

Five Interviews with David Godman

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Introduction to Ramana Maharshi: David Godman talks to John David	2
An Interview with David Godman, by Rob Sacks, for www.realization.org	33
Living the Inspiration of Sri Ramana Maharshi: A dialogue between David Godman and Maalok, an Indian academic now teaching in America	46
Mostly about Books: an interview with Michelle Mikklesen	83
Remembering Nisargadatta Maharaj: A conversation with Harriet	105

Introduction to Ramana Maharshi

David Godman talks to John David

JD: Can you begin by telling us something about Ramana Maharshi's early life? How he woke up as a young boy in Madurai.

DG: His given name was Venkataraman and he was born into a family of South Indian brahmins in Tiruchuzhi, a small town in Tamil Nadu. He came from a pious, middle-class family. His father, Sundaram Iyer, was, by profession, an 'uncertified pleader'. He represented people in legal matters, but he had no acknowledged qualifications to practise as a lawyer. Despite this handicap, he seemed to have a good practice, and he was well respected in his community.

Venkataraman had a normal childhood that showed no signs of future greatness. He was good at sports, lazy at school, indulged in an average amount of mischief, and exhibited little interest in religious matters. He did, though, have a few unusual traits. When he slept, he went into such a deep state of unconsciousness, his friends could physically assault him without waking him up. He also had an extraordinary amount of luck. In team games, whichever side he played for always won. This earned him the nickname '*Tangakai*', which means 'golden hand'. It is a title given to people who exhibit a far-above-average amount of good fortune. Venkataraman also had a natural talent for the intricacies of literary Tamil. In his early teens he knew enough to correct his Tamil school teacher if he made any mistakes.

After his father died when he was twelve, the family moved to Madurai, a city in southern Tamil Nadu. Sometime in 1896, when he was sixteen years of age, he had a remarkable spiritual awakening. He was sitting in his uncle's house when the thought occurred to him that he was about to die. He became afraid, but instead of panicking he lay down on the ground and began to analyse what was happening. He began to investigate what constituted death: what would die and what would survive that death. He spontaneously initiated a process of self-enquiry that culminated, within a few minutes, in his own permanent awakening.

In one of his rare written comments on this process he wrote: 'Enquiring within "Who is the seer?" I saw the seer disappear leaving That alone which stands forever. No thought arose to say "I saw". How then did the thought arise to say "I did not see".'

In those few moments his individual identity disappeared and was replaced by a full awareness of the Self. That experience, that awareness, remained with him for the rest of his life. He had no need to do any more practice or meditation because this death-experience left him in a state of complete and final liberation. This is something very rare in the spiritual world: that someone who had no interest in the spiritual life should, within the space of a few minutes, and without any effort or prior practice, reach a state that other seekers spend lifetimes trying to attain.

I say 'without effort' because this re-enactment of death and the subsequent self-enquiry seemed to be something that happened to him, rather than something he did. When he described this event for his Telugu biographer, the pronoun 'I' never appeared. He said, 'The body lay on the ground, the limbs stretched themselves out,' and so on.

That particular description really leaves the reader with the feeling that this event was utterly impersonal. Some power took over the boy Venkataraman, made him lie on the floor and finally made him understand that death is for the body and for the sense of individuality, and that it cannot touch the underlying reality in which they both appear.

When the boy Venkataraman got up, he was a fully enlightened sage, but he had no cultural or spiritual context to evaluate properly what had happened to him. He had read some biographies of ancient Tamil saints and he had attended many temple rituals, but none of this seemed to relate to the new state that he found himself in.

JD: What was his first reaction? What did he think had happened to him?

DG: Years later, when he was recollecting this experience he said that he thought at the time that he had caught some strange disease. However, he thought that it was such a nice disease, he hoped he wouldn't recover from it. At one time, soon after the experience, he also speculated that he might have been possessed. When he discussed the events with Narasimha Swami, his first English biographer, he repeatedly used the Tamil word *avesam*, which means possession by a spirit, to describe his initial reactions to the event.

JD: Did he discuss it with anyone? Did he try to find out what had happened to him?

DG: Venkataraman told no one in his family what had happened to him. He tried to carry on as if nothing unusual had occurred. He continued to attend school and kept up a veneer of normality for his family, but as the weeks went by he found it harder and harder to keep up this façade because he was pulled inside more and more. At the end of August 1896 he fell into a deep state of absorption in the Self when he should have been writing out a text he had been given as a punishment for not doing his schoolwork properly.

His brother scornfully said, 'What is the use of all this for one like this?' meaning, 'What use is family life for someone who spends all his time behaving like a yogi?'

The justice of the remark struck Venkataraman, making him decide to leave home forever. The following day he left, without telling anyone where he was going, or what had happened to him. He merely left a note saying that he was off on a 'virtuous enterprise' and that no money should be spent searching for him. His destination was Arunachala, a major pilgrimage centre a few hundred miles to the north. In his note to his family he wrote, 'I have, in search of my father and in obedience to his command, started from here'. His father was Arunachala, and in abandoning his home and family he was following an internal summons from the mountain of Arunachala.

He had an adventurous trip to Tiruvannamalai, taking three days for a journey that, with better information, he could have completed in less than a day. He arrived on September 1st 1896 and spent the rest of his life here.

JD: For someone who doesn't know much about Arunachala, could you paint a picture of what this place is like, and what it signifies? Perhaps also say what it would have been like when Ramana Maharshi first arrived.

DG: The town of Tiruvannamalai, with its associated mountain, Arunachala, has always been a major pilgrimage centre. The town's heart and soul haven't changed that much in

recent times despite the presence of auto-rickshaws, TV aerials and a vast expanse of suburbs. The basic culture and way of life of people in Tiruvannamalai have probably been the same for centuries. Marco Polo came to Tamil Nadu in the 1200s on his way home from China. His description of what people were doing and how they were living are very recognizable to people who live here today.

Tiruvannamalai has one of the principal Siva-lingam temples in South India. There are five temples, each corresponding to one of the elements: earth, water, fire, air and space. Tiruvannamalai is the fire lingam.

The earliest records of this place go back to about AD 500, at which point it's already famous. Saints were touring around Tamil Nadu in those days, praising Arunachala as the place where Siva resides, and recommending everyone to go there. Before that, there aren't really any records because local people didn't start writing things down or making stone buildings that would last.

There's a much older tradition that suddenly appears in the historical record about 1,500 years ago, simply because a major cultural change resulted in people making proper monuments and writing things down. I would say that Ramana Maharshi was, in this historical context, the most recent and probably the most famous representative of a whole stream of extraordinary saints who have been drawn by the power of this place for at least, I would guess, 2000 years.

JD: When was the big temple built?

DG: It grew in layers, in squares, from the inside out. Once upon a time there was probably a shrine about the size of a small room. You can date all these things because the walls of temples here are public record offices. Whenever a king wins a war with his neighbour, he gets someone to chisel the fact on the side of a temple wall. Or, if he gives 500 acres to someone he likes, that fact also is chiselled on the temple wall. That's where you go to see who's winning the battles and what the king is giving away, and to whom.

The earliest inscriptions, they're called epigraphs, on the inner shrine date from the ninth century, so that's probably the time it was built. Progressively, up to about the 1600s the temple got bigger and bigger and bigger. It reached its current dimensions in the seventeenth century. For people who have never seen this building, I should say that it's huge. I would guess that each of the four sides is about 200 yards long, and the main tower is over 200 feet high.

JD: And that's where Bhagavan came to when he arrived?

DG: When Bhagavan was very young he intuitively knew that Arunachala signified God in some way. In one of his verses he wrote, 'From my unthinking childhood the immensity of Arunachala had shone in my awareness'. He didn't know then that it was a place that he could go to; he just had this association with the word Arunachala. He felt, 'this is the holiest place, this is the holiest state, this is God himself'. He was in awe of Arunachala and what it represented without ever really understanding that it was a pilgrimage place that he could actually go to. It wasn't until he was a teenager that one of his relatives actually came back from here and said, 'I've been to Arunachala'.

His first reaction to the word Arunachala was absolute awe. Later there was a brief period of anticlimax when he realised it was just a place on the map. Later still, after his enlightenment experience, he understood that it was the power of Arunachala that had precipitated the experience and pulled him physically to this place.

The verse I just quoted from chronicles the early stages of his relationship with the mountain:

Look, there [Arunachala] stands as if insentient. Mysterious is the way it works, beyond all human understanding. From my unthinking childhood, the immensity of Arunachala had shone in my awareness, but even when I learned from someone that it was only Tiruvannamalai, I did not realize its meaning. When it stilled myself and drew me to itself and I came near, I saw that it was stillness absolute.

The last line contains a very nice pun. *Achala* is Sanskrit for ‘mountain’ and it also means ‘absolute stillness’. On one level this poem is describing Bhagavan’s physical pilgrimage to Tiruvannamalai, but in another sense he is talking about his mind going back into the Heart and becoming totally silent and still.

When he arrived, and this is something you won’t find in any of the standard biographies, he said he stood in front of the temple. It was closed at the time, but all the doors, right through to the innermost shrine, spontaneously opened for him. He walked straight in, went up to the *lingam* and hugged it.

He didn’t really want this version of events publicised for two reasons. First, he didn’t like letting people know that miracles were happening around him. When such events happened, he tried to play them down. Second, he knew that the temple priests would get very upset if they found out that he had touched their *lingam*. Even though he was a brahmin, the temple priests would take his act to be a contaminating one, and they would have had to order a special elaborate puja to reconsecrate the *lingam*. Not wanting to upset them, he kept quiet.

JD: Yes, we’ve just come from the temple just now and there’s a huge lock on the door.

DG: Yes. Ordinarily, no outsider can get anywhere near the *lingam*. Looking after it is a hereditary profession. No one from outside this lineage is allowed over the metal bar that is about ten feet in front of the *lingam*.

There is another interesting aspect to this story. From the moment of his enlightenment in Madurai there was a strong burning sensation in Bhagavan’s body that only went away when he hugged the *lingam*. Touching the *lingam* grounded or dissipated the energy. The *lingam* in the temple is not just a representation of Arunachala. It is held to be Arunachala himself. The hugging of the *lingam* was the final act of physical union between Bhagavan and his Guru, Arunachala.

I have not read of any other visit by Bhagavan to the inner shrine. This may have been the only time he went. One visit was enough to transact this particular piece of business.

Bhagavan always loved the physical form of the mountain Arunachala and spent as much time as he could on its slopes, but his business with the temple *lingam* was completed within a few minutes of his arrival in 1896.

JD: Am I right in thinking that from then on he pretty much stayed within the confines of the temple?

DG: After this dramatic arrival, he stayed in various parts of the temple for several months. The day he arrived he threw away all his money into a local tank; he shaved his head, which is a sign of physical renunciation; he threw away all his clothes, and then just sat quietly, often in a deep *samadhi* in which he was completely unaware of his body or his surroundings. It was his destiny to stay alive and become a great teacher, so people force-fed him and looked after him in other ways. Without that particular destiny to fulfil, he would have probably given up his body or died from physical neglect. For the first three or four years he was here, he was mostly unaware of anything around him. He rarely ate, and at one time his body started to rot. Portions of his legs became open, festering sores, but he didn't even notice.

JD: This is when he was sitting down in that kind of basement?

DG: Yes. Have you been there? It's called Patala Lingam. He was in that place for about six weeks. At the end of that period he had to be physically carried out and cleaned up.

In his early years here he said that he would open his eyes, without knowing how long he had been oblivious to the world. He would stand up and try to take a few steps. If his legs were reasonably strong, he would infer that he had been unaware of his body for a relatively short period – perhaps a day or two. If his legs buckled when he stood to walk, he would realise that he had probably been in a deep *samadhi* for many days, possibly weeks. Sometimes he would open his eyes and discover that he was not in the place where he had sat when he closed his eyes. He had no recollection of his body moving from one place to another within one of the temple *mantapams*.

JD: Did anyone recognize him as a great saint, or at least as someone special?

DG: There were a few. Seshadri Swami, who was also a local saint, spotted him while he was sitting in the Patala Lingam. He tried to look after him and protect him, but without much success. Bhagavan has spoken of one or two other people who intuitively knew that he was in a very elevated state, but in those days, they were very few in numbers.

JD: Were they people in the temple?

DG: Seshadri Swami lived all over the place. There were probably two or three other people who even then recognised him as being something special. Some people revered him simply because he was living such an ascetic life, but there were other people who seemed to know that he was in a high state. The grandfather of a man who later became the ashram's lawyer was one whom Bhagavan said had a full appreciation of who he really was.

JD: In those days you could easily take his behaviour as a sign of being a bit crazy, yes? For example, there was a man in the ashram this morning wearing a loincloth, rather like Bhagavan's loincloth, with a French accent. He could be a famous saint or he could be a loony. It wouldn't be very easy to decide at the moment.

DG: People get the benefit of the doubt here, especially if they are sitting all day, absolutely still, and not eating. That's hard to fake. You don't sit in full lotus, absolutely motionless, for a few days just to get a free meal. But at the same time, it doesn't prove you are enlightened. There was a man here in Bhagavan's time who sat eighteen hours a day in full lotus with his eyes closed. His name was Govind Bhat and he lived in Palakottu, a *sadhu* colony adjacent to Ramanasramam. He tried to attract devotees even while Bhagavan was alive, but he didn't do very well. In the end it is the enlightenment not the physical antics that attracts the real devotees.

JD: So how did it happen that he moved from there up onto the hill?

DG: Have you been to a place called Gurusurtham? It's a temple about a mile out of town. A man who was looking after Bhagavan invited him to go and stay in a mango orchard that was next to this temple. He moved out there for about a year and a half. That was the furthest away from the mountain he ever went in all his fifty-four years here. Even there he was mostly unaware of his body and the world. He said his fingernails grew to be several inches long. He didn't comb or wash his hair for a couple of years. Many years later he commented that if one doesn't comb one's hair it becomes very matted and it grows very quickly. By the end of his time at Gurusurtham, he had long matted hair and long fingernails.

He has said that he could hear people whispering outside, saying 'This man's been in there for hundreds of years'. Because of the extent of his asceticism, he looked old even when he was eighteen.

JD: From the way you're telling the story, it has always been clear that he was a saint.

DG: Clear to whom? It is easy to say this in hindsight, but at the time there were many local people who had no opinion of him at all. The population of Tiruvannamalai around 1900 was probably in the region of 20,000. If twenty people came to see him regularly, and the rest didn't bother, that means 99.9% of the local people either didn't know anything about him, or didn't care enough to pay him a visit.

His uncle, who came in the 1890s to try and bring him home, asked people in town, 'What's he doing? Why is he behaving like this?' The replies he received were not positive. His uncle was led to believe that he was just a truant who should be taken home. Even in later years there were many people in Tiruvannamalai who didn't have a high opinion of him. The people who became his devotees are the ones who left some records, so the published opinions of him are a bit one-sided.

JD: So, when he was already twenty or so, were there devotees already coming to spend time with him?

DG: He arrived when he was sixteen and for the next two or three years he sometimes had one full-time attendant, plus a few people who occasionally came to see him.

It wasn't really until the early years of the last century that people started coming regularly. By the beginning of the first decade of the twentieth century he had a small group of followers. A few people brought him food regularly and a few others were frequent visitors. A large number of curiosity seekers would come to have a look at him and go away. Apart from these tourists, he seems to have had perhaps four or five regular devotees.

JD: Were those people local people?

DG: They were mostly locals. One woman called Akhilandamma, who lived about forty miles away, used to come from her village and bring him food once in a while. Another, Sivaprakasam Pillai, lived in another town, but he came for *darshan* regularly. Just about everyone else lived here in Tiruvannamalai.

JD: And he went from the mango orchard up onto the hill?

DG: Around 1901 he moved up to Virupaksha Cave and stayed there for about fifteen years, but it was not a good place to live all year round. In summer it was too hot. He stayed there for about eight months a year and then moved to other nearby caves and shrines such as Guhai Namasivaya Temple, Sadguru Swami Cave and a place called Mango Tree Cave.

They are all less than five minutes' walk from Virupaksha Cave. There's a big tank up there, Mulaipal Tirtham, a little lower down the hill from Virupaksha Cave. This was the *sadhus'* water supply. Everybody up there was dependent on that tank, so all their caves and their huts were in walking distance of that tank.

JD: Now, it's become a bit of a farm up there, a lot of cows and what have you.

DG: Things move on.

JD: But in fact there's a stream that runs right past the cave. Whenever I've been there...

DG: It doesn't run all year, and when Bhagavan moved into the cave it wasn't there at all. There was a big thunderstorm one summer which produced an avalanche that carried away many of the rocks that were near the cave. After the debris had been cleared away, it was discovered that a new spring was coming out of nearby rocks. The devotees said that it was a gift from Arunachala, and Bhagavan seemed to agree with them.

JD: It seems a nice little water supply.

DG: It's very seasonal. We have just had a week and a half of good rain. If it doesn't rain, within a week it will dry up, so it's not that good a source.

JD: Is that the same spring that goes through Skandashram?

DG: No, Virupaksha Cave has an independent spring. Skandashram probably has the best spring on that side of the hill. That spring also didn't exist when Bhagavan first moved onto the hill. He went on a walk there – it's a few hundred feet higher up the mountain from Virupaksha Cave – noticed a damp patch and recommended that it be dug out to see if there was a good water source there. There was, and the stream that now flows through Skandashram is the highest source of permanent water on the hill. It's about 600 feet above the town.

JD: Does that mean Skandashram didn't exist in those days?

DG: No. It's named after a man called Kandaswami who started building it in the early years of the last century.

Kandaswami did a massive amount of work on the site. When he started it was a 45-degree scree slope. He dug back into the side of the hill and used the excavated soil and rocks to make a flat terrace on the side of the hill. He planted many coconut and mango trees, which are still there. It's a beautiful place now, a shady oasis on the side of the hill.

JD: So when Bhagavan moved up there, it was pretty well set. There were some buildings and a terrace?

DG: The terrace was there and the young trees had been planted, but there was only one small hut that was not big enough for everyone. The devotees of the time did some fundraising and erected the structure that can be seen there today.

JD: Do you know how many people were there with Bhagavan? Half a dozen?

DG: In Virupaksha Cave about four or five would be a good average. By the time Bhagavan moved to Skandashram, the average numbers were probably up to ten or twelve. I am talking about people who lived with Bhagavan full time, and who slept with him at night. There were many other people who just visited and left.

JD: So even in the cave there were in fact people living there with him?

DG: Yes, they ate with him and slept there at night. Many of them left during the day to do things elsewhere. They were not sitting there all the time. They were all men, by the way. Until Bhagavan's mother arrived in 1914, only men were allowed to sleep in Virupaksha Cave. Even though there was no formal structure, the people who lived with Bhagavan tended to regard themselves as celibate *sadhus*. They regarded the cave as a men-only ashram.

Initially these *sadhus* didn't want Bhagavan's mother to move in with them. However, when Bhagavan declared, 'If you make her leave, I will also leave along with her,' they had to back down and allow her to stay.

JD: So, when he lived in the cave he wasn't in 'retreat' or in 'solitary silence'. You know, the image of Bhagavan is always of this totally silent, totally alone person.

DG: He behaved differently in different phases of his life. In the late 1890s, when he was in his late teens, he almost never interacted with anyone. Most of the time he just sat with his eyes closed, either in the temple or in nearby temples and shrines. He knew what was going on because in later years he would often talk about incidents from this era, but he hardly ever spoke. The period of rarely speaking lasted for about ten years, up to about 1906. He hadn't taken a vow of silence, he had just temporarily lost the ability to articulate sounds. When he tried to speak, a kind of guttural noise would initially come out of his throat. Sometimes he would have to make three or four attempts to get the words out. Because it was so hard to speak, he preferred silence.

Around 1906-7, when he recovered his ability to speak normally, he began to interact verbally with the people around him. By this time he was also spending a lot of time wandering around by himself on Arunachala. He loved being out on the mountain. It was his main passion, his only attachment.

JD: And that would be alone? He would go around alone?

DG: Occasionally he would take people out for brief walks but mostly he was alone.

JD: Is it on record who was his first disciple? Perhaps we shouldn't say 'first disciple'.

DG: There were people who looked after him in his early years here who could be regarded as his earliest devotees. The most prominent was Palaniswami who looked after him from the 1890s until he passed away in 1915. The two of them were inseparable for almost twenty years.

JD: So this man would have lived at the cave with Bhagavan?

DG: Yes, he was the full-time attendant at Virupaksha Cave. He also lived with Bhagavan at Gurumurtham.

JD: And gradually other people were attracted and would become fairly permanent. Presumably, there was no formal initiation?

DG: I really don't know who decided, 'OK, you can sleep here tonight'. There was no management, no check-in department.

Everyone was welcome to come and sit with Bhagavan – all day if they wanted to. And if they were still there at night, they could also sleep there. If food was available, everyone who was present would share.

Bhagavan never had much to do with who was there and who wasn't, who was allowed to stay and who wasn't. If people wanted to stay they stayed, and if they wanted to leave they left.

JD: And presumably that continued. I mean, he was never actively involved in managing the ashram, was he?

DG: In the Virupaksha period there wasn't a lot of work going on. It was a community of begging *sadhus* who just stayed with Bhagavan whenever they felt like it. People would go to town, beg on the streets, collect the food, and bring it back to Virupaksha Cave. Bhagavan would mix it all up together, distribute it, and that was the food for the day. If not enough food was begged, people went hungry. Nobody was cooking, so there was no work to do except for occasional cleaning. After his mother came in 1914, the kitchen work started. Slowly, slowly it got to the situation where if you wanted to live full time with him, you had to work.

Even today the people who eat and sleep full time in the ashram have to work there. It's not a place for people who want to sit and meditate all day. If you want to do that, you live somewhere else.

JD: So that would have been when they moved to Skandashram?

DG: It got a bit more organised when Bhagavan moved to Skandashram, but it was still a community of begging *sadhus* right up to the early 1920s. Bhagavan himself went begging in the 1890s. I wouldn't say he encouraged begging, but he thought it was a good tradition. Go out and beg your food, eat what people give you, sleep under a tree and wake up the next day with nothing. He heartily approved of a lifestyle like this, but it wasn't one he could follow himself once he settled down and an ashram grew up around him.

JD: And he wore just a loincloth?

DG: In the beginning, for the first few months, he was naked. A couple of months after he arrived, there was a big festival in the temple. Some devotees lifted him up and dressed him in a loincloth because they knew that he might be arrested if he sat in a prominent place with no clothes on. For most of his life he only wore a loincloth, occasionally supplemented by a *dhoti* that he would tie under his armpits, rather than round his waist. It gets quite cold here on winter mornings, but he never seemed to want or need more clothes.

JD: When did the ashram begin to get big?

DG: Coming down the hill was the big move in Bhagavan's life. When his mother died in 1922, she was buried where the ashram is now located. The spot was chosen because it was the Hindu graveyard in those days. Bhagavan continued to live at Skandashram, but about six months later he came down the hill and didn't go back up. He never gave any reason for staying at the foot of the hill. He just said he didn't feel any impulse to go back to Skandashram. That's how the current Ramanasramam started.

JD: So the ashram's actually built on a Hindu burial ground?

DG: Yes. In those days the graveyard was well outside the town. Now the town has expanded to include Ramanasramam, and the present Hindu graveyard is now a mile further out of town.

JD: How did the ashram come to take over the land round here?

DG: The place where Bhagavan's mother was buried was actually owned by a *math*, a religious institution, in town. The man who headed that organization had a high opinion of Bhagavan, so he handed over the land to the emerging Ramanasramam. When Bhagavan's mother died, the devotees had to get permission from the head of this *math* to bury her on this land, but there was no problem since he was also a devotee.

JD: And the first building, was it the shrine over the mother's grave?

DG: Well, shrine is a bit of a fancy word. A really wonderful photo was taken here in 1922, shortly after Bhagavan settled here. The only building is a coconut-leaf hut. It looks as if one good gust of wind would blow it over. People who came to see him that year have reported that there wasn't even room for two people in the room where Bhagavan lived. That was the first ashram building here: a coconut-leaf hut that probably leaked when it rained.

JD: It's very beautiful now – water, trees, peacocks. It must have been very primitive eighty years ago.

DG: I talked to the man who cleared the land here. He told me there were large boulders and many cacti and thorn bushes. It wasn't really forest. It's not the right climate for a luxuriant forest, and there isn't much soil. The granite bedrock is often close to the surface, and there are many rocky outcrops. This man, Ramaswami Pillai, said that he spent the first six months prising out boulders with a crowbar, cutting down cacti and levelling the ground.

JD: When the building started, was Bhagavan himself involved in that?

DG: I don't think he built the first coconut leaf hut but once he moved here he was very much a hands-on manager. The first proper building over the mother's *samadhi* was organised and built by him. Have you seen how bricks are made round here?

JD: Possibly.

DG: It's like making mud pies. You start with a brick-shaped mould. You make a pile of mud and then use the mould to make thousands of mud bricks that you put out in the sun to dry. After they have been properly dried, you stack them in a structure the size of a house that has big holes in the base for logs to be put in. The outside of the stack is sealed with wet mud and fires are lit at the base. Once the fire has taken, the bottom is sealed as well. The bricks are baked in a hot, oxygen-free environment, in the same way that charcoal is made. After two or three days the fires die down, and if nothing has gone

wrong, the bricks are properly baked. However, if the fires go out too soon, or if it rains heavily during the baking, the bricks don't get fired properly. When that happens, the whole production is often wasted because the bricks are soft and crumbly – more like biscuits rather than bricks.

In the 1920s someone tried to make bricks near the ashram, but the firing was unsuccessful and all the half-baked bricks were abandoned. Bhagavan, who abhorred waste of any kind, decided to use all these commercially useless bricks to build a shrine over his mother's grave. One night he had everyone in the ashram line up between the kiln and the ashram. Bricks were passed from hand to hand until there were enough in the ashram to make a building. The next day he did bricklaying himself as he and his devotees raised a wall around the *samadhi*. Bhagavan did a lot of work on the inside of the wall because people felt that, since it was going to be a temple, the interior work should be done by brahmins.

This was the only building that he constructed himself, but years later, when the large granite buildings that make up much of the present ashram were erected, he was the architect, the engineer and the building supervisor. He was there every day, giving orders and checking up on progress.

JD: You say he 'abhorred waste'. Can you expand on that a little?

DG: He had the attitude that anything that came to the ashram was a gift from God, and that it should be properly utilised. He would pick up stray mustard seeds he found on the kitchen floor with his fingernails and insist that they be stored and used; he used to cut the white margins off proof copies of ashram books, stitch them together and make little notebooks out of them; he would attempt to cook parts of vegetables, such as the spiky ends of aubergines, that are normally thrown away. He admitted that he was a bit of a fanatic on this subject.

He once remarked, 'It's a good thing I never got married. No woman would have able to put up with my habits.'

JD: Going back to his building activities, how involved in day-to-day decisions was he? Did he, for example, decide where the doors and windows went?

DG: Yes. Either he would explain what he wanted verbally, or he would make little sketches on the backs of envelopes or on scrap pieces of paper.

JD: What you're describing now is a totally different Bhagavan from the one who sat in *samadhi* all day. Most people think that he spent his whole life sitting quietly in the hall, doing nothing.

DG: He didn't like sitting in the hall all day. He often said that it was his prison. If he was off doing some work when visitors came, someone would come and tell him that he was needed in the hall. That's where he usually met with new people.

He would sigh and remark, 'People have come. I have to go back to jail.'

JD: 'Got to go sit on the couch'.

DG: Yes. ‘Got to go and sit on the couch and tell people how to get enlightened.’

Bhagavan enjoyed all kinds of physical work, but he particularly enjoyed cooking. He was the ashram’s head cook for at least fifteen years. He got up at two or three o’clock every morning, cut vegetables and supervised the cooking. When the new ashram buildings were going up in the 1920s and 30s, he was also the supervising engineer and architect.

JD: I think what you’ve just been speaking about is in a way very important in general. People have set ideas about Bhagavan. Most people have an image of him as a man who sat on a couch, looking blissful and doing nothing. What you are describing is a completely different man.

DG: His state didn’t change from the age of sixteen onwards, but his outer activities did. In the beginning of his life here at Arunachala he was quiet and rarely did anything. Thirty years later he had a hectic and busy schedule, but his experience of who he was never wavered during this later phase of busy-ness.

JD: I like the way you’re speaking because in a way you’re debunking a lot of spiritual myths.

DG: Bhagavan never felt comfortable with a situation in which he sat on a couch in the role of a ‘Guru’, with everyone on the floor around him. He liked to work and live with people, interacting with them in a normal, natural way, but as the years went by, the possibilities for this kind of life became less and less.

One of the problems was that people were often completely overawed by him. Most people couldn’t act normally around him. Many of the visitors wanted to put him on a pedestal and treat him like a god, but he didn’t seem to appreciate that kind of treatment.

There are some nice stories of new people behaving naturally and getting a natural response from Bhagavan. Major Chadwick wrote that Bhagavan would come to his room after lunch, go through his things like an inquisitive child, sit on the bed and chat with him. However, when Chadwick once put out a chair in the expectation of Bhagavan’s arrival, the visits stopped. Chadwick had made the transition from having a ‘friend’ who dropped by to having a Guru who needed respect and a special chair. When this formality was introduced, the visits ended.

JD: So he saw himself as a ‘friend’ not as ‘the Master’.

DG: Bhagavan didn’t have a perspective of his own; he simply reacted to the way people around him thought about him and treated him. He could be a friend, a father, a brother, a god, depending on the devotee’s way of approaching him. One woman was convinced that Bhagavan was her baby son. She had a little doll that looked like Bhagavan, and she would cradle it like a baby when she was in his presence. Her belief in this relationship was so strong, she actually started lactating when she held her Bhagavan doll.

Bhagavan seemed to approve of any Guru-disciple relationship that kept the devotee's attention on the Self or the form of the Guru, but at the same time he still liked and enjoyed people who could treat him as a normal being.

Bhagavan sometimes said that it didn't matter how you regarded the Guru, so long as you could think about him all the time. As an extreme example he cited two people from ancient times who got enlightened by hating God so much, they couldn't stop thinking about Him.

There is a Tamil phrase that translates as 'Mother-father-Guru-God'. A lot of people felt that way about him.

Bhagavan himself said he never felt that he was a Guru in a Guru-disciple relationship with anyone. His public position was that he didn't have any disciples at all because, he said, from the perspective of the Self there was no one who was different or separate from him. Being the Self and knowing that the Self alone exists, he knew that there were no unenlightened people who needed to be enlightened. He said he only ever saw enlightened people around him.

Having said that, Bhagavan clearly did function as a Guru to the thousands of people who had faith in him and who tried to carry out his teachings.

JD: During which period was Bhagavan actively involved in the building work?

DG: The ashram started to change from coconut-leaf structures to stone buildings around 1930. The big building phase was 1930-42. The Mother's Temple was built after that, but Bhagavan wasn't supervising the design and construction of that so much. That work was subcontracted to expert temple builders. Bhagavan visited the site regularly, but he wasn't so involved in design or engineering decisions.

JD: If anybody had visited during those twelve years they would have found a Bhagavan who was not sitting on the couch. They would have found him out working, supervising workers?

DG: It would have depended on when they came. Bhagavan had a routine that he kept to. He was always in the hall for the morning and evening chanting – two periods of about forty-five minutes each. He would be there in the evening, chatting to all the ashram's workers who could not see him during the day because of their various duties in different parts of the ashram. He would be there if visitors arrived who wanted to speak to him. He walked regularly on the hill, or to Palakottu, an area adjacent to the ashram. These walks generally took place after meals. He would fit in his other jobs around these events. If nothing or no one needed his attention in the hall, he might go and see how the cooks were getting on, or he might go to the cowshed to check up on the ashram's cows. If there was a big building project going on, he would often go out to check up on the progress of the work. Mostly though, he did his tours of the building sites after lunch, when everyone else was having a siesta.

He supervised many workers, not just the ones who put up the buildings. Devotees in the hall would bind and rebind books under his supervision, the cooks would work according to his instructions, and so on. The only area he didn't seem inclined to get involved in was the ashram office. He let his brother have a fairly free rein there,

although once in a while he would intervene if he felt that something that had been neglected ought to be done.

In earlier years, up to 1926, he would also walk round the base of Arunachala quite regularly.

JD: Would a few people follow him?

DG: Yes, large crowds would go with him in the later years, and when he passed through town there would be even more people waiting for him, trying to feed him, or attempting to get him into their houses. He turned down all these invitations. After the 1890s he never entered a private house in town.

He stopped going round the hill in 1926 because people started fighting over who should stay behind in the ashram. No one wanted to be left behind, but someone always had to remain to guard the property.

Finally he said, 'If I stop going there won't be any more fights about who is going to stay behind'.

He never did the walk again.

JD: You were saying he was a very natural person who liked very natural people. I presume he also liked animals.

DG: Almost all of them. I have read that he didn't particularly like cats, but I don't know what the evidence is for that. As far as I can make out, he loved all the animals in the ashram. He showed a particular fondness for the dogs, the monkeys and the squirrels.

JD: And they, presumably, lived in the ashram as well?

DG: Bhagavan used to say that people in the ashram were squatting on land that belonged to the animals, and that the local wild animals had prior tenancy rights. He never approved of animals being driven away either to make more room for people, or because some people didn't like having animals around. He always took the side of the animals whenever there was any attempt to throw them out or inconvenience them in any way.

He had squirrels on his sofa. They moved in and made nests in the grass roof over his head; they ran all over his body, and had babies in his cushions. Once in a while he'd sit on one and accidentally suffocate it. They were all over the place.

JD: He sounds like a very natural person who felt it normal and natural to have animals around him.

DG: It was natural and normal for him, but it was not natural and normal for many of the people who congregated around him. Bhagavan always had to fight in the animals' corner to make sure they got proper treatment, or were not unnecessarily inconvenienced.

The big new hall, the stone building in front of the Mother's Temple, was built for Bhagavan in the 1940s. The old hall that he had lived in since the late 1920s was by then too small for the crowds of people that wanted to see him. The new hall was a large,

grandiose, granite space that resembled a temple *mantapam*, but it was an intimidating place for some people and for all of the animals.

When Bhagavan was shown where he was going to sit, he asked, 'What about the squirrels? Where are they going to live?'

There were no niches for them to sit in, or grassy materials to raid for their nests. Bhagavan also complained that the building would intimidate some of the poor people who wanted to come and see him. He always saw things like this from the side of the underdog, whether animal or human.

JD: That large stone couch somehow seems to be for the wrong person.

DG: Yes, that wasn't his style at all. There was a sculptor making a stone statue of him at the same time that the finishing touches were being made to this new hall. When Bhagavan was told that this new carved, granite sofa was for him, he remarked, 'Let the stone swami sit on the stone sofa'. He eventually did move into this hall because there was nowhere else where he could meet with large numbers of people, but he didn't stay there long.

JD: And that was about a year before he gave up his body?

DG: The temple over his mother's *samadhi* was inaugurated in March 1949, and Bhagavan moved into the new hall shortly afterwards. He developed a cancer, a sarcoma, on his arm that year. It physically debilitated him to the extent that he couldn't walk to his bathroom and back. At that point his bathroom was converted into a room for him. That's where he spent the last few months of his life.

JD: That's the place they call the *samadhi* room?

DG: Yes. An energetic Tamil woman, Janaki Amma, came to the ashram in the 1940s. When she asked to be shown to the women's bathroom, she was told that there wasn't one. She arranged for one to be built, and this was the room that Bhagavan spent his final days in. It was the nearest bathroom to the new hall that he moved into in 1949. It became his own bathroom at that time because no one wanted to inconvenience him by making him walk any further. He refused to let anyone help him when he walked to this bathroom, even when he was extremely weak. Have you seen the video of him in his last year?

JD: Probably.

DG: It's excruciating to watch. His knees have massive swellings on them, and they seem to shake from side to side. It is clear from this footage that he was extremely debilitated, but he would never let anyone help him to move around. There is an elaborate stone step in the doorway of the new hall. Devotees would have to stand by, completely helpless, as Bhagavan would attempt to climb over this obstruction. No one was allowed to offer assistance. Eventually, when this step proved to be too much of an obstacle, he moved into the bathroom and stayed there until he passed away in April 1950.

JD: Is it right that during that time he was still available?

DG: He was very insistent that anyone who wanted to see him could have darshan at least once a day. When people realized he wasn't going to be here much longer, the crowds increased. For the last few weeks there was a 'walking *darshan*'. People would file past his room and pranam to him one by one.

JD: And that went on until his last day?

DG: Yes, he gave his final public *darshan* on the afternoon of the day he died.

JD: Yes, I actually met someone who walked past him the day before he died.

DG: He insisted that the public should have as much access as possible. Up until the 1940s, the doors of his room were open twenty-four hours a day. If you wanted to see him at 3 a.m., no one would stop you from walking in and seeing him. If you had some problem, you could go and tell him in the middle of the night.

JD: So even though he was doing a lot of work – cutting vegetables, working on the buildings and so on – he was, in fact, always available?

DG: In that era of his life there weren't too many people around him. You are talking about the years when he was actively involved in cooking and building work. In those days, if a group of people came to see him, he would go to the hall to see what they wanted.

Everybody who lived in the ashram had a job. You were either working in the cowshed or the kitchen, the garden, the office, and so on. These ashram residents were not allowed to sit with Bhagavan during the day because they had work to do. In the evening all the ashram workers would gather around Bhagavan, and for a few hours they would generally have him to themselves. The visitors would usually go home in the evening. The people whom he saw during the day in the hall would be visitors to the ashram, along with a few devotees who had houses nearby.

JD: Was everyone free to question him?

DG: In theory, yes, but many people were far too intimidated to approach him. He would sometimes talk without prompting, without being questioned. He liked to tell stories about famous saints, and he often told stories about what had happened to him in various stages of his life. He was a great storyteller, and whenever he had a good story to tell, he would act out the parts of the various protagonists. He would get so involved in the narratives, he would often start crying when he came to a particularly moving part of the story.

JD: So the impression of him being silent is not really true?

DG: He *was* silent for much of the day. He told people that he preferred to remain in silence, but he did speak, often for hours at a time, when he was in the mood.

I'm not saying that everyone who came to see him got a prompt verbal answer to his or her question. You could come and ask an apparently earnest question, and Bhagavan might ignore you. He might stare out of the window and show no sign that he had even heard what you had said. Someone else might come in and ask a question and get an immediate reply. It sometimes looked like a bit of a lottery, but everyone in the end got what they needed or deserved. Bhagavan responded to what was going on in the minds of the people who were in front of him, not just to their questions, and since he was the only person who could see what was going on in that sphere, his responses at times seemed to outsiders to be occasionally random or arbitrary.

Many people would ask something and not get a spoken answer, but they would find later that merely sitting in his presence had given them the peace or the answer they required. This was the kind of response that Bhagavan preferred to make: a silent, healing stream of grace that gave people peace, not just a satisfactory spoken answer.

JD: When did he begin to give out teachings, and what were they? I have been told that when he was living in a cave on the hill someone came to him and asked what his teachings were. He apparently wrote them out in a small booklet. Can you say something about this?

DG: This was 1901. He didn't even have a notebook. A man called Sivaprakasam Pillai came and asked questions. His basic question was 'Who am I? How do I find out who I really am?' The dialogue developed from there, but no words were spoken. Bhagavan wrote his answers with his finger in the sand because this was the period in which he found it difficult to articulate sounds. This primitive writing medium produced short, pithy answers.

Sivaprakasam Pillai didn't write down these answers. After each new question was asked, Bhagavan would wipe out his previous reply and pen a new one with his finger. When he went home, Sivaprakasam Pillai wrote down what he could remember of this silent conversation.

About twenty years later he published these questions and answers as an appendix to a brief biography of Bhagavan that he had written and published. I think there were thirteen questions and answers in this first published version. Bhagavan's devotees appreciated this particular presentation. Ramanasramam published it as a separate booklet, and with each edition more and more questions and answers were added. The longest version has about thirty.

At some point in the 1920s Bhagavan himself rewrote this series of questions and answers as a prose essay, elaborating on some answers and deleting others. This is now published under the title *Who Am I?* in Bhagavan's *Collected Works*, and separately as a small pamphlet. It is simply Bhagavan's summary of answers written with his finger more than twenty years before.

JD: It sounds fairly brief.

DG: Yes, it is probably about ten pages in most books.

JD: The key is this question ‘Who am I?’ Is that right?

DG: It’s called *Who am I?* but it covers all kinds of things: the nature of happiness, what the world is, how it apparently comes into existence, how it disappears. There is also a detailed portion that explains how to do self-enquiry.

JD: You could say something on that. I’ve personally been reading about self-enquiry for many years but it’s never quite clear exactly what it is. Is it something you do in the morning as a practice? Is it something you do once or regularly? Is it like a breathing technique or a type of meditation?

DG: Papaji always used to say ‘Do it once and do it properly’. That’s the ideal way, but I only know of two or three people who have done it once and got the right answer: a direct experience of the Self. These people were ready for a direct experience, so when they asked the question, the Self responded with the right answer, the right experience.

JD: Like Papaji himself?

DG: Papaji never did self-enquiry, although he did advocate it vigorously once he started teaching.

I’m thinking of two remarkable people who both came to Bhagavan in the late 1940s. One was a woman who had had many visions of Murugan, her chosen deity. She was a devotee who had never heard of self-enquiry. She didn’t even know much about Bhagavan when she stood in front of him in April 1950. She was one of the people who had ‘walking *darshan*’ in Bhagavan’s final days. As she stood in front of Bhagavan, the question ‘Who am I?’ spontaneously appeared inside her, and as an answer she immediately had a direct experience of the Self. She said later that this was the first time in her life that she had experienced *Brahman*.

The second person I am thinking of is Lakshmana Swamy. He, too, had not done any self-enquiry before. He had been a devotee for only a few months and during that time he had been repeating Bhagavan’s name as a spiritual practice. In October 1949 he sat in Bhagavan’s presence and closed his eyes. The question ‘Who am I?’ spontaneously appeared inside him, and as an answer his mind went back to its source, the Heart, and never appeared again. In his case it was a permanent experience, a true Self-realisation.

In both cases there had been no prior practice of self-enquiry, and in both cases the question ‘Who am I?’ appeared spontaneously within them. It wasn’t asked with volition. These people were ready for an experience of the Self. In Bhagavan’s presence the question appeared within them, and in his presence their sense of individuality vanished. In my opinion being in the physical presence was just as important as the asking of the question.

Many other people have asked the question endlessly without getting the result that these people got from having the question appear in them once.

I should also like to point out that both these people had their experiences in the last few months of Bhagavan’s life. Though his body was disintegrating, physically

enfeebling him, his spiritual power, his physical presence, remained just as strong as ever.

JD: Are you saying that self-enquiry is not a practice, that it is not something that we should do laboriously, hour after hour, day after day?

DG: It *is* a practice for the vast majority of people, and Bhagavan *did* encourage people to do it as often as they could. He said that the practice should be persisted with, right up to the moment of realisation.

It wasn't his only teaching, and he didn't tell everyone who came to him to do it. Generally, when people approached him and asked for spiritual advice, he would ask them what practice they were doing. They would tell him, and his usual response would be, 'Very good, carry on with that'.

He didn't have a strong missionary zeal for self-enquiry, but he did say that sooner or later everyone has to come to self-enquiry because this is the only effective way of eliminating the individual 'I'. He knew that most people who approached him preferred to repeat the name of God or worship a particular form of him. So, he let them carry on with whatever practice they felt an affinity with.

However, if you came to him and asked, 'I'm not doing any practice at the moment, but I want to get enlightened. What is the quickest and most direct way to accomplish this?' he would almost invariably reply, 'Do self-enquiry'.

JD: Is he on the record as saying that it is the quickest and most direct way?

DG: Yes. He mentioned this on many occasions, but it was not his style to force it on people. He wanted devotees to come to it when they were ready for it.

JD: So even though he accepted whatever practices people were involved in, he was quite clear the quickest and most direct tool would be self-enquiry?

DG: Yes, and he also said that you had to stick with it right up to the moment of realisation.

For Bhagavan, it wasn't a technique that you practised for an hour a day, sitting cross-legged on the floor. It is something you should do every waking moment, in combination with whatever actions the body is doing.

He said that beginners could start by doing it sitting, with closed eyes, but for everyone else, he expected it to be done during ordinary daily activities.

JD: With regard to the actual technique, would you say that it is to be aware, from moment to moment, what is going on in the mind?

DG: No, it's nothing to do with being aware of the contents of the mind. It's a very specific method that aims to find out where the individual sense of 'I' arises. Self-enquiry is an active investigation, not a passive witnessing.

For example, you may be thinking about what you had for breakfast, or you may be looking at a tree in the garden. In self-enquiry, you don't simply maintain an awareness

of these thoughts; you put your attention on the thinker who has the thought, the perceiver who has the perception. There is an 'I' who thinks, an 'I' who perceives, and this 'I' is also a thought. Bhagavan's advice was to focus on this inner sense of 'I' in order to find out what it really is. In self-enquiry you are trying to find out where this 'I' feeling arises, to go back to that place and stay there. It is not simply watching; it's a kind of active scrutiny in which one is trying to find out how the sense of being an individual person comes into being.

You can investigate the nature of this 'I' by formally asking yourself, 'Who am I?' or 'Where does this "I" come from?' Alternatively, you can try to maintain a continuous awareness of this inner feeling of 'I'. Either approach would count as self-enquiry. You should not suggest answers to the question, such as 'I am consciousness' because any answer you give yourself is conceptual rather than experiential. The only correct answer is a direct experience of the Self.

JD: It's very clear what you just said, but almost impossible to accomplish. It sounds simple, but I know from my own experience that it's very hard.

DG: It needs practice and commitment. You have to keep at it and not give up. The practice slowly changes the habits of the mind. By doing this practice regularly and continuously, you remove your focus from superficial streams of thoughts and relocate it at the place where thought itself begins to manifest. In that latter place you begin to experience the peace and stillness of the Self, and that gives you the incentive to continue.

Bhagavan had a very appropriate analogy for this process. Imagine that you have a bull, and that you keep it in a stable. If you leave the door open, the bull will wander out, looking for food. It may find food, but a lot of the time it will get into trouble by grazing in cultivated fields. The owners of these fields will beat it with sticks and throw stones at it to chase it away, but it will come back again and again, and suffer repeatedly, because it doesn't understand the notion of field boundaries. It is just programmed to look for food and to eat it wherever it finds something edible.

The bull is the mind, the stable is the Heart where it arises and to where it returns, and the grazing in the fields represents the mind's painful addiction to seeking pleasure in outside objects.

Bhagavan said that most mind-control techniques forcibly restrain the bull to stop it moving around, but they don't do anything about the bull's fundamental desire to wander and get itself into trouble.

You can tie up the mind temporarily with *japa* or breath control, but when these restraints are loosened, the mind just wanders off again, gets involved in more mischief and suffers again. You can tie up a bull, but it won't like it. You will just end up with an angry, cantankerous bull that will probably be looking for a chance to commit some act of violence on you.

Bhagavan likened self-enquiry to holding a bunch of fresh grass under the bull's nose. As the bull approaches it, you move away in the direction of the stable door and the bull follows you. You lead it back into the stable, and it voluntarily follows you because it wants the pleasure of eating the grass that you are holding in front of it. Once it is inside the stable, you allow it to eat the abundant grass that is always stored there. The

door of the stable is always left open, and the bull is free to leave and roam about at any time. There is no punishment or restraint. The bull will go out repeatedly, because it is the nature of such animals to wander in search of food. And each time they go out, they will be punished for straying into forbidden areas.

Every time you notice that your bull has wandered out, tempt it back into its stable with the same technique. Don't try to beat it into submission, or you may be attacked yourself, and don't try to solve the problem forcibly by locking it up.

Sooner or later even the dimmest of bulls will understand that, since there is a perpetual supply of tasty food in the stable, there is no point wandering around outside, because that always leads to sufferings and punishments. Even though the stable door is always open, the bull will eventually stay inside and enjoy the food that is always there.

This is self-enquiry. Whenever you find the mind wandering around in external objects and senses perceptions, take it back to its stable, which is the Heart, the source from which it rises and to which it returns. In that place it can enjoy the peace and bliss of the Self. When it wanders around outside, looking for pleasure and happiness, it just gets into trouble, but when it stays at home in the Heart, it enjoys peace and silence. Eventually, even though the stable door is always open, the mind will choose to stay at home and not wander about.

Bhagavan said that the way of restraint was the way of the yogi. Yogis try to achieve restraint by forcing the mind to be still. Self-enquiry gives the mind the option of wandering wherever it wants to, and it achieves its success by gently persuading the mind that it will always be happier staying at home.

JD: In that very moment when you realize there's plenty of grass at home and therefore no need to go out, would you call that awakening?

DG: No, I would just call it understanding.

JD: That's only understanding? Surely, once you've perceived that there are piles of grass at home, why would you want to go out again?

DG: The notion of being better off at home belongs to the 'I', and that 'I' has to go before realisation can happen.

Let's pursue this analogy a little more. What I will say now is not part of Bhagavan's original analogy, but it does incorporate other parts of his teaching.

For realisation, for a true and permanent awakening, the bull has to die. While it is alive, and while the door is still open, there is always the possibility that it will stray. If it dies, though, it can never be tempted outside again. In realisation, the mind is dead. It is not a state in which the mind is simply experiencing the peace of the Self.

When the mind goes voluntarily into the Heart and stays there, feeling no urge whatsoever to jump out again, the Self destroys it, and Self alone remains.

This is a key part of Bhagavan's teachings: the Self can only destroy the mind when the mind no longer has any tendency to move outwards. While those outward-moving tendencies are still present, even in a latent form, the mind will always be too strong for the Self to dissolve it completely.

This is why Bhagavan's way works and the forcible-restraint way doesn't. You can keep the mind restrained for decades, but such a mind will never be consumed by the Self because the desires, the tendencies, the *vasanas*, are still there. They may not be manifesting, but they are still there.

Ultimately, it is the grace or power of the Self that eliminates the final vestiges of the desire-free mind. The mind cannot eliminate itself, but it can offer itself up as a sacrifice to the Self. Through effort, through enquiry, one can take the mind back to the Self and keep it there in a desire-free state. However, mind can't do anything more than that. In that final moment it is the power of the Self within that pulls the last remains of the mind back into itself and eliminates it completely.

JD: You say that in realisation the mind is dead. People who are enlightened seem to think, remember, and so on, in just the same way that ordinary people do. They must have a mind to do this. Perhaps they are not attached to it, but it must still be there, otherwise they couldn't function in the world. Someone who had a dead mind would be a zombie.

DG: This is a misconception that many people have because they can't imagine how anyone can function, take decisions, speak, and so on without a mind. You do all these things with your mind, or at least you think you do, so when you see a sage behaving normally in the world, you automatically assume that he too is coordinating all his activities through an entity called 'mind'.

You think you are a person inhabiting a body, so when you look at a sage you automatically assume that he too is a person functioning through a body. The sage doesn't see himself that way at all. He knows that the Self alone exists, that a body appears in that Self and performs certain actions. He knows that all the actions and words that arise in this body come from the Self alone. He doesn't make the mistake of attributing them to an imaginary intermediary entity called 'mind'. In this mindless state, no one is organising mental information, no one is deciding what to do next. The Self merely prompts the body to do or say whatever needs to be done or said in that moment.

When the mind has gone, leaving only the Self, the one who decides future courses of actions has gone, the performer of actions has gone, the thinker of thoughts has gone, the perceiver of perceptions has gone. Self alone remains, and that Self takes care of all the things that the body needs to say or do. Someone who is in that state always does the most appropriate thing, always says the most appropriate thing, because all the words and all the actions come directly from the Self.

Bhagavan once compared himself to a radio. A voice is coming out of it, saying sensible things that seem to be a product of rational, considered thought. However, if you open the radio, there is no one in there thinking and deciding.

When you listen to a sage such as Bhagavan, you are not listening to words that come from a mind; you are listening to words that come directly from the Self. In his written works Bhagavan uses the term *manonasa* to describe the state of liberation. It means, quite unequivocally, 'destroyed mind'.

The mind, according to Bhagavan, is just a wrong idea, a mistaken belief. It comes into existence when the 'I'-thought, the sense of individuality, claims ownership of all the

thoughts and perceptions that the brain processes. When this happens, you end up with a mind that says, 'I am happy' or 'I have a problem' or 'I see that tree over there'.

When, through self-enquiry, the mind is dissolved in its source there is an understanding that the mind never really existed, that it was just an erroneous idea that was believed in simply because its true nature and origin were never properly investigated. Bhagavan sometimes compared the mind to a gatecrasher at a wedding who causes trouble and gets away with it because the bride's party thinks he is with the bridegroom and vice versa. The mind doesn't belong to either the Self or the body. It's just an interloper that causes trouble because we never take the trouble to find out where it has come from. When we make that investigation, mind, like the troublesome wedding guest, just melts away and disappears.

Let me give you a beautiful description of how Bhagavan spoke. It comes from part three of *The Power of the Presence*. It was written by G. V. Subbaramayya, a devotee who had intimate contact with Bhagavan. It illustrates very well my thesis that the words of a sage come from the Self, not from a mind:

Sri Bhagavan's manner of speaking was itself unique. His normal state was silence. He spoke so little, casual visitors who only saw him for a short while wondered whether he ever spoke. To put questions to him and to elicit his replies was an art in itself that required an unusual exercise in self-control. A sincere doubt, an earnest question submitted to him never went without an answer, though sometimes his silence itself was the best answer to particular questions. A questioner needed to be able to wait patiently. To have the maximum chance of receiving a good answer, you had to put your question simply and briefly. Then you had to remain quiet and attentive. Sri Bhagavan would take his time and then begin slowly and haltingly to speak. As his speech continued, it would gather momentum. It would be like a drizzle gradually strengthening into a shower. Sometimes it might go on for hours together, holding the audience spellbound. But throughout the talk you had to keep completely still and not butt in with counter remarks. Any interruption from you would break the thread of his discourse and he would at once resume silence. He would never enter into a discussion, nor would he argue with anyone. The fact was, what he spoke was not a view or an opinion but the direct emanation of light from within that manifested as words in order to dispel the darkness of ignorance. The whole purpose of his reply was to make you turn inward, to make you see the light of truth within yourself.

JD: Can we go back to the analogy of the bull that has to be enticed back into its stable? It seems the bull, which represents the mind, has to die. When the mind dies, can this be considered a full awakening? Is there a difference between awakening and enlightenment? Obviously, we're just using words, but are there two different states?

DG: Self is always the same. Self being aware of the Self is always the same. Different levels of experiences belong to the mind, not the Self.

Mind can be temporarily suspended, having been replaced by what appears to be a direct experience of the Self. Nevertheless, this is not the *sahaja* state, the permanent

natural state in which the mind can never rise again. These temporary states are very subtle experiences of the mind. The bliss and peace of the Self are being experienced, being mediated through an 'I' that has not yet been fully eliminated.

For example, I experience being in this room. I mediate it through my senses, through my knowledge, my memory. When the 'I' goes back into the Heart and remains still without rising, there, in that state, it experiences the emanations of the Self; the quietness, the peace, the bliss.

This is still an experience, and as such, it is not enlightenment. It's not the full awareness of the Self. That full awareness is only there when there is no 'I' that mediates it. The experiences of the Self that happen when the 'I' is still existing may be regarded as a 'preview of forthcoming attractions', like the trailers for next week's movie, but they are not the final, irreversible state. They come and they go, and when they go, mind returns with all its usual, annoying vigour.

JD: How does one progress from these temporary experiences to a permanent one? Is keeping still enough, or is grace required?

DG: I would like to bring in Lakshmana Swamy again at this point. I mentioned him earlier as being an example of someone who realised the Self in Bhagavan's presence through the practice of self-enquiry. So, we are dealing with an expert here; someone who knows what he is talking about.

Lakshmana Swamy is quite clear on this point. He says that devotees can, by their own effort, reach what he calls 'the effortless thought-free state'. That's as far as you can go by yourself. In that state there are no more thoughts, desires or memories rising up. They are not being suppressed; they simply don't rise up any more to grab your attention.

Lakshmana Swamy says that if you reach that state through your own intense efforts and then go and sit in the presence of a realised being, the power of the Self will make the residual 'I' go back to its source where it will die and never rise again. This is the complete and full realisation. This is the role of the Guru, who is identical with the Self within: to pull the desire-free mind into the Heart and destroy it completely.

As I mentioned before, this won't happen if the desires and tendencies of the mind are still latent. They all have to go before this final act of execution can be achieved. The disciple himself has to remove all the unwanted lumber from his mental attic, and he also needs to be in a state in which there is no desire to put anything more into it. The Guru cannot do this work for him; he has to do it himself. When this has been accomplished, the power of the Self within, the inner Guru, will complete the work.

JD: We've both had this common experience of living around Papaji, and we have both heard him say to people 'You've got it!' Was he referring to that first temporary state or the second, final irrevocable state?

DG: I would say almost invariably the first. His particular knack, his talent, his skill was to completely pull the mental chair out from underneath you. He would somehow, instantaneously, disentangle you from the superstructure, the infrastructure of the mind, and you would fall – Plop! – right into the Self. You would then immediately think, 'This is great! This is wonderful! I'm enlightened!'

He had this astonishing talent, this power of being able to rub your nose in the reality of the Self. It was completely spontaneous because most of the time he wasn't even aware that he was doing it. Somehow, in his presence people lost this sense of functioning through the individual 'I'. When this happened you would be completely immersed in the feeling, the knowledge of being the Self. However, it wouldn't stick for the reasons I have already given. If you haven't cleared out all the lumber from your mental attic, these experiences will be temporary. Sooner or later the mind will reassert itself, and this apparent experience of the Self will fade away. It might last ten days, ten weeks, ten months or even years, but then it goes away and just leaves a memory.

JD: Does that mean that this second, this final state is very, very, very rare?

DG: In the *Bhagavad Gita* Krishna says, 'Out of every thousand people one is really serious, and out of every thousand serious people only one knows me as I really am'.

That's one in a million, and I think that's a very generous estimate. Personally, I think it's far fewer than that.

JD: This brings us to the subject of your recent series of books. In these books you have chosen people who were close to Bhagavan. Presumably, you chose people who you feel have reached that final state.

DG: No, that wasn't the criterion at all. Initially, my aim was to bring into the public domain accounts by devotees of Bhagavan that hadn't been published before in English. I make no judgements about spiritual maturity or accomplishments. My prime consideration was 'Has this been published before in English, and if it hasn't, is it interesting enough to print now?'

JD: So you don't in any way suggest in the book that they've reached this or that state?

DG: I let people speak for themselves. The second chapter of part one of *The Power of the Presence*, for example, is about a man, Sivaprakasam Pillai, who spent fifty years with Bhagavan. I have already mentioned him; he was the person who recorded the answers that Bhagavan wrote in the sand in 1901. In many parts of this chapter he's lamenting 'I've wasted my life', 'I'm worse than a dog', 'I've sat here for many years without making any progress'.

JD: But this man might have got it in that period, even if he thinks he didn't.

DG: In Bhagavan's day there was a daily chanting of Tamil devotional poetry. There was a fixed selection of material that took fifteen days to go through. Sivaprakasam Pillai's poems were part of this cycle. Every fifteen days the devotees would sit in front of Bhagavan and chant 'I am worse than a dog,' and so on.

Somebody asked Bhagavan, 'This man has been here fifty years and he is still in this state. What hope is there for us?'

Bhagavan replied, 'That's his way of praising me'.

When Sivaprakasam Pillai died Bhagavan commented, 'Sivaprakasam has become the light of Siva'.

Prakasam means 'light', so this was a pun on his name.

JD: This suggests that he had achieved this second, final state.

DG: Bhagavan himself only gave public 'certificates of enlightenment' to his mother and the cow, Lakshmi. He did indirectly hint that other people had reached this state, but he would never name the names. He only named those two after they died.

JD: Let me ask this question differently. In the collective consciousness of the ashram and the people who are associated with it, are there certain people who, somehow, everyone agrees on? Are there people that everyone accepts as enlightened, even though Bhagavan didn't publicly acknowledge their state?

DG: You'll never get everybody to agree on anything around here, but probably the most widely revered was Muruganar. He's an obvious candidate because right from the 1920s onwards he was writing Tamil poetry that spoke of his own realisation. He wrote more than 20,000 verses, and in a large number of them he was declaring his enlightenment. Many of these were published in Bhagavan's lifetime, and Bhagavan made no attempt to discourage the notion that these were true accounts. Bhagavan often read out extracts from these books, and this convinced many people that the contents must have been true.

JD: Are there some other candidates that Bhagavan himself seems to acknowledge?

DG: There's a very interesting 'back door'. Both his mother and Lakshmi the cow were given traditional burial rites that are reserved, according to an ancient Tamil scripture, for enlightened beings. During Bhagavan's lifetime only one other devotee was buried in this way: a Muslim man called Mastan who passed away in 1931. He is relatively unknown, but when he died Bhagavan immediately sent Kunju Swami to his village, which is about forty miles away, with instructions to build the kind of shrine that he ordered when his mother died.

I would take this to be a very strong but indirect endorsement of this man's state.

JD: There are many people nowadays who travel around the world giving satsang. Many of them place themselves in Bhagavan's lineage. Would you like to say anything about this?

DG: First of all, Bhagavan never authorised anybody to teach, so anyone who claims they've got Bhagavan's permission to teach isn't telling the truth. People might claim they are in the Ramana Maharshi lineage, which means that Bhagavan is their Guru or their Guru's Guru. I don't necessarily think that this gives people authority to teach. Authority to teach can come from someone who has realised the Self, and it can also come from the Self within. It was the power of the Self that gave Bhagavan himself the authority to speak and teach. No human teacher gave him that authority.

Papaji used to say, 'If you are destined to be a Guru, the Self within will give you the power to do the work. That authority doesn't come from anywhere else, or anyone else.'

Papaji told me once that Arunachala gave Bhagavan the power and authority to be a *Sadguru*. I think most people would agree with that.

Bhagavan was never authorised to teach by a human Guru, because he didn't have one. In fact, I don't think Bhagavan particularly wanted to be a teacher. In his early years on the hill he tried to run away from his devotees on three occasions, but he never got very far because he was severely limited by his love of Arunachala. There's a limit to how well you can hide yourself on Arunachala. If you are willing to run away to the Himalayas, you can get away with it, but if you are just dodging from rock to rock in Tiruvannamalai, people will catch up with you sooner or later. After the third unsuccessful attempt, Bhagavan realised that it was his destiny to have people around and to teach them.

JD: Can we go back to the story of Bhagavan's life? I have been very struck by the stories about his final days. He had a small cancer on his arm, which could have been easily treated by western medicine, but he never gave it much interest.

DG: He did receive the best western medical treatment. He had four operations, which were all done by very competent surgeons, but it was a malignant growth that kept coming back. The only thing that might have cured him was amputation. He drew the line at that and refused to have his arm amputated.

You shouldn't get the impression, though, that he wanted all this treatment. Whenever he was asked what should be done, his reply was 'Let nature take its course'.

The doctors were brought by the ashram authorities and by devotees who didn't want to see him suffering. Bhagavan accepted all their treatments, not because he felt that he needed to be cured, but because the various treatments were offered as acts of devotion. Allopaths, homeopaths, ayurvedic doctors, nature cure experts and herbalists all came, and he accepted all their treatments. He didn't really have much interest in whether they succeeded or not because there was nothing left in him that could say 'I want this to happen,' or 'I don't want this'. He let everyone, one by one, play with his body. He let the surgeons cut him open; he let the herbalists put poultices on.

JD: In a sense that is how he lived his whole life. He basically let his whole life happen.

DG: Yes. He probably knew better than the doctors what would work for him and what would not, but he didn't interfere. He let them do whatever they wanted to do. There's one story from his final days that I really like. Some village herbalist came along and made a concoction of leaves and put it on his arm. The high-powered allopaths were horrified. They thought they were losing valuable time as this bundle of leaves was sitting on Bhagavan's arm. Finally, they ganged up on this man and compelled the ashram manager to take the poultice off so they could get back to work with their scalpels. Even though Bhagavan had agreed to have this poultice on, he accepted the decision to take it off.

I have already said that Bhagavan didn't like to waste anything. He took the poultice off himself and put it on the neck of somebody who had a cancerous growth there and said, 'Well, let's see if it does you any good'.

That person got better and Bhagavan died.

JD: In a way his whole life was a living example of total surrender to ‘life taking its course’. It seems to me that this is a message that doesn’t always come through because it’s the ‘self-enquiry’ that is connected to his name.

DG: I think the key word to understanding Bhagavan’s behaviour is a Sanskrit term, *sankalpa*, which means ‘will’ or ‘intention’. It means the resolve to follow a particular course of action or a decision to do something. That is a *sankalpa*. Bhagavan has said that this is what separates the enlightened being from the unenlightened.

He said unenlightened people are always full of *sankalpas*, full of decisions about what they’re going to do next: how they are going to plan their lives; how they are going to change their current circumstances to benefit themselves the most in the long or the short-term future.

Bhagavan maintained that the true *jnani* has no desire whatsoever to accomplish anything in this world. Nothing arises in him that says, ‘I must do this, I must be like this’.

The title of my book *The Power of the Presence* actually came from an answer on this topic. I will read you what I wrote:

Narayana Iyer once had a most illuminating exchange with Bhagavan on this topic, an exchange that gave a rare insight into the way that a *jnani*’s power functions:

‘One day when I was sitting by the side of Bhagavan I felt so miserable that I put the following question to him: “Is the *sankalpa* of the *jnani* not capable of warding off the destinies of the devotees?”

‘Bhagavan smiled and said: “Does the *jnani* have a *sankalpa* at all? The *jivanmukta* [liberated being] can have no *sankalpas* whatsoever. It is just impossible.”

‘I continued: “Then what is the fate of all us who pray to you to have grace on us and save us? Will we not be benefited or saved by sitting in front of you, or by coming to you?...”

‘Bhagavan turned graciously to me and said: “...a person’s bad karma will be considerably reduced while he is in the presence of a *jnani*. A *jnani* has no *sankalpas* but his *sannidhi* [presence] is the most powerful force. He need not have *sankalpa*, but his presiding presence, the most powerful force, can do wonders: save souls, give peace of mind, even give liberation to ripe souls. Your prayers are not answered by him but absorbed by his presence. His presence saves you, wards off the karma and gives you the boons as the case may be, [but] involuntarily. The *jnani* does save the devotees, but not by *sankalpa*, which is non-existent in him, only through his presiding presence, his *sannidhi*.”’

JD: Is that what the Dalai Lama and the Buddhists call ‘compassion’?

DG: I don’t know enough about Buddhism to comment on that.

‘No *sankalpas*’ means that in an enlightened being there are no feelings or thoughts such as, ‘I must help this person’, ‘this person needs to be helped’, or ‘this situation needs to be changed’. Everything is totally OK as it is. By abiding in that state, somehow an energy, a presence, is created that takes care of all the incoming problems.

It’s like a desk in the outer office. All the incoming requests are processed, and processed very efficiently, in the outer office. The door to the inner office is closed, and behind it the *jnani* sits at his desk all day doing absolutely nothing. However, by abiding in his natural state the energy is created that somehow deals with all the requests that come in. The *jnani* needs to be there in the inner office, just being himself, because if he wasn’t there, the outer office wouldn’t be able to function at all.

JD: That would reinforce the time-honoured idea that you have to go and sit with an enlightened one.

DG: I agree, but such people are hard to find. In my opinion there are very few of them.

JD: Well, I think your opinion has some authority because you have been living here for about twenty years.

DG: Twenty-five years.

JD: In those twenty-five years you have met many people who were with Bhagavan. You have an unusual, analytic way of looking at things; you have had your own practice here, and you have served several teachers in this lineage. That should be enough to give you some authority to talk about these things.

DG: I have opinions, but I am not an authority. Don’t try to make me into one. You can find many people who have been here twenty-five years or more, and none of them agrees with me. You are quite free to go and listen to them and believe anything they have to say.

JD: Is there anything else you’d like to say that somehow summarises what we’ve been talking about?

DG: Find a teacher whose mind is dead and spend as much time as possible in his or her presence. That’s my advice to everyone who is serious about enlightenment.

JD: That’s interesting. We met a teacher in Rishikesh who basically said the same thing. He said, ‘You have to find a Guru’.

DG: There is a limit to what you can accomplish by yourself. Sitting in the presence of a true Guru will always do you more good than meditating by yourself. I am not saying that meditation is not useful. Intense meditation will purify the mind and it may lead you to a competent Guru, but being with a Guru is like freewheeling down a hill on a bike instead of pedalling uphill.

Papaji had an interesting notion. He said that if you meditate intensively enough, you will accumulate the *punyas*, which are spiritual brownie points, that somehow earn you the right to sit in the presence of a realised being. However, he said that once you had entered the presence of a realised being, it was more productive to sit quietly and not make any effort at all. When you sit in the presence of such a being, it is the power of the Self coming off and through that person that makes you progress further, not anything you do there.

I think Bhagavan would agree with this. He once told one of his devotees, 'Just keep quiet. Bhagavan will do the rest.'

JD: Thank you.

An Interview with David Godman

By Rob Sacks for Realization.org

David Godman is best known for his anthology of Ramana Maharshi's writings, Be As You Are, which has become a popular reference on the great sage's teachings. But few people know that David has written nine other books, and each one is equally remarkable in its own way. Two of these books have just come out, providing a good excuse for an interview. Since David lives in Tiruvannamalai and the editor of this website lives in New York, the interview was conducted by e-mail.

RS: You have just brought out two new books on Ramana Maharshi. Can you tell me something about them?

DG: In the late 1980s I began to collect first-person accounts by people who had spent time with Ramana Maharshi. It was my intention to make an anthology of accounts that hadn't been published before. To find original material I did extensive research on books that had appeared in various Indian languages but not in English. I also found some good material written in English that had never been published. At some point during this research I went to see Annamalai Swami, a devotee of Sri Ramana who had moved intimately with him for many years. His account proved to be so interesting and so long, I ended up doing a whole book just about him. Then I went to Lucknow to interview Papaji. His story fascinated me so much, I spent four years in Lucknow and eventually wrote a massive 1,200-page biography. The original project got put on the back burner, and I only came back to it about a year ago. I have changed my original criteria. I am now using some material that has been published before. However, since most of this material is rarely sold outside India, I think non-Indian readers of these books, even devotees of Sri Ramana, will find that most of the material is new to them.

RS: What made you decide to take this particular approach to Sri Ramana?

DG: Sri Ramana is all things to all people. There is no standard Ramana Maharshi who is the same for all people. People who approached him brought their minds with them, and Bhagavan, being a non-person with no mind of his own, magnified and reflected back all this incoming mental energy. So, different people saw him and experienced him in many different ways. If I wanted to write about Sri Ramana myself, I would have to put my own editorial overlay on top of all these differing experiences and impressions. So, I thought, 'Let people speak for themselves. Let people explain who their particular Ramana is.'

There is a fictional detective, Hercule Poirot, who appears in many of Agatha Christie's books. In one story, when he was completely stuck, he just started talking to everyone who was involved, and spent many hours just listening to what they had to say. Poirot's theory was, 'If you let people talk about themselves for long enough, sooner or later they give themselves away'.

This was my approach. I didn't want to edit or shorten anyone's story. On the contrary, I wanted to make it as detailed as possible. So, I just let them talk and say what

they wanted to say. If you give someone thirty pages to talk or write about their relationship with Sri Ramana, they have to reveal who they are in a very intimate way. This was my aim: to have a gallery of intimate portraits of Sri Ramana, each one drawn lovingly by a person who had a personal and very unique perspective on this great being.

RS: Could you describe one of your favorite sections from either of these books?

DG: When I made the first drafts of some of these chapters back in the 1980s, I circulated copies to all my friends in Tiruvannamalai. I asked everyone to give marks out of ten on how interesting they found each account. Some chapters that were given ten by one person would get zero from someone else. This illustrates what I was just saying: everyone has a different idea of who Sri Ramana is, and because people relate to him in different ways, they react differently to stories about him. My favorites were not so popular with many of my friends.

It's fashionable nowadays to be very positive about one's spiritual experiences. People like to jump up and down and exclaim, 'I'm free! I'm free!' I prefer the refreshing honesty of a devotee, Sivaprakasam Pillai, who, after fifty years of being with Sri Ramana, was still lamenting about his faults and his lack of progress. This is the person who first got Bhagavan to record his teachings on self-enquiry in 1901. I admired his honesty, his humility and his integrity in admitting that he still couldn't control his mind. I also enjoyed some of the teachings of Sri Ramana that were recorded by Sadhu Natanananda, whose account also proved to be not too popular with my friends. This is an extract that I particularly liked:

A certain lady who had a lot of devotion performed a traditional ritual for worshipping sages whenever she came into Bhagavan's presence to have *darshan*. She would prostrate to Bhagavan, touch his feet and then put the hands that had touched Bhagavan's feet on her eyes. After noticing that she did this daily, Bhagavan told her one day:

Only the Supreme Self, which is ever shining in your heart as the reality, is the *Sadguru*. The pure awareness, which is shining as the inward illumination 'I', is his gracious feet. The contact with these [inner holy feet] alone can give you true redemption. Joining the eye of reflected consciousness [*chitabhasa*], which is your sense of individuality [*jiva bodha*], to those holy feet, which are the real consciousness, is the union of the feet and the head that is the real significance of the word '*asi*' ["are", as in the *mahavakya* 'You are That']. As these inner holy feet can be held naturally and unceasingly, hereafter, with an inward-turned mind, cling to that inner awareness that is your own real nature. This alone is the proper way for the removal of bondage and the attainment of the supreme truth.

I appreciate and applaud anyone who has devotion to Bhagavan's form, but at the same time I love the purity of Bhagavan's advaitic response to this woman.

RS: Can we backtrack a little? Can you tell me something about your own background... some details of your family and how you came to be interested in Ramana Maharshi?

DG: I was born in 1953 in Stoke-on-Trent, a British city of about 300,000, located about halfway between Birmingham and Manchester. My father was a schoolmaster and my mother was a physiotherapist who specialised in treating physically handicapped children. Both of my parents are dead. I have one sister who is a year older than me. She is a former professional mountaineer who now teaches mountain and wilderness skills and occasionally leads groups to exotic and inaccessible places. My younger sister, now 43, used to teach in a college in England. Nowadays, though, she apparently spends most of her time assessing the quality of education on offer in different colleges.

I was educated at local schools and in 1972 won a place at Oxford University, where I did very little academic work, but had an enormous amount of fun. Sometime in my second year there I found myself getting more and more interested in Eastern spiritual traditions. I seemed to have an insatiable hunger for knowledge about them that resulted in massive bookstore bills, which I couldn't really afford, but not much satisfaction. Then, one day, I took home a copy of Arthur Osborne's *The Teachings of Ramana Maharshi in his Own Words*. Reading Ramana's words for the first time completely silenced me. My mind stopped asking questions, and it abandoned its search for spiritual information. It somehow knew that it had found what it was looking for. I have to explain this properly. It wasn't that I had found a new set of ideas that I believed in. It was more of an experience in which I was pulled into a state of silence. In that silent space I knew directly and intuitively what Ramana's words were hinting and pointing at. Because this state itself was the answer to all my questions, and any other questions I might come up with, the interest in finding solutions anywhere else dropped away. I suppose I must have read the book in an afternoon, but by the time I put it down it had completely transformed the way I viewed myself and the world. The experiences I was having made me understand how invalid were the academic techniques of acquiring and evaluating knowledge. I could see that the whole of academia was based on some sort of reductionism: separating something big into its little component parts, and then deriving conclusions about how the 'big something' really worked. It's a reasonable approach for comprehending mechanical things, such as a car engine, but I understood — and knew by direct experience — that it was a futile way of gaining an understanding of oneself and the world we appear to be in.

When I went through my academic textbooks after having these experiences, there was such a massive resistance both to their contents and to the assumptions that lay behind them, I knew I could no longer even read them, much less study them in order to pass exams. It wasn't an intellectual judgement on their irrelevance; it was more of a visceral disgust that physically prevented me from reading more than a few lines. I dropped out in my final year at Oxford, went to Ireland with my Ramana books, and spent about six months reading Ramana's teachings and practising his technique of self-enquiry. I had just inherited a small amount from my grandmother, so I didn't need to work that year. I rented a small house in a rural area, grew my own food, and spent most of my time meditating. This was 1975. At the end of that year my landlady reclaimed her house and I went to Israel. I wanted to go somewhere sunny and warm for the winter, and then return to Ireland the following spring. I worked on a kibbutz on the Dead Sea and

while I was there decided I could have a quick trip to India and Ramanasramam before I went back to Ireland. I figured out the costs and realised I couldn't afford it unless another £200 appeared from somewhere. I decided that if Bhagavan wanted me to go to India, he would send me the money. Within a week I received a letter from my grandmother's lawyer saying that he had just found some shares that she had owned, and that my share of them would be £200. I came to India, expecting to stay six weeks, and have been here more or less ever since.

RS: I've always wondered about your name. Is Godman your birth name or did you change it?

DG: It's my family name. I never had any desire to take a new name, and no one has ever tried to give me one.

RS: You said that you spent six months practicing self-enquiry based on your reading of Sri Ramana's books. Were you able to get a good understanding of the method from your reading? I ask because this seems to be difficult for most people. Did you need to modify your understanding later when you went to Sri Ramanasramam?

DG: I did find it hard to practise self-enquiry merely by reading books simply because I did not have access to much material. I had at that time only managed to find Arthur Osborne's three books on Ramana. Though they explained most aspects of the teachings quite well, I don't think that Osborne had a good understanding of self-enquiry. He seemed to think that concentrating on the heart-center on the right side of the chest while doing self-enquiry was an integral part of the process. When I later read Bhagavan's answers in books such as *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi* and *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, I realised that he specifically advised against this particular practice. Overall, though, I got a good grounding from these books. I had a passion to follow the practice and a deep faith in Bhagavan. I think that this elicited grace from Bhagavan and kept me on the right path. If the attitude is right and if the practice is intense enough, it doesn't really matter what you do when you meditate. The purity of intent and purpose carries you to the right place.

RS: If someone wants to learn self-enquiry, what should they read?

DG: I don't know what book I would recommend to new people who want to start self-enquiry. *Be As You Are* is certainly a good start since it was designed for Westerners who have had no previous exposure to Bhagavan and his teachings. There is also a book by Sadhu Om: *The Path of Sri Ramana Part One*. It is a little dogmatic in places but it covers all the basic points well. Self-enquiry is a bit like swimming or riding a bicycle. You don't learn it from books. You learn it by doing it again and again till you get it right.

RS: Could you briefly describe what your life has been like in Tiruvannamalai? What work have you done at Sri Ramanasramam?

DG: I spent my first eighteen months just meditating, practising self-enquiry, and occasionally walking round Arunachala. In 1978 I began to do voluntary work for Sri Ramanasramam. I looked after their library from 1978 to 1985, edited their magazine for a short period of time, and from 1985 onwards did research for my various books. In the later 1980s and early 90s I also devoted a considerable amount of time to looking after Lakshmana Swamy and Saradamma's garden. They bought land in Tiruvannamalai in 1988 and I ended up helping to develop it. In 1993 I went to Lucknow and spent four years with Papaji, where I wrote *Nothing Ever Happened*. Since my return to Tiruvannamalai in 1997 I have been writing and researching new books on Ramana.

RS: How have you supported yourself in India all these years?

DG: I didn't. Grace supported me. I have found that if you give all your time to God and his work, then he looks after you. I came here with \$500 in 1976. I didn't earn money for twenty years, but I always had enough to live on. Until I left Lucknow I gave the proceeds from all my books to the various organisations that supported me while I was writing them.

When I first came to Arunachala I fell in love with the place and wanted to stay as long as I could. I knew I didn't have much money, but I wanted to make it last as long as possible. There was a meter ticking away in my head: I have so much money, I am spending so much per day, and that means I have so many more days here. Those numbers, those equations were there all the time. Then, one day, as I was doing *pradakshina* of Arunachala, it all dropped away. It wasn't a mental decision. I stopped walking, turned, and faced the hill. I knew in that moment that whatever power had brought me here would keep me here until its purpose was finished, and that when it was time to go, it wouldn't matter if I was a millionaire or not, I would have to leave. From then on I stopped caring about money. In the period that I was worrying about money, all I did was spend. When I stopped caring, complete strangers would come up to me and give me money. Whenever I needed money, money just appeared out of nowhere.

RS: Can you give me an example of how this worked?

DG: When I volunteered to look after Lakshmana Swamy's land in the late 80s, I had about \$20 to my name. Somebody in Canada whom I had spoken to for about ten minutes two years before got out of bed and suddenly felt that he should give me some money. He sent me \$1,000, which was enough to get the garden going. I lived like that for years. When you work for Gurus, God pays the bills. That's my experience anyway. It was Papaji who encouraged me to start working for myself. He himself was a householder who spent decades supporting his family. He generally wouldn't let anyone give up his or her worldly life until retirement age, which in India is around 55. When I started work on *Nothing Ever Happened*, I assumed that all the proceeds would go to him, or to some organisation that was promoting his teachings. At some point during the research though, he let me know that he wanted me to accept royalties from the sale of the book.

Nowadays, I am not supported by any institution, so I publish my own books and live off the proceeds, which I have to say are minimal. I can live fairly comfortably in a

third world country such as India, but if I tried to live in America on what I earn from my books, I would be several thousand dollars a year below the poverty line.

RS: What effect do you feel in the presence of Arunachala?

DG: Arunachala brought me here in the same way it brought Ramana here. And it has kept me here for most of the last 25 years. I have occasionally left to be with teachers in other places: Nisargadatta Maharaj in Bombay, Lakshmana Swamy in Andhra Pradesh, Papaji in Lucknow, but Arunachala has always brought me back here afterwards. It's my spiritual center of gravity. I can make an effort to be somewhere else if I feel I would spiritually benefit from it, but when I stop making that effort, the natural pull of Arunachala brings me back here again. It's the only place in the world that I feel truly at home.

Arunachala has been attracting people for well over 1,500 years. Ramana liked to quote a saint of about 500 years ago who wrote in one of his verses, 'Arunachala, you draw to yourself all those who are rich in *jnana tapas*'. *Jnana tapas* can be translated as the extreme efforts made by those who are in search of liberation.

There are dozens of teachers nowadays who tour the world touting their experiences and their teachings. Many of them trace their lineage back to Ramana Maharshi via Papaji. And where did Ramana Maharshi's power and authority come from? From Arunachala, his own Guru and God. He explicitly stated that it was the power of Arunachala that brought about his own Self-realisation. He wrote poems extolling its greatness, and in the last 54 years of his life, he never moved more than a mile and a half away from its base. So, it is the power of Arunachala that is the true source of the power that now appears as '*advaita* messengers' all over the world.

For me, this is the world's great power spot. Arunachala has brought about the liberation of several advanced seekers in the past few centuries, and its radiant power remains even today as a beacon for those who want to find out who they really are.

RS: Have there been living people whom you regarded as your Gurus, or who had an especially strong impact on you spiritually?

DG: I think the four key spiritual figures would be Lakshmana Swamy, Saradamma, Nisargadatta Maharaj and Papaji. I have to include Ramana Maharshi on this list, even though I never met him while he was alive. I feel him as strongly as I have felt any other teacher. The Self that took the form of Ramana Maharshi is my Guru. He lit the lamp of enlightenment in the Heart of a few of his devotees, and when I sit in the presence of these beings I am receiving the luster, the light of Ramana Maharshi through them. So I will not say that my Guru has a particular form. I will say that the light of Arunachala became manifest in Ramana, and through him it was passed on to Lakshmana Swamy, Papaji, and Saradamma. When I bask in their light, I am basking in the living, transmitting light of Arunachala-Ramana.

Nisargadatta does not belong to this lineage, but he was an enormously beneficial presence in my life in the late 1970s and early 80s. I used to go and see him as often as I could. He repeatedly told me 'you are consciousness' and on a few rare, glorious occasions I understood what he was talking about. He was not simply giving me

information; he was instead describing my own state, my own experience in that moment. That was his technique. He would talk endlessly about the Self until you suddenly realised directly, 'Yes, this is what I am right now'.

RS: Have you used any practices in addition to those associated with Sri Ramana?

DG: No. From the moment I first encountered Bhagavan and his teachings in the 1970s I have never found myself attracted to any other teachings or practices.

RS: I often wonder whether Westerners misunderstand Ramana Maharshi. What are the most common misconceptions about his teachings?

DG: I am not sure how much understanding there is of Ramana Maharshi and his teachings in the West. He is an iconic figure to a vast number of people who are following some sort of spiritual path. I think that for many people he epitomises all that is best in the Hindu Guru tradition, but having said that, I think that very few people know much about him, and even fewer have a good grasp of his teachings. Not many people read books about him nowadays — I know that from trying to sell my own — and even fewer would profess themselves to be his devotee. I find there is very little interest in his teachings even among the people who come to visit Ramanasramam. Nowadays, many of the people who come are spiritual tourists, pilgrims who just travel round India, checking out all the various ashrams and teachers. About twenty years ago I met a foreigner here who had come to the ashram for advice on how to do self-enquiry properly. For several days he couldn't find anyone who was practising it, even in Ramanasramam. The people he asked in the ashram office just told him to buy the ashram's publications and find out from them how to do it. Eventually, he had what he thought was a bright idea. He stood outside the door of the meditation hall at Ramanasramam, the place where Sri Ramana lived for over twenty years, and asked everyone who came out how to do self-enquiry. It transpired that none of the people inside were doing self-enquiry. They came out one by one and said, 'I was doing *japa*,' or 'I was doing *vipassana*,' or 'I was doing Tibetan visualisations'.

How can there be misunderstandings among people who have never even bothered to find out the teachings in the first place, or put them into practice?

RS: I think that some people who are now teaching in the West are creating misunderstandings about his teachings. Some of them seem to confuse glimpses of nonduality and feelings of relative selflessness with Self-realisation. Since a number of these teachers trace their lineage back to Sri Ramana, their students project the ideas of these teachers onto Sri Ramana. What do you think about this?

DG: What are Sri Ramana's teachings? If you ask people who have become acquainted with his life and work, you might get several answers such as '*advaita*' or 'self-enquiry'. I don't think Sri Ramana's teachings were either a belief system or a philosophy, such as *advaita*, or a practice, such as self-enquiry.

Sri Ramana himself would say that his principal teaching was silence, by which he meant the wordless radiation of power and grace that he emanated all the time. The words

he spoke, he said, were for the people who didn't understand these real teachings. Everything he said was therefore a kind of second-level teaching for people who were incapable of dissolving their sense of 'I' in his powerful presence. You may understand his words, or at least think that you do, but if you think that these words constitute his teachings, then you have really misunderstood him.

RS: There are some aspects of his spoken teachings that appear to be unique. For example, his reference to the heart center on the right side of the chest. He said that this was the source of the 'I' and the place in the body where the sense of 'I' had to return in order for realisation to take place. People who talk about his teachings in the West rarely seem to mention this point.

DG: Ramana didn't mention it much either. On a few occasions when he was asked about it, he said it was more important to have the experience of the Self, rather than locate it in some part of the body. It is true that no teacher who came before him ever mentioned this, but I would not say that this is a major aspect of his teachings. Nor would I say that it is necessary to have this knowledge in order to have an experience of the Self.

RS: How did you choose the subjects for your three biographical books?

DG: In two of the three cases the subjects chose me. When I went to Lakshmana Swamy's ashram in the early 1980s, he asked me to write a brief biography of Saradamma, a project that eventually turned into a book-length account of both of them. A few years later, when I wrote a fifty-page account of Papaji's experiences with Ramana, intending to use it in a book about Ramana's disciples, Papaji liked it so much, he invited me back to Lucknow to do a complete biography on him. As for the third biography, I approached Annamalai Swami in the late 1980s, hoping to interview him in order to get enough material for a chapter in the same book that was going to feature Papaji's account. His story turned out to be so engrossing, so detailed, so unlike anything I had come across in the existing Ramana literature, it soon expanded into a book-length project.

RS: All these people seem to be Self-realised. Did you pick them for this reason? How did you know that they are Self-realised?

DG: The simple answer is that no one who is not a *jnani* can really tell who is in that state, and I would not claim to be in that state myself. Ramana told people that the peace one feels in the presence of such beings is a good indication that one is in the presence of an enlightened being, but this is a sign not a proof.

When I first went to see Lakshmana Swamy in the late 1970s, I did not go there with any intention of evaluating him. But as soon as I looked into his eyes, something inside me said, 'This man is a *jnani*'. Nothing has ever caused me to doubt that first impression. I don't know how I came to that conclusion because I had never had that kind of thought before with anybody else. Something inside me just knew. Up till the time I first met him, I had been meditating intensively for most of the day for a period of about eighteen

months. My mind was fairly quiet most of the time and I really felt that I was making good progress on the road to Self-realisation. However, within a few seconds of being looked at by Lakshmana Swamy, I was in a state of stillness and peace that was way beyond anything that I had experienced through my own efforts. That one *darshan* effectively demonstrated to me the need for a human Guru, and it also demonstrated to me that there were still people alive in the Ramana lineage who seemed to have the same power and presence that I had read about in so many Ramanasramam books. Since that day a large portion of my life and energy has been devoted to serving such beings and writing about their life and teachings.

RS: What is Self-realisation? The terms ‘glimpse’ and ‘waking-up experience’ appear in *Nothing Ever Happened*. Did you invent these terms? What is the relationship between a glimpse or waking-up experience and Self-realisation?

DG: I would say that Self-realisation is what remains when the mind irrevocably dies in the Heart. The Heart is not a particular place in the body. It is the formless Self, the source and origin of all manifestation. Self-realisation is permanent and irreversible. I also suspect that it is quite rare. Many people have had glimpses or temporary experiences of a state of being in which the mind, the individual ‘I’, temporarily stops functioning, but I don’t think that there are many people in the world in whom the ‘I’ has died.

Papaji used to say, ‘What comes and goes is not real. If you have had an experience that came and went, it was not an experience of the Self because the Self never comes and goes.’

I think this is an interesting comment. If it is true, it means that most waking-up experiences are merely new states of mind. It is only when the mind dies completely, never to rise again, that the Self really shines as one’s own natural state.

The terms ‘glimpses’ and ‘waking-up experiences’ that you refer to are temporary. They come and they go because the ‘I’ itself has not been permanently eradicated. A powerful Guru may be able to give a glimpse of the Self to just about anyone, but it is not within his power to make it stick. If the person has a mind that is full of desires, those desires will eventually rise again and cover up the glimpse.

RS: Do Westerners tend to have an exaggerated idea of the significance of these preliminary experiences?

DG: When these temporary no-mind states are being experienced, their importance can be greatly exaggerated by people who think that they have attained permanent enlightenment. But in most cases the feeling of self-importance vanishes along with the experience.

RS: I think you quote Papaji as saying that he met only two Self-realised people in his entire life, Sri Ramana and a Spanish priest. But he also met Nisargadatta Maharaj. Does this mean that he didn’t think Maharaj was Self-realised? Can you shed any light on this?

DG: When I first talked to Papaji in 1992, I asked him how many *jnanis* he had met in his life. He scratched his head and came up with three names: Ramana Maharshi, a Sufi *pir* he met in Madras and Tiruvannamalai, and a wandering *mahatma* who lived in the forests between Tiruvannamalai and Bangalore. When I got to know him better, he would sometimes add names to the list, and Nisargadatta Maharaj was one of them. He went to see him many times in the 1970s and was very impressed with him. J. Krishnamurti also made the list, although Papaji didn't think much of him as a teacher. The Spanish priest never appeared on his list. Papaji said he was the best Christian he had ever met, but he never said he was enlightened.

This list might expand or contract according to his mood or memory, but it never exceeded seven. These were all people he had met on his travels. What I found curious about this was that he never ever included any of his own disciples on this master list, an omission that might lead one to infer that none of his disciples had actually attained the final *sahaja* or natural state of the *jnani*. This is both interesting and paradoxical since many of his disciples were told very categorically by him, 'You are enlightened. You are free.' When I wrote his biography, I recovered several thousand letters Papaji had written to devotees all over the world. I would say that at least fifty of them could produce a hand-written letter from Papaji congratulating them on their enlightenment.

In the vast majority of cases these experiences were temporary. I often wondered why Papaji was so enthusiastic about these temporary experiences, and many other people felt the same way. Lots of people asked him about this, but I don't know anyone who got a straight answer, including me. When I asked him about this phenomenon, he said that he lived in the silence and that when silence spoke, it always said the most appropriate thing, even though it might not be factually accurate. He added, 'I have spent all my life in that silence. I have learned to trust what it says.'

Implicit in this statement is a recognition that Papaji is sometimes telling people that they are enlightened when he can see clearly that they are not. He trusted the source of these statements, but he could never give a good explanation of why the silence was making him say these things.

RS: Here's a question from a reader which I pass along to you: 'Papaji says that the only thing that needs to be done is to stop all effort. When this happens, there is quiet and a sense of egolessness. But in that state, it is possible to ask "Who am I?" and find an observer whose source is yet to be found. In other words, in that state, it seems that self-enquiry is still needed. Does this mean that Papaji is teaching something different from Ramana Maharshi? What is the connection between this effortless state and the state of abiding in the heart?'

DG: When Papaji said in satsang, 'Make no effort,' he was trying to put the person in front of him into a state of no-mind in which no effort is necessary or possible, since the 'I' has temporarily gone. He was not trying to put the person in a halfway stage in which further effort is needed

Here is a paradox for you. Ramana Maharshi realised the Self without any effort, without being interested in it, and without any practice, and then spent the rest of his life telling people that they must make continuous effort up till the moment of enlightenment. Papaji spent a quarter of a century doing *japa* and meditation prior to his climactic

meetings with Ramana, but when he began teaching, he always insisted that no effort was necessary to realise the Self.

Papaji's attitude to self-enquiry was, 'Do it once and do it properly'. Ramana's was, 'Do it intensively and continuously until realisation dawns'. Although you could never get Papaji to admit that there were differences between his teachings and those of his Guru, they clearly didn't agree on the question of effort.

With regard to the question of the difference between the effortless state and the state of abiding in the Heart, I would refer to Lakshmana Swamy. He agrees with Ramana that hard, continuous effort is needed up till the moment of realisation. He also says that by effort the mind can reach the effortless thought-free state, but no further. If that state has been achieved, and if one has the good fortune to be with a realised Guru, then the power of the Self will pull the mind into the Heart and destroy it. In the effortless state, mind is still there, but when one abides in the Heart it is gone.

Papaji conceded that meditation and effort had a limited use. He would sometimes say that intense meditation would earn the *punyas* or spiritual merit necessary to have the opportunity to sit with a realised being. Once that has happened, effort is no longer necessary. In fact, it is counter-productive. When one meets the Guru, the power of the Self that is present in an enlightened being's satsang takes over and gives the results and experiences that the mind is ready for.

All this probably appears to be confusing and contradictory. The teachers I have written about disagree profoundly on the question of effort and its role in Self-realisation, but they all agree that being in the presence of a realised being is the greatest aid to enlightenment. I can say from my own experience that when one is in the presence of such beings, mind drops away of its own accord.

RS: In his book *Relaxing Into Clear Seeing*, Arjuna Nick Ardagh says, 'In the past few years, there has been a dramatic increase in the ease with which Self-realisation can occur. Indeed, a kind of "epidemic" has begun in the West whereby the awakened view is becoming increasingly available.' It seems to me that Arjuna is referring here to glimpses, not Self-realisation, and I wonder if they are any more common today than they have been in India for millennia. Perhaps the real difference is that Indians didn't regard these glimpses as particularly unusual or worth noting.

DG: I don't think that there is an epidemic of Self-realisation in the West or anywhere else. I think full realisation is a rare phenomenon. There are certainly more people who think that they have realised the Self, but I think that they are deluding themselves.

RS: According to some Western *advaita* teachers who claim to follow Sri Ramana's teachings, Self-realisation is a two-part process. First, there is an awakening, a temporary experience of non-duality and egolessness. The second step is to stabilise the experience of this awakening, or in other words, make it permanent. But when I read about Mathru Sri Sarada in your book *No Mind — I Am the Self*, I seem to get a completely different picture. In her case, a permanent awakening experience may have been necessary, but by itself was not sufficient. For her, Self-realisation happened only when her mind descended into her Heart center and dissolved permanently. I get the impression that she

could have remained in the 'awakened state' indefinitely without this descent into the Heart. Would you comment on this?

DG: When egolessness is there, there is no one left who can stabilise or lose the experience. These experiences come and go. They go because the *vasanas* of the mind reassert themselves. When they arise and take over, you resume the practice again. This is the classic prescription of the *Gita*, and it is also what Ramana taught. Stay awake, stay mindful, and whenever you catch the mind straying, take it back to its source.

As regards Mathru Sri Sarada, I think you are referring to the experience she had just before she realised the Self. She felt that her mind had died because she was temporarily abiding in the Heart, but her Guru, Lakshmana Swamy, could see that her 'I' was not dead, which meant that this was a temporary experience. She was talking about her experiences and genuinely felt that her 'I' was dead, but it was not a real, permanent awakening.

A few minutes later, with the help of her Guru, the 'I' went back to its source and died forever. There was no fully awakened state prior to this experience. The final death of the 'I' in the Heart was necessary to complete the realisation process

RS: Can you name any people who are teaching today who are Self-realised?

DG: I could hide behind my earlier statement and say that I am not qualified to say who is enlightened and who is not. That is true, but I have absolute faith that Lakshmana Swamy and Saradamma are in that state. I don't want to make comments about anybody else.

RS: What plans do you have for future books and other works?

DG: I am working on a third volume of *The Power of the Presence*, and I hope to see it published in a few months. After that, I have a project to translate and publish some of Muruganar's poetry from Tamil into English. He recorded many of Bhagavan's teaching statements in short Tamil verses, and most of them have never been translated. This will be a major undertaking that may take a year or two. I also hope to get back to working on Papaji in the near future. I particularly want to edit the Lucknow satsang dialogues from the early 1990s. That's a big job, though, and would probably take years. I recently volunteered to make a book of all Sadhu Natanananda's writings on Bhagavan for Ramanasramam. I will fit that in between all my other projects.

When I sit down in front of my screen in the morning I often have no idea what I will be working on ten minutes later. I might look at something I have edited recently, move on to something else, and then find another chapter of another book that suddenly grabs my attention and interest. Or I might switch the machine off and go outside and do some gardening instead.

I have come to the conclusion that Bhagavan brought me to Tiruvannamalai to write about him and his disciples. I have learned this the hard way. I went back to England twenty years ago, hoping to earn enough money to come back to India and not do any work here. Nobody was willing to hire me to do anything. I even flunked an interview for picking up litter in the London zoo. But as soon as I had the idea of writing a book about

Bhagavan, everything fell into place. Though I had never written anything in my life, I was given a contract by a major publisher and sent back to India to write about him. That's how *Be As You Are* came into existence.

A few years before that I gave up editing the Ramanasramam magazine and went to Andhra Pradesh to be with Lakshmana Swamy. My intention was just to meditate there. I had had enough of writing, but within a few weeks of my arrival he asked me to write *No Mind — I am the Self*. Whenever I do work on Bhagavan or his disciples, everything goes well. Whenever I try to do something else, so many problems come up, nothing ever gets accomplished or completed.

Having learned this from experience, I have now surrendered to this destiny. I enjoy the work, and many, many people seem to appreciate the books. I asked Papaji years ago whether writing all these books on Bhagavan was a distraction for the mind.

He replied, 'Any association with Bhagavan is a blessing'. I took that as an instruction to carry on with the work.

RS: Thanks very much for this interview, David. I learned a lot from it, and you have been extraordinarily generous.

DG: You're welcome.

Living the Inspiration of Sri Ramana Maharshi

A dialogue between David Godman and Maalok, an Indian academic now teaching in America

Maalok: Ramana Maharshi has had a lasting influence on your life. For those of us who don't know much about the Maharshi, could you please share some of the salient aspects of his life that have influenced you deeply.

David: About two or three times a year someone asks me this question, 'Summarise Ramana Maharshi's life and teachings in a few words for people who know little or nothing about him'. It's always hard to know where to start with a question like this.

Let me say first that Ramana Maharshi was one of the most highly regarded and widely respected spiritual figures that twentieth-century India produced. I can't think of any other candidate who is as persistently held out to be an example of all that is best in the Hindu spiritual tradition. Everyone reveres him as the perfect example of what a true saint and sage ought to be.

How did this come about? While he was still in his teens Sri Ramana underwent a remarkable, spontaneous experience in which his individuality died, leaving him in a state in which he found his true identity to be the Self, the immanent and transcendent substratum. It was a permanent awakening that was truly remarkable because he had not previously had any interest in spiritual matters. He left his family home a few weeks later, without telling anyone where he was going, and spent the remainder of his life at the foot of Arunachala, a holy mountain and pilgrimage center that is about 120 miles southwest of Chennai.

After a few years there – a period in which he was largely oblivious to the world and his body – he began to attract devotees because there was a spiritual radiance emanating from him that many people around him experienced as peace or happiness. This, I think, is the secret of his subsequent fame and popularity. He didn't get a reputation for being a great sage because of what he did or said. It came about because people, who arrived at his ashram with all kinds of questions and doubts, suddenly found themselves becoming quiet, peaceful and happy in his presence. There was a continuous, benign flow of energy coming off him that somehow evaporated the mental anxieties and busy minds of the people who came to see him. He didn't ask people to come. People just came of their own accord. A 19th century American author once wrote that if you invent a better mousetrap, even if you try to hide yourself in the woods, people will beat a path to your door. People beat a path to Sri Ramana's door – for many years he lived in very inaccessible places – because he had something far better than an improved mousetrap to offer; he had a natural ability to induce peace in the people around him.

Let me expand on this because this is the key to understanding both his state and the effect he had on other people. When he had his final experience at the age of sixteen, his mind, his sense of being an individual person vanished forever, leaving him in a state of unassailable peace. He realised and understood that this was not some new

experience that was mediated by and through his 'I', his sense of being an individual person. It was, instead, his natural state, something that is there all the time, but which is only experienced when the mind and its perpetual busy-ness is absent. By abiding in this natural and effortless state of inner silence he somehow charged up the atmosphere around him with a healing, quietening energy. People who came to see him spontaneously became happy, peaceful and quiet. Why? Because Sri Ramana himself was effortlessly broadcasting his own experience of happiness, peace and quietude in such a way that those people who were around him got an inner taste, an inner flavor of this natural state that is inherent to all of us. I should say that this power was not restricted to his physical vicinity, although it did seem to be stronger there. People who merely thought about him, wherever they happened to be, discovered that they could experience something of this peace simply through having this mental contact with him.

So, having given that background, I can now answer the question: 'Who was Ramana Maharshi and what were his teachings?'

Sri Ramana Maharshi was a living embodiment of peace and happiness and his 'teachings' were the emanations of that state which helped other people to find and experience their own inner happiness and peace.

If all this sounds a little abstract, let me tell you a story that was passed on to me by Arthur Osborne's daughter. In the 1940s their house was a kind of dormitory for all the stray foreigners who couldn't find anywhere else to stay near Sri Ramana's ashram. A miserable, crabby woman appeared one evening, having been sent by the ashram. They put her up, gave her breakfast and sent her off to see Sri Ramana the next morning. She came back at lunchtime looking absolutely radiant. She was glowing with happiness. The whole family was waiting to hear the story of what happened, but she never said anything about her visit to the ashram. Everyone in the house was expecting some dramatic story: 'He looked at me and this happened,' or 'I asked a question and then I had this great experience.' As the lunch plates were being cleared away, her hosts could not contain their curiosity any longer.

'What happened?' asked one of them. 'What did Bhagavan do to you? What did he say to you?'

The woman looked most surprised. 'He didn't do anything. He didn't say anything to me. I just sat there for the whole morning and then came back for lunch.'

She had been just one new person sitting in a crowd of people, but the power coming off Sri Ramana had been enough to wash away a lifetime of depression, leaving her with a taste of what lay underneath it: her own inherent, natural happiness and peace.

Sri Ramana knew that transformations such as these were going on around him all the time, but he never accepted responsibility for them. He would never say, 'I transformed this woman'. When he was asked about the effect he was having on people, he would sometimes say that by continuously abiding in his own natural state of peace, a *sannidhi*, a powerful presence, was somehow created that automatically took care of the mental problems of the people who visited him. By abiding in silence as silence, this energy field was created, a field that miraculously transformed the people around him.

Your original question was, 'Why has Ramana Maharshi influenced me so much?' The answer is, 'I came into his *sannidhi* and through its catalytic activity I discovered my own peace, my own happiness.'

Maalok: If somebody wants to start practising the teachings of Ramana Maharshi, where and how should they start?

David: This is another classic question: ‘What should I do?’ However, the question itself is misconceived. It is based on the erroneous assumption that happiness and peace are states that can be experienced by striving, by effort. The busy mind covers up the peace and the silence that is your own natural state, so if you put the mind in gear and use it to pursue some spiritual goal, you are usually taking it away from the peace, not towards it. This is a hard concept for many people to grasp.

People found their own inner peace in Sri Ramana’s presence because they didn’t interfere with the energy that was eradicating their minds, their sense of being a particular person who has ideas, beliefs, and so on. The true practice of Sri Ramana’s teachings is remaining quiet, remaining in a state of inner mental quiescence that allows the power of Sri Ramana to seep into your heart and transform you. This can be summarised in one of Sri Ramana’s classic comments: ‘Just keep quiet. Bhagavan will do the rest.’

If you use the phrase ‘practising the teachings,’ the following sequence is assumed: that Sri Ramana speaks of some goal that has to be attained, that he gives you some route, some practice, to reach that goal, and that you then use your mind to vigorously move towards that goal. The mind wants to be in charge of this operation. It wants to listen to the Guru, understand what is required, and then use itself to move in the prescribed direction. All this is wrong. Mind is not the vehicle one uses to carry out the teachings; it is, instead, the obstacle that prevents one from directly experiencing them. The only useful, productive thing the mind can do is disappear.

Sri Ramana himself always said that his true teachings were given out in silence. Those who were receptive to them were the ones who could get out of the way mentally, allowing Sri Ramana’s silent emanations to work on them. In the benedictory verse to his philosophical poem *Ulladu Narpadu* Sri Ramana wrote, and I paraphrase a little: ‘Who can meditate on that which alone exists. One cannot meditate on it because one is not apart from it. One can only be it.’ This is the essence of Sri Ramana’s teachings. ‘Be what you are and remain as you are without having any thoughts. Don’t try to meditate on the Self, on God. Just abide silently at the source of the mind and you will experience that you are God, that you are the Self.’

Maalok: Did the Maharshi give some guidelines on what kind of life one should lead that would help spiritual quests? I mean mundane things like – eating, sleeping, drinking, talking, family, marriage, sexuality, etc.

David: I think the key word here is ‘moderation’. On several occasions he said that moderation in eating, sleeping and speaking were the best aids to *sadhana*. He didn’t approve of or encourage excess of any kind. He didn’t, for example, encourage people to take vows of silence. He used to say, ‘If you can’t keep your mind still, what is the point of keeping your tongue still?’

Though he encouraged devotees to live decent, upright lives, he never imposed rigorous moral codes on them. He was happy if devotees took to *brahmacharya*

naturally, but he didn't see much point in suppressing sexual desires. Someone once told him that in Sri Aurobindo Ashram, the men and the women slept separately, even if they were married. His response was, 'What is the point of sleeping separately if the desires are still there?' If people who had desires and wanted to get rid of them came to him for advice, he would usually say that meditation would make them lose their strength. According to Sri Ramana, you don't get rid of desires by suppressing them, or by not indulging in them; you get rid of them by putting your attention on the Self.

He didn't look down on people who were married as people who had succumbed to their desires. He once told Rangan, one of his married devotees, that it was easier to realise the Self as a householder than as a *sannyasin*.

Sri Ramana didn't think that renouncing habits or possessions was very beneficial. Instead, he asked people to go to the root of the problem and renounce the idea that they were individual people occupying bodies. He would sometimes say that even if you give up your job, your family and all your responsibilities and go to a cave and meditate, you still have to take your mind with you. While that mind is still there, exercising its tyranny, you haven't really renounced anything that will do you any good in the long term.

Maalok: When the topic of Ramana Maharshi's teachings comes up, most people think of self-enquiry, the practice of asking oneself 'Who am I?' You haven't even mentioned this.

David: I'm laying the foundation, as they say in court. I'm trying to put it in a proper perspective. People came to Sri Ramana with the standard seekers' question: 'What do I have to do to get enlightened?' One of his standard replies was the Tamil phrase '*Summa iru*'. '*Summa*' means 'quiet' or 'still' and '*iru*' is the imperative of both the verb 'to be' and the verb 'to stay'. So, you can translate this as 'Be quiet,' 'Be still,' 'Stay quiet,' 'Remain still,' and so on. This was his primary advice.

However, he knew that most people couldn't naturally stay quiet. If such people asked for a method, a technique, he would often recommend a practice known as self-enquiry. This is probably what he is most famous for. To understand what it is, how it works, and how it is to be practised, I need to digress a little into Sri Ramana's views on the nature of the mind.

Sri Ramana taught that the individual self is an unreal, imaginary entity that persists because we never properly investigate its true nature. The sense of 'I', the feeling of being a particular person who inhabits a particular body, only persists because we continuously identify ourselves with thoughts, beliefs, emotions, objects, and so on. The 'I' never stands alone by itself; it always exists in association: 'I am John,' 'I am angry,' 'I am a lawyer,' 'I am a woman,' etc. These identifications are automatic and unconscious. We don't make them through volition on a moment-to-moment basis. They are just the unchallenged assumptions that lie behind all our experiences and habits. Sri Ramana asks us to disentangle ourselves from all these associations by putting full attention on the subject 'I', and in doing so, prevent it from attaching itself to any ideas, beliefs, thoughts and emotions that come its way.

The classic way of doing this is to start with some experienced feeling or thought. I may be thinking about what I am going to eat for dinner, for example. So, I ask myself,

‘Who is anticipating dinner?’ and the answer, whether you express it or not, is ‘I am’. Then you ask yourself, ‘Who am I? Who or what is this “I” that is waiting for its next meal?’ This is not an invitation to undertake an intellectual analysis of what is going on in the mind; it is instead a device for transferring attention from the object of thought – the forthcoming dinner – to the subject, the person who is having that particular thought. In that moment simply abide as the ‘I’ itself and try to experience subjectively what it is when it is shorn of all identifications and associations with things and thoughts. It will be a fleeting moment for most people because it is the nature of the mind to keep itself busy. You will soon find yourself in a new train of thought, a new series of associations. Each time this happens, ask yourself, ‘Who is daydreaming?’ ‘Who is worried about her doctor’s bill?’ ‘Who is thinking about the weather?’ and so on. The answer in each case will be ‘I’. Hold onto that experience of the unassociated ‘I’ for as long as you can. Watch how it arises and, more importantly, watch where it subsides to when there are no thoughts to engage with.

This is the next stage of the inquiry. If you can isolate the feeling of ‘I’ from all the things that it habitually attaches itself to, you will discover that it starts to disappear. As it subsides and becomes more and more attenuated, one begins to experience the emanations of peace and joy that are, in reality, your own natural state. You don’t normally experience these because your busy mind keeps them covered up, but they are there all the time, and when you begin to switch the mind off, that’s what you experience.

It’s a kind of mental archaeology. The gold, the treasure, the inherent happiness of your own true state, is in there, waiting for you, but you don’t look for it. You are not even aware of it, because all you see, all you know, are the layers that have accumulated on top of it. Your digging tool is this continuous awareness of ‘I’. It takes you away from the thoughts, and back to your real Self, which is peace and happiness. Sri Ramana once compared this process to a dog that holds onto the scent of its master in order to track him down. Following the unattached ‘I’ will take you home, back to the place where no individual ‘I’ has ever existed.

This is self-enquiry, and this is the method by which it should be practiced. Hold on to the sense of ‘I’, and whenever you get distracted by other things revert to it again.

I should mention that this was not something that Sri Ramana said should be done as a meditation practice. It is something that should be going on inside you all the time, irrespective of what the body is doing.

Though Sri Ramana said that this was the most effective tool for realising the Self, it must be said that very few people actually achieved this goal. For most of us the mind is just too stubborn to be overcome by this or any other technique. However, the effort put into self-enquiry is never wasted. In fact, it’s a win-win situation for most people; either you get enlightened, or you just get peaceful and happy.

Maalok: Listening to your answer above – that very few people achieve the goal of Self-realisation even when practicing self-enquiry – people could be discouraged to even try. Perhaps in this context it would be helpful for you to elaborate on what is meant by complete Self-realisation? Is Self-realisation difficult or rare? Is it rare because people don’t practice self-inquiry properly?

David: Self-realisation is the definitive ending of the experience of the individual 'I'. It is a permanent state of knowing awareness, that contains, inherent within it, the understanding that one's true identity is the substratum out of which the world and all its names and forms appear. Many people have brief glimpses of this reality, but lose them when the mind, the individual 'I' reasserts itself. I believe that the permanent eradication of this sense of being an individual person is a rare event, although I know many people who would disagree with me on this subject.

I once asked Nisargadatta Maharaj why some people, such as Ramana Maharshi, realised the Self very quickly through a single act of self-enquiry, whereas others spent fifty years meditating and failed to reach the same state. I was curious to hear his answer because I knew that at this stage of his teaching career he was persistently maintaining that reincarnation did not happen. This meant that he couldn't say that people such as Sri Ramana arrived in this world with an advantage over other people who might not have done as much meditation in their previous lives.

In his reply he said that some people were born with a pure 'chemical' and some were not. I think he got the 'chemical' analogy from the layer of chemicals that coats a film. From what I gathered talking to him, we are all issued with a film for our life, that is to say, a more-or-less pre-determined script that plays itself out as our lives. The quality of the chemical is determined by a coming together of all sorts of factors that are mostly prevalent at the time of conception: our parents' genes, astrological configurations, the environment we are due to be brought up in were a few that he named. Those who have the good luck to be issued with a good chemical realise the Self, and those who have a bad or dirty chemical never do, irrespective of how much they try.

When I commented that this all sounded very deterministic, and that there didn't seem to be much point in spiritual effort if the quality of our issued chemical determined whether or not we got enlightened, he said that some people came into the world with a chemical that was only very slightly impure. These people, he said, could realise the Self by associating with a realised teacher and by having a strong and earnest desire to know and be the truth. In this particular model, the people who meditate or do self-enquiry for years without success are not necessarily doing it wrongly or badly; they are simply in the unfortunate majority whose chemical is so impure, no amount of effort will clarify it. And since there is no reincarnation, the effort these people make is not carried forward into future lives.

I found this unique model – I have never heard or read about this theory anywhere else – to be quite perplexing. In the years that I was going to see Nisargadatta Maharaj, the front cover of *I Am That*, his own book of teachings, contained a detailed statement by him on how reincarnation took place. Yet, during the last years of his life, I never once heard him admit that reincarnation was true, or say that effort or maturity in one life could be carried forward into another.

The disciples of Sri Ramana I have been with, such as Lakshmana Swamy and Papaji, have all said that spiritual effort in past lives is carried forward, making it possible for enlightenment to happen relatively quickly in the final birth. When I asked Lakshmana Swamy why he had realised the Self so quickly in this life, he said that he had finished his work in previous lives, and Papaji said he had memories of being a yogi in South India in his previous life.

Sri Ramana never talked about his previous lives, although he did concede once that he must have had a Guru in some other life. I personally feel that he completed all his spiritual work in some other body and arrived in his final birth in a state of such utter purity and readiness that enlightenment came to him virtually unasked while he was still in his teens.

I think people need to take a long-term view when they take to self-enquiry or any other practice. It's not bad to think of enlightenment as something that might occur at any moment. In fact, I think it's a laudable attitude to have, but at the same time one should not be disappointed if it doesn't happen. For many people, asking oneself 'Who am I?' is chipping away at a mountain of ignorance and mental conditioning. It may bear fruit in this life, but if it doesn't, the benefits will be carried forward to some other incarnation. Meanwhile, the practice, if it is carried out regularly, will give you enough peace and quiet to justify the investment of time and energy you put into it, here and now.

Maalok: In my experience there is a tendency among many people to convert the 'Who Am I?' technique into a mantra and repeat it. Is this a good method?

David: In the Second World War American troops took over an isolated Pacific island that had never been exposed to western civilisation before. They built a runway and flew in a vast amount of supplies for their military personnel. The locals, some of whom were still hunter-gatherers, ended up with many of the leftovers.

When the war was over, the Americans departed, leaving behind a runway and some abandoned buildings. The local tribals wanted the American bounty to continue, but they didn't know how to bring it about. They were clueless about geopolitics and technology. They had seen large birds descend from the sky and deposit an unimaginable amount of goodies on the runway. They had never really bothered to find out why these strangers were on their island, or how these exotic goods were manufactured and brought to the island.

They set up altars on the runway and started to perform their own religious rites there in an attempt to entice the big metal birds back to their island. These practices became a kind of religion that anthropologists labeled 'cargo-cult'.

I mention all this because many people try to do self-enquiry without really understanding how it works and why it works, and this lack of understanding leads them to do many practices that are not real self-enquiry, and which consequently will not produce the desired results. If I may pursue this analogy a little further, there is self-enquiry and there is cargo-cult enquiry, and to understand the difference between the two, you have to know how and why self-enquiry works.

In self-enquiry one is isolating the individual 'I', and by doing so one is making the mind, the individual self, sink back into its source and vanish. Any technique that encourages the mind to associate with objects or thoughts is not self-enquiry, and it will not make the mind disappear. On the contrary, it will make the mind stronger. When you repeat 'Who am I? Who am I?' the subject 'I' is concentrating on an object of thought, the phrase 'Who am I?' This does not lead to the disassociation of the 'I' from its thoughts; it keeps it enmeshed in them.

The same comment can be made about practices that associate self-enquiry with concentration on a particular place in the body. A lot of people have this misconception. If you are focusing on a place in the body, you are associating the subject 'I' with an object of perception – whatever spot you are concentrating on. This is not self-enquiry, and you will never cause the 'I' to vanish in this way. Any technique that puts attention on a thought or a perception or a feeling that is not 'I' is not self-enquiry. If you think it is, you are practicing cargo-cult enquiry. You are following a ritual or a practice that derives from an incorrect understanding of how the mind comes into existence, and how it can be made to disappear. Your likelihood of success will be the same as the islanders who tried to entice planes out of the sky with religious ceremonies.

Maalok: But doesn't faith and devotion have a role? What about the people who are doing things with deepest devotion and faith but perhaps don't have a good idea of what needs to be done (or undone in this case)?

David: I'm not criticising faith or devotion here. I'm simply saying that there's an effective way of doing self-enquiry and an ineffective way, and that one understands the difference by understanding Sri Ramana's teachings on the nature of the 'I': how it rises, and on how it can be made to subside.

If you have complete faith in a realised teacher, and complete devotion to him or her, that in itself will take you to the goal. You won't need to bother with anything else, and you won't even care about anything else. The best example of this I have ever come across is Mathru Sri Sarada, a devotee of Lakshmana Swamy who realised the Self solely on account of her intense love and devotion towards him. In the 1970s she was doing *japa* of his name and concentrating on a photo of him for up to twenty hours a day, and in the remaining four hours, while she was asleep, she would often be dreaming about him. This wasn't merely intense concentration; it was accompanied by an intense, uninterrupted flow of love towards him. Lakshmana Swamy has said that at times, the flow was so strong, it kept him awake at night. He once asked her to moderate the flow a little so that he could get some sleep, but she couldn't do it. That love was flowing continuously, twenty-four hours a day to the object of her devotion, and in the end, the power of her love brought about her realisation.

You need that much love to realise the Self through this method, and if you are hoping to realise the Self through self-enquiry, you need the same kind of commitment and intensity on your spiritual path.

Maalok: It is said that Ramana Maharshi was clear that mere mantra *japa* and mental imagery can be obstacles to Self-realisation. Is this correct? Is it also true that he allowed and even encouraged many people to continue their spiritual practices even if they were not quite consistent with his strong preference for the method of self-Enquiry? If he thought that self-Enquiry was so beneficial, why did he not encourage everyone who came to him for advice to do it?

David: There are several different questions here. I will answer them one by one.

When people came to Sri Ramana for the first time, they would often ask for spiritual advice. Sri Ramana would generally reply, 'What practice are you following

right now?’ If they said they were worshipping some particular deity, or repeating a mantra, he would usually say, ‘Good, you can carry on with that’.

He recognised that different people were attracted to different paths, and he knew that many people found self-enquiry difficult or uninspiring. He was not a dictator. Everyone in his ashram was quite free to follow any spiritual path. No one was compelled to study Sri Ramana’s teachings, and no one was compelled to follow a particular practice.

Quite often devotees would find, after a few months, that they were no longer interested in their old practices. They would again come to see Sri Ramana and ask him what they should do. When this happened Sri Ramana might suggest self-enquiry, but he would never force a change.

However, some people went up to him and said, ‘I am not following any particular practice at the moment, but I want to get enlightened. What is the quickest and most direct way of accomplishing this?’

I think that such a questioner would invariably be told to do self-enquiry.

There is a nice story about a group of villagers who came to see Sri Ramana in the 1920s. One of them asked for the best technique to realise the Self, and Sri Ramana advised him to do self-enquiry. A senior devotee later expressed a doubt that this advice was appropriate. He thought that such people ought to be told to do some form of *japa*.

When Sri Ramana heard about this comment, he said, ‘Why should I cheat people who come to me and ask for the best technique? He asked this question, so I gave him the right answer.’

If people wanted to do self-enquiry, Sri Ramana always encouraged them to do it, but if they felt drawn to other paths, he never tried to push them into doing something that they didn’t feel comfortable with. If you go through the published dialogues that visitors had with Sri Ramana you can find several instances of Sri Ramana recommending self-enquiry to people who didn’t seem enthusiastic about doing it. When he sensed their hesitation, he would ask them to follow some other practice instead.

This leads on to one of your other questions. What role did devotional practices, such as *japa* or meditation on a visual image or symbol of God, have in Sri Ramana’s teachings? He always said that there were only two ways to get enlightened: either do self-enquiry or completely surrender to God or the Guru. He never belittled devotion to names and forms of the divinity.

Many of the people who were following the path of surrender would do *japa* of some holy name. Sri Ramana approved of this whole-heartedly, but he did on occasion say that such practices would only bring results if one had love towards the name that one was repeating, or the form that one was concentrating on. This is an important distinction to note. You can repeat a particular name of God all day, but this will only be an exercise in concentration if there is no love, no devotion towards the name that is being repeated. Such repetitions will make the mental muscles stronger in the same way that repeated exercise makes the body’s muscles stronger. They will not make the mind disappear. However, if one can chant the name of God with love, not just with concentration, this will ultimately make the mind dissolve into God and become God.

Maalok: A curious thing happened the other day during my visit to Delhi. I accompanied my niece to a famous bookstore in Delhi. They had a big section on spirituality. I scanned the section carefully only to find not a single book on Ramana Maharshi. On enquiring, the bookstore manager told me that books on Ramana Maharshi are simply not popular and don't sell easily. Being the editor and author of significant books on Ramana Maharshi and his disciples, I was wondering if this has been your experience as well? If so, in your opinion, why?

David: They are not as popular as books by modern teachers such as Osho, nor do they have the appeal of the kind of self-help or new-age titles that seem to fill the 'spirituality' shelves in most bookstores. However, they do have steady, enduring sales. The standard texts that record Sri Ramana's dialogues tend to sell almost a thousand copies a year, every year, year after year. That means that a book such as *Talks with Ramana Maharshi*, which was first published in the mid-1950s, has probably sold well over 40,000 copies by now, and it continues to sell. I should mention that this is a 650-page hardback, and it's not an easy read unless you have a good knowledge of Sanskrit spiritual terms. New people discover Sri Ramana and his teachings every year, and every year the basic titles keep on selling.

Sri Ramanasramam, the publisher of most of the books on Sri Ramana, takes a rather passive approach to distribution. Its publishing and sales department fulfils orders that come in, but they don't advertise, and they don't lobby bookstores or distributors to take their books. That may be one reason why books on Sri Ramana don't often appear on bookstore shelves. I wouldn't be surprised to learn that most bookstore managers, even in India, don't know that good books on Ramana Maharshi exist.

Having said that, I will also concede that books that attempt to codify or explain his teachings will never be very popular. I think they will always be restricted to a small market of discriminating people who have a hunger for spiritual liberation. In any generation that group will not be very large. Sri Ramana's teachings are not a 'feel-good' philosophy, nor do they offer quick fixes or instant experiences. They, instead, offer a tried and tested roadmap to those who want to pursue spiritual practice seriously. That kind of traditional approach is not so popular nowadays. People want instant results, not a prescription for hard work.

About twenty years ago I attended a talk in which an enthusiastic speaker said that he wanted to bring Sri Ramana's teachings to millions of people all over the world. The next man who stood up commented on this proposal by saying: 'I think this idea is misguided. The more accurately you explain Ramana Maharshi's teachings, the fewer people you will find are interested in them. If you succeed in finding millions of new devotees for Sri Ramana, that will only be a measure of the extent to which you have diluted his teachings.'

I think that I agree with this. Ramana Maharshi was an exemplary saint who transformed the lives of countless people. Books about the transforming effect he had on people who came to see him will probably always find a good market, but if you publish a book about his teachings, few people will be interested in buying it, and even fewer in putting into practice the teachings that it contains.

Maalok: On a related note, I noticed that, recently, you are publishing books independently with no affiliation to an ashram or organisation. What led to this change? In my opinion your recent trilogy entitled *The Power of The Presence* is very inspiring. Despite their obvious intrinsic merit, has it been difficult to distribute and sell these books by yourself?

David: Most of the books I wrote or edited in the 1980s and early 90s were sponsored by various ashrams or spiritual organisations. I did these books as *seva*, as service to the teacher, and I gave all the royalties and rights away. In the middle of the 1990s Papaji, a direct disciple of Sri Ramana, encouraged me to start taking royalties from books as a means of supporting myself. Up until then the organisations I had been working for had generally supported me while I worked for them. Papaji had been a householder all his life, and he had supported his family through his earnings until he retired in his mid-50s. He liked people to be self-sufficient, and he encouraged people to support themselves. For the last few years I have been supporting myself by writing and publishing, and I am no longer sponsored or supported by any organisation.

I like publishing my own stuff because I can choose any topic that appeals to me; I can write as much or as little as I like, and I have no deadlines. Having said that, though, I must add that I only publish material on Ramana Maharshi, his teachings, his disciples, and his Guru, Arunachala. I have no interest in branching out into other fields.

Selling and distribution can occasionally be a bit of a headache, particularly since potential customers are spread thinly all over the world. Having been in the spiritual book business for almost twenty years, I think I would be right in saying that it is much harder to distribute a good spiritual book nowadays than it was in the late eighties and early nineties. Spiritual bookstores are chronically short of money to pay their bills, and mainstream bookstores are primarily interested in bestsellers. Amazon, along with Barnes and Noble, are putting a lot of good outlets out of business.

My advertising budget is zero. I don't do book tours. I don't sit in shops and sign books. I don't go from city to city doing radio interviews. These are the standard promotional tools in the West. Many publishers nowadays won't even consider giving an author a contract unless he or she is willing to go on the road and promote the book for them. I have brought out three new books in the last eighteen months, and during that period there hasn't been a single night when I haven't slept in my own bed in Tiruvannamalai.

I have a good mailing list of people who I know are interested in my books. Whenever I have something new to offer, I notify everyone by email. Other people hear about my books from friends or from notifications on the Web. Nowadays, there are so many specialised web sites, if a new book comes out on Sri Ramana, news of it will appear on sites specialising in *advaita*, gurus, enlightenment or Ramana Maharshi within a matter of days.

Hardly anyone comes across my books in bookstores nowadays because so few bookstores stock them. That doesn't bother me at all. There are several thousand people in the world who appreciate Ramana Maharshi enough to buy a new book about him or his teachings. Sooner or later my books will come to the attention of these people and they will buy them. I don't work very hard to find customers. I have a feeling that if someone is ready to appreciate a book on Sri Ramana, that book will somehow drop

into his or her lap at the right time. I don't think it's my responsibility to try to foist my books on reluctant customers. When I was ready for Sri Ramana's words, the book was there, waiting for me. The same thing will happen when other people need to read about him or his teachings.

Last year a man I have never met volunteered to make a web page for me that would contain details of where to buy my books. 'OK', I said. 'Thank you.' He bought my domain name, made a simple site for me and paid the fees for two years. This year someone else I barely know offered to put in a lot of time upgrading it and adding lots of new material. 'OK,' I said again. 'Thank you.' People turn up when they are needed and the work gets done.

If any businessmen or women are reading this, they are probably scratching their heads in disbelief. However, it works. My books eventually find their customers, and from the feedback I get, the customers are generally happy with what they buy and read.

Maalok: Among the dozen or so books you have written and edited, are there any one or two that stand out as being special for you personally?

David: Not really, I enjoyed working on them all. However, I think I got the most pleasure and happiness out of the biographies because they involved a lot of personal contact with all the subjects. Also, I enjoyed the research aspect of these books: tracking down little-known facts and incidents is something I always enjoy doing. Finally, once the research is over, there is the creative challenge of putting it all together into a seamless whole, constructing a narrative that enables the reader to enter into and be immersed in an astonishingly different world. I try to be as factual as possible when I do this, but at the same time I want to convey the reverence, the awe and the esteem I feel for these people. I write about these people because for me they are magnificent examples of how human lives should be lived.

Maalok: How did you gather the material for the biographies you have written? Did you use tape recorders etc. while conversing with the subjects? The reason I am asking is that on reading I am impressed by the degree of details in each one of them, which becomes especially astounding since several of them were written in the twilight years of the subjects.

David: I don't think I had a tape recorder when I interviewed Saradamma and Lakshmana Swamy. I suppose I ought to remember something like that, but I can't. I think I just took notes as they talked. I remember sitting with them every morning for about an hour, probably over a period of about a month. There was a lot of detail in that book simply because Saradamma had such a good memory. She had an astonishing recall. Lakshmana Swamy didn't have such a good memory about the years that Saradamma was doing her *sadhana*, but her astounding photographic memory of that period more than made up for this. Lakshmana Swamy did, though, have excellent memories of his early life, his time with Sri Ramana and the years he spent as a solitary recluse. The two accounts complemented each other very well. There was no question of old age being a factor here because Lakshmana Swamy was still in his fifties then,

and Saradamma was in her early twenties. She was describing events that had mostly happened five to eight years before.

With Annamalai Swami I had taped sessions every afternoon. I would fill most of a ninety-minute tape almost every day. I would transcribe it overnight, go back the next afternoon and use the same tape again for the next day's stories. I think it was an economy measure because I didn't have much money at the time, but looking back on it, I wish now that I had used separate tapes and kept them all. It would have been a nice record. I am sure there are now many people who would enjoy listening to him tell his stories. He was a good story-teller, and he had a captivating narrative style. He wasn't very good on dates or sequences of events – which story came before or after which other one – so I had to work all that out for myself later. That was an absorbing and fulfilling challenge: recreating his world, and populating it with all the characters and incidents he had told me about. I did a lot of Sherlock Holmes work, poring over old photos of ashram buildings, and going through old ashram account books, trying to match the stories he was telling me with the physical evidence of the buildings he was working on.

What I particularly liked about him was the way he would distinguish between stories that he had first-hand knowledge of and those that he didn't. If he had been present at some incident, he would tell me. If he had heard a story second-hand, he would qualify his account by saying that he only had indirect knowledge. He wasn't a scholarly man, but he understood the necessity of good scholarship. We were writing about his Guru, and to him the words and actions of his Guru were sacred. He wanted utmost accuracy wherever possible. Sometimes he would even give me what politicians would call 'off-the-record briefings'. He would give me opinions on why he thought certain people behaved the way they did, but then he would add, 'Don't print this because this is just my opinion. I am just telling you this to give you some background information on what the ashram was like at this time.' It was a pleasure to deal with someone who knew how to evaluate source material in this way.

When you talk to eighty-year-olds about their youth, there is always the possibility that they are misremembering things, but just about everything that was checkable from other sources turned out to be true. That gave me the confidence to believe in the reliability and accuracy of his whole narrative.

As I said, dates were not his strong point. Initially, for example, he was quite insistent that he came to Sri Ramana in 1930, but when I proved to him that Seshadri Swami died in early 1929, he had to change his mind because he had met Seshadri Swami on a few occasions. However, mistakes such as these were few and far between.

Papaji was also in his eighties when I collected the details of his life. He wrote out about 200 pages of answers for me in response to a massive biographical questionnaire I inflicted on him. It was sixteen pages long. All his satsangs were being recorded in those days, and during the hour or so he spent with visitors every day he often mentioned incidents from his early life. So, although I wasn't recording his stories directly, I had access to a whole archive of tapes that had records of him telling stories about various things that had happened to him over the years.

I contacted many people who had known him and moved with him at various periods of his life. Their information corroborated a lot of what he had been telling me. For example, when he was a child he said that Krishna would come and play with him

in his bedroom, but apparently no one else in the family could see him. I spoke to two of his surviving sisters and they both remembered incidents in which a very young Papaji seemed to be playing with an unseen friend on his bed or in the family home. On one of these occasions he went into trance that lasted for hours.

Usually, when he told a story in response to a question, I got the feeling that he was often getting his information from his memory of the last time he told the story, rather than from the original incident itself. I think a lot of people do this. However, sometimes, he would spontaneously remember some incident and start talking about it. When this happened, the most astonishing details would come out. I remember him talking about a Muslim *pir* he met in Madras. I had heard the story before, but when he started telling me on this occasion I could feel that he was actually back in Madras in the mid-1940s, walking down the street and describing all the things he was seeing. He was talking about walking past particular shops and businesses and describing the sights and scenes as if he were actually walking down that particular street. These stories were very precious for me. It was like having a video replay of the incident, unobstructed by any of the subsequent retellings. I learned not to interrupt when he got into this kind of mood. If you asked a question, perhaps a clarification or an explanation, the look in his eyes would change and he would not be in the street any more. He would be back in his memory, telling the story in the way he usually did.

Overall, with all the people I have written about, I satisfied myself that I was dealing with reliable memories. With Papaji and Annamalai Swami, there were occasional discrepancies that no amount of research or questioning could sort out. The events they pertained to were simply too long ago. However, I am satisfied that, to the best of my ability, I have given reliable accounts of truly great people.

Question: You mentioned that Papaji's surviving sisters saw him playing with Krishna when he was young, but no one saw actually Krishna except for Papaji himself. He could have been making it up and just telling people that he had seen Krishna. Later, when he became famous, the family would probably say, 'Yes, yes, we saw him playing with Krishna when he was young'. Did you consider possibilities such as these?

David: Yes, this is a valid point, and I probably picked a bad example when I mentioned this particular story. Of course, no one can corroborate visionary experiences because they are almost always restricted to one person. Papaji had visions on a regular basis throughout his life, and virtually no one else ever saw them. Many of his devotees had visions of their own when they were in Papaji's presence, and these too were only seen by one person. Even Papaji did not see them.

Leela, one of the sisters who said she had seen Papaji playing with Krishna as a boy had a vision of Sita in Valmiki Ashram on the banks of the Ganga. Papaji was present on that occasion, and both of them saw the deity take a physical form and speak to them. Leela became somewhat hysterical and passed out. It definitely was not a normal experience for her. So, when she said that she had seen Papaji playing with Krishna when he was young, she had every reason to believe that he was telling the truth.

Many of the other stories that Papaji narrated were much easier to corroborate. Papaji had a huge fund of improbable stories and events. Some of them were so ridiculous, they left you thinking, 'This can't possibly be true. He's playing a joke on us

and making all this up.’ However, whenever I found people who had been present when the incident had taken place, they would always back up Papaji’s version of events, or at least tell a story that was very, very similar to it.

Question: You have mentioned that final Self-realisation is when the mind actually ‘dies’ irreversibly in the Self. You have also mentioned how Papaji used to sometimes give an account of his life based on memory of his earlier narration. The idea of memories and a dead mind seem contradictory. Could you please clarify this?

David: Many people are puzzled by this apparent conundrum. A dead mind is one in which there is no thinker of thoughts, no perceiver of perceptions, no rememberer of memories. The thoughts, the perceptions and the memories can still be there, but there is no one who believes, ‘I am remembering this incident,’ and so on. These thoughts and memories can exist quite happily in the Self, but what is completely absent is the idea that there is a person who experiences or owns them.

Papaji once gave a nice analogy: ‘You are sitting by the side of the road and cars are speeding past you in both directions. These are like the thoughts, memories and desires in your head. They are nothing to do with you, but you insist on attaching yourself to them. You grab the bumper of a passing car and get dragged along by it until you are forced to let go. This in itself is a stupid thing to do, but you don’t even learn from your mistake. You then proceed to grab hold of the bumper of the next car that comes your way. This is how you all live your lives: attaching yourself to things that are none of your business and suffering unnecessarily as a result. Don’t attach yourself to a single thought, perception or idea and you will be happy.’

In a dead mind the ‘traffic’ of mental activity may still be there, usually at a more subdued level, but there is no one who can grab hold of the bumper of an idea or a perception. This is the difference between a quiet mind and no mind at all. When the mind is still and quiet, the person who might attach himself or herself to the bumper of a new idea is still there, but when there is no mind at all, when the mind is dead, the idea that there is a person who might identify with an object of thought has been permanently eradicated. That is why it is called ‘dead mind’ or ‘destroyed mind’ in the Ramana literature. It is a state in which the possibility of identification with thoughts or ideas has definitively ended.

Let me go back to Papaji and what I said about his memories. Papaji said in an interview he gave in 1990 to two American dentists, ‘When I speak, I never consult my memory or my past experience’. When I asked him about this, he said that people with minds always go back to the past in order to formulate their next sentence, whereas the words of enlightened people are prompted by the Self in the present moment, and are not the consequence of past memories or experiences. This is the difference between using your mind to have a conversation and allowing the Self to put the necessary words into your mouth whenever it is necessary to speak. When there is no mind, words come out spontaneously, as and when they are required. If those words happen to take the form of a story from the past, one should not come to the conclusion that there is an ‘I’ who is delving into past memories and retrieving them. When we see an enlightened person do this, we assume that this – a mind retrieving information from the memory – is what is happening because this is the way our own minds work. We project the

mechanism of our own minds onto the enlightened person and assume that she too must think and function in this way. We do this because we can't conceive of any other way that thoughts and memories can be articulated.

Just for fun, I once asked Papaji how he managed to do his shopping without using his memory or his past experiences. I should mention here that he was a ferocious bargain hunter when it came to buying vegetables. He always insisted on the best quality at the cheapest price.

'How can you do this,' I asked, 'without a memory? To know whether you are getting a bargain, you have to know what the price was yesterday or last week, and to know whether or not a carrot is in a good condition, you need to need to have a memory and a prior experience of what a good carrot looks like.'

At first he just said, 'What a stupid question!' but then he laughed and more or less summarised what I have just explained: that there is no one who thinks, decides and chooses while he is out shopping. The Self does all these things automatically, but to an onlooker it appears as if there is someone inside the body making decisions based on past experience and knowledge.

I heard U. G. Krishnamurti talk about his shopping habits in very similar terms in the late 1970s.

He said, 'I push my trolley down the aisle and watch an arm reach out, pick up a can and put it in the cart. It's nothing to do with me. I didn't tell the arm to move in that direction and select that particular can. It just happened by itself. When I reach the checkout counter, I have a basketful of food, none of which I have personally selected.'

Question: You obviously have a reverence for the people you were writing about. Didn't that make it difficult to be objective about facts? For example, if you saw something 'not so nice' (at least as perceived by an average reader) about these people or their lives, there could have been a tendency to not include it in the books, given that you have a reverence towards them.

David: Let me start with Ramana Maharshi. I have been researching his life and teachings for a large part of the last twenty-five years and in all that time I have not come across a single incident that I would keep out of the public domain because it might give people a bad idea of him. His behaviour and demeanour at all times were impeccable. All the attributes we associate with saintliness were present in him: kindness, gentleness, humility, equanimity, tolerance, and so on. For decades he lived his life fully in the public spotlight. He had no private room of his own, so everything he did and said was open to scrutiny. Except when he went to the bathroom, he was never behind a closed door. Up until the 1940s, if you wanted to come and see him at 2 a.m. in the morning, you could walk into the hall where he lived and sit with him. Some people did occasionally invent stories about him to try to discredit him, but no one who had moved with him closely would ever believe them. There was simply no scope for scandal or misbehaviour because his life was so public, and so saintly. He never dealt with money; never spoke badly of anyone; he owned nothing except his walking stick and his water pot; and he was never alone with a woman. Only people who had never watched him live his life could invent scandalous stories about him and expect other people to believe them.

When outsiders did make up stories about him, Sri Ramana would react with amusement rather than annoyance. When a disgruntled ex-devotee brought out an extremely libellous pamphlet about him in the early 1930s, the ashram manager wanted to go to court and sue the author to protect the good name of Sri Ramana and the ashram.

Sri Ramana dissuaded him and said, 'Why don't you instead sell it at the front gate. The good devotees will read it and not believe a word of it. The bad devotees will believe it and stay away. That way we will get fewer visitors here.'

The manager, of course, could never agree to such a proposal since the devotees would not stand for such a scurrilous booklet being sold on the ashram's premises. However, the whole incident illustrates an interesting aspect of Sri Ramana's character: not only was he unmoved by personal criticism, he occasionally enjoyed it, and at times even seemed to revel in it. It is said in the *sastras* that response to praise or blame is one of the last things to go before enlightenment happens. It was definitely absent in Sri Ramana. Let me mention one other story that very few people have heard about. There used to be a scrapbook in the hall where Sri Ramana lived. If there were any stories about him in the newspapers, someone would cut them out and paste them in the book. They were either neutral reports that gave information about his life, teachings and ashram, or they were very favourable testimonials. One day a highly critical report appeared in a newspaper. Sri Ramana himself cut it out and pasted it on the front cover of the scrapbook, overruling the horrified objections of all the devotees.

'Everyone should have their say,' he said. 'Why should we keep only the good reports? Why should we suppress the bad ones?'

This is all a roundabout way of saying that there are no bad stories about Sri Ramana, so the question of suppressing them doesn't arise.

A few years ago I was sitting in on a conversation between Kunju Swami, someone who had been with Sri Ramana since the early 1920s, and a friend of mine, Michael James. Kunju Swami was revising one of his books, deleting a few stories that he thought might give a bad impression of Sri Ramana. To me the deletions were pointless. For example, when Sadhu Natanananda first came to Sri Ramana in 1918, he asked someone in the temple in town for directions.

The man he spoke to said, 'Don't waste your time going to see that man. I have been visiting him for sixteen years. He is completely indifferent to everyone.'

Kunju Swami wanted to delete this reply because he didn't want people to feel that someone could spend sixteen years visiting Bhagavan and not feel some benefit. For me, this is a reflection on this particular visitor's spiritual immaturity, not a criticism of Sri Ramana's transforming power. The story reflects badly on the person who was unable to recognise Sri Ramana's greatness, not on Sri Ramana himself. It may rain twenty-four hours a day, but nothing will grow in sterile soil.

Anyway, Michael asked Kunju Swami, 'In the thirty years that you were associated with Sri Ramana [1920-50] did you ever see him do or say anything that was so bad or so embarrassing that you feel that you couldn't tell anyone, or make it public, because it would reflect badly on his public image?'

Kunju Swami thought for a while and said 'No'.

'Then who are we protecting by censoring stories?' asked Michael.

He didn't receive an answer.

Kunju Swami felt that that it was an expression of his Guru *bhakti* to filter out any stories that might, even remotely, cause readers to think that Sri Ramana was not some great omnipotent being who transformed everyone who came to him. I take a different view. I don't think I need to burnish Sri Ramana's image at all because the uncensored truth of his life speaks for itself.

Having said all this, I should also make it clear that Sri Ramana himself readily admitted that enlightenment didn't turn people into paragons of virtue. Like most great Masters before him, he said that it was impossible to judge whether someone was enlightened by what he or she did or said. Saintliness does not necessarily go hand in hand with enlightenment, although most people like to think that it should. Sri Ramana was a rare conjunction of saintliness and enlightenment, but many other Masters and enlightened beings were not. They were not less enlightened because they didn't conform to the social and ethical mores of their times; they simply had different destinies to fulfil.

In *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Sri Ramana narrates the story of Kaduveli Siddhar, an austere ascetic who attracted public ridicule by having an affair with a temple dancer. A local king offered a reward to anyone who could prove whether this man really was a saint or not. At the time the challenge was issued, Kaduveli Siddhar was subsisting on dry leaves that fell from trees. When the dancer eventually gave birth to Kaduveli Siddhar's baby, she thought that she had proved her point and went to the king to collect her reward.

The king, who wanted some public confirmation of their intimate relationship, arranged a dance performance. When it was under way, the dancer stretched out her foot towards Kaduveli Siddhar because one of her anklets had become loose. When he retied it for her, the audience jeered at him. Kaduveli Siddhar was unmoved. He sang a Tamil verse, part of which said, 'If it is true that I sleep day and night quite aware of the Self, may this stone burst into two and become the wide expanse'.

Immediately, a nearby stone idol split apart with a resounding crack, much to the astonishment of the audience.

Sri Ramana's conclusion to this story was, 'He proved himself to be an unswerving *jnani*. One should not be deceived by the external appearance of a *jnani*.'

I find it fascinating that Sri Ramana, a man of impeccable saintliness, could say that behaviour such as this could not be taken to indicate that Kaduveli Siddhar was unenlightened.

Question: That seems to take care of Ramana Maharshi. What about the other people you have written about?

David: Well, the story of Kaduveli Siddhar reminds me of Papaji, who took a second wife, a Belgian woman called Meera, while his first wife was still alive and even fathered a daughter, Mukti, with her. He was over sixty at the time, and Meera was not much more than twenty. This relationship upset many of Papaji's devotees, and a significant number of them abandoned him because they all thought that he had fallen from his high state. Papaji himself did not conceal this relationship. As soon as the baby was born, he brought both Meera and Mukti to his parents' home in Lucknow to introduce Mukti to her grandparents. When I was researching his biography, I told him

that it was his decision whether or not this story went into the book. In response, he sat down and wrote out an account of the relationship for me. He didn't think that it was anything that he needed to conceal. Though many people might think badly of him because of this relationship, there was never any question of suppressing it, of leaving it out of the book.

Question: Did he ever explain why he started this relationship? Did he give any reasons?

David: Papaji, and enlightened people in general, never have any reasons for the actions they undertake. Since they don't have minds that choose and decide, they don't generate reasons for future courses of action.

I remember when there was a plan to go on an extensive foreign tour. Tickets had been booked, visas had been obtained. When the travel agents arrived with the tickets, he simply said, 'I'm not going anywhere,' and the trip was cancelled. A few weeks later, when someone asked him the reason for the sudden last-minute cancellation, he said, 'Reasons? I don't have reasons for anything I do.'

When you abide as the Self, you do whatever the Self prompts you to do, without thinking or knowing why. There is nobody there who can say, 'I should do this; I should not do that,' because there is no one left who can make these decisions.

I once met someone who lived with him in Hardwar. They used to go for walks along the Ganga every day, often taking the same route. Sometimes Papaji would start off along one route and then, for no apparent reason, he would veer right or left and head off somewhere else. The following dialogue once ensued:

'Where are we going?'

'I don't know.'

'Why did you turn off the path?'

'I don't know. Something just impelled me to walk in this direction.'

'How far do we have to go?'

'I don't know. I will know when we get there.'

'Where's "there"?''

'I don't know. When we get there I will know why I started walking this way.'

Eventually, they met a man in the forest, and that man had a waking-up experience with Papaji. The Self knew that this man was ready for such an experience and it directed Papaji towards him. Papaji didn't know that he had been diverted towards this meeting until he met the man. He simply accepted that the Self had propelled him in a particular direction. He didn't question or doubt the diversion. In fact, he didn't think or worry about it in any way. He just let the Self take him to where he was needed.

I think we can say that Papaji had a destined meeting with this man. I think I would also say that Papaji had a destiny with Meera, some karma to work out with her. Because the business involved sex and a baby rather than a meeting in a forest that involved a waking-up experience, many people would say that he behaved immorally, but I would just say that his body fulfilled its ordained destiny.

Question: That an extraordinarily lenient view to take of a man who was fathering a baby outside marriage with a woman forty years his junior.

David: In *Sri Ramana Darsanam*, a book I recently edited for Sri Ramanasramam, the author, Sadhu Natanananda, attributes the following remarks to Sri Ramakrishna, the great 19th century Bengali saint: ‘Even if my Guru is one who frequents the toddy shop, I will not superimpose any blemish on him. Why? Because I know that he is not going to lose his Guru-nature simply because of that. I have taken refuge in him not for examining and investigating his external life. That also is not my duty. Therefore, whatever happens, he alone is my Guru.’

The word Guru means ‘the one who dispels darkness’. Someone who has ‘Guru-nature’ has the ability to wake people up from the darkness of their self-inflicted ignorance and show them the light of the Self. Papaji had that Guru-nature. In the four years that I was writing and researching his biography I came across innumerable people from all over the world who testified that, in an encounter with him, they had had a direct experience of the Self. The experiences often didn’t stay, but the fact that they happened at all indicates to me that Papaji had that Guru-nature, that rare ability to show people the Self. He could be cranky and irascible at times, but no one who moved with him for any length of time could doubt that a massive, transforming energy was radiating from him.

Question: So you think that an enlightened Guru can never be held to account for his actions? That we never have the right to complain about or criticise his behaviour simply because it does not conform to accepted canons of morality?

David: For me, the true Guru is God manifesting in a human form. There is nobody inside the Guru’s body who chooses or decides to take actions, and no one there to take responsibility for them. What they say is the word of God, and what they do are the actions of God. People who want to judge them by their words and actions are just seeing a body and are assuming that there is a mind inside it that thinks and decides in much the same way that they do. They can’t see the divinity behind the form, and they can’t feel or experience it in the radiations that come of that form.

When Saradamma was doing her *sadhana* at Lakshmana Swamy’s ashram in the 1970s, he occasionally treated her very harshly and put her through many tests.

Years later, after her own realisation, Saradamma told me, ‘You shouldn’t think that Swamy was sitting in his house, plotting and scheming: “I will test Sarada in this way and see how she reacts.” The *jnani* has no mind to think, plan and decide like this. I was tested by the Self because I needed to be tested. Nobody planned these tests, although it looks as if Swamy did.’

When Annamalai Swami came to Ramanashram in the late 1920s, Sri Ramana made him work very hard for many years. Whenever he saw Annamalai Swami sitting down, doing nothing, he would invent some job for him to keep him busy. He set up situations in which Annamalai Swami would be brought into fierce conflict on a regular basis with the ashram manager. This went on for about twelve years, at the end of which Sri Ramana told him, ‘Your karma is finished,’ and repeated the phrase twice. From then on, Annamalai Swami was allowed to meditate in peace by himself. Who can judge something like this? The Self, acting through Sri Ramana, made Annamalai

Swami toil hard for years in a confrontational situation, while other people there had a much easier life.

Sometimes the Guru has to be harsh because other methods don't work. Nisargadatta Maharaj once said, 'You are all holding onto the banks of a river, while I am trying to launch you out into the middle where you can float with the flow. I tell you to let go, but you don't do it, or you ask for a method to accomplish the letting go. I ask you nicely to let go, but you don't listen. In the end I give up and just stamp on your fingers.'

How can you judge apparently harsh behaviour when its goal is the liberation of devotees? What looks like bad behaviour to an ignorant onlooker might in fact be just what a particular devotee needs.

Papaji appeared to treat Meera and Mukti very harshly in the 1980s and early 90s. They both suffered a lot at his hands, but when I spoke to them in early 1998, just after Papaji passed away, they both conceded that the treatment had been very effective from a spiritual point of view.

Experience has taught me that Gurus rarely behave in what ordinary people would regard as a socially acceptable way. I take the position that their apparently erratic behaviour is necessary to crush devotees' egos. I don't judge them. I accept that are doing what the situation demands, without planning, choosing or deciding.

Question: We have digressed a little from the original question. Have you ever left out stories about the people you have written about because you felt that they would give a bad impression of their subjects?

David: The main censors were the subjects themselves, but in all cases the censored stories were about other people, not about themselves. Even Sri Ramana did this. When *Self-Realisation* was first published in 1931, there was an extensive chapter about the years when Sri Ramana was living on the hill. During that period many jealous *sadhus* campaigned against him, trying to drive him away. From their point of view, Sri Ramana was stealing their business because he was attracting too many devotees. One *sadhu* tried to kill him by rolling rocks down a hill onto him. Someone else tried to poison him. When the book was first published, Sri Ramana asked that many of these stories be left out of the next edition because most of these people were still alive. He thought that they would be upset when they found out that an account of their harassment had been published. Later on, in the 1940s, when they had all passed away, he said that the stories could be put back in because there was no one left alive who could be offended.

When I wrote Lakshmana Swamy's biography he also deleted a few stories for the same reason.

'That particular person is still alive,' he told me. 'She and her husband may be upset if they find that this particular story has been published.'

In that particular book I let Lakshmana Swamy and Saradamma decide which stories they wanted to be included or excluded. None of the ones that were excluded would have reflected badly on them. On the contrary, I think that many of them would have enhanced their reputation. Some quite miraculous events were excluded, much to

my regret, but don't ask me what they are because I am abiding by their decision not to make them public.

Annamalai Swami also asked me to omit a few stories that didn't show some of Sri Ramana's devotees in a favourable light. Some of them were still alive, and a few were personally well known to me, so I recognised the validity of his request.

Let me tell you one story, just to give you some idea of the sort of thing that we are dealing with here. In the 1920s, quite a few of the *sadhus* who congregated around Sri Ramana were regular users of *ganja*. Sri Ramana discouraged them from this habit, but they didn't listen to him. They used to congregate in a small Draupadi shrine about 300 yards from the ashram. These people would come to Sri Ramana and say, 'We are going for Draupadi *darshan*,' which everyone knew was the code for 'We're going off for a smoke'.

Ramaswami Pillai was one of this *ganja*-taking group. When he returned from the Draupadi Temple, he would be in a garrulous mood, and would often interrupt the question-and-answer sessions that were going on in the hall. Someone would ask Sri Ramana a question, and Ramaswami Pillai would then launch into a long, stoned *advaita* ramble, which he thought was the perfect answer to the question. Eventually, to circumvent these interruptions, a rule was passed that no one could interrupt a dialogue between a visitor and Sri Ramana unless they were invited to do so by either of the two parties to the conversation.

One day, a man came to the hall and began to question Sri Ramana in a very argumentative way. Sri Ramana was at first patient with him, but after a few minutes he turned to his attendant and said, 'This man hasn't come here to learn anything. He has only come to fight and quarrel. Go and fetch Ramaswami Pillai. He can fight and quarrel with him.'

I thought this was a very funny story, a good slice of ashram life from the 1920s, but I could also recognise the validity of not publishing it. Ramaswami Pillai was still alive at the time. In fact, he was a good friend of mine, and I often visited him. The next time I saw him, I asked him if it was true. He laughed and agreed that it was. He also confessed that once, when he was very stoned, he went on the rampage with a machete and chopped down all the ashram's banana trees. Though he wasn't at all embarrassed by these memories, I decided not to pass them on while he was still alive. I am telling you now because, following Sri Ramana's policy, there is no one left alive who can be embarrassed or hurt by them.

Interestingly, it was Seshadri Swami rather than Sri Ramana who cured him of the *ganja* habit. Seshadri Swami just looked at him and told him off for smoking *ganja*. From that moment on, Ramaswami Pillai never again felt the urge to smoke.

There are many stories such as these that I chose for various reasons not to include in any of my books. None of them was excluded because they might reflect badly on the principal subjects of the book.

Question: Were there any other constraints that made you decide what to put into and what to leave out of your books?

David: When I wrote *Nothing Ever Happened* I included many accounts that had been written by devotees themselves. I also interviewed many people who had known Papaji,

and I included many of these interviews in the book. Whenever I did this, I would always show the author or the interviewee my final draft. If they wanted to make changes, they were quite free to do so. I wanted all the contributors to be satisfied that I had given a fair and accurate presentation of their views and their stories. The encounter between a Guru and a disciple is for many people a sacred one, and I didn't want to be guilty of misrepresenting or misrecording them through ignorance or inadvertence.

When *Living by the Words of Bhagavan* came out, some people from Ramanasramam came to Annamalai Swami and asked him to change or delete some of the stories in subsequent editions. He had no problem with omitting stories about other people, but he adamantly refused to change any of the accounts of the exchanges that took place between himself and Sri Ramana.

He said, 'The words of my Guru are sacred. Everything he told me is sacred. Everything I saw him do is sacred to me. I have lived my life by following his words and his example. All these things are sacred to me, and no one has the right to change them. These are his gifts to me, and I accept them as his *prasad*. To change any of these things would be to refuse his *prasad* or to throw it away. I will never do that.'

I think all devotees think this way about the encounters they have had with their Guru, which is why I don't want to be guilty of misrepresenting any of these meetings.

Question: Going back to my original question, do you ever feel that your reverence for your subjects prevents you from recording their stories in an objective way?

David: When I wrote the biographies of Lakshmana Swamy, Saradamma, Annamalai Swami and Papaji, the subjects were still alive. I worked closely with all of them on their stories and always gave them the final authority to include something or to leave it out. I had enormous respect and admiration for all of them. I saw myself as a vehicle for them to get their stories out, not as someone who was sitting in judgement on them. I used my writing skills to express the sense of awe I felt when I encountered the stories of their lives and accomplishments. They were not hagiographies since I did my utmost to research and corroborate all the facts I was given, but at the same time I want to make it clear that in some sense these books were an act of worship for me, an offering to God. When I had finished writing *Nothing Ever Happened* I put the following verse from Tukaram in my introduction:

Words are the only
Jewels I possess.
Words are the only
Clothes I wear.
Words are the only food
That sustains my life.
Words are the only wealth
I distribute among people.

Says Tuka [Tukaram],
'Witness the Word.
He is God.

I worship Him
With words.'

This is how I feel about my writings. I worship manifestations of God on earth with the words that I string together. I don't worship by inventing stories or by suppressing them. I use my intellect to assemble credible, authoritative and readable accounts that I hope will imbue readers with a desire for liberation and a respect for Ramana Maharshi and all the teachers and devotees in his lineage.

Maalok: There is a prevalent myth among many people who don't know much about Ramana Maharshi that he rarely spoke. When these people see volumes and volumes of books written that claim to be '*Talks with Ramana Maharshi*' they question the authenticity of these books. Were these talks real? How authentic are the sources?

David: Ramana Maharshi was silent for a lot of the time, but if you had a spiritual query to put to him, he would generally be happy to give you an answer, often quite a detailed one. I mentioned *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi* a little earlier. Someone who picks this up might come to the conclusion that he was a talkative man because there are over 600 pages of dialogues there. But have a look at the dates. The book covers a four-year period in the late 1930s. If you average that out, it comes to about half a page a day. That's not a lot of talking for a man who sat in public for up to eighteen hours every day.

The question of how authentic all the books about Sri Ramana's life and teachings are is a complex one, and, given time constraints, I will refrain from going into it on a book-by-book basis. A number of books of dialogues were published during Sri Ramana's lifetime, and all of them were checked and edited by Sri Ramana himself. These include *Maharshi's Gospel*, *Spiritual Instructions*, and the talks that precede *Sat Darshana Bhashya*. One must also put on this list the teachings Sri Ramana gave out that were recorded by Muruganar in Tamil verse. These have been brought out in a book entitled *Guru Vachaka Kovai*. Though all of these works have Sri Ramana's imprimatur, they only constitute a small fraction of the published dialogues.

No one ever recorded Sri Ramana speaking because he refused to let any recordings be made. For many years the ashram manager also forbade anyone from taking notes in Sri Ramana's presence. This meant that many of the dialogues were written down from memory several hours later. There are always going to be errors in a system like this, but I don't think that there are many serious ones. Sri Ramana's teachings have been expressed very clearly in his written works and in the few books of dialogues that he vetted during his lifetime. The remaining body of work, which was not checked, is fairly consistent with these approved teachings.

Maalok: In one of the books you wrote or edited I remember reading that Maharshi's answers to similar questions by different devotees were not necessarily the same because they were guided by the state of mind of the questioner, rather than the question itself. Could you comment on this, based on your own experience of watching enlightened people teach?

David: If you drop ten people at random in a big city and have them ask people in their neighborhood, ‘How do I get to the city centre?’ each person will be given a different set of directions, and all the instructions will be correct. People who start from different places need different instructions to get to the same destination.

If you sit in the presence of an enlightened teacher and ask, ‘What do I have to do to get enlightened?’ that teacher can immediately see where you are spiritually, and what you need to do to make progress. The reply will be based on what he or she sees in your mind, not on some prescribed formula that is handed out to everyone. In some therapy groups there are tried-and-tested techniques that are given out to everyone – the twelve-step approach for recovering alcoholics is a good example – but you don’t find that kind of approach with enlightened teachers.

That’s one answer to your question. One can also say that enlightened people respond to the state of the mind of the person in front of them, not just to the question it asks. A person asking an apparently polite and respectful question may be hiding his true feelings. He may be trying to test the teacher; he may be trying to provoke him, and so on. Quite often, the teacher will respond to those inner feelings, rather than the question itself. Since only the teacher can really see what is going on in people’s minds, replies and responses often appear to be random or arbitrary to other people who are watching or listening. Ramana Maharshi once quoted, with approval, a verse that said, in effect, ‘The enlightened one laughs with those who joke, and cries with those who grieve, all the time being unaffected by the laughter and the grief’.

It is often the inner mood of a questioner that determines the emotional tone of an exchange with a teacher. There are records of Ramana Maharshi, who was normally quiet and unprovokable, jumping off his sofa and chasing people out of the room because he could see that they had come to him with a hidden agenda, perhaps anger, or a desire to demonstrate the superiority of their own ideas. Other people couldn’t see this aggression at all because it was well hidden.

I watched a woman approach Papaji a few years ago with what appeared to be a sensible, spiritual question. He exploded with anger, said that she was only interested in sex and told her to go away. We were all quite shocked because this was her first day, her first meeting. Later that day I spoke to the woman she had come with and asked her how her friend had dealt with this extreme reaction.

She laughed and said, ‘I’m so glad Papaji reacted like that. Every year she comes to India and goes to a new ashram, pretending to be interested in the teacher and the teachings, but every year she starts an affair with some devotee. That’s the real reason why she comes. After a few months she gets bored and leaves. I’m so happy that someone has finally seen through her game.’

I have witnessed countless strange reactions such as these in the teachers I have been with, all of them caused by hidden thoughts and desires that none of the rest of us could see.

There is something else that is going on when you sit in front of a true teacher. There is an effortless transmission of peace that stills the mind and brings an intense joy to the heart. None of this will be recorded in the dialogue that is going on between the two of you. It is something very private, and only the two of you are in on the secret. Words may be exchanged but the real communication is a silent one. In such cases the

teacher is often reacting to the temporary absence of your mind, rather than the question you asked a few minutes before, but who else can see this?

Let me give you an example from my own experience. In the late 1970s I sat with a little-known teacher called Dr Poy, a Gujarati who lived in northern Bombay. On my first meeting I asked him what his teachings were and he replied, 'I have no teachings. People ask questions and I answer them. That is all.'

I persevered: 'If someone asks you "How do I get enlightened?" what do you normally tell them?'

'Whatever is appropriate,' he replied.

After a few more questions like this, I realised that I wasn't going to receive a coherent presentation of this man's teachings, assuming of course that he had any. He was a good example of what I have just been talking about. He didn't have a doctrine or a practice that he passed out to everyone who came to see him. He simply answered all questions on a case-by-case basis.

I sat quietly for about ten minutes while Dr Poy talked in Gujarati to a couple of other visitors. In those few minutes I experienced a silence that was so deep, so intense, it physically paralysed me.

He turned to me and said, smiling, 'What's your next question?'

He knew I was incapable of replying. His question was a private joke between us that no one else there would have understood. I felt as if my whole body had been given a novocaine injection. I was so paralysed, in an immobilised, ecstatic way, I couldn't even smile at his remark.

He looked at me and said, 'There is no such thing as right method; there is only right effort. Whatever technique you choose will work if you follow it intensely enough. You asked for my teachings and here they are: "Part-time *sadhus* don't get enlightened."'

On one level this was a statement that one had to work hard at one's *sadhana*, but at the same time the experience I was having there clearly indicated to me that it is the powerful presence of the teacher that effortlessly quietens the mind. So much is going on in a teacher-student encounter that is not picked up by other people who are watching it take place. Just about everyone I know who has been with a real teacher has had experiences like this, experiences that have little or nothing to do with the words that were going backwards and forwards.

Maalok: It is interesting that you bring up the idea of peace in the presence of a realised person. Sometimes, people talk about feeling very happy or bubbly in the presence of such people and not as much about peace. In your understanding, are happiness and peace equivalent?

David: Sri Ramana sometimes described the state of the Self as being peace, and sometimes he would say that it is happiness. I have used these terms frequently in talking to you because these are terms that most people can relate to. Most people claim that they have experienced peace or happiness at some point, but this is not what Sri Ramana is really alluding to when he says that the Self is peace or happiness. He is attempting to describe a state in which there is no experiencer at all. That state is

impossible to convey in words, but the terms ‘peace’, ‘stillness’, ‘silence’ and ‘happiness’ were words that he often used to indicate the nature of the final state.

What you describe as ‘bubbly’ experiences, feelings of ecstasy or joy, are pleasant mental states. They are not the true awareness of what remains when mind itself has completely gone.

Maalok: Above all other traits, Maharshi used to emphasise humility the most. But humility is one of the hardest things to get. In fact if you try to be humble, often, it has the opposite effect. From your research and meetings with jnanis can you share with us some of their teachings that would help a seeker in this regard?

David: I agree with you that Maharshi prized humility. He himself had a natural, effortless humility, and he frequently stressed that humility was necessary for spiritual development. But how to practise it? This is a big problem because attempting to be humble is just the ego adopting a new behavior pattern. If it’s done deliberately, it’s not true humility.

Lakshmana Swamy, a direct disciple of Sri Ramana, also stresses humility, even occasionally saying that humility alone will be enough to attain realisation of the Self. However, he defines humility as ‘the mind humbling itself before the Self’. This, for me, is the true humility. To whatever extent your mind has surrendered to the Self within, to that extent you are humble. It is nothing to do with how you behave with other people. If the inner humility that comes from an attenuated mind is there, then true humility will manifest in outer behavior. Humility is egolessness, and egolessness is attained by making the mind subside into its source, the Self.

Let me give you an extract from a book, *Sri Ramana Darsanam*, that I recently edited. This is Sri Ramana speaking about the necessity of humility:

The power of humility, which bestows immortality, is the foremost among powers that are hard to attain. Since the only benefit of learning and other similar virtues is the attainment of humility, humility alone is the real ornament of the sages. It is the storehouse of all other virtues and is therefore extolled as the wealth of divine grace. Although it is a characteristic befitting wise people in general, it is especially indispensable for sadhus.

Since attaining greatness is impossible for anyone except by humility, all the disciplines of conduct such as *yama* and *niyama*, which are prescribed specifically for aspirants on the spiritual path, have as their aim only the attainment of humility. Humility is indeed the hallmark of the destruction of the ego. Because of this, humility is especially extolled by *sadhus* themselves as the code of conduct befitting them.

Moreover, for those who are residing at Arunachala, it is indispensable in every way. Arunachala is the sacred place where even the embodiments of God, Brahma, Vishnu and Sakti, humbly subsided. Since it has the power to humble even those who would not be humbled, those who do not humbly subside at Arunachala will surely not attain that redeeming virtue anywhere else. The Supreme Lord, who is the highest of the high, shines unrivalled and unsurpassed only because he remains the humblest of the humble. When

the divine virtue of humility is necessary even for the Supreme Lord, who is totally independent, is it necessary to emphasise that it is absolutely indispensable for sadhus who do not have such independence? Therefore, just as in their inner life, in their outer life also sadhus should possess complete and perfect humility. It is not that humility is necessary only for devotees of the Lord; even for the Lord it is the characteristic virtue.

In the final paragraph of this extract Sri Ramana mentions that God Himself derives His greatness from His humility. This is a point of view I have never found expressed by other teachers. We all imagine God as a being who has infinite power. Sri Ramana is on record as saying, perhaps somewhat whimsically, that God got His job because He was the most humble being in the universe, not because He was the most powerful. Here are two of his statements on this topic:

One's greatness increases to the extent that one becomes humble. The reason why God is supreme to such an extent that the whole universe bows to Him is His sublime state of humility in which the deluded ego never rises unknowingly.

Is it not on account of His behaving so humbly, as one ever in the service of every creature, that God stands worthy of all the glorious worships ever performed by all the worlds? By seeing Himself in all, by being humble even to devotees who bow to everyone, and by naturally remaining at such a pinnacle of humility that nothing can be humbler than Himself, the state of being supreme has come to the Lord.

All this may sound very eccentric unless one understands that humility equates with egolessness, rather than with a kind of 'nice' or socially acceptable behaviour. God is God because he is utterly egoless, utterly humble, and not because He is omnipotent or omniscient.

Maalok: Ramana Maharshi himself never had a physical Guru – I mean no living person. Is it correct to say that he often encouraged people to be connected to the Guru within, the Self, instead of the physical Guru? On the other hand, his direct disciple, Sri Lakshmana Swamy (who realised the Self in presence of Ramana Maharshi) says that a living physical Guru is necessary for Self-realisation. Can you help clarify these apparently contradictory viewpoints? What is your best understanding on this issue?

David: Sri Ramana himself never had a human Guru, but he is on record as saying that the mountain of Arunachala was his Guru. In his devotional poetry he says that Arunachala was his Guru, his Self and his God. So, his Guru did have a physical form, even though it wasn't a human one.

Sri Ramana always taught that a Guru is necessary for everyone who wants to realise the Self. When he spoke on this topic, he would usually say that the Self takes the form of a physical Guru who instructs the devotee and supervises his progress. At the same time, the Guru is also the Self within. That inner Self, that inner Guru, pulls

the mind into itself, and if the mind is mature enough, the inner Guru dissolves the mind completely. Both the inner and the outer Guru are required to complete the work.

You have cited Lakshmana Swamy as someone who says that a living human Guru is essential for devotees who want to realise the Self. He is on record as saying that in a few very rare cases the Self within can alone serve as the Guru and bring about enlightenment. He puts Ramana Maharshi in this category. The vast majority of people, he says, need a physical Guru. I don't think that this is too different from what Sri Ramana said on many occasions.

The Saiva religion of South India speaks of three categories of seekers. Those in the first and biggest category need a human Guru because they have a large amount of impurities or spiritual impediments. The second category comprises devotees who are much more pure. These people can realise the Self by having God appear to them in the form of a Guru to instruct and enlighten them. Many of the old Saiva saints, whose writings and stories now form part of the Saiva canon, fall into this category.

In the highest category there are those very rare souls who can realise the Self through the power of the Self within.

In my opinion, the number of people who can realise the Self without the aid of a living human Guru is very, very small.

Maalok: Surrender to God or the Guru is rare in today's times. But you have mentioned that in your life quite often you simply had to surrender. Could you give some incidents from your life that illustrate the feeling of surrender to destiny?

David: We all think that we are in charge of our lives, that we are responsible for our well-being and the well-being of our dependents. We might acknowledge at a theoretical level that God is in charge of the world, that God does everything, but that doesn't stop us planning and scheming and doing. Sometimes, we find something we can't control – a child may be dying of leukemia despite the best medical treatment – so we turn to God and ask for divine intervention. This is not surrender; it's just more doing. It's seeking an extra resource when all the traditional ones have failed.

Surrender is different. It's acknowledging that God runs the world every minute of every day, that He is not just an extra resource, a *deus ex machina* that one turns to in times of need. Surrender is not asking that things be different; it is acceptance and gratitude for things being the way they are. It's not a grit-your-teeth stoicism either; it's the experience of joy in God's dispensation, whatever it might be.

About twenty years ago I read a Christian book entitled *Thank You God*. Its basic thesis was that one should continuously thank God for the way things are right now, not petition Him for things to be different. That means thanking Him for all the terrible things that are going on in your life, not just thanking Him for the good stuff that is coming your way. And this should not just be at the verbal level. One needs to keep saying 'Thank you, God' to oneself until one actually feels a glow of gratitude. When this happens, there are remarkable and unexpected consequences. Let me give you an example.

There was a woman featured in this book whose husband was an alcoholic. She had organised prayer meetings at her local church in which everyone had prayed to God, asking Him to stop this man from drinking. Nothing happened. Then this woman heard

about 'Thank you, God'. She thought, 'Well. Nothing else has worked. Let me try this.' She started saying, 'Thank you God for making my husband an alcoholic,' and she kept on saying it until she actually began to feel gratitude inside. Shortly afterwards, her husband stopped drinking of his own accord and never touched alcohol again.

This is surrender. It's not saying, 'Excuse me God, but I know better than You, so would You please make this happen'. It's acknowledging, 'The world is the way You want it to be, and I thank You for it'.

When this happens in your life, seemingly miraculous things start happening around you. The power of your own surrender, your own gratitude, actually changes the things around you. When I first read about this, I thought, 'This is weird, but it just might work. Let me try it.' At that point in my life, I had been having problems with four or five people whom I was trying to do business with. Despite daily reminders, they were not doing things they had promised to do. I sat down and started saying 'Thank you Mr X for not doing this job. Thank you Mr Y for trying to cheat me on that last deal we did,' and so on. I did this for a couple of hours until I finally did feel a strong sense of gratitude towards these people. When their image came up in my mind, I didn't remember all the frustrations I had experienced in dealing with them. I just had an image of them in my mind towards which I felt gratitude and acceptance.

The next morning, when I went to work, all of these people were waiting for me. Usually, I had to go hunting for them in order to listen to their latest excuse. All of them were smiling, and all of them had done the jobs I had been pestering them for days to do. It was an astonishing testimonial to the power of loving acceptance. Like everyone else, I am still stuck in the world of doing-doing-doing, but when all my misguided doings have produced an intractable mess, I try to drop my belief that 'I' have to do something to solve this problem, and start thanking God for the mess I have made for myself. A few minutes of this is usually enough to resolve the thorniest of problems.

When I was sixteen, I took a gliding course. The first time I was given the controls, the glider was wobbling all over the place because I was reacting, or I should say over-reacting, to every minor fluctuation of the machine. Finally, the instructor took the controls away from me and said 'Watch this'. He put the glider on a level flight, put the controls in the central position and then let go of them. The glider flew itself, with no wobbles at all, with no one's hands on the controls. All my effects were just interfering with the glider's natural ability to fly itself. That's how life is for all of us. We persist in thinking that we have to 'do' things, but all our doings merely create problems.

I am not claiming that I have learned to take my hand off the controls of life and let God pilot my life for me, but I do remember all this, with wry amusement, when problems (all self-inflicted, of course) suddenly appear. A couple of weeks ago, for example, I found myself in the middle of a publishing drama that seemed to be utterly insoluble. It was such a mess, I didn't even try to talk to all the people involved. I went instead to Sri Ramana's *samadhi*, put the manuscript in front of it, and explained what had happened. I thanked him for the drama and added, 'This is your responsibility, not mine'. I had my eyes closed when I said this. When I opened them, an old friend was there, offering me some chocolate-chip cookies, something that had never happened before. I took them as Ramana's *prasad*. Later that day the problem was solved in five minutes. All the protagonists (who had been immovable antagonists the day before) came together and the work was completed amicably in record time.

Maalok: I think on hearing some of your above examples (all of which led to desirable final outcomes) we can perhaps wrongly deduce that if we want to get things done our way we should adopt this trick of leaving things up to God. I don't think that's what you meant. In the state you were describing, one truly doesn't have a preference for things to work out one way or the other. Is that true?

David: Yes. The state of being grateful for the way things are is the goal. It's not a trick to get what you want. If things turn out well, that's just a side effect. It's not the main purpose of surrender. Surrender is an aim and a goal in itself.

Let me read you a couple of answers that Sri Ramana gave to a devotee who was asking about surrender. They were recorded in the 1940s by Devaraja Mudaliar in *Day by Day with Bhagavan*:

Question: Does not total or complete surrender require that one should not have left even the desire for liberation or God?

Answer: Complete surrender does require that you have no desire of your own. You must be satisfied with whatever God gives you and that means having no desires of one's own.

Question: Now that I am satisfied on that point, I want to know what the steps are by which I could achieve surrender.

Answer: There are two ways. One is looking into the source of 'I' and merging into that source. The other is the feeling 'I am helpless by myself; God alone is all powerful and except by throwing myself completely on him, there is no other means of safety for me.' By this method one gradually develops the conviction that God alone exists and that the ego does not count. Both methods lead to the same goal. Complete surrender is another name for *jnana* or liberation.

In the first reply Sri Ramana gives the answer that true surrender is being satisfied with whatever God gives you, without having any desire for your life to be any different. In the second answer he explains that one can approach this goal in a gradual way. I think that Sri Ramana knew that no one could immediately give up all thoughts, ideas, desires and responsibilities, so he encouraged devotees to do it in a gradual way. One can start on the path of surrender by handing over to God some of the petty responsibilities of life that we believe are ours to solve. When we feel that God has done a good job with managing them, we have more faith in Him and we are encouraged to hand over more and more of our life to Him. The stories that I narrated earlier belong to this phase of surrender.

Sri Ramana occasionally encouraged his devotees to give him all their problems. That is to say, to tell him about them, and then forget about them. One of his persistent images or metaphors was of a passenger on a train who insists on carrying his luggage on his own head instead of putting it on the floor and relaxing. The idea behind this is that God is running the world and looking after all its activities and problems. If we take some of these problems on our own heads, we just inflict unnecessary suffering on ourselves. Sri Ramana is telling us that God is driving the train that constitutes our life

on this earth. We can sit down and relax with the knowledge that he is taking us to our destination, and not interfere, or we can imagine that we are responsible for it all. We can pace up and down the aisles of the train with 100lbs on our head. It's our choice.

When devotees surrendered their problems to Sri Ramana, it was the same as surrendering them to God. They were submitting to the same divine authority, surrendering to a living manifestation of that same power. Here are some statements that Sri Ramana made on this subject. I have taken them from a book I am currently working on. Each sentence was originally recorded by Muruganar in Tamil verse:

- 1 My devotees have the qualifications to rejoice abundantly, like children of an emperor.
- 2 Abandon the drama [of the world] and seek the Self within. Remaining within, I will protect you, [ensuring] that no harm befalls you.
- 3 If you inquire and know me, the indweller, in that state there will be no reason for you to worry about the world.
- 4 For the cruel disease of burning *samsara* to end, the correct regimen is to entrust all your burdens on me.
- 5 In order that your needless anxieties cease, make sure that all your burdens are placed on me through the brave act of depending totally on grace.
- 6 If you completely surrender all your responsibilities to me, I will accept them as mine and manage them.
- 7 When bearing the entire burden remains my responsibility, why do you have any worries?
- 8 Long ago you offered your body, possessions and soul to me, making them mine, so why do you still regard these things as 'I' and 'mine' and associate yourself with them?
- 9 Seek my grace within the Heart. I will drive away your darkness and show you the light. This is my responsibility.

These verses come from a sub-section I have entitled 'Bhagavan's Promises'. When people surrendered completely to him, he was more than happy to manage their lives for them. Just about everyone discovered that when she surrendered the burden of responsibility for her life to Sri Ramana, problems diminished or went away completely.

The Guru is primarily there to teach the truth, to bestow grace on his disciples and to bring about the liberation of the mature souls who come to him. But he also has this very nice sideline of being able to manage the affairs of his devotees much better than they can.

Maalok: Ramana Maharshi was a prime example of living detachment. However, it is said, if there was one thing that he had slight attachment to, it was Arunachala. Perhaps you could explain why the Maharshi never moved from Arunachala after reaching there as a teenager.

David: Arunachala has been a spiritual magnet for as long as records have been kept. Various saints, yogis and spiritual seekers have felt its call for at least 1,500 years, probably much longer. Some inexplicable power draws people to this place and keeps them here. Seen in this context, Ramana Maharshi is just the latest and most famous saint to feel the pull of this place. When he was very young, he had an intuitive knowledge that the word Arunachala denoted God or a heavenly realm, but at the time he didn't realise it was a place he could actually visit. He didn't find this out until he was in his early teens. A few weeks after he realised the Self at the age of sixteen, he left home, traveled to Arunachala and spent the rest of his life there.

Why this place? For him it was his father, his Guru and his God, Siva. It may sound strange to say that a mountain can be all these things, but Sri Ramana was not alone in seeing Arunachala in this light. This is what a famous local saint, Guru Namasivaya, wrote a few hundred years ago:

Mountain who drives out the night of spiritual ignorance.
Mountain who is the lamp of true knowledge to devotees.
Mountain in the form of abundant knowledge.
Mountain who came to me, a mere dog,
As father, mother and *Sadguru*:
Annamalai.

'Annamalai' is the local Tamil name of the mountain. This is what the Tamil *purana* of Arunachala, also written centuries ago, has to say about the holiness of this place:

Beginning with these first ones and continuing up to the present day, many are those who have attained the deathless state of liberation, through dwelling on Aruna[chala] in their thoughts, through lovingly speaking its praises, through hearing of it, and then coming to gaze upon it, through performing *pradakshina* of it on foot, through dwelling there in a state of righteousness, through walking in the path of truth there, through bathing in its broad tanks, and through carrying out good works, performing holy service in the temple and worshipping there at the feet of that Effulgent Light.

That is the tradition of this place. Throughout its history Arunachala has attracted ardent seekers and liberated them. Yet, surprisingly, it remains relatively unknown even within India.

Arunachala has always been regarded as a manifestation of Siva, not just a symbolic representation of Him, or a place where He lives. The mountain itself is a *lingam* that has the full power and authority of Siva Himself. This is what millions of South Indians believe, and their belief is backed up, authenticated by many great saints who have gone on record as saying that it was the power of this mountain that brought about their own spiritual liberation. Ramana Maharshi was one of them. He was quite categorical that Arunachala was his Guru, and that Arunachala had been the agent that

brought about his own realisation. Seen in this context, why should he not spend the rest of his physical life in its vicinity?

Sri Ramana loved this mountain passionately. He wrote devotional poetry about it that at times verged on the ecstatic, and in all the fifty-four years he lived here, he could never be persuaded to go more than a mile from the base of the mountain.

Question: How did the mountain of Arunachala get to be such a powerful place? Was it because of all the pilgrims who have been coming here for centuries and worshipping it?

David: This is a question that intrigues me, but I have no answer to it. Sri Ramana said, in one of his poems, ‘Mysterious is the way it works, beyond all human understanding’. He clearly recognised its power, but I don’t think he had any explanation for it.

Years ago I heard Lakshmana Swamy make the following remarks about the mountain. ‘When I gaze at Arunachala, I know I am in the presence of *jnana*. There is the same energy coming off the hill that I felt when I sat in Bhagavan’s presence.’

I don’t think this kind of energy would accumulate from all the prayer and worship of devotees. In fact, I think it is the other way round. People offer worship here because, at some intuitive level, they feel the power coming off the mountain.

Lakshmana Swamy seems to sense spiritual power in unexpected places. In the days when he was more accessible, when he moved around more outside his compound, he would occasionally comment that he could sense small amounts of spiritual power in certain places, animals, trees, and even apparently inanimate objects. He seems to have an extra faculty that picks up these emanations. However, nothing remotely compared to the power that he felt radiating from the mountain of Arunachala. For him, for Sri Ramana, and for many other saints who have been drawn here, this mountain is radiating the power of the Self in a way that no other place is doing. Jnanasambandhar, a famous Tamil saint who came here in the sixth century, described it in one of his poems as a ‘condensed mass of *jnana*’. I like that description. It echoes the principal myth of Arunachala in which Siva condenses himself from an effulgent column of light into the form of a mountain for the benefit of devotees who want a less blinding form to worship. Following this version of events, one can say that though the brightness of the original column of light has gone, the condensed spiritual radiance of Siva-*jnana* is still there. The energy that comes off the mountain is so intense, so awesome, even great saints such as Sri Ramana just gaze in wonder at it.

When Lakshmana Swamy first moved back to Arunachala about twelve years ago, he initially lived in a rented room that had no windows facing the hill. He could only see a small outcrop of rock at the base of the western side of the mountain from one of his side windows. However, that was more than enough for him. Saradamma told me that he would sit by the window and gaze, in a state of rapture, at this tiny portion of the mountain for hours together. As with his own Guru, Sri Ramana, the power emanating from the mountain drew his attention to itself and kept it fixed there.

Sri Ramana once wrote in one of his verses to Arunachala:

I have discovered a new thing! This hill, the lodestone of lives, arrests the movements of anyone who so much thinks of it, draws him face to face with

it, and fixes him motionless like itself, to feed upon his soul thus ripened.
What a wonder is this!

When there is no mind to delude you into believing that you are just looking at a form of a mountain, the power of Arunachala compels your attention to such an extent, it is sometimes hard to look anywhere else.

I was once making the seating arrangements for one of Lakshmana Swamy's public *darshans*. I put his chair facing the hill.

Saradamma saw what I had done, laughed and said, 'If you leave it there, he won't notice anyone. He will spend the whole time gazing at the hill. If you want him to look at the people who come, put his chair so it faces away from the hill. Then there will be no distractions.'

I asked him once, 'How did this mountain come to be enlightened?' It seems a strange question to ask, but I couldn't think of phrasing it any other way. Here was this very solid mass of granite rock that was emanating the power of the Self. How did it get that way?

He said he didn't know and couldn't speculate. He could clearly feel its power, but he couldn't think of any scenario that would explain how it came about.

I tried a couple of leading questions, such as, 'Was there some enlightened being who took the form of this hill or became one with it in some way?' He said 'No' to that one and to all my other proffered suggestions. In the end we were back to Sri Ramana's comment, 'Mysterious is the way it works, beyond all human understanding'.

The preceding sentence, by the way, says, 'Look, there it stands as if insentient'. Ordinary people, people with minds, look at this mountain and see insentient rock. Those with true vision come here and see and feel the radiation of *Siva-jnana*.

Maalok: Is it true that Ramana Maharshi encouraged people to do a *pradakshina* around the sacred Arunachala mountain as often as possible? Isn't recommendation of this kind of practice a bit 'out-of-sync' with his general teaching of being still? Could you also explain the significance of doing this *pradakshina*?

David: Lucia Osborne, Arthur Osborne's wife, made an interesting comment in *The Mountain Path* about twenty-five years ago. She wrote that Sri Ramana never prescribed a spiritual practice for anyone unless he was first asked for advice. However, there was one exception to this rule: he often encouraged people to walk around the hill, even if they had not asked whether or not they should do it.

When Sri Ramana spoke of 'being still', he wasn't talking about sitting motionless on the floor. He was speaking instead about mental silence. He advocated *pradakshina* of Arunachala as a means of reaching this silence. Kunju Swami has recorded a story in which Sri Ramana speaks of a kind of 'walking *samadhi*' that sometimes overtakes one as one is doing the *pradakshina*.

It's all very illogical, and not even Sri Ramana had an explanation of how and why it worked. If skeptics who wanted to be convinced of the efficacy of *pradakshina* came to him to ask him about it, he would say, 'Try it and see'. He had found from long experience that people who had completed one *pradakshina* would always enjoy it, and soon afterwards would want to do it again. After a few circuits of the hill, most people

would be convinced that it was doing them some good. One became convinced by experience rather than by any sensible or rational explanation.

When Sri Ramana sent people off to do *pradakshina*, he was sending them to commune with his own Guru for a few hours. Walking around the base of the mountain, one is always aware of its looming presence. By being aware of the constantly changing form of the mountain as one walks around it, one is putting one's attention on a highly charged form of the divine. And once the mind has made contact with that divine form, the grace, the energy of that form begins to flow. This is what silences people as they open themselves to the mountain's power.

I should also mention that Sri Ramana taught that the power of this mountain is not dependent on whether or not one believes it to be divine. Sri Ramana said that it is like a fire. Those who approach it get burnt whether they believe in it or not.

Maalok: What about you? What exactly made you leave everything and come to Tiruvannamalai in your early youth? Could you also share some of the surrounding circumstances, your state-of-mind, and the events that led to this move?

David: I first came across Sri Ramana's teachings in 1974 by reading one of the few books about him that had been published in the West. I read this book in a few hours and immediately my whole worldview was transformed. It wasn't just a new piece of information that I could file away with all the other pieces of knowledge I had stored in my brain; it was a living transmission that completely changed the way I perceived myself and the world around me. I didn't have to think about the teachings or convince myself that they were true. I recognised the truth of them as soon as I read them.

Nor was it just one set of beliefs being replaced by another. It was more a case of a busy, searching mind being utterly silenced by an exposure to the light of a higher power. In the months preceding my discovery of Sri Ramana, I had bought and read many spiritual books. The information they contained had been stored in my memory, but none of it had truly touched me. When I read Ramana Maharshi's words for the first time, my mind actually stopped. I stopped searching and I stopped reading spiritual books. The words had a power in them that silenced my mind. I didn't judge these words and decide that they were correct. The words themselves went straight inside me, stopped the busy-ness of my questing mind and gave me a state of silence that had within itself the conviction 'This is the truth'.

A few months later I dropped out of university and went to Ireland to meditate. I chose the west of Ireland because it was remote and cheap. I wanted to have a complete break from all the things I had been doing, all the people I had been associating with. I wanted to drop all the trivia that had accumulated in my life. I lived there alone – it was in the Limerick area if anyone wants to know – for about nine months, growing my own food and meditating. At the end of that period I had to leave because my landlady wanted her house back. I took a break by going to Israel for the winter, thinking that I would go back to Ireland the following spring. While I was in Israel, the thought came to me, 'Why not have a quick trip to India before you settle down in Ireland again?' I decided to come here for a few weeks.

The weeks turned into months, and then the months turned into years. I am still here twenty-six years later. I think the key moment came while I was walking around

Sri Ramana's *samadhi*. It must have been some time in 1976. I was wondering how much longer I would be able to stay here before I had to go 'home'. As I was walking, an understanding suddenly dawned in me: 'I don't have to go home. This is home. I already am home.'

This revelation actually stopped me in my tracks. I stopped walking and was suddenly filled with a flood of happiness, of relief. Something in me acknowledged that I was physically, spiritually and emotionally home. The thought of leaving, or having to leave, never arose again.

Maalok: What about your own relationship with Arunachala? Can you briefly elaborate on what this mountain has meant to you in the almost three decades you have spent here?

David: I came here initially because of Sri Ramana and his teachings. I just wanted to be in the place where he had lived and taught. Later, I realised that it had probably been the power of Arunachala that had brought me here. One of Sri Ramana's devotees, Sadhu Om, once wrote a nice poem about Arunachala, comparing it to a post to which a cow is attached by a long rope. The cow walks round and round the post, shortening the rope with each circuit. Eventually it is stuck next to the post, unable to move anywhere. That's how I feel sometimes. The mountain has pulled me here, shortened my tether inch by inch until I now feel that I am pressed up against it, unable to go anywhere else. It's a very happy imprisonment, though. I enjoy it. I have no desire to be anywhere else.

I see Arunachala as the source, the powerful fountainhead of the lineage that includes not only Sri Ramana and his disciples but also all the other saints who have lived here in the last 1,500 years. I am fascinated by these people, but I can't say why. Perhaps it is because all these people are conduits of this power that is Arunachala.

For me, Arunachala is the power of the divine in a physical form. If you want to ask, 'Why have you chosen to spend your adult life near this mountain in South India?' I would first say, 'I don't think I had a choice. I was drawn here by a power that is beyond my control.' Then I might add, 'Why should I not choose to spend my days sitting in the presence of God, because I have to accept that this is what this mountain is.'

Maalok: David, it has indeed been a great joy to have this heart-to-heart conversation with you. I am very grateful to you for sharing your insights, and for your extraordinary generosity in sparing your time. On behalf of all of us, a heartfelt 'Thanks!'

Mostly about Books

A few months ago I spent a pleasant hour or so telling a curious visitor, Michelle Mikklesen, a few stories about how some of my books came to be written. She liked some of the anecdotes so much, she came back with a tape recorder and asked me to tell the stories again. Second time round, she played whatever the female equivalent of a straight man is, just prompting me with occasional questions, rather than doing a proper interview. Some days later she was nice enough to supply me with a transcript. This is my edited version. Thank you Michelle!

Michelle: Can you start by telling me how you became a writer?

David: A series of events led up to it. When I was staying near Ramanasramam in 1977, I became aware that the ashram had many good spiritual books that were hard to get access to. They were locked in a room near the ashram's cowshed, and the key was held by a rather grumpy man in the ashram office who wouldn't let anyone in the room. I volunteered to sort them out and turn the collection into a library that people could use. There were thousands of books there on all kinds of spiritual topics. When I was finally given the job, I realised that most of these books had been sent to the ashram free of charge because the publishers wanted the books to be reviewed in the ashram's magazine, *The Mountain Path*. I then discovered that the reviewing process was in a disorganised and moribund state. Books were being sent out to reviewers who never reviewed them, or if they did, would take so long, when the reviews finally came back, the book would be almost out of print. Realising that the flow of books would stop if I didn't get the reviewing process properly organised, I began to do reviews myself, just to ensure that the publishers would be satisfied that their books were receiving proper attention. When the editor realised that I could write well, or at least better than most of his regular contributors, I was given other writing and editing jobs. Within a couple of years I ended up editing the whole magazine, primarily, I suspect, because no one else wanted the job. In retrospect I would say that I became a writer simply so that I could have a good supply of books to read.

Michelle: When did it occur to you to write a book, rather than just reviews or articles?

David: I think the idea came from the teachers I have been with. It didn't seem to originate with me. When I was visiting Nisargadatta Maharaj in the late 1970s, I mentioned that I was writing reviews for *The Mountain Path*. He gave me a very strong look, almost a glare, and said, 'Why don't you write a book about the teachings? It's the teachings that are important.' I remember being very surprised by this suggestion. The idea had never occurred to me before. I didn't follow it up for a long time, but when I finally got round to it, I remembered his words and the force with which he had spoken them. It seemed to be an order rather than just a suggestion.

Maharaj encouraged me to write about the teachings, but at the same time he discouraged me from publicly speaking about them. Around 1980 I gave a talk in Delhi on Bhagavan's teachings. On the way back to Tiruvannamalai I stopped in Bombay and

went to see Maharaj for a few days. Someone must have told him about the talk I had given in Delhi. When he called me up to the front of the room, I went up and sat opposite him, facing him. That was where people sat when he put them on the spot.

‘No, no,’ he said, ‘sit next to me, facing the people.’

My spirits sank. I didn’t know what he had planned, but I knew I wouldn’t enjoy it.

He started off making fun of me, saying that whereas only about forty people came to hear him speak, I had just been talking to hundreds of people in Delhi. I was obviously much better than he was at this job, he said, so he invited me to give a speech to all the people there. I tried to back out, but when I realised he was serious, I gave a five-minute summary of what I had said in Delhi. I felt like an undergraduate physics student, trying to give a lecture in front of Einstein. One of his translators gave a simultaneous translation.

When it was over, he said, quietly, ‘I can’t quarrel with anything you have said. What you said was all correct.’

Then he glared at me and added, ‘But don’t waste your time giving spiritual talks until you are enlightened yourself, until you know from direct experience what you are talking about. Otherwise you will end up like that Wolter Keers.’

Wolter Keers was a Dutch advaita teacher who toured around Europe, giving lectures on *advaita* and yoga in at least three different languages. He was a very fluent and informative teacher and he used to come to see Maharaj regularly. Every time he came, Maharaj would shout at him, telling him he wasn’t enlightened, and that he shouldn’t set himself up as a teacher until he was. I got the message. I have never given a public talk since then.

I received more or less the same advice from Papaji. He very much encouraged me to write about him. In fact, he invited me from Tiruvannamalai to Lucknow to compile the work that was eventually published as *Nothing Ever Happened*. When I interviewed him for a video documentary in 1993, he said, ‘When you go back to the West, if people ask you about what happened to you in Lucknow, keep quiet. If they ask again, just laugh.’

I was asked by him to write about him, but he didn’t want me appear in front of an audience and speak about him. Other people were encouraged to speak, but were not asked to write. Different people received different orders, different advice.

Michelle: Did any other teachers encourage you to write?

David: When I first went to Lakshmana Ashram in 1982, I was actually running away from writing. I had been working at Ramanasramam, editing their magazine and looking after their library, for several years. I just wanted to meditate and sit at the feet of a realised teacher. Within a couple of weeks of my arrival, Lakshmana Swamy asked me to write a small book about Saradamma. He explained to me that he thought she might give up her body because of her tendency to go into long, deep *samadhis* from which it was very difficult to bring her back to normal consciousness. He thought that if she had devotees of her own, she would have to externalise her attention more in order to deal with them. The book project was a way of letting the world know that she existed. At that time both of them were virtually unknown. I stayed in their ashram for about seven months that year. During the day there were usually two of us there, apart from

Saradamma and Lakshmana Swamy. A few other people would sometimes come in the evenings. For one period of about two weeks, when Saradamma was in town with her family, I was the only person there, apart from Lakshmana Swamy.

Michelle: This was the second book you wrote, the first being *Be As You Are*.

David: No, it was the first. I wrote it in 1982, but it wasn't published until around 1986.

Michelle: What happened? Why was there such a delay?

David: It's a long story. When Lakshmana Swami asked me to write this book, I, of course, agreed. He said that I should talk to Saradamma and get her story from her. However, when I approached her, I found that she wasn't interested in talking. She didn't want the book at all. She didn't want a lot of people coming to see her, something she knew might happen if this book ever came out. She was quite content with the life she had.

I reported back to Lakshmana Swamy, telling him that Saradamma had no interest in cooperating with this project. He decided that he would have to sit next to her and compel her to tell her story. He knew that she would find it very hard to refuse his request to talk if he was there in person. This was a big bonus for me because it meant that I would get to see them both every day for about an hour while Saradamma narrated various incidents from her life.

Even with Lakshmana Swamy sitting next to her, encouraging her to speak, it was sometimes hard to get information from her. Sometimes she would talk willingly, but at other times she would close down completely and refuse to say anything. After a week or so of interviewing her, she announced that she wasn't going to cooperate any more unless half the book was about Lakshmana Swamy. He didn't particularly want a book about himself to be published, but he had to agree in the end because that was the only way he could get Saradamma to carry on telling her stories. The interviews resumed. Neither wanted a book about himself or herself, but both wanted a book about the other.

Lakshmana Swamy had told Saradamma about many incidents from his own life. She wrote down everything she could remember and then interviewed him privately to get extra information. All this she wrote down in a big notebook that she eventually passed on to me. Once I had the basic story straight, I asked him many supplementary questions that he was always happy to answer.

Saradamma seemed to have almost perfect recall of just about every minute of every day of the years she was doing her *sadhana*. Lakshmana Swamy occasionally had to prompt her to stick to essentials. Even so, the material I was collecting was rapidly increasing every day. I realised that the 'small booklet on Saradamma' that Lakshmana Swamy had originally envisaged was going to be quite a substantial book.

One morning, when I went to the interview session on Lakshmana Swamy's veranda, he announced, 'No more research or interviews. You can go off and write the book now. I want you to finish it in two weeks.'

I was stunned. It seemed to me that there were still many more good stories to be collected, and as for writing a book from start to finish in less than two weeks, I couldn't begin to imagine how that might be accomplished.

Two factors had combined to produce this ultimatum. Lakshmana Swamy only had a very small amount of money available for the publication of this book. He had received an estimate from a local printer that made him realise that he couldn't afford to print a bigger book. The two-week deadline came from a plan he had to put a copy of the book on Ramana Maharshi's *samadhi* on his next visit to Tiruvannamalai. He had budgeted two weeks for me to write the book and about a month to print it.

I sat down to write the book. I wrote out the first few drafts by hand and then later typed the final version on an old typewriter that had a couple of letters missing. I had to fill in the gaps by hand later. I took the two-week deadline very seriously. I seem to remember working round the clock for the last few days. I definitely stayed up all night the day before I was due to deliver the manuscript, and I think I only finished it an hour or so before Swamy's regular 9 a.m. *darshan*. In those days he was much more available. Visitors could sit with him and ask questions just about every day. I prostrated before him at 9 a.m. and presented my manuscript. Saradamma wasn't there that day, but I can't remember why. He laughed and said that he wasn't able to read it because he had broken his glasses the day before and wouldn't be able to get a new pair for several days. This was the first sign that the deadline wasn't going to be met. The last-minute rush hadn't really been necessary. Since he couldn't read any of it himself, at his request I read out the chapter in which Saradamma had realised the Self in his presence. He seemed to enjoy it.

About a week later he announced in the morning *darshan* that he had read the manuscript and liked it. He looked at me and apparently said that I had done a good job. I say 'apparently' because I didn't hear him say this. The other people present all heard him say these words but nothing like this registered in my mind. Lakshmana Swamy is extremely sparing with his praise of devotees, other than Saradamma of course, and I think that this was the only complimentary thing he has ever said about me directly to my face. And I missed it. Maybe he thought it would be bad for my ego to hear it and somehow managed to make sure that everyone there heard it except me.

The manuscript went to a local devotee who had a printing press in Gudur, the local town. Unfortunately, he wasn't equipped to print books. I think his staple product was wedding invitations and other items of a similar size. He didn't have enough letters to make a book, and his main compositor seemed to be drunk a lot of the time. For those people who have been brought up on word-processors I need to say that once upon a time books were composed letter by letter. Small metal letters would be hammered into grooves on wooden blocks, the metal surfaces would be inked and a page would be printed as a proof sheet. When mistakes were spotted, the metal letters had to be pulled out and rearranged. It may sound medieval, but this, with many elaborations, was how most of the world's books were printed up until the 1980s. It can be done fairly quickly by experts, but if you haven't done a job like this before, it can take months and months. That's what happened. By the time the visit to Ramanasramam came round, only a few pages had been assembled, and they were full of mistakes. It eventually became clear that this particular press couldn't do the job, but by then the money for the printing had been spent on other projects. The manuscript was shelved for a few years and was only printed in 1986 when an American devotee came forward and offered to pay for it to be done in a major printing press. Before it was printed in 1986 I took the opportunity to include a few extra stories that had come to light in the intervening years, and I also went through it

again to improve the style. The first draft had been done in an extreme hurry, and in several places it showed.

Michelle: Did both Lakshmana Swamy and Saradamma go through the book prior to its publication?

David: Oh yes, they both took their editing work very seriously. Lakshmana Swamy could read and speak English quite well because he had learned the language at school and college. I think he went through the manuscript four or five times, and each time he returned it to me there would be portions deleted or comments added in the margin. When he was finally satisfied with it, a devotee who knew good Telugu and English read it out in Telugu to Saradamma, and she too made a number of changes. It was very much their book, their story. I was just the scribe who put it into shape for them.

Michelle: Let's move on to *Be As You Are*. That's the book that most people associate with you. How did that come to be written?

David: In 1983 I went back to England, hoping to get a job. I had been in India seven years, and for most of the previous five years I had been supported by Ramanasramam because I had been doing various jobs for them – running their library, editing their magazine, and so on. I wanted to come back to India with enough money to be financially independent. I wanted to live outside the ashram, supporting myself, and I wanted to spend more time meditating, without being dependent on an institution for food and accommodation. Well, it didn't work out. No one wanted to hire me to do anything. I sent off lots of applications for jobs that I was eminently qualified to do and either received no reply at all, or I received rejection letters that were downright offensive. I had started and run a library in India for five years, but when I applied for a job to run a private library that was smaller than the one in Tiruvannamalai, I received a reply that said: 'Dear Mr Godman, Thank you very much for your very entertaining application. However, we would prefer to engage someone who is qualified to do the job.' This went on for months. I even blew an interview to pick up litter because I laughed at the wrong moment. Bhagavan says in *Maharshi's Gospel* that if you are destined to work, you cannot avoid it, and if you are destined not to work, no matter how hard you look for a job, no one will hire you. That was my situation in the summer of 1983. What I didn't realise at the time was that Bhagavan had other plans for me. The landlord of the house where I was staying was a philosophy lecturer in Leicester University, and so was his wife. He had just delivered a manuscript his wife had written to the editor of a London publisher.

When she, the editor, discovered that he too was a philosophy lecturer, she had said, 'Why don't you write a book for us as well. We are always looking for new books on philosophy.'

I perked up when I heard this. This was something I could do. I called up the editor and asked if she wanted a book on Ramana Maharshi. Her reply astounded me:

'Come to my office at once. Don't go anywhere else. We want you. Come right now.'

After months and months of rejections, this was a welcome turn of events. I thought up a quick plan for a book and discussed it with her a few hours later. She checked on the

sales figures of the few other books on Ramana that had been published in the West and said, 'We'll do it'. It was as simple as that. I was given a contract and sent off to India to put together *Be As You Are*. I was astonished because I had been brought up believing one of the standard myths of authorship. The would-be writer spends months or years writing a book. He or she then spends just as long sending the manuscript off to various publishers, who all reject it. Then, if he or she is lucky, the 101st publisher finally says 'Yes'.

It was my destiny to come back to India and write books on Bhagavan, his teachings, and his disciples. When I tried to do something else, I couldn't make it happen.

When I went to Lakshmana Ashram in 1982, it was to get away from the writing and editing work I was doing for Ramanasramam. Within a couple of weeks I was writing a book there. When I went to England the following year, hoping to generate enough cash so that I wouldn't have to do writing work in India, I ended up coming back with a contract for a book on Bhagavan. That has been my work, my destiny, more or less ever since. Nowadays, I don't try to fight it. I enjoy it.

Michelle: *Be As You Are* was a big success. Most people who have only read one book about Bhagavan's teachings have probably read that one. Why do you think so many people bought it and appreciated it? There are many other books around on Bhagavan's teachings.

David: The book did very well outside India because it had a structure that made the teachings accessible and understandable. Bhagavan's teachings can be very confusing if you don't have a background of Vedanta, or if you don't understand that he gives different answers to the same question to different people. I think the book succeeded because readers were given the right set of keys to understand all the different things he said, all the different levels of the teachings.

When I went to see the editor in London for that first meeting, she asked if I had a sample to show her. I didn't because I had only dreamed up the scheme that morning.

I told her, 'I'll lend you my copy of *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*. It's the biggest collection of his dialogues. I will definitely be taking quite a few extracts from this book.'

When I collected the book a couple of days later she had a bemused look on her face.

'I hope your book is better than this,' she said. 'I couldn't understand a word of it.'

This was a woman who was the commissioning editor of the spiritual book division of a major London publisher. If people like her can't understand Bhagavan's teachings by reading books such as *Talks*, it's a good guess that most other people can't make much sense of them either.

The other thing that made it such a success was Penguin's ability to distribute it so well. Throughout the 80s and 90s I was astounded at all the different places I saw it on sale. If a bookstore only had ten spiritual books on its shelves, *Be As You Are* would usually be one of them. For many people in the West *Be As You Are* was their introduction to Bhagavan simply because it was the only book on Bhagavan's teachings that ever made it to the shelves of their local bookstore.

I remember going with my father and his second wife into a boutique in Pondicherry around 1990. They were hunting for cheap clothes and souvenirs. Near the checkout

counter there was a magazine rack and a shelf that had four books for sale. One was a Delia Smith best-selling cookery book. The next two were airport-style thriller novels by famous authors of that genre, and the fourth was *Be As You Are*. My father was very impressed to find me in such company. Judging by the comments he made to other people, he wasn't particularly impressed by the life I had chosen for myself.

Michelle: How long did it take you to compile this book?

David: I suppose I did it in two or three months, mostly in my spare time. When I went back to India, I took over the running of the Ramanasramam library again, and that was a seven-day-a-week job. I did the editing in the evenings. However, saying this is a bit misleading because I had spent the previous seven years reading and studying the Ramana literature, and I had spent years doing self-enquiry quite intensively. In addition to all this, I had had many long discussions and debates with other devotees on all aspects of the teachings. All this matured into the understanding that I presented in the book. If a musician tells you that he just spent a week learning a new piece of music, it is understood that he spent several years prior to that week mastering his instrument. I put the book together in a few weeks, but I can also say that it was the culmination of several years of study and practice.

Michelle: You said that you typed out *No Mind – I am the Self* on a broken typewriter. Had your technology improved by the time you did *Be As You Are*?

David: Not really. I didn't even own a typewriter. I had to borrow one to type out the final draft. Before I started the work I bought copies of all the Ramana books I thought I would need from the ashram bookstore. Then I cut out all the teaching dialogues and put them in files. I arranged the clippings into subjects and then stapled conversations to pieces of blank paper in an order that seemed to make sense to me. It was classic cut-and-paste word-processing, but I did it with scissors and a stapler instead of a computer. I don't think I even saw a computer until about five years later. When I was satisfied with the order of the extracts, I wrote brief introductions to each chapter and then typed the whole thing out. I had been given an 80,000-word limit by the publisher. I wanted to go right up to that limit and have as much of Bhagavan as possible in the book. That meant keeping my explanations brief and terse. It's occasionally good to have limits like this. It makes you think about the essence of the teachings. Also, summarising complex ideas in half a page is a good test of one's understanding.

Michelle: After *Be As You Are* and *No Mind – I am the Self* came out, you didn't publish again for many years. What were you doing?

David: I did do a lot of writing and research during this period but none of it ever made it as far as publication, at least not in book form. I decided that I wanted to edit a book about all the various saints who had been associated with Arunachala over the last 1,500 years. Many great saints have lived and taught here during that period. Their writings exist in Tamil and Sanskrit, but virtually none of their output has ever been published in English. I decided to find as much of this material as possible and then find people who

could translate it for me. So many bad or weirdly inexplicable things happened to the various people I co-opted into this scheme, I began to believe that this particular project didn't have Arunachala's blessings.

All this happened a long time ago. Let me see if I can remember it all. A friend of mine, Robert Butler, had learned classical, literary Tamil. He volunteered to translate some verses for me, but since he was new to the Tamil translation business, he wanted to have his material checked by someone who knew a lot more Tamil than he did. I approached Sadhu Om, who was generally regarded as being the best Tamil poet and scholar in the vicinity of Ramanasramam, and asked him if he would be willing to check a few of the verses for me, just to see if Robert's understanding was good enough for him to continue with his work. Sadhu Om said he was very busy on other work, but he promised he would get round to it at some point. Weeks went by and nothing happened. Then Michael James, who was his chief assistant, approached me and said that Sadhu Om had promised to do them the following day. Michael had put the verses on his desk so that he could start work on them the next morning. That night Sadhu Om had a stroke from which he never recovered. He died a few days later.

Robert, meanwhile, had gone to England to see his family. While he was there, visas were introduced for British and other Commonwealth people. He wanted to come back with an entry visa that would enable him to stay full-time at the ashram where he hoped to continue working with me. I got the president of Ramanasramam to sponsor him with a signed letter that stated that he was coming to India to do voluntary work at the ashram. These visas usually take about three months to process, but his application dragged on for over a year, with no decision forthcoming from the government. Eventually, someone in Delhi checked with Ramanasramam to see if the ashram really was sponsoring him. Someone who didn't know anything about this arrangement wrote back saying that the ashram had never heard of him, and that he was not coming here to work. That letter effectively left Robert marooned in England because the Indian government was convinced that he had faked his visa application.

I then approached a famous Tamil translator called Vanmikinathan and was delighted when he agreed to help me. I gave him fifty-three verses from the *Tevarams* that had been composed by famous saints who had been associated with Arunachala in the sixth to ninth centuries. It was tricky stuff to translate, needing expertise in that era of Tamil literature. Vanmikinathan had already translated and published poems from this era, so I was very happy to have him on board. After a few days I received a letter from him that stated that he had completed the work, that he would make a fair copy of it and mail it to me the following day. I was impressed with his speed. A few days later I received another letter from him whose text went approximately as follows:

'Dear Mr Godman, I translated your verses and left them on my desk, thinking that I would copy them out later. Then a gust of wind came in through the window, picked up your papers and blew them out into the garden. When I went outside to collect them, there was no sign of them anywhere.'

He ended up getting into a protracted dispute with the Ramakrishna Math in Madras over another book he had translated for them, and I lost his services. For a while I was being helped by Ratna Navaratnam, a Sri Lankan scholar who was an expert on old Tamil and a devotee of Bhagavan. I can't remember why she dropped out. It couldn't have been anything too bad, or I would remember.

Another foreign scholar, an American woman, was also caught up in this drama. She wanted to do a Ph.D on *Arunachala Mahatmyam*, the Sanskrit work that records all the puranic stories and legends about Arunachala. There was a plan for her to move to Tiruvannamalai with her son and do all the work here. I remember that at some point she arranged for her son to do a year of French schooling here by post. I arranged all the paperwork at this end. I got her registered at Madras University and arranged for the professor of Sanskrit there to be her nominal thesis supervisor since she couldn't do graduate work here without one. I went to all this trouble because she had promised to do a translation of *Arunachala Puranam* for me while she was here. This is a Tamil work that records most of the stories that appear in the *Arunachala Mahatmyam*. Everything was ready for her arrival but the Indian embassy in Paris gave her the wrong form to fill in (a tourist visa application) and when it was processed, it was turned down because one cannot do academic research in India on a tourist visa. She had to abandon all her research plans and stay in France with her husband and son. Once you have been turned down for a visa, you can't apply again, even if it is the government's fault for giving you the wrong form. Another resource gone.

While all this was going on, I was continuing to collect material. I had found a version of the *Arunachala Mahatmyam* entitled *Kodi Rudra Samhita* in a government manuscript library in Madras. Since it only existed on palm leaves, I had to engage a pandit to copy it out for me in the library. The only person I knew who knew enough Sanskrit to tackle this kind of job was a devotee called Jagadish Swami who lived in Ramanasramam. I gave him a xeroxed copy and he said he would have a look at it and tell me afterwards if he thought he would be able to translate it for me. Before he had a chance to go through it, he died while he was meditating in his room. He sat cross-legged on a metal chair, which must have been very uncomfortable, in the evening for his usual meditation, and was found there the next morning, still upright, and still cross-legged, but definitely dead. I suppose that it was a good way to die, but I really hoped that my manuscript didn't have anything to do with it.

A couple of days later I did a *pradakshina* of Arunachala. I faced the mountain when I reached the Ganesh temple and tank that is about a third of the way round the hill.

I addressed Siva and said, 'Too many things are going wrong with this project. If you don't want me to carry on with it, give me a sign.'

I should mention that I had already asked Saradamma at Lakshmana Ashram if I should carry on with the work, and she had refused to commit herself either way. She told me that she didn't want the responsibility for it. I had already told her about some of the bad things that had been happening. I should have taken this lack of enthusiasm as a sign to stop.

Anyway, within a day or so I received a bill from the man in Madras who had copied out the *Kodi Rudra Samhita* for me. I think I assumed at the time that this bill had been paid long before. It was a minor event, but I took this as the sign that I should stop.

Relative to the other people who were involved in this project, I escaped rather lightly. I fractured my femur around this time and spent twelve weeks in traction, but some of the others fared far worse than I did.

Some of the work I did on Arunachala saints did eventually appear in *The Mountain Path*, the ashram's magazine, but not under my name. I was already contributing articles on Bhagavan under my own name, so when I had other material to contribute I would

usually use someone else's name. One man, for example, had managed to get a study visa to come to India, but he wasn't doing any studying. He was just meditating instead. I put a couple of articles in his name so that he would have something to show the police if he ever got the midnight knock. Another friend of mine, Nadhia Sutara, was staying at Guhai Namasivaya Temple on the hill. Since her tenure there was not very secure, I put her name on two articles about Guhai Namasivaya and Guru Namasivaya, hoping that the man who ran the place would be impressed enough to let her continue to stay there.

Michelle: Amazing! You are lucky to still be alive. What did you turn to after this project fell through?

David: I started to collect the reminiscences of old devotees of Ramana Maharshi, particularly the ones that hadn't appeared in English before. I think the aim was to produce a large, single-volume anthology in which each devotee would be given a chapter to tell his or her story. I collected a lot of good material, but the book itself didn't see the light of day until fairly recently. It got demoted in my priorities because other projects came up that seemed more exciting, more appealing.

Around 1987 I approached Annamalai Swami and asked him if I could interview him for this book. I knew he had worked with Bhagavan in the ashram in the 1930s and I assumed that his reminiscences would probably make a good chapter. Annamalai Swami's translator, who was a good friend of mine, lobbied on my behalf but couldn't get Annamalai Swami to agree to talk to me. Several weeks went by during which Annamalai Swami steadfastly refused to tell me his story. Then Sundaram, his translator, had a flash of inspiration.

He told Annamalai Swami, 'David has already written a good book on Bhagavan's teachings. Many of the foreigners who come here say that it is the best book on Bhagavan's teachings.'

This intrigued Annamalai Swami because he himself spent an hour or so every afternoon answering questions on Bhagavan and his teachings. He was beginning to attract foreign visitors to his ashram, and he agreed to talk to them on condition that the sole topic of conversation was Bhagavan. He didn't want to talk about anything else. Bhagavan had told him not to socialise and to stay at home and meditate as much as possible. People who just wanted to meditate with him were told to go and meditate in Ramanasramam, but people who had questions about spiritual practice, or Bhagavan's teachings were generally welcome, but only for as long as it took for Annamalai Swami to answer their questions. He was a hard man to get to see, and it was even harder to get to spend a lot of time with him.

Annamalai Swami instructed Sundaram to get hold of a copy of *Be As You Are* and read it out to him. Annamalai Swami didn't know much English, so Sundaram had to translate as he went along. Annamalai Swami listened to almost the entire book before finally deciding that he would be willing to talk to me.

When I finally managed to see him, he told me, 'You have a good understanding of Bhagavan's teachings. I know that if I speak to you, you will not misrepresent what I say.'

There was already a very bad book about his life in Tamil by Suddhananada Bharati, and Annamalai Swami didn't want another, equally bad version to appear.

Up until that time Annamalai Swami had not told his story to anyone, or rather I should say that he had not told his story in a systematic way. He had told Sundaram and a few other people odd stories, but he had never linked them all together. For the next few weeks I went there every afternoon and interviewed him for about ninety minutes. I soon realised that this was not going to be just another chapter in my book. The material he was giving me was so astonishing, so extensive, I knew I had a full-length book project on my hands. When the interviews were completed, it took me almost eighteen months of steady, patient work and detailed research to put together the book *Living by the Words of Bhagavan*.

Annamalai Swami was something of an inspiration for me. He seemed to epitomise and embody all the qualities that a good devotee needs when he is dealing with his Guru and his ashram. I admired his integrity and his unshakable determination to carry out Bhagavan's instructions, irrespective of the consequences. That's why I called the book *Living by the Words of Bhagavan*. Annamalai Swami's whole life was dedicated to carrying out his Guru's words.

When Sundaram read out the final version, Annamalai Swami was very happy with it. However, when he arranged a second reading for the Tamil devotees who couldn't understand the original English, some of them pointed out to him that a few of the stories might get him into trouble with the Ramanasramam authorities. He agreed that this was probably true. He sent for me and told me to hide the manuscript and not let anyone see it.

'When I am dead,' he said, 'you can do anything you like with it, but until then don't let anyone read it. Bhagavan told me to lead a quiet life and not to see many people. I will not be able to follow his instructions if lots of people come to see me as a result of reading this book, and I don't want my life to be disturbed by people coming here to complain about some of these stories.'

This was 1987 I think. I put it away and didn't take it out again until 1994. That year, he changed his mind and allowed it to be printed. A year later he passed away. I think he was right to put off the publication. When it came out, it did attract a lot of new people, and several of them did come to complain about some of the stories he had narrated.

In the last few months of his life there was a tape recorder running while he gave his answers to visitors. At Sundaram's request I edited these new dialogues into a new book, *Final Talks*, which, I think, makes quite a nice supplement to the original biography.

Michelle: We seem to have filled in some of the blanks on your 1980s map. What were you doing for the rest of the time?

David: While I was collecting more information about old devotees of Bhagavan and from about 1988 onwards, I was also helping Lakshmana Swami and Saradamma with a piece of land they had bought here.

Lakshmana Swamy had mentioned a few times that he wanted to move back to Tiruvannamalai. Sundaram, Annamalai Swami's translator, and I were asked to look for possible properties that might be suitable for him. We found a few, but every time Lakshmana Swamy was taken to see them, they didn't appeal to him. At one point we actually agreed to buy a piece of land near the junction of the *pradakshina* road and the Bangalore road, but the owners backed out after a price had been agreed.

Then a piece of land came on the market that was located behind the Government Arts College. Much to our surprise Lakshmana Swamy gave the order to buy before he had even seen it. It seems that he had been sitting on this land in the early 1950s when he had suddenly had a vision of himself living there forty years later. The next time he came to Tiruvannamalai he looked at the land and confirmed that this was the place where he had had the vision. He had let us run around, looking at other properties and negotiating for them, but somehow he seemed to know that he would end up living in the place where he is now.

I volunteered to develop the garden. It was just an empty field when we started, so empty in fact that we had to get the government surveyor in to determine where our piece of empty field ended and the neighbours' empty fields began. We surveyed the land, fenced it, dug a well and started a nursery of trees. The well didn't produce any water, so we ended up running a pipe to a neighbour's well and buying from him. For about three years I put in several hours a day in this garden, growing trees and flowers. It was a tough time to start a project like this because there was a drought in the area. The monsoon failed several years in a row. A house was started for Lakshmana Swamy and Saradamma, but work was halted when the water ran out. We could have shipped water in tankers, but we discovered that it was too saline to be used in building work. The water would have corroded the steel inside the cement. When the work stopped, I ended up being the night watchman there. The house was full of tools and cement bags, but there were no doors and windows to protect them. I think I slept on this building site for most of a year, watching the property and waiting for the rains to come so that the work could continue. For two summers in a row I bought water in tankers to keep the garden alive. Every well in the neighbourhood was completely dry.

I was still living in Ramanasramam, working on my project to collect and edit the stories of Ramana devotees. Sometime in 1990 I wrote to Papaji in Lucknow, asking him if he would be willing to contribute his story to the book. He wrote back, saying that he would be happy to have his story included, but he added that he didn't want to write it down himself. He asked me to submit a questionnaire, and he would then do his best to answer it by giving verbal answers that would be recorded on tape. This seemed like a good suggestion. It took him a few months to get round to it, but when he finally did, he spent at least an hour talking about his early life and his association with Bhagavan. There seemed to be a few major discrepancies in his account, but when I wrote, asking for clarification, he just repeated the same stories all over again. In 1992 I decided to go and see him in the hope of getting his story straightened out. I spent a chaotic two weeks with him, chaotic because his wife died about three days after I arrived, which meant a major disruption to his usual routine. His family descended en masse; there was a trip to Hardwar to immerse the ashes in the Ganga; but in between all these comings and goings I managed to get most of the information I had been looking for. A lot of it came in a last-minute interview I had with him about an hour before my train was due to leave. It was that kind of trip.

Back in Tiruvannamalai I went through all my notes and put together a fifty-page version of his life that focused on his early life and the meetings he had had with Bhagavan. At the time I wasn't interested in anything that came after 1950. I submitted it with some hesitancy because there were still a few events that I couldn't place in the right order, but he seemed to love it. He invited me back to Lucknow, telling me that he had

many more stories he wanted to tell me. I went back in March 1993, intending to stay for a short time, but I ended up staying there until he passed away in 1997.

Michelle: What was the attraction? What made you decide to stay, and stay so long?

David: First of all, I felt his power and I felt his peace. Here was a man in the Ramana lineage, promulgating his teachings and radiating a kind of tangible *sakti* that shut up the minds of the people around him, and in some cases gave them temporary experiences of the Self. It was a heady, intoxicating environment in which people were having amazing experiences almost every day. On top of that there was the promise of getting more extraordinary stories from him. My first trip there had been a kind of smash-and-grab raid. I had come with very limited time. With all the funeral events going on I had had to remind him constantly that our time was limited and that I wanted to talk to him about his life. Second time round I waited for him to take the initiative, but strangely enough he didn't. Having invited me there to tell stories, he never showed any interest in doing so.

Within two weeks of my arrival I was given a book project that someone else couldn't deal with. A German doctor, Gabby, had been asked to collect interviews that Papaji had had with various visitors and arrange them in book form. She was struggling a bit with this because she wasn't a native English speaker. I was asked to help her, and when she left Lucknow a few weeks later, I inherited the whole project. I wanted to take my time and do it properly, but Papaji wanted it to be brought out in a hurry. He didn't seem to have much patience with long, drawn-out projects. His motto seemed to be 'Do it, and do it now!'

I gave him samples every day to read and it took me a while to work out what kind of style he liked. I finally succeeded when I gave him a manuscript just before he ate his lunch. He took it back to his bedroom after lunch and read it in his room. When I went to the house again around four, there was a big water melon waiting for me with my name on it, and when I next saw him he exclaimed, 'This is just what I want! Where's the rest of it? I want to read the rest of it.' He seemed disappointed that I couldn't suddenly produce a whole book out of thin air at a moment's notice.

After that, knowing what he wanted, the work was easy. I think I finished it in about two months, which was probably still too slow for Papaji's liking. This was *Papaji Interviews*, by the way.

One other reason for the slowness was that Papaji also got me involved in a film project. An American film-maker, Jim Lemkin, arrived in Lucknow and asked if he could make a documentary about Papaji and his teachings. Papaji agreed and sent me along as a kind of advisor, interviewer and general consultant. I don't know why I got this job. I had never worked on a film before in my life. Within about three months we had the film ready. I had spent my first three months in Lucknow finishing somebody else's book and helping Jim with his film. There was no sign, however, that Papaji was willing to start talking about any of the incidents he had promised to tell me. I dropped several hints, but no business resulted.

After a few months I suggested that he could just sit in front of a camera and tell all the main stories of his life. I didn't know what else to do to start him talking.

'I couldn't do that,' he replied. 'I would need some notes to remind me which stories I wanted to tell.'

This sounded like another excuse to put off the answering, so I decided to push the issue a little.

‘No problem,’ I said. ‘I’ll make the notes for you. I’ll make a list of every story I have ever heard you tell, and every incident I have heard about your life, and I will arrange them in chronological order. You can go through the list one by one and answer any that appeal to you.’

I got no answer to that one, but I went ahead and made the list anyway. I gave it to him one afternoon while he was having his afternoon tea. He seemed to be very excited by the first few questions, saying what good questions they were, and how much he would enjoy talking about them. Then he turned the page and realised that it wasn’t two pages he had to go through. It was sixteen.

His face dropped and his enthusiasm vanished. ‘This is a very long list,’ he said, all excitement gone.

‘Well,’ I said, ‘you have had a very long life, and it has been full of interesting incidents.’

I was hoping I hadn’t blown my chance by overloading him with questions.

‘I’ll have to go through it,’ he said. ‘I’ll make notes in the margins about what I want to talk about.’

That seemed to be good news. At least he was going to try.

The list of questions stayed in his bedroom for several months, completely unread so far as I could ascertain. I would occasionally mention it to him and he would reply that he was working on it. Whatever he was doing, he wasn’t doing it with the papers in his hand.

In 1994 I received news that Annamalai Swami wanted me to print his book. I approached Papaji and asked him what I should concentrate on. I should mention at this point that I had unofficially inherited another project that was known as the ‘Om Shanti’ book. In 1992 and early 1993 Papaji began his daily satsangs with a brief talk on whatever he felt inspired to speak about that day. These had been transcribed and there was a plan to make a book of them. At one point Catherine Ingram was supposed to be doing this, but when she wrote to Papaji, saying that she couldn’t do it, she added ‘Maybe David can do it instead’.

Papaji read out the letter and said, ‘Yes, David can do it’. I was sitting in a far corner of the room at the time, but he never looked at me, and he never officially asked me to start the work. Since I didn’t particularly want the job – I had enough on my plate already – I never asked him about it myself until this meeting I had with him in 1994.

I explained to him, ‘I have been asked to go to Tamil Nadu to make sure this Annamalai Swami book gets printed properly. You said indirectly that you wanted me to edit this ‘Om Shanti’ book, and the questions about your biography are all still pending. What do you want me to do, and in what order?’

‘How near is the “Om Shanti” book to completion?’ he asked.

‘There’s one version available,’ I answered, ‘but no one likes it. If I took up that work, I would probably have to start from scratch and do it all again. It would probably take several months.’

‘OK,’ he said. ‘we don’t want that project any more. It’s not necessary. Go back to Tiruvannamalai, print your new book, and when you come back we will start on my biography.’

This was just what I wanted to hear. I had permission to go away and print Annamalai Swami's book; I had got myself out of a job that I didn't really want to do; and I had received a promise that he would start work on my main project as soon as I returned from the south.

That's not what happened though. Things rarely go according to plan when Papaji is concerned. As soon as I left the house to go to South India, he sent someone out to buy a big foolscap notebook. He took my questionnaire from his bedroom, blew the dust off it, and began to answer all the questions by writing them out in this book. The people who were there said he spent several hours a day patiently going through all my sixteen pages of questions. It must have been very uncomfortable for him. It was summer, there were frequent power cuts, and he had a brace on his neck because he was suffering from spondylitis. That made it hard for him to look down and see the page he was writing on. He stuck at it, though, day after day, and when I finally returned he had written almost 150 pages. The moment I walked into the house, he put his pen down and wouldn't write any more. I have thought about this many times, but I still can't come up with any sensible conjectures. Why did he have to wait half a year until I was out of town to start writing his memoirs, and why did he stop the moment I returned? He had asked me to be his official biographer, but he seemed to be incapable of answering questions when I was around. I should add that no one would ever accuse him of being shy or diffident. If he wanted to do something, he did it, and if he wanted to say something, no social convention on politeness would prevent him from saying exactly what he wanted to say. He was a bulldozer in everything he did.

These handwritten stories were just what I needed to start my book. There were many incidents I had never heard before, along with good versions of stories that I already knew. I got myself organised. I found myself a computer; I recruited volunteers who were willing to listen to all the old satsang tapes in order to find all the different versions of the stories he told; I started collecting letters from all the people he had written to over the years; I wrote to everyone whose address appeared in his address book; and I started interviewing everyone I knew who had been connected with him. It was a long, long job, but it was immensely rewarding. I discovered many people from all over the world who had been utterly transformed by Papaji, sometimes after only a single meeting with him. Whenever I needed supplementary information, I would write out a list of questions, and he would give me written answers. He seemed to prefer this format when he dealt with matters pertaining to his life story. However, whenever I asked him questions about his teachings, he would take the list to satsang and give answers there so that everyone could immediately benefit from what he had to say.

For most of his life Papaji forbade his devotees from talking about him. He wanted a high level of secrecy to guard his privacy. When I started writing to old devotees, asking for their stories, they immediately wrote back to Papaji, asking what they should do. I had told them all in my letters that I was doing this with Papaji's permission, but, quite rightly, they all felt a need to check. Papaji encouraged and in some cases even ordered these people to tell me their stories. Some people told me about incidents they hadn't even mentioned to members of their own families.

Every time I finished a chapter, I would give it to Papaji to read and check. At first he would go through it in his house and then later take it to the morning satsang and read it out there. Later, though, he would just say, 'Put it in the satsang bag. I'll read it

tomorrow.’ I have to say that I was touched by the faith he showed on these occasions. I don’t think I would volunteer to read out a biography of myself in front of 200 people without first checking to see what was in it. In the beginning he would make a few corrections, but once I got the hang of how he liked to have his stories presented, he rarely touched any of them. He even stopped reading with a pen in his hand. In the last few hundred pages the only things he changed were the spellings of the names of a few Indian devotees that I had misspelled because I had never seen them written down before. He finished the last portion about a month before he passed away in 1997. Sometimes I wish that I had worked a bit harder so that I could have presented him with a copy of the first book, but that wasn’t ready until the middle of 1998.

After Papaji passed away in September 1997 I finished work on *Nothing Ever Happened* and came back to Tiruvannamalai, and I have been here more or less ever since.

Michelle: What work did you start when you came back here? What are you working on now?

David: I did nothing for a while. I took a break from writing. I didn’t feel like doing anything new. Until the middle of 1998 there were proofs of *Nothing Ever Happened* to go through, but after that I had a complete break from book work for about a year. Papaji had asked me to edit his Lucknow satsangs for him and bring them out in book form. He even told me what format to use. That’s a big job and I have only just started on it.

In 1999 I suddenly remembered the reminiscences project I had started in the 1980s. Two books on Annamalai Swami and four books on Papaji had sidetracked me for a decade, but when one of my friends here asked to have a look at one of the unpublished chapters, I took everything out of its folder and read it for the first time in maybe ten years. Realising that I still had plenty of good material that deserved to be printed, I started to organise it into book form. That particular project, *The Power of the Presence* in three volumes, started about two years ago and ended quite recently when I finally received the last volume from the press.

Michelle: You are now publishing your own books. What made you take that decision?

David: In the middle of 2000 I approached Penguin in Delhi to see if they would be interested in bringing out the series that later came out as *The Power of the Presence*. I also wanted to see if they might be willing to bring out an Indian edition of *Nothing Ever Happened* since it is far too expensive for most Indians to buy. Right now, only the American edition exists. Its \$45 price translates as over Rs 2,100 in this country. Hardly anyone can afford that kind of price here.

When I went to see the commissioning editor for spiritual books in the headquarters of Penguin India in Delhi, the woman I spoke to claimed that *Be As You Are* was not a Penguin book, and that the office had no record of either the book or me. I couldn’t believe she was serious, but she was. The book has been continuously in print in its Indian Penguin edition for more than ten years but there was no trace of it, she said, either in their catalogues or on their computers. I decided I didn’t want to deal with a company that could lose titles and authors so completely that no record of them showed

up on their computers. It wasn't just the English edition she had lost. She didn't know anything about the versions that had been brought out in several Indian languages.

I have always had bad experiences with commercial publishers. When *Be As You Are* first came out in the mid-80s, the original publisher didn't tell me it was out, and didn't even send me a copy. The first copy I ever saw came from a friend of mine who bought it in a second-hand bookstore.

I decided in the end to publish *The Power of the Presence* myself. I find it quite rewarding to be involved in everything from the original idea to distribution and marketing points several thousand miles away.

Michelle: Other than the new Papaji books, is there anything else in the pipeline?

David: I am working on a new presentation of Bhagavan's teachings that I hope will come out around the end of the year. It will be based on teaching statements by Bhagavan that were recorded by Muruganar in a Tamil work entitled *Padamalai*. That will probably be the title of the book when it comes out. There are also a few other possibilities, but they are so vague, I don't really want to start talking about them. I think I have said enough for one afternoon. I haven't talked this much for months and I think my voice is going. Come back in a year and ask me 'What's new?' and I might have something more to tell you. That's enough for now...

Postscript

Last year I wrote an account on my blog which covered the time I spent in London in 1983, the period when I was looking for a job and ended up getting a contract to write Be As You Are. Since there was additional information in that account that dovetails with some of the stories in the Michelle interview, I am adding it here.

In 1983 I was in London, staying in the house of a friend of mine. Her partner, Piers, knew a man in Hampstead who wanted someone to house sit for him while he went on holiday. Piers, who had been a devotee of Bhagavan for years, introduced me and gave me a recommendation. The man who owned the house was a retired professor of art, having taught for many years at a prestigious London art school. His main claim to fame in the academic world was discovering hidden Rosicrucian symbols in centuries-old paintings. In those days non-Christian groups had to transmit their ideas in unorthodox ways to avoid persecution by the church. I can't remember the professor's name, so I will continue to call him 'the professor'. He taught perspective, possibly the most boring subject in any art curriculum, but it was one that had always fascinated him. He had looked at an old painting of a ballroom scene in which the dancers were strutting their stuff on a black-and-white chessboard-like surface, which receded off into the distance. He noted how the squares had all the right angles and foreshortening to make the perspective look realistic. As an exercise in perspective, and just to amuse himself, he reconstructed the ballroom from the chandelier perspective: that is to say, he made a top view of the room in which all the squares became squares. When he did this, he discovered that the floor was covered with secret Rosicrucian teachings, which were not visible when the ballroom was viewed from the angle that the artist had painted it. This

was great fun for the art historians, who then spent the next few years checking out all the other floors in old paintings to see what might be hidden on them. Angles, optics and perspective fascinated this man, and he was rightly celebrated as a man who had opened up a whole new field in art history.

At our first meeting, which was a kind of interview for the job, we ended up talking about Plotinus, a neo-Platonist mystic. I knew about him from his writings on mysticism, and the professor knew about him because he had apparently written the world's first treatise on optics. The professor decided that anyone who could talk intelligently about Plotinus was OK with him, so I was given the job.

He took me to the house next door to introduce me to the neighbours because he didn't want them to call the police when they saw a strange man entering the house. I was introduced as someone who lived in an ashram in India, and who was in London on a long holiday.

'My brother went to live in an ashram in India,' said the neighbour. 'A place called Tiruvannamalai. Have you heard of it?'

I laughed and told her that this was my ashram as well. Curious to hear more about her brother, I asked what his name was, and when he lived there.

I learned that her brother had been stationed in India during the Second World War and that during his visit he had been to see Bhagavan in Tiruvannamalai. The visit had made a deep impression on him. When the war was over, he decided to go back to India and live permanently in Tiruvannamalai. He had stayed on after Bhagavan passed away and had apparently died there in the 1950s. His sister said that he had been buried somewhere near Ramanasramam.

She told me his name, and I was a little surprised that I had never heard of it. There were not many permanent foreign residents in Tiruvannamalai in the 1940s, and I thought I knew the names of all of them. I asked the woman if she was sure that her brother was staying near Ramanasramam, and not some other ashram. She went off to another room and came back with a folder of his letters that she had kept. They were headlined 'Ramanasramam' with 1940s and 50s dates, and other foreigners such as Cohen and Chadwick were mentioned in them.

I can't remember this man's name either, but I did write it down because I wanted to check in Ramanasramam to see if anyone remembered him there. On my return I spoke to Kunju Swami, Ramaswami Pillai and a few others, but none of them could remember this mysterious British ex-soldier who had fallen in love with Bhagavan, moved to Tiruvannamalai, and died there. S. S. Cohen could probably have told me all about him, but he had passed away a couple of years before.

We went back to the professor's house, where he gave me a quick briefing on my duties. They were not particularly onerous. He had inherited the house in the 1950s and part of the inheritance was a large tortoise who lived in the garden. He was several decades old, impressively large, but not very intelligent. The garden was terraced and the tortoise had a life-long habit of walking off the edge of the terrace walls and falling down to the next level, where he would often end up on his back. Ramps had been specially built for him to walk between the different levels, but he often forgot to use them. Tortoises apparently cannot live for more than twenty-four hours on their backs. My only household duty, said the professor, was to go out into the garden once a day, locate the tortoise, and make sure he was the right way up. For this, I had the run of a millionaire's

mansion in one of the most expensive and desirable corners of London. At this particular time rich Arabs were buying up the best houses in the city. Other than making sure that the tortoise was the right way up, my only other job was to say 'no' to the various agents who might knock on the door and offer huge amounts for the house. No one came while I was there, but the professor told me that he had been offered well over a million pounds for the place by visitors in the preceding weeks. That's 1983 prices. I would guess that a place like that would go for over 10 million today. That's about twenty million dollars.

It was a huge mansion, and everything in it seemed to be antique and valuable. The floors were covered in old Persian rugs; the bookshelves with leather-bound 18th and 19th century first editions; the paintings, unsurprisingly, were originals; and even the kitchen was stocked with valuable antiques. I found this out after I had had my first bowl of breakfast cereal. I washed up and left the spoon to dry on the draining board. A couple of hours later, when it had gone black, I realised that it was solid silver. I checked the hallmark and then turned over my bowl. It was Meissen china, and probably old as well. Not wanting any domestic accidents with valuable family heirlooms, I went off to Woolworth's and bought myself some cheap plates, bowls and cutlery to eat my food off during my stay.

Down in the cellar there were thousands of bottles of what I assumed was very good wine. That assumption was based on the prices on the unopened boxes, rather than any knowledge of the subject. I found out later from my friend Piers that one reason I was given the house by the professor was that he thought it unlikely that a *sadhu* from India would have a riotous party and end up drinking all his wine. Even so, I found his trust quite astonishing. He had given me the house after a twenty-minute chat, having never set eyes on me before. Even though the contents of his house may well have been worth almost as much as the house itself, I had been given the run of the place after the most cursory of evaluations.

There was a living room in the centre of the house, although I suppose its various owners had probably given it a more grandiose name. It had huge bay windows that overlooked the terraced garden, which sloped down away from the house. Hampstead is on a slight hill. Beyond the garden wall the whole of London spread itself out before me, with famous landmarks such as St Paul's cathedral clearly visible in the distance. Facing the window were an 18th century clavichord and a more modern harpsichord. Both were in tune and ready to be played. I decided to enter into the spirit of the occasion by learning a piece of old music and playing it on the antique clavichord as I faced this gorgeous panorama of London. I selected a simple section of a Bach piece from the sheet music I found inside the stool, and then, blowing the dust off the memories of piano lessons I had unwillingly endured when I was eight and nine, I spent three days mastering my little piece.

The professor, who had gone on holiday, was a creature of habit. Each year, in the same month, he headed off the Channel Islands to spend time with an old friend. That year the strange Ramana coincidences were uppermost in his mind when he arrived. My friend Piers had revealed that he was a Ramana devotee, which was the first time the professor had ever heard the name; I was then introduced as a devotee of the same Guru; finally, on our visit to his neighbour, he discovered for the first time that his neighbour's brother had lived at Ramanasramam and had eventually been buried nearby. He narrated this strange story to his host on their first evening together. His friend listened in silence

and then left the room for a few minutes. He came back a few minutes later with a huge pile of Ramana books; the professor's best and oldest friend had been a devotee for decades and had never bothered to tell him. It was something he liked to keep secret, but the professor's story had persuaded him to come out of the closet.

All this was told to me on his return. He had dismissed the story of his neighbour's brother being buried in Tiruvannamalai as an odd coincidence, but he was genuinely shocked when he discovered that his oldest friend had been a Ramana devotee for years and had never spoken to him about it.

I suppose the story should end with the professor seeing the light and turning to Ramana, but it was not to be. As I said, he was a creature of habit. He went back to his music and his art, and probably used his Ramana story as a conversation-filler on social occasions. I never saw him again.

With that story reaching a dead end, I will continue the narrative with Piers, the friend who had introduced me to the professor. I had met him in Tiruvannamalai in the 1970s, where he was a regular winter visitor. He worked as a gardener or a house painter in London, jobs that allowed him to take time off every winter and come to Tiruvannamalai. He lived, by western standards, an austere life in London. He slept on the floor in a sparsely furnished room. The few objects on view were Ramana portraits, God pictures and a few Ramana books. He liked to sit quietly in his room, absorbing himself in his inner silence. His needs were minimal since the room was in his mother's house. He generally walked to work, ate at home, and had no interest in spending money on the usual consumer items. He lived like a *sadhu* whether he was in London or Tiruvannamalai. He would work as many hours as were needed to meet his meagre financial obligations, and no more. Given his lifestyle, he could get by on working half a week or less, even at minimum wages. And how did he finance his trips to India? He told me that if Ramana wanted him to come to Tiruvannamalai in the winter, he would send him a big job offer around August or September. When such offers came, he took them as a sign that he should take them and save enough money for a trip to India. This happened almost every year.

There was one other aspect of his *sadhana* that impressed me. He would write letters to Ramana about all the things that were going on in his life. He would then 'post' the letters by putting them through the slit of a box that was under his Ramana photo. That way, Piers felt that Ramana would be up to speed on all the developments in his life.

Piers is about my age. A few years ago a thought suddenly popped into his head: 'What's going to happen to me when I get old?' He had a job that required physical stamina; he had no pension, no savings, and no home of his own. A sudden thought such as this might have induced some sort of panic in most people, but Piers decided that he would just tell Ramana that he had had this thought and leave it to him to deal with it. He wrote out his story and posted it in his box.

Meanwhile, his mother, who, incidentally, is also a Ramana devotee, was visiting a friend of hers in Hampstead, the same area where my art professor had had his house. This woman was in her early eighties and had no family. She asked Annie, Piers' mother, if she could leave her flat to her since she had no one else to pass it on to. Annie consulted her solicitor (another Ramana devotee) who suggested that for tax and inheritance reasons, it would be better to put the flat in her son Piers' name. Annie agreed. She did actually want him to have the flat as his personal property. It wasn't just

a case of putting her own property in his name. Neither Annie nor her solicitor knew about the letter that Piers had written and ‘posted’ to Bhagavan. When the woman passed away, Piers’ mother gave him the flat to live in.

So, after posting his letter to Ramana, a complete stranger indirectly left him a valuable flat in a very expensive area of London. Since the place needed major renovations, when the woman passed away Piers took a loan, fixed it up, and paid for the improvements by renting it out for a couple of years. I suppose the moral of this story is: if you really can hand over all your burdens to Ramana, he will be more than happy to take responsibility for them.

Piers, incidentally, was instrumental in launching my professional writing career. In 1983, around the time I lived in the millionaire’s house, I was unemployed and eagerly looking for work that would give me enough money to go back to India and live in Tiruvannamalai. I thought myself to be reasonably well educated and qualified, but I couldn’t find anyone who was interested in hiring me. I wasn’t aiming too high: I was, at one point, turned down for a job picking up litter in the London Zoo, apparently because I laughed at the wrong moment during the interview.

I was living in a millionaire’s mansion in Hampstead and getting turned down for litter-picking jobs, and every other kind of job I applied for.

At some point during that summer Piers introduced me to the owner of the house that was next to his mother’s. I was staying in this house at the time, camping out in a sleeping bag in the basement. The owner was a lecturer in philosophy at Leicester University, and so was his wife. He had come to London to hand in a manuscript on philosophy that his wife had written. When her editor discovered that he too was a philosopher, she said, ‘Why don’t you write a philosophy book as well? We are always interested in new books on philosophy.’

My ears pricked up when I heard this. I had at that time already written *No Mind – I am the Self* and had had a brief period as editor of *The Mountain Path*. Writing a book on Ramana was something I felt I was more than qualified to do. I obtained the editor’s phone number from the philosophy lecturer and called it, but with not much expectation of success. I had spent most of that summer being turned down for menial jobs, and my limited experience of authors was that, after writing your first book, you then spent the next year having it turned down by a succession of publishers.

However, far from being given the cold shoulder, the woman whom I gave my pitch to got very excited and said, ‘Put the phone down and come here at once! We want you. Don’t go anywhere else. Come and talk to me as soon as possible.’

Having being laughed at or ignored by potential employers for several months, I have to say that this made a very pleasant change. I went, was ushered into her office, and emerged half an hour later with a contract to come back to India and write *Be As You Are*. I know that the book has been a commercial and critical success – continuously in print for twenty-five years and translated into at least fifteen languages – but in retrospect I know the woman took a gamble on me. I was an unknown author, with no experience. I didn’t even have a synopsis of the book I wanted to write. I just made it all up on the spot as I sat in her office.

All I can say now is that I was destined to come back to India and write about Bhagavan, and whatever power had organised this script had also determined that this

woman would say, in defiance of all sound commercial judgement, 'Here's a contract. Sign here. Go to India and write your book.'

I leave the last word on this to Bhagavan:

The feeling 'I work' is the hindrance. Ask yourself 'Who works?' Remember who you are. Then the work will not bind you; it will go on automatically. Make no effort either to work or to renounce; your effort is the bondage. What is destined to happen will happen. If you are destined not to work, work cannot be had even if you hunt for it; if you are destined to work, you will not be able to avoid it; you will be forced to engage yourself in it. So, leave it to the higher power; you cannot renounce or retain as you choose. (*Maharshi's Gospel*, page 5)

Remembering Nisargadatta Maharaj

I was sitting with a visitor recently, looking at a new book on Nisargadatta Maharaj that consisted of photos and brief quotes. I knew some of the people in the pictures and narrated a few stories about them. This prompted a wider and lengthy discussion on some of the events that went on in Maharaj's presence. After she left I felt prompted to write down some of the things I had remembered since I had never bothered to record any of my memories of Maharaj before. As I went about recording the conversation, a few other memories surfaced, things I hadn't thought about for years. This, therefore, is a record of a pleasant afternoon's talk, supplemented by recollections of related incidents that somehow never came up.

Harriet: Every book I have seen about Maharaj, and I think I have looked at most of them, is a record of his teachings. Did no one ever bother to record the things that were going on around him? Ramakrishna had *The Gospel of Ramakrishna*, Ramana Maharshi had *Day by Day*, and a whole library of books by devotees that all talk about life with their Guru. Why hasn't Maharaj spawned a similar genre?

David: Maharaj very rarely spoke about his life, and he didn't encourage questions about it. I think he saw himself as a kind of doctor who diagnosed and treated the perceived spiritual ailments of the people who came to him for advice. His medicine was his presence and his powerful words. Anecdotes from his past were not part of the prescription. Nor did he seem interested in telling stories about anything or anyone else.

Harriet: You said 'rarely spoke'. That means that you must have heard at least a few stories. What did you hear him talk about?

David: Mostly about his Guru, Siddharameshwar Maharaj, and the effect he had had on his life. I think his love for his Guru and his gratitude to him were always present with him. Nisargadatta Maharaj used to do five *bhajans* a day simply because his Guru had asked him to. Siddharameshwar Maharaj had passed away in 1936, but Nisargadatta Maharaj was still continuing with these practices more than forty years later.

I once heard him say, 'My Guru asked me to do these five *bhajans* daily, and he never cancelled his instructions before he passed away. I don't need to do them any more but I will carry on doing them until the day I die because this is the command of my Guru. I continue to obey his instructions, even though I know these *bhajans* are pointless, because of the respect and gratitude I feel towards him.'

Harriet: Did he ever talk about the time he was with Siddharameshwar, about what passed between them?

David: Not on any of the visits I made. Ranjit Maharaj once came to visit during one of his morning sessions. They chatted in Marathi for a few minutes and then Ranjit left.

Maharaj simply said, ‘That man is a *jnani*. He is a disciple of my Guru, but he is not teaching.’

End of story. That visit could have been a springboard to any number of stories about his Guru or about Ranjit, but he wasn’t interested in talking about them. He just got on with answering the questions of his visitors.

Harriet: What else did you glean about his background and the spiritual tradition he came from?

David: He was part of a spiritual lineage that is known as the Navnath Sampradaya. This wasn’t a secret because he had photos or pictures of many of the teachers from his lineage on his walls. He did a Guru *puja* every morning at the end of which he put *kum kum* on the foreheads of all the teachers in his lineage and on the photos of everyone else he thought was enlightened. I should mention that his walls were covered with portraits. Ramana Maharshi was there, and so were many other famous saints who were not part of his lineage. Mixed in with them were other pictures, such as one of Sivaji, a famous Marathi warrior from a few hundred years ago.

I once asked him why Sivaji had made it onto his walls, and he said, ‘My son wants me to keep it there. It’s the logo on our brand of beedis [hand-made cigarettes]. He thinks that if it is mixed in with all the other pictures that I do *puja* to, sales will increase.’

Harriet: What did he say about all these photos of the people from his lineage? Did he never explain who they were?

David: Never. I only found out what their names were a few years later when I came across a book by R. D. Ranade, who was in a Karnataka branch of the *sampradaya*. He, or rather his organization, brought out a souvenir that contained the same photos I had seen on Maharaj’s walls, along with a brief description of who they were.

I do remember one interesting story that Maharaj told about the *sampradaya*. He had been answering questions in his usual way when he paused to give us a piece of history:

‘I sit here every day answering your questions, but this is not the way that the teachers of my lineage used to do their work. A few hundred years ago there were no questions and answers at all. Ours is a householder lineage, which means everyone had to go out and earn his living. There were no meetings like this where disciples met in large numbers with the Guru and asked him questions. Travel was difficult. There were no buses, trains and planes. In the old days the Guru did the traveling on foot, while the disciples stayed at home and looked after their families. The Guru walked from village to village to meet the disciples. If he met someone he thought was ready to be included in the *sampradaya*, he would initiate him with the mantra of the lineage. That was the only teaching given out. The disciple would repeat the mantra and periodically the Guru would come to the village to see what progress was being made. When the Guru knew that he was about to pass away, he would appoint one of the householder-devotees to be the new Guru, and that new Guru would then take on the teaching duties: walking from village to village, initiating new devotees and supervising the progress of the old ones.’

I don’t know why this story suddenly came out. Maybe he was just tired of answering the same questions again and again.

Harriet: I have heard that Maharaj occasionally gave out a mantra to people who asked. Was this the same mantra?

David: Yes, but he wasn't a very good salesman for it. I once heard him say, 'My Guru has authorised me to give out this mantra to anyone who asks for it, but I don't want you to feel that it is necessary or important. It is more important to find out the source of your beingness.'

Nevertheless, some people would ask. He would take them downstairs and whisper it in his or her ear. It was Sanskrit and quite long, but you only got one chance to remember it. He would not write it down for you. If you didn't remember it from that one whisper, you never got another chance.

Harriet: What other teaching instructions did Siddharameshwar give him? Was he the one who encouraged him to teach by answering questions, rather than in the more traditional way?

David: I have no idea if he was asked to teach in a particular way. Siddharameshwar told him that he could teach and give out the Guru mantra to anyone who asked for it, but he wasn't allowed to appoint a successor. You have to remember that Nisargadatta wasn't realised himself when Siddharameshwar passed away.

Harriet: What about personal details? Did Maharaj ever talk about his childhood or his family? Ramana Maharshi often told stories about his early life, but I don't recollect reading a single biographical incident in any of Maharaj's books.

David: That's true. He just didn't seem interested in talking about his past. The only story I remember him telling was more of a joke than a story. Some man came in who seemed to have known him for many years. He talked to Maharaj in Marathi in a very free and familiar way. No translations were offered but after about ten minutes all the Marathi-knowing people there simultaneously broke out into laughter. After first taking Maharaj's permission, one of the translators explained what it was all about.

'Maharaj says that when he was married, his wife used to give him a very hard time. She was always bossing him around and telling him what to do. 'Maharaj do this, Maharaj go to the market and buy that.'

She didn't call him Maharaj, of course, but I can't remember what she did call him.

The translator continued: 'His wife died a long time ago, when Maharaj was in his forties. It is usual for men of this age who are widowed to marry again, so all Maharaj's relatives wanted him to find another wife. He refused, saying, "The day she died I married freedom".'

I find it hard to imagine anyone bossing Maharaj around, or even trying to. He was a feisty character who stood no nonsense from anyone.

Harriet: From what I have heard 'feisty' may be a bit of a euphemism. I have heard that he could be quite bad-tempered and aggressive at times.

David: Yes, that's true, but I just think that this was part of his teaching method. Some people need to be shaken up a bit, and shouting at them is one way of doing it.

I remember one woman asking him, rather innocently, 'I thought enlightened people were supposed to be happy and blissful. You seem to be grumpy most of the time. Doesn't your state give you perpetual happiness and peace?'

He replied, 'The only time a *jnani* truly rejoices is when someone else becomes a *jnani*'.

Harriet: How often did that happen?

David: I don't know. That was another area that he didn't seem to want to talk about.

I once asked directly, 'How many people have become realised through your teachings?'

He didn't seem to welcome the question: 'What business is that of yours?' he answered. 'How does knowing that information help you in any way?'

'Well,' I said, 'depending on your answer, it might increase or decrease my level of optimism. If there is a lottery with only one winning ticket out of ten million, then I can't be very optimistic about winning. But if it's a hundred winning tickets out of a thousand, I would feel a lot better about my chances. If you could assure me that people are waking up here, I would feel good about my own chances. And I think feeling good about my chances would be good for my level of earnestness.'

'Earnestness' was one of the key words in his teachings. He thought that it was good to have a strong desire for the Self and to have all one's faculties turned towards it whenever possible. This strong focus on the truth was what he termed earnestness.

I can't remember exactly what Maharaj said in reply except that I know he didn't divulge any numbers. He didn't seem to think that it was any of mine or anyone else's business to know such information.

Harriet: Maybe there were so few, it would have been bad for your 'earnestness' to be told.

David: That's a possibility because I don't think there were many.

Harriet: Did you ever find out, directly or indirectly?

David: Not that day. However, I bided my time and waited for an opportunity to raise the question again. One morning Maharaj seemed to be more-than-usually frustrated about our collective inability to grasp what he was talking about.

'Why do I waste my time with you people?' he exclaimed. 'Why does no one ever understand what I am saying?'

I took my chance: 'In all the years that you have been teaching how many people have truly understood and experienced your teachings?'

He was quiet for a moment, and then he said, 'One. Maurice Frydman.' He didn't elaborate and I didn't follow it up.

I mentioned earlier that at the conclusion of his morning *puja* he put *kum kum* on the forehead of all the pictures in his room of the people he knew were enlightened. There

were two big pictures of Maurice there, and both of them were daily given the *kum kum* treatment. Maharaj clearly had a great respect for Maurice. I remember on one of my early visits querying Maharaj about some statement of his that had been recorded in *I am That*. I think it was about fulfilling desires.

Maharaj initially didn't seem to agree with the remarks that had been attributed to him in the book, but then he added, 'The words must be true because Maurice wrote them. Maurice was a *jnani*, and the *jnani*'s words are always the words of truth.'

I have met several people who knew Maurice, and all of them have extraordinary stories to tell about him. He visited Swami Ramdas in the 1930s and Ramdas apparently told him that this would be his final birth. That comment was recorded in *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi* in the late 1930s, decades before he had his meetings with Maharaj. He was at various stages of his life a follower of Ramana Maharshi, Gandhi, and J. Krishnamurti. While he was a Gandhian he went to work for the *raja* of a small principality and somehow persuaded him to abdicate and hand over all his authority to people he had formerly ruled as an absolute monarch. His whole life is full of astonishing incidents such as these that are virtually unknown. I have been told by someone who used to be a senior Indian government official in the 1960s that it was Frydman who persuaded the then India Prime Minister Nehru to allow the Dalai Lama and the other exiled Tibetans to stay in India. Frydman apparently pestered him continuously for months until he finally gave his consent. None of these activities were ever publicly acknowledged because Frydman disliked publicity of any kind and always tried to do his work anonymously.

Harriet: What were Frydman's relations with Ramana Maharshi like? Did he leave a record?

David: There are not many stories in the Ramanasramam books, and in the few incidents that do have Maurice's name attached to them, Ramana is telling him off, usually for trying to give him special treatment. In an article that Maurice wrote very late in his life, he lamented the fact that he didn't fully appreciate and make use of Bhagavan's teachings and presence while he was alive.

However, he did use his extraordinary intellect and editing skills to bring out *Maharshi's Gospel* in 1939. This is one of the most important collections of dialogues between Bhagavan and his devotees. The second half of the book contains Frydman's questions and Bhagavan's replies to them. The quality of the questioning and the editing is quite extraordinary.

A few hundred years ago a French mathematician set a difficult problem and challenged anyone to solve it. Isaac Newton solved it quickly and elegantly and sent off the solution anonymously. The French mathematician immediately recognized that Newton was the author and apparently said, 'A lion is recognized by his claws'.

I would make the same comments about the second half of *Maharshi's Gospel*. Though Frydman's name has never appeared on any of the editions of the book, I am absolutely certain that he was the editor and the questioner.

Harriet: So far as you are aware Maharaj never publicly acknowledged anyone else's enlightenment?

David: There may have been others but the only other one I know about, since I witnessed it first-hand, was a Canadian – at least I think he was Canadian – called Rudi. I had listened to some tapes before I first went to Maharaj and this man Rudi featured prominently on them. I have to say that he sounded utterly obnoxious. He was pushy, argumentative and aggressive; apparently Maharaj threw him out on several occasions. I had never met Rudi; I only knew him from the tapes I had heard.

Then one day Maharaj announced, ‘We have a *jnani* coming to visit us this morning. His name is Rudi.’

I laughed because I assumed that Maharaj was making fun of his pretensions to enlightenment. Maharaj could be quite scathing about people who claimed to be enlightened, but who weren’t. Wolter Keers, a Dutch *advaita* teacher, was someone who fell into that category. Every so often he would come to Bombay to see Maharaj, and on every visit Maharaj would tell him off for claiming to be enlightened when he wasn’t. On one visit he started lecturing Wolter before he had even properly entered the room. There was a wooden stairway that led directly into the room where Maharaj taught. As Wolter’s head appeared above the top step, Maharaj suspended his other business and started laying into him.

‘You are not enlightened! How dare you teach in the West, claiming that you are enlightened?’

On one of my other visits Wolter was due to arrive and Maharaj kept asking when he was going to appear.

‘Where is he? I want to shout at him again. When is he going to arrive?’

On that particular visit I had to leave before Wolter came so I don’t know what form the lecture took, but I suspect that it was a typically hot one.

Anyway, let’s get back to Rudi. When Maharaj announced that a ‘*jnani*’ was due, I assumed that Rudi was going to get the Wolter treatment. However, much to my amazement, Maharaj treated him as the genuine article when he finally showed up.

After spending a good portion of the morning wondering when Rudi was going to appear, Maharaj then asked him why he had bothered to come at all.

‘To pay my respects to you and to thank you for what you have done for me. I am leaving for Canada and I came to say goodbye.’

Maharaj didn’t accept this explanation: ‘If you have come to this room, you must have some doubt left in you. If you were doubt-free, you wouldn’t bother to come at all. I never visit any other teachers or Gurus because I no longer have any doubts about who I am. I don’t need to go anywhere. Many people come to me and say, “You must visit this or that teacher. They are wonderful,” but I never go because there is nothing I need from anyone. To come here you must either want something you haven’t already got or have a doubt of some sort. Why have you come?’

Rudi repeated his original story and then kept quiet. I was looking at him and he seemed to me to be a man who was in some inner state of ecstasy or bliss that was so compelling, he found it hard even to speak. I still wasn’t sure whether Maharaj was accepting his credentials, but then the woman he had arrived with asked Maharaj a question.

Maharaj replied, ‘Ask your friend later. He is a *jnani*. He will give you correct answers. Keep quiet this morning. I want to talk to him.’

It was at this point that I realised that Maharaj really did accept that this man had realised the Self.

Rudi then asked Maharaj for advice on what he should do when he returned to Canada. I thought that it was a perfectly appropriate question for a disciple to ask a Guru on such an occasion, but Maharaj seemed to take great exception to it.

‘How can you ask a question like that if you are in the state of the Self? Don’t you know that you don’t have any choice about what you do or don’t do?’

Rudi kept quiet. I got the feeling that Maharaj was trying to provoke him into a quarrel or an argument, and that Rudi was refusing to take the bait.

At some point Maharaj asked him, ‘Have you witnessed your own death?’ and Rudi replied ‘No’.

Maharaj then launched into a mini-lecture on how it was necessary to witness one’s own death in order for there to be full realisation of the Self. He said that it had happened to him after he thought that he had fully realised the Self, and it wasn’t until after this death experience that he understood that this process was necessary for final liberation. I hope somebody recorded this dialogue on tape because I am depending on a twenty-five-year-old memory for this. It seems to be a crucial part of Maharaj’s experience and teachings but I never heard him mention it on any other occasion. I have also not come across it in any of his books.

Maharaj continued to pester Rudi about the necessity of witnessing death, but Rudi kept quiet and just smiled beatifically. He refused to defend himself, and he refused to be provoked. Anyway, I don’t think he was in any condition to start and sustain an argument. Whatever state he was in seemed to be compelling all his attention. I got the feeling that he found articulating even brief replies hard work.

Finally, Rudi addressed the question and said, ‘Why are you getting so excited about something that doesn’t exist?’

I assumed he meant that death was unreal, and as such, was not worth quarrelling about.

Maharaj laughed, accepted the answer and gave up trying to harass him.

‘Have you ever had a teacher like me?’ demanded Maharaj, with a grin.

‘No,’ replied Rudi, ‘and have you ever had a disciple like me?’

They both laughed and the dialogue came to an end. I have no idea what happened to Rudi. He left and I never heard anything more about him. As they say at the end of fairy stories, he probably lived happily ever after.

Harriet: You say that Maharaj never visited other teachers because he no longer had any doubts. Did he ever talk about other teachers and say what he thought of them?

David: He seemed to like J. Krishnamurti. He had apparently seen him walking on the streets of Bombay many years before. I don’t think that Krishnamurti noticed him. Afterwards, Maharaj always spoke well of Krishnamurti and he even encouraged people to go and see him. One day Maharaj took a holiday and told everyone to go and listen to Krishnamurti instead. That, I think, shows a high level of approval.

The most infamous teacher of the late 1970s was Osho, or Rajneesh as he was in those days. I once heard Maharaj say that he respected the state that Rajneesh was in, but he couldn’t understand all the instructions he was giving to all the thousands of foreigners

who were then coming to India to see him. Although the subject only came up a couple of times while I was there, I got the feeling he liked the teacher but not the teachings. When Rajneesh's foreign '*sannyasins*' showed up in their robes, he generally gave them a really hard time. I watched him throw quite a few of them out, and I saw him shout at some of them before they had even managed to get into his room.

I heard a story that he also encountered U. G. Krishnamurti in Bombay. I will tell you the version I heard and you can make up your own mind about it. It was told to me by someone who spent a lot of time with U. G. in the 1970s.

It seems that Maurice Frydman knew U. G. and also knew that he and Maharaj had never met, and probably didn't know about each other. He wanted to test the theory that one *jnani* can spot another *jnani* by putting them both in the same room, with a few other people around as camouflage. He organised a function and invited both of them to attend. U. G. spent quite some time there, but Maharaj only came for a few minutes and then left.

After Maharaj had left Maurice went up to U. G. and said, 'Did you see that old man who came in for a few minutes. Did you notice anything special? What did you see?'

U. G. replied, 'I saw a man, Maurice, but the important thing is, what did *you* see?'

The next day Maurice went to see Maharaj and asked, 'Did you see that man I invited yesterday?'

A brief description of what he looked like and where he was standing followed.

Then Maurice asked, 'What did you see?'

Maharaj replied, 'I saw a man Maurice, but the important thing is, what did *you* see?'

It's an amusing story and I pass it on as I heard it, but I should say that U. G.'s accounts of his meetings with famous teachers sometimes don't ring true to me. I have heard and read his accounts of his meetings with both Ramana Maharshi and Papaji, and in both accounts Bhagavan and Papaji are made to do and say things that to me are completely out of character.

When Maharaj told Rudi that he had no interest in visiting other teachers, it was a very true statement. He refused all invitations to go and check out other Gurus. Mullarpathan, one of the translators, was a bit of a Guru-hopper in the 1970s, and he was always bringing reports of new teachers to Maharaj, but he could never persuade him to go and look at them. So, reports of meetings between Maharaj and other teachers are not common. Papaji ended up visiting Maharaj and had a very good meeting with him. In his biography he gives the impression that he only went there once, but I heard from people in Bombay that Papaji would often take his devotees there. He visited quite a few teachers in the 1970s, often when he was accompanying foreigners who had come to India for the first time. It was his version of showing them the sights. They would never ask questions; they would just sit quietly and watch what was going on.

Harriet: What was Maharaj's attitude to Ramana Maharshi and his teachings? Did you ever discuss Bhagavan's teachings with him?

David: He had enormous respect for both his attainment and his teachings. He once told me that one of the few regrets of his life was that he never met him in person. He did come to the ashram in the early 1960s with a group of his Marathi devotees. They were all on a South Indian pilgrimage tour and Ramanasramam was one of the places he visited.

With regard to the teachings he once told me, 'I agree with everything that Ramana Maharshi said, with the exception of this business of the heart-centre being on the right side of the chest. I have never had that experience myself.'

I discussed various aspects of Bhagavan's teachings with him and always found his answers to be very illuminating.

He asked me once, 'Have you understood Ramana Maharshi's teachings?'

Since I knew he meant 'Had I actually experienced the truth of them?' I replied, 'The more I listen to Maharaj, the more I understand what Bhagavan is trying to tell me'.

I felt that this was true at both the theoretical and experiential levels. His explanations broadened and deepened my intellectual understanding of Bhagavan's teachings and his presence also gave me experiential glimpses of the truth that they were all pointing towards.

I have to mention Ganesan's visit here. V. Ganesan is the grandnephew of Ramana Maharshi and in the 1970s he was the *de facto* manager of Ramanasramam. Nowadays, his elder brother Sundaram is in charge. Ganesan came to visit Maharaj for the first time in the late 1970s. As soon as he arrived Maharaj stood up and began to collect cushions. He made a big pile of them and made Ganesan sit on top of the heap. Then, much to everyone's amazement, Maharaj cleared a space on the floor and did a full-length prostration to him.

When he stood up, he told Ganesan, 'I never had a chance to prostrate to your great-uncle Ramana Maharshi, so I am prostrating to you instead. This is my prostration to him.'

Harriet: I have read on many occasions that Ramana Maharshi preferred to teach in silence. I never get that impression with Nisargadatta Maharaj. Did people ever get a chance to sit in silence with him?

David: During the years that I visited it was possible to meditate in his room in the early morning. I forget the exact timings, but I think that it was for an hour and a half. Maharaj would be there, but he would be going about his normal morning activities. He would potter around doing odd jobs; he would appear with just a towel around his waist if he was about to have a bath; sometimes he would sit and read a newspaper. I never got the feeling that he was making a conscious effort to teach in silence in the way that Ramana Maharshi did by looking at people and transmitting some form of grace. However, he did seem to be aware of the mental states of all the people who were sitting there, and he not infrequently complained about them.

'I know who is meditating here and who is not,' he suddenly announced one morning, 'and I know who is making contact with his beingness. Only one person is doing that at the moment. The rest of you are all wasting your time.' Then he carried on with whatever he was doing.

It was true that many people didn't go there to meditate. They just saw it as an opportunity to be with him in his house. They might be sitting cross-legged on his floor, but most of the time they would be peeping to see what he was doing instead of meditating.

One morning he got tired of being spied on this way and exploded: 'Why are you people cluttering up my floor like this? You are not meditating; you are just getting in the

way! If you want to go and sit somewhere, go and sit on the toilet for an hour! At least you will be doing something useful there.'

Harriet: What about the other times of the day, when he was available for questioning? Did he ever sit in silence during those periods?

David: There were two periods when it was possible to question him: one in the late morning and one in the evening. Translators would be available at both sessions. He encouraged people to talk during these sessions, or at least he did when I first started going to see him. Later on, he would use these sessions to give long talks on the nature of consciousness. He never sat quietly if no one had anything to say. He would actively solicit questions, but if no one wanted to talk to him, he would start talking himself.

I only ever had one opportunity to sit with him in complete silence and that was at the beginning of the summer monsoon. When the monsoon breaks in Bombay, usually around the end of the first week of June, there are very heavy rains that bring the city to a standstill. The storm drains are generally clogged, and for a day or so people are walking round in knee-deep water. And not just water. The sewers overflow and the animals that live in them drown. Anyone brave enough to go for a paddle would be wading through sewage, waterlogged garbage and the corpses of whatever animals had recently drowned. Public transport comes to a halt since in many places the water level is too high to drive through.

One afternoon two of us waded through the floodwaters to Maharaj's door. We were both staying in a cheap lodge about 200 yards away, so it wasn't that much of a trek. We scrubbed off the filth with water from a tap on the ground floor and made our way up to Maharaj's room. He seemed very surprised to see us. I think he thought that the floods would keep everyone away. He said in Marathi that there would be no session that afternoon because none of the translators would be able to make it. I assume he wanted us to leave and go home, but we both pretended that we didn't understand what he was trying to tell us. After one or two more unsuccessful attempts to persuade us to go, he gave up and sat in a corner of the room with a newspaper in front of his face so that we couldn't even look at him. I didn't care. I was just happy to be sitting in the same room as him. I sat there in absolute silence with him for over an hour and it was one of the most wonderful experiences I ever had with him. I felt an intense rock-solid silence descend on me that became deeper and deeper as the minutes passed. There was just a glow of awareness that filled me so completely, thoughts were utterly impossible. You don't realise what a monstrous imposition the mind is until you have lived without it, completely happily, completely silently, and completely effortlessly for a short period of time. For most of this time I was looking in the direction of Maharaj. Sometimes he would turn a page and glance in our direction, and when he did he still seemed to be irritated that we hadn't left. I was smiling inwardly at his annoyance because it wasn't touching me in any way. I had no self-consciousness, no embarrassment, no feeling of being an imposition. I was just resting contentedly in my own being.

After just over an hour of this he got up and shooed us both out. I prostrated and left. Later on, I wondered why he didn't sit in silence more often since there was clearly a very powerful quietening energy coming off him when he was silent. Ramana Maharshi said

that speaking actually interrupted the flow of the silent energy he was giving out. I have often wondered if the same thing happened with Maharaj.

Harriet: And what was your conclusion?

David: I realised that it was not his nature to keep quiet. His teaching method was geared to arguing and talking. That's what he felt most comfortable doing.

Harriet: Can you elaborate on that a little more?

David: I should qualify what I am about to say by stating that most of it is just my own opinion, based on observing him deal with the people who came to him. It doesn't come from anything I heard him say himself.

When people first came to see him, he would encourage them to talk about their background. He would try to find out what spiritual path you were on, and what had brought you to him. In the face of Maharaj's probing questions visitors would end up having to justify their world-view and their spiritual practices. This would be one level of the interaction. At a deeper and more subtle level Maharaj would be radiating an energy, a *sakti*, that quietened your mind and made you aware of what lay underneath the mind and all its ideas and concepts. Now imagine these two processes going on simultaneously. With his mind the questioner has just constructed and articulated a version of his world-view. Underneath, though, he will be feeling the pull of his beingness, the knowledge of what is truly real, as opposed to the ideas that he merely thinks to be real. Maharaj's energy will be enhancing awareness of that substratum all the time. At some point the questioner will become acutely aware of what seem to be two competing realities: the conceptual structure he has just outlined, and the actual experience that underlies it. There was a certain look that appeared on some people's faces when this happened: a kind of indecisive 'which way should I go?' look. Sometimes the questioner would realise immediately that all his ideas and beliefs were just concepts. He would drop them and rest in the beingness instead. This, for me, was the essence of Maharaj's teaching technique. He wouldn't try to convince you by argument. He would instead make you argue yourself into a position that you felt to be true, and then he would undercut that position by giving you a taste of the substratum that underlay all concepts. If you were ready for it, you would drop your attachment to your concepts and rest in what lay underneath them. If not, you would blunder ahead, going deeper and deeper into the minefield of the mind. Some people got it quickly. Others, who were desperate for a structure to cling to, would come back again and again with questions that were designed merely to refine their understanding of his teachings.

Talking to visitors and arguing with them was an essential part of this technique. For it to work effectively Maharaj required that visitors talk about themselves and their world-view because he needed them to see that all these ideas were just concepts having no ultimate reality. He needed people to look at their concepts, understand their uselessness and then reject them in favour of direct experience.

I should mention here the limitations he put on the types of question that he was willing to answer.

He would sometimes tell new people, 'I am not interested in what you have heard or read. I am not interested in second-hand information that you have acquired from somewhere else. I am only interested in your own experience of yourself. If you have any questions about that, you can ask me.'

Later, after you had had your initial dialogues with him, he would introduce an even more stringent test for questions: 'I am not interested in answering questions that assume the existence of an individual person who inhabits a body. I don't accept the existence of such an entity, so for me such questions are entirely hypothetical.'

This second constraint was a real conversation killer. You couldn't say, 'How do I get enlightened?' or 'What do I do?' because all such questions presuppose the existence of an 'I', an assumption that Maharaj always used to reject.

I still have vivid memories of him listening as translators explained in Marathi what some questioner had said. As he understood the gist of what the question was, Maharaj's face would sometimes turn to a scowl. He would clench his fist, bang it on the floor and shout '*Kalpana! Kalpana!*' which means 'Concept! Concept!' That would sometimes be the only answer the questioners would get. Maharaj was definitely not interested in massaging visitor's concepts. He wanted people to drop them, not discuss them.

When this second restriction effectively cut off most of the questions that people like to ask Gurus, Maharaj would fill the vacuum by giving talks about the nature of consciousness. Day after day he would continue with the same topic, often using the same analogies. He would explain how it arises, how it manifests and how it subsides. In retrospect I think he was doing what the ancient *rishis* of India did when they told their disciples 'You are *Brahman*'.

When a *jnani* who is established in *Brahman* as *Brahman* says to a disciple, 'You are *Brahman*,' he is not merely conveying a piece of information. There is a power and an authority in the words that, in certain cases, makes the listener become and experience *Brahman* as he hears the words. This is a power and an authority that only *jnanis* have. Other people can say 'You are consciousness,' 'You are *Brahman*,' endlessly, but these will just be pieces of information that you can store in your mind. When a *jnani* tells you this, the full authority of his state and the full force that lies behind it are conveyed in the statement. If you take delivery of that information in the heart, in consciousness, then you experience that state for yourself. If you take delivery in your mind, you just store it there as an interesting piece of information.

When Maharaj told you endlessly 'You are consciousness,' if you received that information in utter inner silence, it activated an awareness of consciousness to such an extent that you felt, 'He isn't just telling me something; he is actually describing what I am, right now in this moment'.

Harriet: Did this ever happen to you?

David: Yes, and I think that this is what he was referring to when he talked about 'getting the knowledge'. It wasn't an intellectual knowledge he was talking about, and it wasn't Self-realisation either. It was a state in which concepts temporarily dissolved leaving a simple awareness of the being that underlay them. While they lasted, the states were very useful; they gave you the conviction and the direct experience that there was something real and enduring that exists whether the mind is there or not.

Harriet: All this is very interesting, but as you have said, a lot of it is your own personal conjecture. Did Maharaj ever confirm himself that this is what he was doing, or trying to do, with the people who came to him?

David: Not directly. He never explained or analysed his teaching methods, or not while I was there. Most of what I have just said comes from my own experience and my own interpretation of what I saw going on there. Other people may have other theories to explain what was going on. However, the facts of the matter are indisputable. People came to Maharaj, had talks or arguments with him, and at some point dropped their accumulation of ideas because they had been convinced that a direct experience invalidated all the long-held cherished notions they had accumulated.

Let me tell you about one conversation I had with him because it gives some good circumstantial evidence for what I have just been trying to explain. Firstly, I should mention that I sometimes used to argue with Maharaj simply because I knew that he liked people to argue with him. He seemed to like the cut and thrust of debate, and if no one had anything to say or ask, I would pick up the ball and start a discussion with him.

I can't remember any more exactly what we talked about on this particular day, but I do remember that we spoke for about five minutes, during which time I was ostensibly pointing out what I claimed were contradictions in his teachings. He, meanwhile, was doing his best to convince me that no contradictions were involved. It was all very good-humoured and I think he knew that I was only disputing with him because, firstly, we both liked talking and arguing about spiritual topics and, secondly, no one else had any urgent questions to ask. After about five minutes, though, he decided to bring the discussion to a close.

'I don't think you really understand the purpose of my dialogues here. I don't say things simply to convince people that they are true. I am not speaking about these matters so that people can build up a philosophy that can be rationally defended, and which is free of all contradictions. When I speak my words, I am not speaking to your mind at all. I am directing my words directly at consciousness. I am planting my words in your consciousness. If you disturb the planting process by arguing about the meaning of the words, they won't take root there. Once my words have been planted in consciousness, they will sprout, they will grow, and at the appropriate moment they will bear fruit. It's nothing to do with you. All this will happen by itself. However, if you think about the words too much or dispute their meaning, you will postpone the moment of their fruition.'

All this was said in a very genial tone. However, at this point, he got very, very serious.

Glowering at me he said very sternly, 'Enough talking. Be quiet and let the words do their work!'

End of conversation.

I always recollect this exchange with happiness and optimism. I feel I have been graced by his presence and further graced by the words of truth he has planted within me. I think those words will always be with me and I know that at the appropriate moment they will bloom.

Harriet: Have you obeyed his instructions? Have you stopped thinking about the teachings?

David: Until you showed up today I hadn't really thought about the teachings for years. I haven't even read many of the new books of dialogues that have come out about him. That answer I gave a few minutes ago, 'The more I listen to Maharaj, the more I understand what Bhagavan is trying to tell me,' is in one of the books but I didn't find out until a few years ago.

My ex-wife Vasanta was reading the book and she said, 'There is someone here from Ramanasramam. Do you know who it is?'

She read a few lines and I realised that it was me. I used to read *I am That* cover to cover about once a year, but I don't even do that any more. Sometimes, if I am in the Ramanasramam library, I pick up *I am That* and read the opening sequence of chapter twenty-three. It is a beautiful description of the *jnani's* state that I never tire of reading. Other than that, I rarely read or think about the teachings any more.

Having said that, I think it would be correct to say that I have more than enough other concepts in my head which are all acting as a herbicide on the words of truth that Maharaj planted within me. However, I have great faith in the irresistible power of Maharaj's words. Sooner or later they will bear fruit.

Harriet: Ramesh Balsekar used to say, 'The only effective effort is the immediate apperception of reality'. Some people would take that to mean that if you don't get the direct experience as the Guru, in this case Maharaj, is talking to you, you are not going to get it at all. Are you sure you are not just suffering from a case of wishful thinking?

David: There is something in what you say. If you could keep your intellect out of the way when Maharaj was speaking, his words, and the authority behind them, would do their work. When he spoke he wasn't asking you to join in the process at all. How could he be asking you to do anything when he knew that you didn't exist? He wasn't asking you to understand, and he wasn't saying, 'Do this and you will be enlightened'. He wasn't addressing you at all. He was directing his words at the consciousness within you in an attempt to make you aware of who you really were. However, if his words didn't immediately produce results, he knew that they might deliver the goods later on. Remember what happened in his own case. Siddharameshwar told him that he was *Brahman*. Nisargadatta struggled with this for three years until he finally dropped his doubts and realised it to be the truth.

There is a power in a *jnani's* words, and that power does not dissipate two seconds after the *jnani* has uttered them. It lingers and it carries on being effective; it carries on doing its work.

Harriet: Did Maharaj himself corroborate this?

David: Yes. I can't remember how the subject came up, but I heard him say, 'The words of enlightened beings have a power that makes them endure. The great saints of the past gave out their teachings, and those teachings have survived because there is an inherent power and authority in them. Other people may have been saying the same thing at the

same time, but the words of those people have disappeared because there was no power in them. The words of *jnanis* have endured because they have the power and authority of the Self behind them.'

I mentioned this answer to Papaji when I was interviewing him a few years ago. He gave it his whole-hearted endorsement.

Harriet: When you say that the words 'have endured' does that mean that they have simply endured in books, as remembered quotations, or do they still have the power to awaken people, even centuries after they were spoken? Is not the immediate presence of the Guru necessary for that?

David: I think I would have to say that a living human Guru is necessary for all but the most mature to realise the Self. However, once you have seen a real Guru and been with him, his presence is always with you. You can tune into his presence, his grace, and his power in any number of ways: through his photo, through thinking about him, and through reading his words.

Harriet: Again, I feel compelled to ask, 'Is this your own opinion or do you have some support from Maharaj to back it up?'

David: I remember a conversation I had with Maharaj on my first visit. I can't remember how we got round to the subject, but we ended up talking about the power of the Guru and the various channels it manifested through. I had been deeply impressed and deeply moved by *I am That*, and I told him so.

Me: For several months I have been reading *I am That*. Through those words I felt a very strong connection with you and the teachings. Can one have a connection with a Guru simply by reading his words, or is it necessary to come in person to see him?

Maharaj: The words will do their work wherever you hear or read them. You can come here and listen to them in person, or you can read them in a book. If the teacher is enlightened, there will be a power in them.

Me: In my particular case I read the words of a Guru who was still alive, and those words compelled me to come here and see you. Perhaps your words had such a strong effect because you are still alive and teaching. I made contact with a living teacher, a living presence. What about a hypothetical case of someone picking up *I am That* in fifty years' time, and in a country several thousand miles away? That person will never have a chance to see you. Will those words still have the power to transform and awaken?

Maharaj: Time and space exist in your mind, not in the Self. There is no limit to the power of the Self. The power of the Self is always present, always working, always the same. What varies is the readiness and willingness of people to turn their attention to it. If someone picks up this book ten thousand

miles away in a thousand years' time, those words will do their work if the reader is in the right state to listen to and assimilate the words.

He didn't actually say that one could get enlightened by reading the words of a dead Guru, but he was quite clear that the words of an enlightened being, even in book form, were charged with a power that future generations could tune into. I think I asked this particular question because of my relationship with Ramana Maharshi. I was the 'hypothetical' person in the question who had discovered the words of a great but deceased Guru. I suppose I really wanted to know whether Ramana Maharshi could be the Guru for someone like me who had been born years after he passed away. Maharaj didn't really answer that question for me, but he did convince me that a considerable part of the power and the authority of the Guru could be found in his recorded teachings.

Over time, I came to the conclusion that a living human Guru really is necessary for the vast majority of people, but at the same time I have a great respect for the power that resides in the recorded words of such people.

Harriet: Was this particular dialogue recorded? I think it would be quite an important one for the many people such as myself who have only discovered Maharaj in the years since he passed away.

David: I doubt it. It was a very quiet afternoon session, and only a few of us were there. There were never any organised recordings. People who had a tape recorder would bring it along and make a recording from wherever they were sitting in the room. In the last couple of years several people were doing this, but when I first went, hardly anyone was doing it.

Harriet: You spoke about 'readiness' and 'willingness to listen' as being key factors. Did Maharaj ever speak about how or why some people got the direct experience, while most people didn't?

David: I did talk to him once about this. It was on one of my later visits. I had gone there with a friend of mine, Cary McGraw, and I discovered that it was Cary's birthday that day. When he told me, we were sitting in a café on Grant Road in the interval between the end of the *bhajans* and the start of the morning question-and-answer session. While Maharaj's room was being swept and cleaned, we all had to disappear for half an hour or so. Most of us would go for a tea or coffee break on Grant Road.

I asked Cary what he would like for a birthday present and he replied, 'Go back in there and have a good argument with Maharaj. I used to love to listen to you when you used to harass him about his teachings, but nowadays you hardly open your mouth at all. Go back in there and get him fired up about something. That will be my birthday treat.'

I didn't feel much like asking anything, and I definitely didn't feel like embarking on a full-blown debate. I think by that time Maharaj had finally subdued my argumentative tendencies; I was quite content just to sit at the back and listen to what everyone else had to say.

We went back in, but I had no idea what to talk about. When everyone had settled down, Cary gave me a nudge and I suddenly found myself talking about why some people get enlightened and others not.

‘Ramana Maharshi,’ I said, ‘got enlightened in a few minutes. It took you three years from the moment you met your Guru until you realised the Self. Other people try for fifty years and don’t succeed. Why is it like this? Are the people who try all their lives and fail doing something wrong?’

Most other Hindu teachers would answer a question like this by saying that some people had more or less finished their work in previous lives and were therefore able to realise the Self very quickly in this life. This wasn’t an option for Maharaj because he steadfastly refused to accept that reincarnation took place at all. This itself was a little strange to me because in the period that I used to visit him the dust jacket of *I am That* reproduced a dialogue with him in which he explained in quite some detail how reincarnation took place. However, in the era that I visited him I never once heard him accept the validity of reincarnation, and he frequently said it didn’t happen. My question was really, ‘If one discounts the theory of reincarnation, which you seem to do, how can someone like Ramana Maharshi get enlightened with no desire for it, no effort and no practice, while everyone else struggles unsuccessfully for decades and fails?’

‘It’s the chemical,’ announced Maharaj. ‘Some people are born with a pure chemical and some are not. Those with a pure chemical get enlightened, and those with an impure chemical don’t.’

‘The chemical’ was one of Maharaj’s idiosyncratic analogies or metaphors. I think it was derived from the chemical on a roll of film. We are all issued with a ‘chemical’ at the moment of conception, said Maharaj, and that is our destiny for this life. In one sense it is like a roll of film, a script that has been given to us for this life. Traditional Hinduism teaches that we have *prarabdha* karma, an unchangeable destiny for this life that is an inevitable result of actions that have been performed in previous lives. Maharaj couldn’t incorporate past-life activities into his ‘chemical’ theory, but he did have an alternative selection of factors to offer.

I can’t remember whether it was during this particular conversation or on some other day, but I remember asking him about the components of ‘the chemical’. He replied that it was a combination of a wide variety of factors: parents’ genes, astrological configurations at the time of conception, the future environment that one was going to be brought up in – these were just a few that he mentioned. These all coalesced at a particular moment and issued a body, or rather an embryo, with its appointed destiny.

‘This is all very deterministic,’ I said. ‘If the purity of the chemical determines whether or not we get enlightened, why should we even care about it or not? What is the point of trying or not trying, wanting or not wanting, if the purity of the chemical has already decided the matter for us in advance? We may as well all go home.’

Maharaj replied, ‘No, it is not completely determined in advance. The vast majority of people in the world are born with a dirty chemical. Nothing they do or don’t do will make any difference. Enlightenment is not for them, and most of them won’t even care about such matters. At the other end of the spectrum there will be an extremely small number of very pure beings who will become aware of their true nature without any striving or inclination.’

He didn’t say so, but I assume he would have put Ramana Maharshi in this category.

‘Between these two extremes,’ continued Maharaj, ‘there are a small number of people whose chemical is only slightly impure. These people have a chance to get enlightened. If they can meet with a Guru who can show them the truth and if their earnestness and seriousness are high enough, they can purify their slightly dirty chemical and find out who they really are. That is why we are all here today. People who come to a teacher with a strong thirst for freedom are the ones who have only a few impurities. They are the ones for whom liberation is possible.’

Harriet: So did he think that the people who came to him were ‘advanced’? There must have been a mixture of all kinds of people. They couldn’t all have been candidates for liberation.

David: Yes, there was a very eclectic mix of people there, from curiosity seekers to people who had travelled half way round the world because they were desperate for liberation and thought that Maharaj could help them. I sometimes used to sit next to a homoeopathic doctor who lived a few streets away. He had no interest in liberation and just saw Maharaj as a good source of entertainment.

‘This is the best show in the neighbourhood,’ he told me once. ‘I just come here because I like watching how Maharaj deals with all the people who come. I don’t believe a word he says, but he puts on a good show.’

This man, incidentally, told me that Maharaj’s language in the original Marathi was occasionally very crude and vulgar. He told me that the translators, who were all respectable, middle-class Hindus, were probably too embarrassed to pass on the full force of his vulgarity. At the end of the sessions he would take me aside on the street outside and take great delight in telling me about all the various sexual jokes and innuendos that the translators had omitted to tell us. I think the doctor’s entertainment included watching his neighbours squirm as they listened to Maharaj’s more outrageous remarks.

Maharaj to some extent determined the sort of people who were likely to come and stay by setting the agenda on what he was willing to talk about and what he wasn’t. He wasn’t interested in what he called ‘kindergarten lessons’. That meant he generally refused to talk about many of the tenets of traditional Hinduism: ritual worship, karma and reincarnation, common practices such as *japa*, things like that. A large proportion of the foreigners who were there had come because they had read *I am That*. They wanted to talk about liberation, not traditional Hindu practices and traditions, and Maharaj was happy to oblige them. The people who wanted to talk about other things soon left to find somewhere more suitable for their inclinations and interests. Some, though, came with traditional ideas and beliefs and fell under the spell of Maharaj and his radical teachings, but I think these people were in the minority.

I remember Mullarpathan telling us one day, ‘I was a traditional Ram *bhakta* when I first arrived here. I thought that if I could have a vision of Ram, I would be sure to join him in Vaikunta [Ram’s heavenly realm] when I died. The first day I came, Maharaj told me that Vaikunta didn’t exist. I was very shocked to hear a Guru speak like this, but I felt attracted to him and I stayed on. Within a short period of time I dropped all my ideas about the gods and their heavens.’

Some of the other local people were very much interested in Maharaj’s uncompromising teachings on liberation, but during the time that I was there, the

foreigners generally outnumbered the locals by about three to one in the morning question-and-answer session. This could have been because many of the Bombay devotees had to go out to work, but even on weekends and holidays, the foreigners always outnumbered the Indians.

There was a separate session in the evening that was conducted in Marathi. We were never invited to that because there wasn't enough room for everyone, so I have no idea what went on in those sessions.

Harriet: Did you get the feeling that the foreigners were treated a little differently from the local people?

David: I would just say that we had different attitudes, different backgrounds and, for the most part, different aspirations. When we spoke to Maharaj, his answers reflected these differences.

One morning a new Indian couple arrived and asked Maharaj in English a series of questions about how to live a detached spiritual life while they were in the middle of all their family and work responsibilities. This is a standard question in India and everyone in the guru business must have a standard answer to it. Maharaj dealt with them very politely and respectfully and talked to them for about fifteen minutes. At the end of that period he asked them to leave. This was a little bit unusual. Usually, when a questioner had finished talking to Maharaj he would go back to his seat and listen to what everyone else had to say.

On this occasion Maharaj watched them disappear down his staircase. He waited about ten seconds more before bursting into a delighted laughter.

'Slapping his thigh, he said, 'That is the sort of boring conversation I used to have every day before all you foreigners came along!'

I think he enjoyed talking to people who didn't come along to talk about all their family or work problems. He also knew he could be more irreverent and risqué with the foreigners, which was something he enjoyed.

Harriet: Can you give me an example?

David: One morning he looked around and noticed that there were no local people there at all except for the one translator.

A mischievous look appeared on his face and he said, 'Three things are absolutely necessary for human life: food, oxygen and sex.'

We all perked up. This was something different from the usual lecture on consciousness. We waited for him to continue, to develop his theme and explain in more detail, but he refused to elaborate.

Instead he said, 'Come on! Somebody dispute that statement. It's very controversial. Somebody disagree with me.'

It looked like he wanted to start an argument, but about what wasn't clear.

When no one else seemed interested in disputing his statement, I stepped into the breach to be the fall guy.

‘If you don’t breathe for a few minutes, you die,’ I began. ‘If you don’t eat for a few weeks, you die. But I have never heard of anyone dying because they didn’t have sex. How can you say that it is essential for human existence?’

Maharaj refused to explain himself. Instead he just repeated himself.

‘Three things are absolutely necessary for human life: food, oxygen and sex.’

I couldn’t see where he was going with the conversation, or where he wanted me to go with it.

‘Are you saying that we should all have sex because if we don’t we will all die?’

I was trying to provoke him into revealing why he had suddenly brought this topic up.

‘No, I’m not saying that at all. I’m simply saying, ‘Three things are absolutely necessary for human life: food, oxygen and sex.’

I tried a couple of other approaches but didn’t get anywhere, and no one else in the room seemed willing to pitch in and help out. He just kept on repeating his original statement. After a few minutes he heard footsteps on the stairs. He immediately started talking about consciousness, and as the new visitors, a group of local people, came into the room, he was well into one of his standard explanations. He obviously didn’t feel comfortable discussing sex in front of his Marathi devotees. I never did find out what the point of his statement was because he never brought it up again.

Harriet: From what you are saying, I get the feeling that Maharaj had a great respect for the foreigners who came because they came looking for the truth about themselves, not for some palliative, a practice or belief that would keep them happy for a while.

David: In one sense, yes. I did hear him say a couple of times that he respected the fact that we had all abandoned our lives in the West in order to come to India in search of liberation, but that didn’t mean that in practice he treated us respectfully. We all got shouted at on various occasions, and we all got told off from time to time because of things we did or said. We were all a little fearful of him because we never knew when the next eruption would come. We had all come to have the dirt beaten out of us, in the same way that the *dhobis* clean clothes by smashing them on rocks. Maharaj smashed our egos, our minds and our concepts on the immovable rock of the Self because he knew that in most cases that was the only way to help us.

I told you a few minutes ago that Maharaj discounted all theories of reincarnation, but he did tell one story that possibly indicated that we had all been searching for God in India before.

‘At the end of the *Ramayana*,’ he said, ‘all the animals who had helped Ram to win the war were given rewards. The monkeys were all told that they could go to a monkey heaven. Now, what is heaven to a monkey? Vast quantities of food, lots of fighting, and limitless sex. So, all the monkeys were reborn as human beings in the West in the twentieth century to experience their idea of “heaven”. After some time, though, they all began to get bored of all this excess. One by one, they all started coming back to India because they wanted to find Ram and be with him again.’

Harriet: What did he shout at *you* for?

David: I remember one time trying to talk to him about effort. I think I was talking about the various efforts I had made to realise the Self. This was soon after I started going to see him. I didn't realise at the time that the word 'effort' was a no-no in that room. He really didn't like anyone using it. The idea that there was a person who did something to achieve some spiritual state was a complete anathema to him. He seemed to feel that it showed a complete lack of understanding of his teachings.

When he started to get annoyed with me for using the word, I just ploughed ahead, thinking innocently that he probably hadn't understood what I was trying to say. The more I attempted to describe my 'efforts' and justify them, the more annoyed he got with me. I ended up getting an earful about my wrong understanding and wrong attitude. I was quite taken aback at the time. I had never come across a teacher before who disparaged hard work and effort on the spiritual path. On the contrary, all the others I had encountered had heartily endorsed such activities. That's why I initially thought that there must have been some kind of misunderstanding. I realised later that when Maharaj spoke, he wasn't giving instructions that he wanted you to act on. He was simply telling you who and what you were. You were supposed to understand and experience what he was talking about, not turn it into a practice. Making a practice out of it simply confirmed for him that you hadn't really understood what he was saying. One question that always rubbed him up the wrong way was, 'Yes, Maharaj, I understand intellectually what you are saying, but what do I do to actually experience it?' If you said that, you didn't understand him, or what he was trying to do, at all.

I have an embarrassing memory of another time he got angry with me. One afternoon my attention was wandering and my mind was embroiled in some larger-than-life ego fantasy. I was off in my own little world, not really listening to what was going on. Maharaj stopped the answer he was giving to someone else, apparently in mid-sentence, turned to me and started shouting at me, demanding to know whether I was listening and understanding what he was saying. I did a little prostration as an apology and put my attention back on what he was talking about. Afterwards, a few people wanted to know why he had suddenly launched such a ferocious attack on me. So far as they were concerned I was just sitting there minding my own business. I definitely deserved that one, though. In retrospect I can say that it increased both my attentiveness and my faith in him. When you know that the teacher in front of you is continuously monitoring all your thoughts and feelings, it makes you clean up your mental act quite a bit.

On another occasion Maharaj got angry with me simply because one of the translators didn't understand what I had asked. I said that the previous day he had said one thing, whereas this morning he was saying what appeared to be the exact opposite. The translator somehow assumed I was criticising the quality of the translation on the previous day and passed on my critique to Maharaj. He really got angry with me over that, but that one just bounced off me because I realised immediately that it was all due to a misunderstanding. Someone eventually told the translator what I had actually said, and he apologized for all the trouble his comments had caused.

Harriet: Were the translators all good? I have been told that some were better than others.

David: Yes, there were good ones and not-so-good ones. I think everyone knew who was good and who was not, but that didn't result in the good ones being called on to do the work if they happened to be there. There seemed to be some process of seniority at work. The translators who had been there the longest were called on first, irrespective of ability, and those who might have done a better job would have to wait until these more senior devotees were absent. When I first went a man called Sapre did most of the morning translations. He was very fluent and seemed to have a good grasp of Maharaj's teachings, but he interpolated a lot of his own stuff in his English answers. Two sentences from Maharaj might turn into a two-minute speech from Sapre. Even though most of us didn't know any Marathi, we knew that he must be making up a lot of his stuff simply because he was talking for so long. Several people complained to Maharaj about this, but he always supported Sapre and generally got angry with the people who complained about him. That was the cause of the outburst I just mentioned. Maharaj thought I was yet another person complaining about Sapre's translations.

Mullarpathan was next down the pecking order. I liked him because he was very literal. Possibly not quite as fluent as some of the others, but he scored points with me because he stuck to the script both ways. I once asked Maharaj a question through him, and when the answer came back, it made absolutely no sense at all. Mullarpathan, though, was beaming at me as if he had just delivered some great pearl of wisdom.

I thought about it again and it still made no sense, so I said, somewhat apologetically, 'I don't understand any of that answer. It doesn't make any sense to me at all.'

'I know,' replied Mullarpathan, 'it didn't make any sense to me either. But that's what Maharaj said and that's what I translated.'

Somewhat relieved, I asked him to tell Maharaj that neither of us had understood what he had said and requested him to explain the topic a little differently. Then we got on with the conversation.

I really respected Mullarpathan for this. He didn't try to put some sense into the answer, and he didn't tell Maharaj that his answer didn't make any sense. He just translated the words for me in a literal way because those were the words that Maharaj had intended me to hear.

Right at the bottom, in terms of seniority anyway, was Ramesh Balsekar. He didn't come to see Maharaj until some point in 1978. I thought this was unfortunate because in my opinion, and in the opinion of many of the other foreigners there, he was by far the most skilful of all the translators. He had a good understanding of the way foreign minds worked and expressed themselves, and a good enough intellect and memory to remember and translate a five-minute rambling monologue from a visitor. He was so obviously the best, many of us would wait until it was his turn to translate. That meant there were occasionally some long, embarrassing silences when the other translators were on duty. Everyone was waiting for them to be absent so that Balsekar could translate for them.

All the translators had their own distinctive style and their own distinctive phrases. When I read Jean Dunne's books in the 1980s I was transported back into Maharaj's room because I would be hearing the words, not just reading them. I would look at a couple of lines, recognise Mullarpathan's style, or whoever else it happened to be, and from then on I would hear the words in my mind as if they were coming out of the translators' mouths.

Harriet: So all these books are simply a transcription of what the interpreter said on the day of the talk. They are not translations of the original Marathi?

David: I don't know about the other books, but I know that's what Jean did. For a couple of weeks I spent the afternoon in her flat, which was near Chowpatthy Beach. On that particular visit, my own place was too far away, so I just slept there at night. Jean was doing transcriptions for *Seeds of Consciousness* at the time and she would occasionally ask for my help in understanding difficult words on the tape, or she would ask for an opinion on whether a particular dialogue was worth including. I know from watching her work and from reading her books later that she was working with the interpreter's words only.

Harriet: Did she ask Maharaj if she could do this work? How did she get this job?

David: From what I remember, it was the other way round. He asked her to start doing the work. This created a bit of resentment amongst some of the Marathi devotees, some of whom thought they had the rights to Maharaj's words. There was an organisation, a Kendra that had been set up in his name to promote him and his teachings, and certain members seemed a bit miffed that they had been left out of this decision. One of them came to the morning session and actually said to Maharaj that he (i.e. the visitor) alone had the right to publish Maharaj's words because he was the person in the Kendra who was responsible for such things. I thought that this was an absurd position to take: if you set up an organisation to promote the teachings of your Guru, and your Guru then appoints someone to bring out a book of his teachings, the organisation should try to help not hinder the publication. Maharaj saw things the same way.

In his usual blunt way he said, 'I decide who publishes my teachings, not you. It's nothing to do with you. I have appointed this woman to do the job and you have no authority to veto that decision.'

The man left and I never saw him again.

Harriet: Did you never feel tempted to write about Maharaj yourself? You seem to have written about all the other teachers you have been with.

David: On one of my early visits Maharaj asked me what work I did at Ramanasramam. I told him that I looked after the ashram's library and that I also did some book reviewing for the ashram's magazine.

He gave me a strong look and said, 'Why don't you write about the teachings?'

I remember being a little surprised at the time because at that point of my life I hadn't written a single word about Ramana Maharshi or any other teacher. And what is more, I had never felt any interest or inclination in doing so. Maharaj was the first person to tell me that this was what I should be doing with my life.

As for writing about Maharaj, the opportunity never really arose. In the years that I was visiting him, I wasn't doing any writing at all, and in the 80s and 90s I had lots of other projects and topics to occupy myself with.

Harriet: You have some good stories to tell, and some interesting interpretations of what you think Maharaj was trying to do with people. I am finding all this interesting, and I am sure other people would if you took the trouble to write it down.

David: Yes, as I have been talking about all these things today, a part of me has been saying, 'You should write this down'. The feeling has been growing as I have been talking to you. After you leave, maybe I will start and try to see how much I can remember.

Harriet: I suppose we should have talked about this much earlier, but how did you first come to hear of Maharaj, and what initially attracted you to him?

David: Sometime in 1977 I gave a book, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, by Chogyam Trungpa, to a friend of mine, Murray Feldman, and said that he would probably enjoy reading it. I knew he had had a background in Buddhism and had done some Tibetan practices, so I assumed he would like it. He responded by giving me a copy of *I am That*, saying that he was sure that I would enjoy it. Murray had known about Maharaj for years and had even been to see him when Maurice Frydman was a regular visitor. I remember Murray's vivid description of the two of them together: two old men having intensely animated discussions during which they would both get so heated and excited, they would be having nose-to-nose arguments, with lots of raised voices and arm waving. He had no idea what they were talking about, but he could feel the passion from both sides. In those days, if you visited Maharaj, you were likely to be the only person there. You would get a cup of tea and a very serious one-on-one discussion, with no one else present.

A few years later I heard Maharaj say, 'I used to have a quiet life, but *I am That* has turned my house into a railway station platform'.

Anyway, back to the story. I am digressing before I have even started. I went through the book and I have to admit that I had some resistance to many of the things Maharaj said. I was living at Ramanasramam at the time and practicing Bhagavan's teachings. There were clear similarities between what Maharaj was saying and what Bhagavan had taught, but I kept tripping over the dissimilarities: statements that the 'I am' was not ultimately real, for example. However, the book slowly grew on me, and by the end I was hooked. In retrospect I think I would say that the power that was inherent in the words somehow overcame my intellectual resistance to some of the ideas.

I went back to the book again and again. It seemed to draw me to itself, but whenever I picked it up, I found I couldn't read more than a few pages at a time. It was not that I found it boring, or that I disagreed with what it was saying. Rather, there was a feeling of satisfied satiation whenever I went through a few paragraphs. I would put the book down and let the words roll around inside me for a while. I wasn't thinking about them or trying to understand them or wondering if I agreed with them. The words were just there, at the forefront of my consciousness, demanding an intense attention.

I think that it was the words and the teachings that initially fascinated me rather than the man himself because in the first few weeks after I read the book I don't recollect that I had a very strong urge to go to see him. However, all that changed when some of my friends and acquaintances started going to Bombay to sit with him. All of them, without

exception, came back with glowing reports. And it wasn't just their reports that impressed me. Some of them came back looking absolutely transfigured. I remember an American woman called Pat who reappeared radiant, glowing with some inner light, after just a two-week visit.

Papaji used to tell a story about a German girl who went back to Germany and was met by her boyfriend at the airport. The boyfriend, who had never met Papaji and who had never been to India, prostrated full length on the airport floor at her feet.

He told her afterwards, 'I couldn't help myself. You have undergone such an obvious illuminating transformation, I felt compelled to do it.'

I know how he felt. I never prostrated to any of the people who had come back from Bombay, but I could recognise the radical transformations that many of them had undergone. Even so, I think it was several months before I decided to go and see for myself what was going on in Bombay.

Harriet: What took so long? What made you wait?

David: Something has just surfaced in my memory, something I haven't thought about for years. After reading *I am That* a few times, I developed a great faith in Maharaj's state and power. I knew he was the real thing. I knew that if I went to see him I would accept any advice that he gave me. Around that time I heard reports that a couple of foreigners I knew had been to see him, and that he had advised them both to go back to their respective countries. This alarmed me a bit. I was very attached to being in Tiruvannamalai, and I definitely didn't want to go back to the West. Something inside me knew that if Maharaj told me to go back to England, I would go. I didn't want to leave India, so I held off going to see him for a few months.

There was another unresolved issue. I wasn't sure at that point whether or not I needed a human Guru. The Ramanasramam party line has always been that Bhagavan can be the Guru for everyone, even people who never met him while he was alive. I seem to remember having a knowledge of all the places in the Ramanasramam books and in *I am That* where the subject of Gurus came up. I would read them quite often, without ever coming to a final conclusion about whether I needed a human Guru or not.

Harriet: So what made you finally overcome your resistance to going to Bombay?

David: An Australian woman, who had been before, suggested we go, and I agreed. I always knew I would go sooner or later. I just needed a push to get me going, and this invitation was it. I am trying to remember when it was. I think it was the middle of 1978, but I can't be more accurate than that.

Harriet: What were your first impressions? What happened when you arrived?

David: I remember sitting in his room, waiting for him to come upstairs. I was very nervous and apprehensive, but I can't remember why. I recollect trying to start a conversation with the man sitting next to me, but he asked me to be quiet so that he could meditate.

Maharaj came in and a few minutes later I found myself sitting in front of him, telling him who I was and why I had come. It was an afternoon session and not many people were there. Since I was the only new person present, he called me up to find out who I was and what I wanted.

I explained that I had come from Ramanasramam, that I had spent two years there, and that I had been practising Bhagavan's teachings on self-enquiry fairly intensively. At this period of my life I often used to meditate eight hours a day, although by the time I met Maharaj this was beginning to tail off a bit.

Maharaj eventually asked me if I had any questions and I replied, 'Not now. I just want to sit and listen to you for a while.'

He accepted this and allowed me to disappear to the back of the room. I should say at this point that I had already felt the power and the peace of his presence in the room. It was something very tangible.

Question: Did you go there with questions that you wanted to ask him? Was there anything that you wanted to talk to him about?

David: I really can't remember. I knew I would end up talking to him, but I didn't have any particular burning question.

Harriet: How long did it take for you to summon up the courage to start a dialogue with him?

David: I think it was the next day, in the afternoon session. That means I must have sat through two full sessions, just listening to what other people had to say, and to what Maharaj had to say to them.

Eventually, when there was a lull in the conversation I asked, 'I have been doing self-enquiry, trying to keep attention on the inner feeling of "I", for several years, but no matter how intensively I try to do it, I don't find that my attention stays on the "I" for more than a few seconds. There doesn't seem to be an improvement in my ability to keep my attention on this inner feeling of "I". Do the periods of being aware of the "I" have to get longer and longer until they become more or less continuous?'

'No,' he replied, 'just having the strong urge to seek this "I" and investigate it is enough. Don't worry about how well or how long you are holding onto it. The strong desire to know the "I" will keep taking you back to it when your attention strays. If something is important to you, it keeps coming up in your mind. If knowing the "I" is important to you, you will find yourself going back to it again and again.'

After that I think I talked to him almost every day, mostly about various aspects of his teachings on consciousness. He seemed to encourage questions from me, and I always enjoyed quizzing him. However, the exact details of the questions and answers seem to have slipped through the cracks of my memory.

Harriet: All this talk about Ramana Maharshi has reminded me of something else that I wanted to ask. We started off this afternoon with a question about why Maharaj isn't the topic of memoirs, at least book length ones. A few people have written short accounts, but I have never come across a full-length book about living with him. Many of the Ramana

Maharshi books are filled with stories of miraculous events that seemed to be taking place around him. Many of his devotees tell stories of how faith in Bhagavan changed their lives or somehow, in an improbable way, transformed their destiny. I know that Bhagavan himself disowned all personal responsibility for these events, but that didn't stop people writing them down and attributing them to Bhagavan's grace.

I suppose my question is, did similar things happen around Maharaj, and if they did, why did no one ever bother to write them down?

David: I don't know how common such events were, but I know that they did happen. And if similar things did happen to other people, I really don't know why those who know about these events don't want to write them down.

Let me redress the balance by telling one very long and very lovely story.

At some point in the late 1970s I was asked to take a South American woman called Anna-Marie to Bombay and look after her because she hardly spoke a word of English. Her native language was Spanish and I think she lived in Venezuela, but I have a vague memory that this wasn't her nationality. I was planning to go to Bombay anyway to see Maharaj, so I agreed to take her and look after her. Very early on in our journey – we were still in Madras – I realised that I had been given a bit of a basket case to look after. Anna-Marie was completely incapable of looking after herself, and was incredibly forgetful. Before we had even managed to get on the train to Bombay, she managed to lose all her money and her passport. By retracing our steps, we eventually tracked them down to a bookstore near the station. Miraculously, the manager had found the purse and had kept it with him in case we came back looking for it.

A few hours into our train journey from Madras to Bombay Anna-Marie went to the bathroom. On Indian trains that means a squat toilet which is just a hole in the floor with footrests on either side of it. Anna-Marie was sitting there, doing her business, when the train jolted on the tracks. Her glasses fell off and disappeared down the hole in the floor. It turned out to be her only pair, and without them she was more or less blind. I realised this later in the day when we stopped at a station further down the line. Anna-Marie was standing on the platform when the train started to pull out of the station. She made no move to get on. When I realised what was happening, I jumped off and pushed her onto the moving train. I had already realised that she was having trouble seeing things, but I didn't realise how bad things really were until I discovered that she couldn't see a moving train, with about twenty-five carriages, that was about ten feet in front of her. I knew that my first priority, once we got to Bombay, would be to get her a new pair of glasses. I remembered that there was an optician quite near to Maharaj's house. I had noticed it on previous trips while I was waiting to catch a bus to go downtown.

Early the next morning, as soon as the shop opened, I took her in to get her eyes tested and to get her some glasses. The test took a long time, partly because of Anna-Marie's deficiency in English, and partly because the optician couldn't work out what her prescription was.

After about half an hour he came out and said, 'She needs to go to a specialist eye hospital. I can't find out with my instruments here what her prescription might be. There is something seriously wrong with her eyes, but I don't know what it is. Take her to "Such and Such" Eye Hospital.'

Whatever the name was, I had never heard of it. He started to give me directions, but since I didn't know Bombay, I wasn't able to follow them. This was when the first 'miracle' of the day happened. It was to be the first of many.

'Don't worry,' said the optician, 'I'll take you there myself.'

He closed his store – there were no assistants to man the counter while we were away – and we set off on a walk across Bombay. We must have walked over a mile before we finally arrived at the hospital. He took us to the office of an eye surgeon he knew there and explained that his instruments were not sophisticated enough to work out what was wrong with Anna-Marie's eyes. He then left us and went back to his store. I have encountered many acts of kindness in all the years I have been in India, but I still marvel at this shop owner who closed down his store for a couple of hours and then went on a two-mile round-trip walk just to help us out.

The eye surgeon set to work on Anna-Marie's eyes. Even he was impressed by how complicated her eyes were. He tried her out on several machines and gadgets, but like the optician before him, he failed to come up with a prescription.

'What is wrong with this woman?' he asked. 'How did she end up with eyes like these?'

I shrugged my shoulders.

'I have no idea. I barely know her and she hardly speaks any English.'

We went off to a different part of the hospital that, to my untrained eye, seemed to have bigger and fancier machines. This new combination of equipment finally came up with a reading for Anna-Marie. Our curiosity had been piqued by this long complicated process so we tried through sign language and the few English words she knew to discover how Anna-Marie's eyes had come to be so peculiar. After a few false starts she realised what we were asking. It turned out that she had fallen out of a building in South America and had landed on her face. Having watched her behaviour and activities in the previous two days, I found this to be an entirely believable scenario. I don't think I have ever come across someone who was so accident-prone.

Her eyes had been damaged in the fall and had been stitched in various places. As a result of this surgery there were places on the eyeball that had a very eccentric curvature. This accounted for the first optician's inability to work out what she needed. Even the big eye hospital took almost an hour to figure out what she needed.

I got to talking to the eye surgeon and discovered that we had a mutual acquaintance in Tiruvannamalai. In fact, he knew quite a few of Bhagavan's devotees. Like the optician before him, he decided to take us under his wing.

'Where will you go to get this prescription fulfilled?' he asked.

'Well, the first man we went to, the one who brought us here, was very helpful to us. I would like to go back to him to give him the business since he was so kind to us.'

'No, no,' said the surgeon, 'he only has a little shop. He won't be able to fulfill an order like this. It is too complicated. I will take you to the biggest optician in Bombay.'

He too closed down his office and took us on another trip across Bombay. As we walked through the front door of the store he was taking us to, everyone jumped to attention. He was clearly a very respected figure in the eye world.

'These are my friends,' he announced, waving at us. 'They have a difficult prescription to fulfill. Please do it as quickly as possible because this woman can't see anything without glasses. She is virtually blind.'

He left us in the hands of the manager of the store and went back to the hospital. The manager's big, beaming smile lasted as long as it took him to read the prescription. He put it down on the counter and started to talk to us very apologetically.

'Normally, we keep lenses for every possible prescription here in the store. We have a huge turnover, so we can afford to make and keep lenses that we have no customers for. Sooner or later somebody will come and buy them, and everyone appreciates the fact that they can get what they want on the spot, without having to wait for anything to be made. But this prescription is such a ridiculous combination, no one would ever think of making it or keeping it. Until I saw it myself I would have guessed that nobody in the world had eyes that corresponded with these numbers. We will have to make a special order and that will take a long time because the glass grinders are out on strike at the moment. Even if they go back to work, it will probably be weeks before we can get them to make an order like this because they already have a lot of pending orders. I'm sorry, I can't help you, and nobody else in the city will be able to help you either because this prescription is just too unusual for anyone to stock.'

This apology took about five minutes to deliver. While it was going on one of the boys from the store, who obviously didn't know any English, picked up the paper and went to the storeroom to look for the lenses. That was his job: to pick up the prescriptions from the front office and find the corresponding lenses in the storeroom. Just as the manager was coming to his conclusion, the boy reappeared with two lenses that exactly corresponded to the numbers on the prescription. The manager was absolutely flabbergasted.

'This is not possible,' he kept saying. 'No one would make and keep lenses like these.'

He finally adjusted the impossibility by saying that someone must have ordered these lenses long ago and had forgotten to collect them.

Because we had been declared friends of the great and famous eye surgeon – we had only known him for about two hours – we were given a massive discount and about half an hour later Anna-Marie walked out of the store wearing what I was absolutely convinced was the only pair of spectacles on planet earth that she could actually see the world through. Now, was there a miracle in there, or were we just the fortunate recipients of an amazingly serendipitous sequence of events?

'I' decided to pick the initial optician who agrees to close down his store and take us to the one eye surgeon in town who happens to be interested in Ramana, who then takes us, against my wishes, to the only store in Bombay where lenses can be found for Anna-Marie. I am a bit of a sceptic, and in my jaundiced opinion there are too many good things in that sequence to be attributed to chance alone.

My own belief is that when you go to the Guru, the power of that Guru takes care of any physical problems that may arise. He doesn't do it knowingly; there is just an aura around him that takes care of all these problems. We never even told Maharaj about Anna-Marie's glasses. When we set off that morning, I just assumed that she had fairly normal eyes and that within half an hour or so we would be able to buy some glasses that would bring the world into focus.

This was not the end of the story. I told you it was a long one. Anna-Marie was sitting with Maharaj every day for about a week, but of course, she couldn't understand a

word of what was going on. There was no one there who spoke Spanish. Then, one morning, she appeared very red-eyed and I asked her what was the matter.

‘I was up all night,’ she said, in very broken English, ‘praying for a Spanish translator to come today. There is something I have to tell Maharaj, and I need a translator to do it.’

Later that morning, as we were all sitting in a café on Grant Road in the interval between the end of the *bhajans* and the beginning of the question-and-answer session, we noticed a new foreign face at an adjoining table – a woman who was reading a copy of *I am That*. We introduced ourselves and discovered that, surprise, surprise, she was a professional Spanish-English translator who worked in Bombay and who had recently come across Maharaj’s teachings. She had decided in a general sort of way to come and visit Maharaj, but only that morning did her general urge translate into positive action. Anna-Marie, of course, was over the moon. The translator she had spent all night praying for had miraculously manifested on the next table to her about fifteen minutes before the question-and-answer session started.

We all went back to Maharaj’s room, curious to find out what Anna-Marie wanted to say to him. This is more or less what she had to say via the translator.

‘I was living in Venezuela when I had a dream of a mountain and two men. I found out soon afterwards that one of the two men was Ramakrishna, but for a long time I didn’t know who the other man was or what the mountain might be. Then, last year, I saw a photo of Ramana Maharshi and realised that this was the second man in the dream. When I did some research to find out more about him, I soon realised that the mountain in the dream was Arunachala. In the dream Ramana Maharshi looked at me in a very special way and transmitted a knowledge of his teachings to me. He didn’t do it verbally. He just looked at me, and as he was looking, I just felt that he was filling me up with an understanding of his teachings, a knowledge that I could articulate quite clearly, even though no words had passed between us. I knew that I had to come to India to find out more about him. I persuaded a friend of mine to bring me here, even though I knew that Ramana Maharshi was no longer alive. I knew I had some business here and something was compelling me to come. While I was in Tiruvannamalai I heard about you, and I knew that I had to come and see you as well. That same compulsion that made me come to India to find out about Ramana Maharshi has made me come here as well. I don’t know what it is, but I knew that I had to come.’

Maharaj interceded at this point: ‘What were the teachings that were transmitted to you in the dream? What did Ramana Maharshi tell you as he was revealing his teachings in silence?’

Anna-Marie talked in Spanish for about five minutes without any translation being given by the interpreter. At the end of that period the translator began to explain what she had said. We all sat there, absolutely dumbfounded. She gave a perfect and fluent five-minute summary of Maharaj’s teachings. They were quite clearly not Ramana’s teachings but Maharaj’s, and this woman was giving a wonderful presentation of them. I think it was one of the best five-minute summaries of the teachings I had ever heard. And remember, this was from a woman who was on her first visit, someone who had had very little acquaintance with Maharaj’s teachings before coming there that day.

Maharaj seemed to be as impressed as everyone else there. He stood up, took Anna-Marie downstairs and initiated her into the mantra of his lineage by writing it on her

tongue with his finger. I mentioned earlier that he would volunteer to give out the mantra if anybody wanted it. If someone asked for it, he would ordinarily whisper it in his or her ear. This is the only case I know in which he gave out the mantra without being first asked, and it is the only instance I know of in which he wrote it with his finger on a devotee's tongue. What does all this mean? I have absolutely no idea. I have long since given up trying to guess or rationalise why Gurus do the things they do.

Harriet: That's a great story! So you would say that Maharaj *was* looking after the welfare of devotees, in the same way that other great Gurus were?

David: I would answer a conditional 'yes' to that question. 'Yes' because it is the nature of enlightened beings to be like this – they don't have any choice in the matter because these things go on around them automatically. However, on a more superficial level the answer might be 'no'. If people took their personal problems to him, he might get angry and say that it was none of his business. He didn't perceive himself as someone who dealt with individual people who had problems. I saw several people go to him to tell him that they had had all their money or their passport stolen, and his standard response was to tell them off for being careless. I told him once that I was worried about how much I was sleeping. At the time, though, I did think this was a legitimate spiritual question because I had read many teachers who had said that it was bad to sleep a lot.

His answer, though, was 'Why are you bringing your medical problems to me? If you think it is a problem, go and see a doctor.'

In that particular case his advice turned out to be perfectly correct. I discovered later that I was suffering from a major infestation of hookworm, almost certainly as a result of walking around India for years with no footwear. Hookworms eat red blood cells and if they get out of control, they eat more than the body can produce. Eventually, you get very anaemic, which means feeling tired and sleepy all the time. So, in this particular case, what appeared to be a cranky, dismissive answer was the most useful thing he could say. I would say that the Self put the right words into his mouth at the right moment, but at the time neither of us knew just how right they were.

Despite his generally irritable response when people went to him for personal help, I think he was fully aware that he was looking after all his devotees' well being, even though it may not have looked that way a lot of the time.

Harriet: Again, can you give me an example of this, or is this just guesswork?

David: I remember a large fat man from Madras who came to see Maharaj with what he said was a problem: 'I have been doing *japa* for many years and I have acquired *siddhis* as a result. If I am very pleased with someone, very good things happen to him or her automatically. I don't think about it or do anything. It just happens by itself. But if I get angry with someone, the opposite happens. Very bad things happen, and sometimes the person even dies. How can I stop these things from happening?'

Maharaj told him, 'All these *siddhis* have come on account of your *japa*. If you stop doing the *japa*, the *siddhis* will also stop.'

'I don't think I can do that,' replied the man. 'The *japa* has taken me over so completely, it is no longer voluntary. It just happens by itself whether I want it to or not.'

Maharaj repeated his advice, but the man wasn't interested in carrying it out. He looked very pleased with himself and I got the feeling that he had just come there to show off his accomplishments. My opinion was confirmed when he announced that he was now willing to answer questions from anyone in the room. He hadn't come there to receive advice; he had come to give it out.

Maharaj asked him to leave and said that if he was really interested in his teachings he could go in the evening to the house of one of his women devotees, a Sanskrit professor who sometimes did translations for him, and she would explain them to him. He was told not to come back to the room. I suspect that Maharaj wanted to keep him away from us because there was something strange and threatening about him. I am not a very psychic kind of person but I could definitely feel an unpleasant energy coming off this man. It was something that made me feel physically queasy. He really did have an aura of bad energy around him. I checked with some of the other people afterwards, and some of them had felt the same way.

All this took place in a morning session. That evening the Sanskrit professor showed up an hour late, looking very flustered. Maharaj immediately wanted to know what was going on.

'This man from Madras came to my house and I couldn't get him to leave. I told him that it was time for me to come here, but he wouldn't get up and go. I didn't really want to force him to go. He might have got angry with me, and then I might have died.'

Maharaj appeared to be outraged. He puffed out his chest like a fighting cock going into battle and announced, very angrily, 'No one can harm my devotees. You are under my protection. This man cannot do you any harm. If he comes to talk to you again, throw him out when it is time for you to come here. Nothing will happen to you.'

This was the only occasion when I heard Maharaj make a strong public declaration that he was protecting and looking after his devotees.

Maharaj himself had no fear of people like this. He told us once about a yogi who had come to his *beedi* shop to test his powers. This yogi apparently had many *siddhis* and he came to see if Maharaj, of whom he had heard great things, could match him. Maharaj just went about his business in the shop and refused all challenges to show off what he could do. Eventually, in an attempt to provoke him into doing something, the yogi said that he would curse him and make something very bad happen to him.

Maharaj apparently looked at him with complete unconcern and said, 'You may be able to pull down a thousand suns from the sky, but you can't harm me and you don't impress me. Now go away.'

Harriet: What about you? Were there any instances when you felt that he was looking after you, taking care of your physical well being as well as your spiritual health?

David: There is nothing remotely as spectacular as Anna-Marie's visit, but I can tell you the story of one trip I made to see him. There are a few incidents on the way that are nothing to do with what you are asking, but by the time I get to the end, you will realise what it is all about.

In 1980 I wanted to see Maharaj but I had no money at all. I couldn't afford the train ticket, and I definitely couldn't afford to stay in Bombay for more than a day or two. I accepted an invitation to give a talk about Bhagavan at a seminar in Delhi on condition

that I could come back via Bombay. My train ticket was paid for by the organisers, so that took care of the transport arrangements. My meagre funds would allow me two days in Bombay, so I booked the tickets accordingly. In India you have to book your train tickets at least seven to ten days in advance in order to get the train you want.

I made my speech in Delhi and then took the train to Bombay. On the suburban train that ran from the main Bombay station to Grant Road I had all my money, my passport (actually a temporary travel document that was given to me while I waited for a new passport) and my onward train ticket stolen. It was a classic piece of work. There is always a crush as everyone piles into the carriage at the same time. In the general scrummaging someone managed to slit the bottom of my bag and remove my wallet. My first reaction was actually admiration. It had been such a slick, professional job. The slit was only about half an inch bigger than the size of the wallet, and the whole operation had been carried out in a couple of seconds while I was trying to ensure that I got onto the train.

Fortunately, my local train ticket was in my shirt pocket. In those days there was a Rs 10 fine (about 20 cents US at today's rate) for ticketless travel, and I wouldn't have been able to pay it if I had been unable to produce a ticket at my destination. When I arrived at Grant Road, I didn't even have that much money to my name. I think I had just over a rupee in loose change in one of my trouser pockets. That constituted my entire worldly wealth. I walked to 10th Lane, Khetwadi, the alley where Maharaj lived, and invested all my change in a cup of tea and a morning newspaper. It was very early in the morning and I knew that it would be a couple of hours before anyone I knew showed up. I didn't want to go in and tell Maharaj that I had been robbed because I had seen how he had reacted to other people in that situation. I was hoping to float a loan from someone I knew and then find a floor to sleep on, because without a passport I wouldn't be able to check into a hotel.

Jean Dunne showed up around the time I expected and I told her what had happened. I knew her well because she had lived in Ramanasramam for a couple of years before she started to visit Maharaj in Bombay. She lent me a few hundred rupees, which I assumed would be enough to have a couple of days in Bombay and get back to Tiruvannamalai. I planned to go to the train station later that morning and get a new copy of my onward ticket issued. Maharaj, though, had other plans for me.

Someone told him that I had been robbed on the suburban train and I braced myself for the expected lecture. Instead, he was astonishingly sympathetic. He spoke to one of his attendants, a bank officer, and asked him to put me up for the duration of my visit. I ended up in a very nice house in quite a good area of Bombay. Quite a change from the bug-ridden lodges that I usually had to frequent. Later that morning I went to V. T. Station to get a new ticket. Much to my amazement, there was no record of my name on any of the trains that were leaving for Madras. In those days there were no computers; all bookings were made by hand in big ledgers. A very civilised and sympathetic railway official (you don't meet many of them when you are not on Guru business in India!) took a couple of hours off to pore over all the ledgers to find out the details of my ticket. There are about 750 people on each train and I think there were three or four trains leaving for Madras on the day that I planned to leave. After scanning over 2,000 names for me, he regretfully announced that I didn't have a reservation on any of the trains that were leaving that day. I began to suspect that some power wanted me to stay in Bombay

because mistakes like this are very rare in the railway booking system. In the twenty-seven years I have been using the trains here, I have never ever arrived at a station and discovered that my booked ticket simply didn't exist. I had no alternative except to go and buy a new ticket, which I did with the funds I had borrowed from Jean. The next train with a vacant berth wasn't leaving for over two weeks, which meant that I had that much time to spend with Maharaj.

I had come with very little money, expecting a two-day flying visit. Instead, courtesy of Maharaj and a mysterious event in the railway booking office, I had a luxurious two-week stay in a devotee's house.

I made my way back to Maharaj's house and found that someone had told him about the talk on Ramana Maharshi's teachings I had given in Delhi a few days earlier. That was something else that I wanted to keep quiet about. Maharaj had strong views on unenlightened people giving public speeches about enlightenment. I had only agreed to do it so that I would have a chance of coming to see him, but I suspected that this wouldn't be a good enough excuse for him.

I discovered that he had found out about the talk because when I walked into his room he called me and asked me to come to the front of the room. I went up and sat facing him in the place where the questioners would usually sit.

'No, no,' he said, 'sit next to me, facing all the other people.'

My spirits sank. I knew that I wouldn't enjoy whatever he had in mind.

'Look at my little room,' he began. 'Only about thirty people come to listen to hear me speak. But David here has just been giving spiritual talks in Delhi. Hundreds of people apparently came to listen to him, so he must be much better at it than me. So today David will give a talk for us.'

This was worse than anything I could have imagined when he called me up. I tried unsuccessfully to wriggle out of his invitation, but when I realised that he wasn't going to back down, I gave a five-minute summary of the paper I had read out in Delhi. It was about the unity between the practices of surrender and self-enquiry in Bhagavan's teachings. One of the translators asked me to go slowly so that he could give a running translation for Maharaj. Throughout the duration of the talk Maharaj was glaring at me very intently. I think that he was waiting to pounce on me if I made some comment that he didn't agree with. I made it to the end of my summary without being interrupted by any scathing comments from Maharaj. I thought that this in itself was quite a major accomplishment.

After my conclusion he looked at me and said in a fairly mild tone, 'I can't quarrel with anything you said. Everything you said was correct.'

Then he fired himself up and said very strongly and forcefully, 'But don't go around giving talks about how to get enlightened unless you are in that state yourself. Otherwise, you will end up like that Wolter Keers.'

I have already told you what he thought of Wolter Keers and his teaching activities. That was a fate I was determined to avoid. All this took place twenty-three years ago. I haven't given a public talk since then.

I need to fast forward a bit here and get to the end of the story. I arrived back in Tiruvannamalai more than two weeks later. I had no income, no prospect of receiving any money from anyone, and I had a debt of several hundred rupees that I owed to Jean. I went to work the next morning in the ashram library and found an orange envelope on my

desk with my name on it. I opened it and found a bundle of rupee notes inside. I counted them and discovered that it was exactly the same amount that had been stolen from me in Bombay: not a rupee more, not a rupee less. There was no mention of who had put the money there, and no one ever came forward to say that he or she was the person responsible. So far as I was aware, no one in Tiruvannamalai even knew about the theft. I hadn't told anyone, and I had been back in Tiruvannamalai less than twenty-four hours when the envelope appeared.

I think this whole episode was orchestrated by the power that looks after the affairs of devotees who have a strong urge to be with a Guru. This power took me to Bombay, stole my money and ticket, removed all traces of my booking from the railway ledgers, arranged excellent accommodation for me for more than two weeks, brought me back to Tiruvannamalai, where it then returned all my money to me via an anonymous donor.

Harriet: Where did you normally stay when you went to Bombay? What did other visiting devotees do for accommodation? Where did you all eat and sleep? I ask this because there was no ashram or centre where all of Maharaj's devotees could stay.

David: It depended on how well off you were. Bombay has always been an expensive place to live in. If you didn't have much money, your choice was very restricted. Some of my friends used to stay at a Buddhist ashram, but that involved participating in a lot of their rituals, which was something many of us didn't want to do because some of the timings clashed with Maharaj's sessions. There were some other cheap options that were either a long way away or which also involved participating in some activity you didn't want to, or submitting to strange rules that were not convenient. I avoided all these places and always stayed at a cheap lodge that was about 200 yards from Maharaj's house, on the same alley. It was called the Poornima, and many of us who were short of money ended up there. I seem to remember that it was Rs 22 for a double room, an amazing price for Bombay even in those days. A couple of streets away there was a place that served cheap lunches to local people who were working in the area. It was made of mud and there were no chairs or tables. However, you could get a great lunch there – chapattis, dhal, and vegetables – for Rs 1.40. I can't remember the exchange rate in those days. I think it may have been about twelve rupees to the dollar. That should give you some idea of the prices.

Maharaj would always ask where you were staying when you first went to see him. If you said 'Poornima' he knew you were either short of funds or being very careful about spending them. He clearly approved of people who didn't waste money, and who got good bargains when they went out shopping. He had spent his whole life being a businessman who knew the value of a rupee, and it irked him considerably to see foreigners wasting money or getting cheated.

One morning when I was there visitors were offering flowers and sweets to him. People would bring flowers to decorate the portraits for the Guru *puja* that took place every morning, and some people brought sweets that would be distributed as *prasad* at the end of it. That day, three foreign women were standing in front of him with flowers that had stems, which meant that they were hoping he would put them in the vases that were kept near him. He asked the first one how much she had paid, and when she told him he was shocked. He got angry with her, said that she had been cheated, and refused to accept

the flowers. The second woman suffered the same fate. The third woman's flowers were accepted because she had done a little bargaining and had got the price down to a reasonable amount. Devotion didn't seem to be a factor when it came to getting your flowers accepted. The best way to get your flowers in his vase was to bargain ferociously for them and get a price that would satisfy him.

Now the subject of flowers has come up, I have to digress a little and mention the *bhajan* and the *Guru puja* that took place between the meditation and the question-and-answer session. It was the only occasion when Maharaj would allow people to garland him. After he had been garlanded, he would stand in the middle of the room, banging cymbals to the tune of the *bhajan* that was being sung. Mostly, his eyes would be closed. At the beginning he would start off with small finger cymbals one or two inches in diameter. As the *bhajan* hotted up he would move on to bigger and bigger cymbals which would be passed on to him by an attendant. The biggest pair were almost the size of garbage can lids. They were huge and the noise they made was ear-splitting. You could hear them several streets away. When Maharaj moved on to this biggest set of cymbals, he would already be wearing so many garlands, they would be sticking out in front of him, sometimes to a distance of about two feet. It wasn't possible to bang the biggest cymbals without utterly destroying the garlands. Maharaj would bang away with his eyes closed, and every time the cymbals came together petals would fly off in all directions. By the time it was all over, the floor would be covered with fragments of the flowers he had shattered and sprayed all over the room. It was a beautiful sight and I never tired of watching him smash his cymbals together and spray flowers in all directions.

Let's get back to his parsimonious habits. I stayed at the Poornima on a visit I made in 1979. I was spending two weeks with Maharaj before flying back to England to visit my family for the first time since I had come to India in 1976. My mother had sent me a ticket, feeling, possibly with some reason, that if she didn't pay for my trip, I might never come home again. I had accumulated orders for copies of *I am That* from friends in England. The British price was about ten times the price of the Bombay price, so all the Maharaj devotees I knew in England had put in orders for cheap copies. I appeared in Maharaj's room with this huge pile of books and asked him to sign them all for the people who were waiting for them in England.

He looked at me very suspiciously and said, 'I thought you had no money. How could you afford to buy all these books?'

I explained: 'They are not for me. They are for people in England who don't want to pay the British price. They have sent me money to bring them Indian copies.'

When I told him the retail price in London he was truly horrified.

'Take as many as you can! No one should pay that price for a book!'

He pulled out his pen and happily autographed all the books.

Harriet: Did you carry on going to see him until he passed away? Were you there in the final days?

David: No, and I didn't want to be. I didn't want sit there watching him slowly die. I wanted to keep my memory of a man who was a perpetual dynamo, an amazingly vital centre of force and energy. I knew that he didn't regard himself as the body, but I didn't

want to be there, watching the cancer slowly reduce him to an invalid. I can't remember the date of my last visit, but I do remember that he was still talking without much trouble.

I haven't explained how Maharaj kept the traffic flowing through his room. You need to know about this to understand what comes after. Because of the restricted space available, Maharaj would generally only allow people to spend about two weeks with him. New people were coming every day and there simply wasn't enough room for everyone to sit on the floor.

When Maharaj saw that it was getting congested, he would pick out a few of the people who had been there the longest and ask them to leave, saying, 'You can leave now. New people have come and there is no room.'

The selected people would then have to leave, but if they were still interested, they could come back after another couple of months and put in another two weeks there. That was the system that many of us followed: two weeks there followed by two or more months somewhere else. Usually, when I arrived, I would tell him that I had a return ticket to Madras in two weeks' time. He trusted me to leave on the appointed day.

On my final visit, though, I have a memory that I was trying to stay few days longer than I had originally intended. I do remember that for a couple of days I would sit in a back corner, hoping he wouldn't notice me, because he knew that my time was up. One morning I couldn't get to my corner seat in time because something delayed me. I found myself sitting quite close to him, effectively blocking his view of some of the people who were immediately behind me. I should mention that I am 6'2" and that my back is disproportionately long for my size. I have short legs and a long back, which means that when I sit on the floor with a straight back the top of my head is the same distance from the floor as someone who is about 6'4". Of course, on that particular morning Maharaj wanted to have a conversation with the person who was sitting immediately behind me, someone who was a lot shorter than I was. I tried unsuccessfully to squirm out of the way, and Maharaj tried to peer round me but it was no use because there wasn't any extra floor space for me to manoeuvre in. We were packed in like sardines in a can.

Eventually Maharaj looked at me and said, with some irritation, 'Why are you still sitting here taking up floor space? I can't see the people behind you. You are full of the knowledge. You are so full of the knowledge it is coming out of your ears and making a mess on my carpet. You can go now and make space for other people.'

That was the last time he spoke to me. I took his irascible remarks to be a blessing and a benediction, a sort of graduation certificate. I left that day and never went back.

Over the next few months I kept receiving reports about his failing health but I never felt tempted to go back one more time. That is, until he suddenly appeared in one of my dreams telling me to come and see him. It was such a forceful dream, it woke me up. I lay there in my bed, wondering if it really was him telling me to come, or whether it was just my subconscious manifesting a secret wish to go and see him one more time. I fell asleep without resolving the issue one way or the other.

A few minutes later he reappeared in my next dream, glaring at me: 'I just told you to come. Why didn't you believe me?'

I woke up and knew that he wanted me to come. Maybe he wanted one last chance to assault my stubborn ego. I didn't go and I can't give any satisfactory excuses for my refusal to respond to this dream. This was just before he passed away in 1981. I could give any number of reasons, but none of them rings true to me or satisfies me. When I

study my memory of this event, I can't find any excuses that will pass muster in my conscience. I didn't go, and to this day I can't remember what stopped me.

Harriet: Did the dreams continue? Did he ask you to come again?

David: No, it was only on that one night. However, after he did die I started to have vivid and regular dreams in which I was visiting him in his room. I would go up the steps and find him there, sitting in his usual seat, and giving out teachings in his usual way. My dream logic would try to work out why he was still there, still teaching. In the dream one part of me knew that he had died, but another part was witnessing him still alive, still teaching in his usual corner. In these dreams I would sometimes come to the conclusion that he hadn't really died at all, that he had faked his death, waited until all the crowds had left, and then gone back to teaching with a small group of people who were somehow in on the game. My dream brain invented all kinds of stories such as these, but even in the dreams they never really convinced me. I knew something was wrong, but I couldn't quite figure out what it was.

These dreams went on all through the 1980s and well into the 1990s. The last dream in this sequence was different. I found Maharaj teaching a small group of people inside the main room of the Ramanasramam dispensary. This was unusual because I had never before dreamed of him anywhere outside his room. Also, the people were different. They were not the Indian faces who populated his room in the earlier dreams. They were all foreigners, all people I knew well. This time there was no doubt, no confusion about why or whether he was still alive.

I looked at Maharaj, turned to my friends who were sitting on the floor with him and said, with a great feeling of exaltation, 'See! I told you! He's alive! He didn't die at all! He's still alive!'

The dream ended and I have never dreamt of him again.

Harriet: What did you make of all this? What did it all mean for you?

David: I don't need Freud on this one. He didn't die because he was never born. He is alive as the Self within me. He can't die. He is inside, biding his time, waiting for the words he planted there to destroy me and my little, circumscribed world. I know that he hasn't given up on me, and I also know that one day he will prevail.

Postscript

In the years that have passed since I first posted this interview I have been asked many times who the mysterious Rudi was. Several people thought it might be the Rudi who was associated with Swami Muktananda, and who was also Da Free John's teacher at one time. It definitely wasn't this man.

I had no idea who he was or what became of him until a few months ago when I received the following email:

Dear David,

Despite the ubiquity of cyber communications, unless one is pointed in the direction of internet articles, much that is valuable remains unread to those it has meaning to. Thank goodness we still rely on interpersonal relationships to help direct us to these wonderful missives and interviews. Owing to the youthful and agile mind of our friend in common, Mullarpattam, I have come to read your article on Nisargadatta Maharaj. I thought you might be interested in learning about the Canadian named Rudy (Rudi). He did leave for Canada, answering a call to help his father recover from spinal surgery. He eventually moved to Northern California, engaged in business, attempting to provide his family with security. During those long years all attention to serious metaphysical studies were outwardly put on hold and this sacrifice was only understood by those who had known him previously. But his deep awareness would surface in his interactions with those around him and his disinterest in the advantageous status his success brought him distinguished him from others in the rat race. He has continued to live simply and truthfully and is a beacon of integrity to those of us that have been privileged to be with him.

Sincerely,

Helaine Melnitzer

“the woman he had arrived with”

In my reply I asked her how long she and Rudi had spent with Maharaj. In her response she wrote:

Dear David,

I arrived there with Rudy on Feb. 18, 1978. We spent over 60 continuous mornings in satsang often coming for afternoon bhajans and glorying in post satsang neighborhood walks with Maharaj. We moved on, and over the next one and a half years returned perhaps every 6-8 weeks for these head to head meetings between Maharaj and Rudy. It seemed that whenever Rudi was with Maharaj, they were alone, the only two in the room...

All good things,

Helaine

