. Others find that it tallies with Sri Shankara's." It is pertinent to mention here that Sri Ramana referenced Adi Shankara's *Vivekachudamani* when defining the Self.

In response to a devotee's question on why self-inquiry alone be considered the direct path to realization, Sri Ramana said: "Because other paths except self-inquiry presuppose the retention of the mind as the instrument for following it, and it cannot be followed without the mind. The ego may take different and more subtle forms at different stages of one's practice, but it is never destroyed. The attempt to destroy the ego or the mind by methods other than Self-inquiry is like a thief turning policeman to catch the thief that is himself.

Self-inquiry alone can reveal the truth that neither the ego nor the mind really exist and enables one to realize the pure, undifferentiated Being of the Self or the Absolute." This is recorded in Arthur Osborne's seminal biography, *Ramana Maharshi and the Path of Self-Knowledge*. Arthur explained that the self-inquiry Sri Ramana encouraged differs from what psychologists recommend, in that true self-inquiry is intended to go "behind the mind to the Self from which it arises."

### Path to the Self

Sri Ramana was clear that ridding ourselves of the ego is crucial in discovering the sacred, spiritual self. Many seekers who explain his teachings emphasize that he wanted them to believe that there is no "other." It is not a billion "I(s)" that he is referring to, rather there is one I which is the substratum of all creation. He urged seekers to dig deep within themselves and remove the notion of wrong thoughts and deeds, whether related to our physical bodies at the gross level or our thoughts at the subtler level.

A cursory reading of Sri Ramana and his interactions with devotees might suggest that he did not base his teachings on any particular philosophy, but it is clear that it aligns with Advaita Vedanta,

**Honoring the knower:** In this photo that appeared in *Life* magazine in 1950, Saiva priests present an offering tray to Bhagavan seeking blessings; Ramana with his forehead covered in holy ash.

though he worshiped God as Siva devoutly and had a deep affinity for the Saiva Siddhanta of Saint Tayumanavar and the 63 Saiva Nayanmar saints.

In Sri Ramana's words, Self-awareness is inherent in seekers. "The state we call realization is simply being oneself, not knowing anything or becoming anything. If one has realized, he is that which alone is, and which alone has always been. He cannot describe that state. He can only be That. Of course, we loosely talk of Self-Realization for want of a better term."

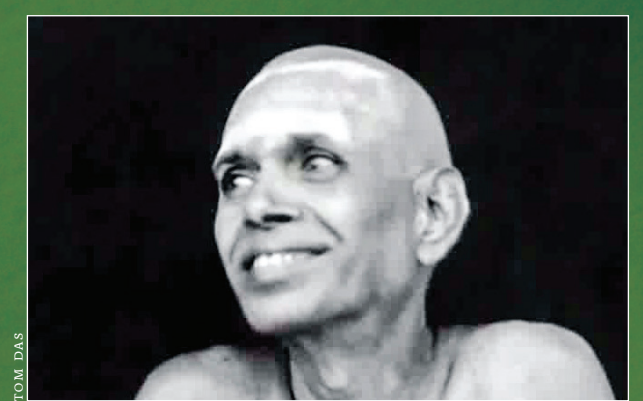
Ramana said, "Atman [the Self] is realized with *mruta manas* (dead mind), i.e., mind devoid of thoughts and turned inward. Then the mind sees its own source and becomes That. It is not as the subject perceiving an object. When the room is dark, a lamp is necessary to illumine, and eyes to cognize objects. But when the sun is risen, there is no need of a lamp, and the objects are seen; and to see the sun no lamp is necessary, it is enough that you turn your eyes towards the self-luminous sun. Similarly with the mind. To see the objects, the reflected light of the mind is necessary. To see the Heart, it is enough that the mind is turned towards it. Then the mind loses itself and the Heart shines forth" (*Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, by Munagala S. Venkataramiah, Talk No. 99, Nov. 19, 1935).

According to David Godman, a prolific author who was drawn to Sri Ramana's teachings and then to India, he consistently urged seekers and devotees to ponder two questions: "What is this thing inside you that is aware of your thoughts? What is this thing inside you that claims it is perceiving objects outside of yourself?" Godman explains that it is not some conclusion that Sri Ramana wants us to draw; rather he wants us to identify with that state of consciousness through deep self-inquiry. This understanding is essential to experience true happiness.

Dr. Venkat S. Ramanan, president of Sri Ramanasramam, explained the importance of jnana marga, knowledge of the Self, as the sole purpose of the Advaita Vedanta philosophy during an interview with me. "Jnana marga is the direct path. It has stood the scrutiny of time and is eternal. However, Self-Realization is only possible through sincere practice, even though it is the easiest path. Many devotees and mature seekers of Sri Ramana Maharshi have experienced being in the Self, but this realization comes only with practice." Dr. Venkat explained that the idea of Self-knowledge resonates strongly in today's world, a fact supported by the significant increase of Sri Ramana devotees even in Middle Eastern countries and China, without any evangelizing.

### Inquire Within

According to Vedanta, there are five sheaths that cover the Self. In Sanskrit, these are known as *annamaya kosha* (food sheath), *pranamaya kosha* (sheath of prana or life), *manomaya kosha* (mind sheath), *vijnanamaya kosha* (knowledge or wisdom sheath), and *anandamaya kosha* (bliss sheath). Sri Ramana teaches that it is necessary not only to acknowledge these sheaths but also to peel them away. The ultimate goal is to understand that the "I" that we seek to discover is the underlying Reality that serves as the substratum of all existence. According



TOM DAS

## Bhagavan's Take on Bhakti

While most historians classify Ramana as an Advaita Vedantin, his special affections for the Tamil Nayanars and Tayumanavar's songs and his building of a Siva temple at Ramanasramam indicate that "Advaita Siddhantin" may be a fitting category. This term denotes a non-dualistic interpretation of Saiva Siddhanta, as expressed in the ancient *Tirumantiram* of Rishi Tirumular, a form of monistic theism which emphasizes the unity of the individual soul (jiva) with the Supreme (Siva).

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"Bhakti is the mother of Jnana. The intense devotion of the devotee eventually leads him to the path of Self-enquiry and wisdom" (*Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk 272).

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"The purpose of all religious worship is to focus the mind on the Divine. A murti is not just stone; it represents the Divine Presence, and worship can lead one beyond form to the formless Self" (*Day by Day with Bhagavan*, entry dated 7-3-1946).

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"Bhakti is not different from mukti. Bhakti is being as the Self. One is always that. He realizes it by the means he adopts. What is bhakti? To think of God. That means only one thought prevails to the exclusion of all other thoughts, so the Bhakta is the Jnani with the only difference that in the Jnani's case, the ego has resolved itself into the Self, and in the Bhakta's case, the ego retains itself" (*Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk 28).

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In the course of your worship, the worship becomes deep and intense and then the mind becomes completely absorbed in the One Being who is beyond name and form. That is realization of the Self. The path of devotion (bhakti marga) or the path of knowledge (jnana marga) ultimately lead to the same goal—liberation" (*Day by Day with Bhagavan*, 11-1-1946).





to Sri Ramana, self-inquiry is “the one infallible means, the only direct way, to realize the unconditioned, absolute being that you really are.”

Sunita Parasuraman, president of Sri Ramana Maharshi Heritage, a registered non-profit in the United States (also a former finance executive at Meta [Facebook] and currently on their board of directors) explained the significance of Sri Ramana’s core teachings: “Advaita Vedanta says the *ahamkara*, or ego, is the root cause of our forgetfulness of our true Self, the Atma. What is special about Bhagavan is how he presented these teachings in the form of self-inquiry, emphasizing tracing the ego to the ‘I’ thought. This is a powerful tool. Otherwise, ahamkara or ego seems like a nebulous concept—we may understand the theory, but find it hard to put in practice and transcend the ego. By giving us the clue, tracing the source of the ‘I’ thought, Bhagavan brought the loftiest philosophy within the realm of personal experience.” Sunita was inspired by the writings of Sri Ramana Maharshi 20 years ago, and today her family is deeply anchored in his teachings and life.

Arthur Osborne notes that while Ramana emphasized Self-Realization as the sole goal, he also identified other means of spiritual progress, including satsang, which is profoundly encouraged in Hindu culture. Sri Ramana echoed the views of Sri Adi Shankara regarding the importance of associating with fellow seekers and sages and encouraged his followers to cherish such connections. Shankara wrote, “Through the company of the wise or the good, there arises non-attachment; from non-attachment comes freedom from delusion; where there is freedom from delusion, there



**The ashram today:** Clockwise from left: In the Samadhi Hall, Saiva priests offer milk to a Sivalingam, with a bronze murti of Ramana behind; the ashram compound with its several buildings and temples

is abidance in self-knowledge, which leads to freedom while alive” (*Bhaja Govindam*, verse 1).

Sri Ramana also advocated the practice of pranayama, but only under proper guidance from a guru who is specialized in this practice. He taught that all forms of breath control are a means to control the mind, with the end goal being to dive inward.

Maintaining silence was synonymous with Sri Ramana. Many stories recount contemporary saints meeting Sri Ramana without exchanging a single word. When asked after the meeting about the nature of their discussions, they would simply state that everything was said that needed saying. Such was the power of silence in the presence of these masters. Regarding diet, Sri Ramana recommended sattvic, vegetarian and non-stimulating foods for seekers. He refused to share

his preferences to the cook, eating whatever fare was prepared for his visitors. On japa, he said mental japa is preferable to verbal japa.

He was a votary of bhakti yoga and karma yoga, as long as they did not encourage the seeker to wander from the path of self-inquiry. Sunita testified, “By following Bhagavan’s path of combining self-inquiry with karma yoga unobtrusively, I have been able to discharge my duties with the greatest efficiency—as a mother, wife, daughter



at home and a financial executive at work. The secret as taught by Bhagavan is to not identify with any of these roles and to simply perform them as actors in a play,” she offered. “Tasked with managing billions of dollars at all the corporations I have worked at, I often remember Bhagavan’s illustration of a cashier handling large sums of money efficiently without emotional entanglement to explain how work should be performed with a detached attitude. Such an attitude helps me enjoy work and execute it well,” she said.

In significant ways, the sage of Tiruvannamalai cut through all of the opaque language of Vedanta. It was this radical simplicity that brought many to his feet. He cautioned them to not become lost in learning, to not be fascinated by the theater of the Divine, instead to simply be and see. Few, if any, have so ruthlessly condensed the

essence of the path to enlightenment.

Sri Ramana Maharshi gave clear instruction on karma and destiny, emphasizing that while destiny (*prarabdha karma*) influences the body and mind, the true Self remains unaffected. “Find out who it is to whom destiny or free will matters. While you are in the body, there will always be karma affecting you. But see if you are in the body. Understand the Self. Then destiny will not worry you” (*Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk 427).

He wanted all of humankind, irrespective of caste, creed or religion, to attain the highest, and did not advocate renunciate life for all. If asked by devotees what is the purpose of Self-Realization, he promptly answered, “Self-Realization is the final goal, and itself the purpose.”

# The Sage’s Forty Sutras

Upon the humble request of Sri Muruganar, an ardent devotee, Sri Ramana Maharshi wrote the essence of his teachings in poetic Tamil. Below are ten verses selected from that historic work that convey the essence of his philosophy. The English translations are considered to have been composed by Sir Arthur Osborne. (drawn from [sriramanamaharishi.com](http://sriramanamaharishi.com))

**Verse 2:** All religions postulate the three fundamentals, the world, the soul and God, but it is only the one Reality that manifests Itself as these three. One can say, “The three are really three” only so long as the ego lasts. Therefore, to inhere in one’s own Being, where the “I,” or ego, is dead, is the perfect State.

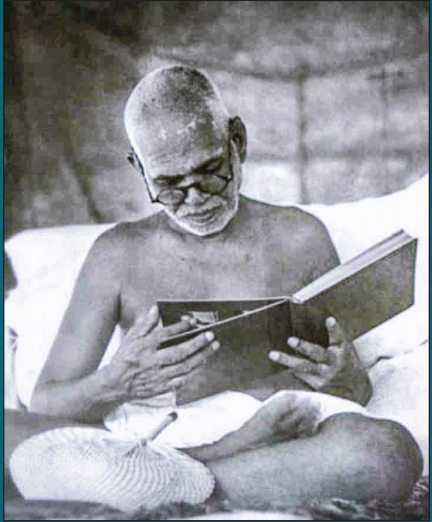
**Verse 3:** “The world is real;” “No, it is a mere illusory appearance;” “The world is conscious;” “No;” “The world is happiness;” “No.” What use is it to argue thus? That State is agreeable to all, wherein, having given up the objective outlook, one knows one’s Self and loses all notions either of unity or duality, of oneself and the ego.

**Verse 6:** The world is nothing more than an embodiment of the objects perceived by the five sense-organs. Since, through these five sense-organs, a single mind perceives the world, the world is nothing but the mind. Apart from the mind, can there be a world?

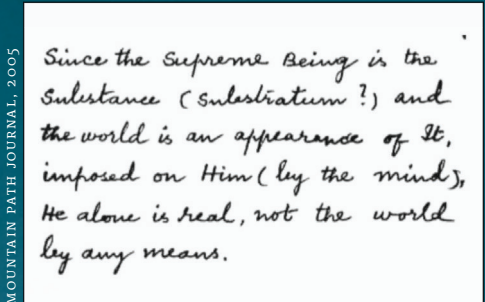
**Verse 7:** Although the world and knowledge thereof rise and set together, it is by knowledge alone that the world is made apparent. That Perfection wherein the world and knowledge thereof rise and set, and which shines without rising and setting, is alone the Reality.

**Verse 14:** If the first person, “I,” exists, then the second and third persons, “you” and “he,” will also exist. By enquiring into the nature of the “I,” the “I” perishes. With it, “you” and “he” also perish. The resultant state, which shines as Absolute Being, is one’s own natural state, the Self.

**Verse 24:** This inert body does not say “I.” Reality-Consciousness does not emerge. Between the two, and limited to the measure of the body, something emerges as “I.” It is this that is known as chit-jada-granthi (the knot between the Conscious and the inert), and also as bondage, soul, subtle-body, ego, samsara, mind and so forth.



**Verse 26:** If the ego is, everything else also is. If the ego is not, nothing else is. Indeed, the ego is all. Therefore, the inquiry as to what this ego is, is the only way of giving up everything.



**Verse 27:** The State of non-emergence of “I” is the state of being THAT. Without questing for that State of the non-emergence of “I” and attaining It, how can one accomplish one’s own extinction, from which the “I” does not revive? Without that attainment how is it possible to abide in one’s true State, where one is THAT?

**Verse 30:** If one enquires Who am I? within the mind, the individual “I” falls

**A master of consciousness:** Left: Ramana was an avid reader, especially of scripture and letters from devotees; Right: a rare example of Bhagavan’s handwriting in English.

down abashed as soon as one reaches the Heart, and immediately Reality manifests itself spontaneously as “I-I.” Although it reveals itself as “I,” it is not the ego but the Perfect Being, the Absolute Self.

**Verse 33:** It is ridiculous to say either “I have not realized the Self” or “I have realized the Self;” are there two selves, for one to be the object of the other’s realization? It is a truth within the experience of everyone that there is only one Self.





# Part 3: Impact & Legacy

BY SUDARSHAN RAMABADRAN

The profound words of Sri Ramana Maharshi, the #“crown jewel of Vedanta,” continue to reverberate to this day. In my opinion, one of the prominent reasons for this is that he was accessible to all. Today, through physical and digital mediums, his teachings are preserved and communicated to seekers, who become encouraged to realize their true potential. Many prominent figures in the Indian socio-political sphere, as well as spiritual leaders and film actors, have been influenced by him. People in India and around the world have embraced the principles of Advaita Vedanta through his teachings.

## Sri Ramanasramam

The primary institution preserving Ramana’s legacy and enabling millions of seekers to glimpse the rishi is Sri Ramanasramam in Tiruvannamalai. Founded in 1922, it remains an essential guide for spiritual seekers navigating the path of self-knowledge. Reading accounts from devotees reveals a shared belief that Bhagavan’s presence continues to permeate the Ashram, guiding seekers even today. I experienced this personally during a visit in 2018, accompanied by youth from various districts of Tamil Nadu.

Even though I have visited the center many times, reading about how every block, hall, library and goshala was built is emotionally moving. Every aspect reflects Sri Ramana’s vision, and the authorities continue to uphold his legacy with great care, sensitivity and respect. Through their efforts, countless devotees have access to the sage’s teachings and the journey toward Self-Realization. Upon entering

this sacred space, one is naturally drawn into silence. It’s as though the sage is there, inviting us to dive deep into the journey of unfolding through self-inquiry.

Seekers from India and abroad converge here. Some visit and some stay. The Ashram offers accommodation for seekers in a 200-room facility, including sattvic food for nourishment of the body, and nourishment of the mind through the teachings. You will miss an incredible experience if you do not visit the Ashram archives, which preserves a diverse collection of everyday objects he used, and records of his interaction with devotees. Also be sure to check the schedule for events, spiritual happenings and Carnatic music concerts at the auditorium.

The year 2023 marked 100 years since the establishment of Sri Ramanasramam, which began as a simple thatched roof and was built up over the decades by dedicated followers. On May 19, 1922, Alagammal, his mother, passed away. Her body was interred at the base of Arunachala Hill, following the traditional rites as recorded in Tirumular’s *Tirumantiram*. A simple shrine was erected over her tomb. In December of that year, Ramana moved from Skandashram into a modest hut near the shrine, marking the humble beginnings of the ashram. Devotees began to gather around him, leading to the construction of thatched huts to accommodate the growing number of followers. By 1924, two additional huts had been constructed—one opposite the mother’s samadhi and another to the north.

In 1928, the Old Hall was constructed as Maharshi’s residence and the central space for his teachings, meditation and interaction with devotees. After his passing in 1950, the ashram expanded to include

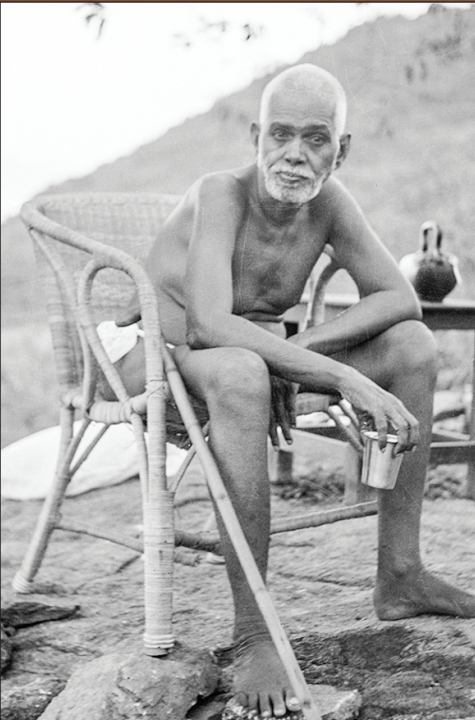
## Darshan: Encountering the Sage

Paul Brunton, a British philosopher and journalist, documented his meeting with Sri Ramana Maharshi in his book *A Search in Secret India*.

“There is something in this man which holds my attention as steel filings are held by a magnet. I cannot turn my gaze away from him. I become aware of a silent, resistless change which is taking place within my mind. One by one, the questions which I have prepared with such meticulous accuracy drop away. It does not matter now whether he answers them or not. My heart beats a little faster; my breathing slows down. My thoughts are stilled. I know that I am in the presence of an extraordinary man. This is the only feeling that comes to me.”

Mercedes de Acosta, an American poet and playwright, visited Sri Ramana Maharshi in 1938.

“When I first saw him, he was seated on a divan in the lotus position. He was a slender, finely built man, with the most serene face I have ever seen. His eyes were large and luminous. I entered the hall and sat down with the other devotees. For a long while, no one spoke. The silence was profound. Then the Maharshi turned his eyes toward me. It was a strange, impersonal gaze, as if he looked through me rather than at me. Yet I felt the immense power of his presence.”



SHUTTERSTOCK



SRI RAMANASHRAM

the Samadhi Hall, the New Hall (for gatherings), the dining hall, Veda Patasala, visitor accommodations, etc.

The ashram’s administration was overseen by Sri Ramana’s younger brother, Niranjanananda Swami, until his death in 1953. Leadership then transitioned to T.N. Venkatraman, then to his son, V.S. Ramanan. In 2020, Dr. Venkat S. Ramanan, son of V.S. Ramanan, continued this legacy as president.

The Meditation Hall (a.k.a Samadhi Hall) is the spiritual heart of Sri Ramanasramam. At its center is the Samadhi Shrine of the Maharshi, offering a serene space for meditation, reflection, stillness, pujas to Bhagavan, and other spiritual activities. The hall is open daily from 5am to 12:30pm and from 2 to 9pm.

Another sacred space is the Matrubeswarar Temple, dedicated to Maharshi’s mother. Originally a simple shrine erected over Alagammal’s samadhi in 1922, it was later expanded under Bhagavan’s guidance and consecrated (kumbhabhishekam) on March 17, 1949, in his presence.

## Ashram Seva

The Veda Patasala was established in 1934 to provide instruction in the *Krishna Yajur Veda*, offering an annual certificate course to young priest trainees. Through Narayana Seva, the Ashram provides 700,000 meals annually, and a medical dispensary offers quality healthcare for all. The center has renovated various temples in and around Tiruvannamalai, including the grand Arunachaleswara Temple, the smaller and older Adi Arunachaleswara Temple, Pachaimman Temple and Durga Temple. Prominent festivals organized and observed at the Ashram include Vidya Homam, Samvatasara Abhishekam and Karthigai Dipam.

Representative of Sri Ramana Maharshi’s love for all beings, the Ashram goshala cares for 200 bovines, including stud bulls, heifers, calves and milking cows of various Indian breeds, such as dharpakar, singhi and kir. The milk they provide nourishes

**Life alone, life shared:** Clockwise from above: Elders of the community and their students gather around Ramana as a young sadhu (seated at center) for a photo in the ashram; he loved to take walks around the region, to have time to himself.

Ashram residents and visitors. In 2017, a facility for retired cows was established. In addition, a home for monkeys is maintained, honoring Sri Ramana’s love for and connection with monkeys, goats, squirrels and all animals.

## Global Centers

The intellectual legacy of Sri Ramana is preserved through the Ashram Granthalaya (library), containing 30,000 volumes in multiple languages. These include Bhagavan’s writings and teachings, biographies and reminiscences, articles and essays, audio and video recordings, photographs and art, with many resources available online. Dr. Ramanan explained, “As part of our important efforts to serve Sri Ramana, we have translated 12 to 15 of his most significant books into nearly all major global and Indian languages.” Books from the sage’s personal collection, such as *Skanda Mahapuranam* and *Siva Mahapuranam*, are kept here.

The Ashram reaches out to seekers worldwide through the famous *Sarangathi* e-newsletter and the *Mountain Path* quarterly journal (also available as an app). Seekers are connected globally through social media, such as Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. By official numbers, the Ashram has 50,000 followers on Facebook and one million digital followers across 11 Indian languages. The app Parayana provides a selection of mantras for seekers to chant anywhere, anytime. There is also a 24/7 online radio station called Voice of Arunachala.

The main centers beyond Tiruvannamalai are Ramana Satchidananda Mandali in Mumbai (established in 1923); Ramana Kendras in New Delhi, Hyderabad and Chennai; and Arunachala Ashram in New York City. Sri Ramana’s thoughts reverberate globally, with roughly 100 centers in 65 countries, including the US, Switzerland, Mauritius, Japan, France, Spain and Eastern Europe. Dr. Ramanan explained that groups interested in





setting up a satellite center affirm their commitment to promoting the teachings and abide by specific rules, such as refraining from demanding funds. Once aligned, these centers are listed on the Sri Ramanasramam website. Some have physical facilities, while others are informal gatherings of devotees, often on weekends. Global satsangs, Jayanti, Aradhana Day and Advent Day are organized to connect devotees worldwide.

Sunita Parasuraman leads the Sri Ramana Maharshi Heritage Centre in the United States, a nonprofit that also supports the initiatives of Sri Ramanasramam in India. Sunita explained, “Dr. Venkat Raman returned to India in 2020 to assume the role of president of Sri Ramanasramam and requested that I establish a nonprofit unit here to support the Ashram. I gladly accepted this responsibility. Serving Bhagavan and his Ashram is the greatest calling of my life.”

## Legacy & Influence

In December of 2024, director Bombay Chanakya launched a web series titled “Maharshi.” The episodes not only traverse the past, but also speak about the present global influence of Sri Ramana. The series has been airing every Sunday on Sri Sankara TV and is also available on the creator’s YouTube and Facebook channels. Similarly, there are documentaries on Sri Ramana Maharshi on YouTube that have clocked a million views. One that comes to mind is “Jnani,” which is highly recommended, even by my family, as a must-watch.

Many famous individuals have drawn inspiration from Sri Ramana Maharshi. Notable cinema figures include icons Rajinikanth and Ilayaraja, who have publicly acknowledged his spiritual influence on their personal and professional lives. Rajinikanth’s philanthropy in Tiruvannamalai and Ilayaraja’s humble devotion during Ashram visits reflect their reverence. Other luminaries, such as freedom fighter Subramania Bharati, former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, and India’s Home Minister Amit Shah, were also profoundly impacted.

Early devotees included Major Chadwick, a World War I veteran; Mrs. Taleyarkhan, a Parsi; S. S. Cohen from Iraq; and Dr. Hafiz Sayed from Persia. Visitors also came from America, France, Germany, Holland, Czechoslovakia, Poland and other countries, as noted by Arthur Osborne. Among them was Maurice Frydman, a Polish Jew who

converted to Hinduism. Among the first Western devotees was F. H. Humphreys, a police officer.

Sri Ramana’s Indian devotees included Sivaprakasham Pillai, an officer in the Revenue Department of the South Arcot District; Natesa Mudaliar, a teacher; Muruganar; and Ganapati Sastri, also known as Ganapati Muni. Sri Ramana called him Kavyakanta, meaning “one with poetry in his throat.” It was he who coined the title “Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi.”

Ram Mohan noted in the centenary souvenir that “prominent visitors included mahatmas like Shri Shankaracharya of Puri, Paramahansa Yogananda, Swami Sivananda, Swami Chinmayananda, Sri Yogi Lakshman Joo and Sri Chidbhavananda, among several others.” It was inspiring to learn that Sri Ramana’s influence continues to shape the Advaita Vedanta legacy through several acharyas and other spiritual lineages.

## Publications

Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, former Vice President of India, wrote in his brief foreword for Arthur Osborne’s biography of the sage, “Sri Ramana Maharshi gives us the outlines of a religion based on the Indian scriptures which is essentially spiritual without ceasing to be

## LEARN MORE .....

- ❖ **Sri Ramanasramam:** The Ashram’s official website, featuring his teachings, writings, photos and details about ashram activities. [www.gururamana.org](http://www.gururamana.org)
- ❖ **Who Am I:** A Q&A with Ramana Maharshi on his essential teachings (pdf). [www.bit.ly/WhoAmIRamana](http://www.bit.ly/WhoAmIRamana)
- ❖ **The Ashram’s YouTube channel:** [www.youtube.com/@SriRamanasramam](http://www.youtube.com/@SriRamanasramam)
- ❖ **Biography by Arthur Osborne:** *Ramana Maharshi and the Path of Self-Knowledge*—widely available online
- ❖ **Video Documentary, by Arunachala Ashram:** A full biography, with footage of the sage at his ashram in the late 1940s. [bit.ly/RamanaDocumentaryArunachala](http://bit.ly/RamanaDocumentaryArunachala)
- ❖ **Sri Ramana Maharshi Heritage Centre in the US:** website: [www.srmh.org](http://www.srmh.org)



**Pujas and Vedic training:** Left: Students of the Ashram’s Veda Patasala chant in the Samadhi Hall during one of the daily pujas to the Sivalingam, held at 6:45am, 9am and 5pm; Right: Ramana wearing the sadhu’s traditional angavastram on a trail with walking stick and water pot.

rational and ethical.” Osborne, a British devotee and founding editor of *The Mountain Path* journal, produced four books about Sri Ramana. In addition to his biography, he wrote: *The Teachings of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi in His Own Words*; *My Life and Quest* (Ramana’s autobiography, written in Tamil and translated into English); and *The Collected Works of Sri Ramana Maharshi*. Osborne’s books continue to serve as transformative guides, offering a glimpse into the profound vision and mission of the sage.

And who can forget Paul Brunton and his famous book, *A Search in Secret India*. The *New York Times* wrote in a book review, “In the Maharshi—the Great Sage—who lives in hermetic seclusion in a lowly dwelling at the foot of the Hill of the Holy Beacon and who formerly spent six years in a cave on the mountainside, Mr. Brunton found that which he had been seeking—the holiest of holy men.”

The Indian government has issued stamps in honor of the silent sage. The first was unveiled by President V.V. Giri on April 14, 1971. In 1998, President K.R. Narayanan released a stamp to mark the 48th anniversary of Sri Ramana’s mahasamadhi. In 2014, for Maharshi’s jayanti, the postmaster general of Chennai introduced a permanent pictorial cancellation—a special postmark featuring the Ramanasramam logo with text in Devanagari and Roman scripts.

## Conclusion

With the simple but deep question “Who am I?,” Sri Ramana nudged seekers to look within. In an uncertain world, where significant wars are ongoing, his message of oneness needs to be carefully read, re-read and understood. From his remote mountain lair, he churned out thousands of ambassadors of oneness. Here was a sage who never asked us to learn anything or do anything except realize the Self. The Tamil expression, *summa iru* (“just be”) summarizes his life most appropriately. There can be a no better tribute to this inspirational sage than to put this into practice in our everyday life while discharging our duties. We must not mistakenly think that Ramana’s message is relevant only to the renunciate. It is applicable to all, and more relevant now than ever. 🙏

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Sudarshan Ramabadran, author, policy expert and researcher, is an alumnus of the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. In 2017, he completed the Professional Fellow for Governance and Society, South and Central Asia program run by the U.S. State Department. In 2013, he authored the book *Good Governance: People’s Voice*, published by the Government of Gujarat. In 2021, he co-authored *Makers of Modern Dalit History*, published by Penguin Random House India.



## The Sage’s Grand Departure

In 1947, at age 68, Ramana Maharshi was suffering from cancer. When the doctors suggested amputating his left arm above a large tumor, Ramana replied with a smile: “There is no need for alarm. The body is itself a disease. Let it have its natural end. Why mutilate it? A simple dressing on the affected part will do.” Still, two operations were performed to remove the tumor, but it appeared again, as large as a coconut. Indigenous systems of medicine were tried, and homeopathy, too, but the disease did not yield to treatment. The sage, supremely indifferent to suffering, remained unconcerned. He sat as a spectator watching the disease waste the body; his eyes shone as bright as ever, and his grace flowed toward all beings. Many were coming to say goodbye to the master. In this tradition, it is regarded as a special blessing to be near a realized soul at the time he or she gives up the body. Ramana insisted that the crowds be allowed to have his darshan, and he had his bed placed in a public courtyard and sat on it day after day leaning against a white pillow in just his loin cloth. Devotees came and went for weeks as his body slowly diminished. Ramana had compassion for those who grieved, and he sought to comfort them by reminding them of the truth that he was not the body. The Great Departure came on April 14, 1950. That evening the sage gave darshan to all present in the ashram. They sat singing his favorite hymn to Arunachala, the form of Siva as an infinite pillar of light. He asked his attendants to help him sit up. He smiled as a tear trickled down his cheek, and at 8:47pm his breathing stopped. As instructed, devotees prepared a pit in the earth and placed the body there in a seated yogic posture, encasing it in salt. Such interments of great masters are revered as supremely holy. A Sivalingam was installed above the crypt, and a shrine was constructed over it, known as the Sri Ramana Maharshi Samadhi Shrine. This shrine is centrally located within the ashram premises, serving as a focal point for meditation and worship.