

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. Jnanasambandar, 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 busyness 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!'