

Mostly about Books

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Michelle: Did any other teachers encourage you to write?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In the last few months of his life there was a tape recorder running while he gave his answers to visitors. At Sundaram's request I edited these new dialogues into a new book, *Final Talks*, which, I think, makes quite a nice supplement to the original biography.

Michelle: We seem to have filled in some of the blanks on your 1980s map. What were you doing for the rest of the time?

David: While I was collecting more information about old devotees of Bhagavan and from about 1988 onwards, I was also helping Lakshmana Swami and Saradamma with a piece of land they had bought here.

Lakshmana Swamy had mentioned a few times that he wanted to move back to Tiruvannamalai. Sundaram, Annamalai Swami's translator, and I were asked to look for possible properties that might be suitable for him. We found a few, but every time Lakshmana Swamy was taken to see them, they didn't appeal to him. At one point we actually agreed to buy a piece of land near the junction of the *pradakshina* road and the Bangalore road, but the owners backed out after a price had been agreed.

Then a piece of land came on the market that was located behind the Government Arts College. Much to our surprise Lakshmana Swamy gave the order to buy before he had even seen it. It seems that he had been sitting on this land in the early 1950s when he had suddenly had a vision of himself living there forty years later. The next time he came to Tiruvannamalai he looked at the land and confirmed that this was the place where he had had the vision. He had let us run around, looking at other properties and negotiating for them, but somehow he seemed to know that he would end up living in the place where he is now.

I volunteered to develop the garden. It was just an empty field when we started, so empty in fact that we had to get the government surveyor in to determine where our piece of empty field ended and the neighbours' empty fields began. We surveyed the land, fenced it, dug a well and started a nursery of trees. The well didn't produce any water, so we ended up running a pipe to a neighbour's well and buying from him. For about three years I put in several hours a day in this garden, growing trees and flowers. It was a tough time to start a project like this because there was a drought in the area. The monsoon failed several years in a row. A house was started for Lakshmana Swamy and Saradamma, but work was halted when the water ran out. We could have shipped water in tankers, but we discovered that it was too saline to be used in building work. The water would have corroded the steel inside the cement. When the work stopped, I ended up being the night watchman there. The house was full of tools and cement bags, but there were no doors and windows to protect them. I think I slept on this building site for most of a year, watching the property and waiting for the rains to come so that the work could continue. For two summers in a row I bought water in tankers to keep the garden alive. Every well in the neighbourhood was completely dry.

I was still living in Ramanasramam, working on my project to collect and edit the stories of Ramana devotees. Sometime in 1990 I wrote to Papaji in Lucknow, asking him if he would be willing to contribute his story to the book. He wrote back, saying that he would be happy to have his story included, but he added that he didn't want to write it down himself. He asked me to submit a questionnaire, and he would then do his best to answer it by giving verbal answers that would be recorded on tape. This seemed like a good suggestion. It took him a few months to get round to it, but when he finally did, he spent at least an hour talking about his early life and his association with Bhagavan. There seemed to be a few major discrepancies in his account, but when I wrote, asking for clarification, he just repeated the same stories all over again. In 1992 I decided to go and see him in the hope of getting his story straightened out. I spent a chaotic two weeks with him, chaotic because his wife died about three days after I arrived, which meant a major disruption to his usual routine. His family descended en masse; there was a trip to Hardwar to immerse the ashes in the Ganga; but in between all these comings and goings I managed to get most of the information I had been looking for. A lot of it came in a last-minute interview I had with him about an hour before my train was due to leave. It was that kind of trip.

Back in Tiruvannamalai I went through all my notes and put together a fifty-page version of his life that focused on his early life and the meetings he had had with Bhagavan. At the time I wasn't interested in anything that came after 1950. I submitted it with some hesitancy because there were still a few events that I couldn't place in the right order, but he seemed to love it. He invited me back to Lucknow, telling me that he had

many more stories he wanted to tell me. I went back in March 1993, intending to stay for a short time, but I ended up staying there until he passed away in 1997.

Michelle: What was the attraction? What made you decide to stay, and stay so long?

David: First of all, I felt his power and I felt his peace. Here was a man in the Ramana lineage, promulgating his teachings and radiating a kind of tangible *sakti* that shut up the minds of the people around him, and in some cases gave them temporary experiences of the Self. It was a heady, intoxicating environment in which people were having amazing experiences almost every day. On top of that there was the promise of getting more extraordinary stories from him. My first trip there had been a kind of smash-and-grab raid. I had come with very limited time. With all the funeral events going on I had had to remind him constantly that our time was limited and that I wanted to talk to him about his life. Second time round I waited for him to take the initiative, but strangely enough he didn't. Having invited me there to tell stories, he never showed any interest in doing so.

Within two weeks of my arrival I was given a book project that someone else couldn't deal with. A German doctor, Gabby, had been asked to collect interviews that Papaji had had with various visitors and arrange them in book form. She was struggling a bit with this because she wasn't a native English speaker. I was asked to help her, and when she left Lucknow a few weeks later, I inherited the whole project. I wanted to take my time and do it properly, but Papaji wanted it to be brought out in a hurry. He didn't seem to have much patience with long, drawn-out projects. His motto seemed to be 'Do it, and do it now!'

I gave him samples every day to read and it took me a while to work out what kind of style he liked. I finally succeeded when I gave him a manuscript just before he ate his lunch. He took it back to his bedroom after lunch and read it in his room. When I went to the house again around four, there was a big water melon waiting for me with my name on it, and when I next saw him he exclaimed, 'This is just what I want! Where's the rest of it? I want to read the rest of it.' He seemed disappointed that I couldn't suddenly produce a whole book out of thin air at a moment's notice.

After that, knowing what he wanted, the work was easy. I think I finished it in about two months, which was probably still too slow for Papaji's liking. This was *Papaji Interviews*, by the way.

One other reason for the slowness was that Papaji also got me involved in a film project. An American film-maker, Jim Lemkin, arrived in Lucknow and asked if he could make a documentary about Papaji and his teachings. Papaji agreed and sent me along as a kind of advisor, interviewer and general consultant. I don't know why I got this job. I had never worked on a film before in my life. Within about three months we had the film ready. I had spent my first three months in Lucknow finishing somebody else's book and helping Jim with his film. There was no sign, however, that Papaji was willing to start talking about any of the incidents he had promised to tell me. I dropped several hints, but no business resulted.

After a few months I suggested that he could just sit in front of a camera and tell all the main stories of his life. I didn't know what else to do to start him talking.

'I couldn't do that,' he replied. 'I would need some notes to remind me which stories I wanted to tell.'

This sounded like another excuse to put off the answering, so I decided to push the issue a little.

‘No problem,’ I said. ‘I’ll make the notes for you. I’ll make a list of every story I have ever heard you tell, and every incident I have heard about your life, and I will arrange them in chronological order. You can go through the list one by one and answer any that appeal to you.’

I got no answer to that one, but I went ahead and made the list anyway. I gave it to him one afternoon while he was having his afternoon tea. He seemed to be very excited by the first few questions, saying what good questions they were, and how much he would enjoy talking about them. Then he turned the page and realised that it wasn’t two pages he had to go through. It was sixteen.

His face dropped and his enthusiasm vanished. ‘This is a very long list,’ he said, all excitement gone.

‘Well,’ I said, ‘you have had a very long life, and it has been full of interesting incidents.’

I was hoping I hadn’t blown my chance by overloading him with questions.

‘I’ll have to go through it,’ he said. ‘I’ll make notes in the margins about what I want to talk about.’

That seemed to be good news. At least he was going to try.

The list of questions stayed in his bedroom for several months, completely unread so far as I could ascertain. I would occasionally mention it to him and he would reply that he was working on it. Whatever he was doing, he wasn’t doing it with the papers in his hand.

In 1994 I received news that Annamalai Swami wanted me to print his book. I approached Papaji and asked him what I should concentrate on. I should mention at this point that I had unofficially inherited another project that was known as the ‘Om Shanti’ book. In 1992 and early 1993 Papaji began his daily satsangs with a brief talk on whatever he felt inspired to speak about that day. These had been transcribed and there was a plan to make a book of them. At one point Catherine Ingram was supposed to be doing this, but when she wrote to Papaji, saying that she couldn’t do it, she added ‘Maybe David can do it instead’.

Papaji read out the letter and said, ‘Yes, David can do it’. I was sitting in a far corner of the room at the time, but he never looked at me, and he never officially asked me to start the work. Since I didn’t particularly want the job – I had enough on my plate already – I never asked him about it myself until this meeting I had with him in 1994.

I explained to him, ‘I have been asked to go to Tamil Nadu to make sure this Annamalai Swami book gets printed properly. You said indirectly that you wanted me to edit this ‘Om Shanti’ book, and the questions about your biography are all still pending. What do you want me to do, and in what order?’

‘How near is the “Om Shanti” book to completion?’ he asked.

‘There’s one version available,’ I answered, ‘but no one likes it. If I took up that work, I would probably have to start from scratch and do it all again. It would probably take several months.’

‘OK,’ he said. ‘we don’t want that project any more. It’s not necessary. Go back to Tiruvannamalai, print your new book, and when you come back we will start on my biography.’

This was just what I wanted to hear. I had permission to go away and print Annamalai Swami's book; I had got myself out of a job that I didn't really want to do; and I had received a promise that he would start work on my main project as soon as I returned from the south.

That's not what happened though. Things rarely go according to plan when Papaji is concerned. As soon as I left the house to go to South India, he sent someone out to buy a big foolscap notebook. He took my questionnaire from his bedroom, blew the dust off it, and began to answer all the questions by writing them out in this book. The people who were there said he spent several hours a day patiently going through all my sixteen pages of questions. It must have been very uncomfortable for him. It was summer, there were frequent power cuts, and he had a brace on his neck because he was suffering from spondylitis. That made it hard for him to look down and see the page he was writing on. He stuck at it, though, day after day, and when I finally returned he had written almost 150 pages. The moment I walked into the house, he put his pen down and wouldn't write any more. I have thought about this many times, but I still can't come up with any sensible conjectures. Why did he have to wait half a year until I was out of town to start writing his memoirs, and why did he stop the moment I returned? He had asked me to be his official biographer, but he seemed to be incapable of answering questions when I was around. I should add that no one would ever accuse him of being shy or diffident. If he wanted to do something, he did it, and if he wanted to say something, no social convention on politeness would prevent him from saying exactly what he wanted to say. He was a bulldozer in everything he did.

These handwritten stories were just what I needed to start my book. There were many incidents I had never heard before, along with good versions of stories that I already knew. I got myself organised. I found myself a computer; I recruited volunteers who were willing to listen to all the old satsang tapes in order to find all the different versions of the stories he told; I started collecting letters from all the people he had written to over the years; I wrote to everyone whose address appeared in his address book; and I started interviewing everyone I knew who had been connected with him. It was a long, long job, but it was immensely rewarding. I discovered many people from all over the world who had been utterly transformed by Papaji, sometimes after only a single meeting with him. Whenever I needed supplementary information, I would write out a list of questions, and he would give me written answers. He seemed to prefer this format when he dealt with matters pertaining to his life story. However, whenever I asked him questions about his teachings, he would take the list to satsang and give answers there so that everyone could immediately benefit from what he had to say.

For most of his life Papaji forbade his devotees from talking about him. He wanted a high level of secrecy to guard his privacy. When I started writing to old devotees, asking for their stories, they immediately wrote back to Papaji, asking what they should do. I had told them all in my letters that I was doing this with Papaji's permission, but, quite rightly, they all felt a need to check. Papaji encouraged and in some cases even ordered these people to tell me their stories. Some people told me about incidents they hadn't even mentioned to members of their own families.

Every time I finished a chapter, I would give it to Papaji to read and check. At first he would go through it in his house and then later take it to the morning satsang and read it out there. Later, though, he would just say, 'Put it in the satsang bag. I'll read it

tomorrow.' I have to say that I was touched by the faith he showed on these occasions. I don't think I would volunteer to read out a biography of myself in front of 200 people without first checking to see what was in it. In the beginning he would make a few corrections, but once I got the hang of how he liked to have his stories presented, he rarely touched any of them. He even stopped reading with a pen in his hand. In the last few hundred pages the only things he changed were the spellings of the names of a few Indian devotees that I had misspelled because I had never seen them written down before. He finished the last portion about a month before he passed away in 1997. Sometimes I wish that I had worked a bit harder so that I could have presented him with a copy of the first book, but that wasn't ready until the middle of 1998.

After Papaji passed away in September 1997 I finished work on *Nothing Ever Happened* and came back to Tiruvannamalai, and I have been here more or less ever since.

Michelle: What work did you start when you came back here? What are you working on now?

David: I did nothing for a while. I took a break from writing. I didn't feel like doing anything new. Until the middle of 1998 there were proofs of *Nothing Ever Happened* to go through, but after that I had a complete break from book work for about a year. Papaji had asked me to edit his Lucknow satsangs for him and bring them out in book form. He even told me what format to use. That's a big job and I have only just started on it.

In 1999 I suddenly remembered the reminiscences project I had started in the 1980s. Two books on Annamalai Swami and four books on Papaji had sidetracked me for a decade, but when one of my friends here asked to have a look at one of the unpublished chapters, I took everything out of its folder and read it for the first time in maybe ten years. Realising that I still had plenty of good material that deserved to be printed, I started to organise it into book form. That particular project, *The Power of the Presence* in three volumes, started about two years ago and ended quite recently when I finally received the last volume from the press.

Michelle: You are now publishing your own books. What made you take that decision?

David: In the middle of 2000 I approached Penguin in Delhi to see if they would be interested in bringing out the series that later came out as *The Power of the Presence*. I also wanted to see if they might be willing to bring out an Indian edition of *Nothing Ever Happened* since it is far too expensive for most Indians to buy. Right now, only the American edition exists. Its \$45 price translates as over Rs 2,100 in this country. Hardly anyone can afford that kind of price here.

When I went to see the commissioning editor for spiritual books in the headquarters of Penguin India in Delhi, the woman I spoke to claimed that *Be As You Are* was not a Penguin book, and that the office had no record of either the book or me. I couldn't believe she was serious, but she was. The book has been continuously in print in its Indian Penguin edition for more than ten years but there was no trace of it, she said, either in their catalogues or on their computers. I decided I didn't want to deal with a company that could lose titles and authors so completely that no record of them showed

up on their computers. It wasn't just the English edition she had lost. She didn't know anything about the versions that had been brought out in several Indian languages.

I have always had bad experiences with commercial publishers. When *Be As You Are* first came out in the mid-80s, the original publisher didn't tell me it was out, and didn't even send me a copy. The first copy I ever saw came from a friend of mine who bought it in a second-hand bookstore.

I decided in the end to publish *The Power of the Presence* myself. I find it quite rewarding to be involved in everything from the original idea to distribution and marketing points several thousand miles away.

Michelle: Other than the new Papaji books, is there anything else in the pipeline?

David: I am working on a new presentation of Bhagavan's teachings that I hope will come out around the end of the year. It will be based on teaching statements by Bhagavan that were recorded by Muruganar in a Tamil work entitled *Padamalai*. That will probably be the title of the book when it comes out. There are also a few other possibilities, but they are so vague, I don't really want to start talking about them. I think I have said enough for one afternoon. I haven't talked this much for months and I think my voice is going. Come back in a year and ask me 'What's new?' and I might have something more to tell you. That's enough for now...

Postscript

Last year I wrote an account on my blog which covered the time I spent in London in 1983, the period when I was looking for a job and ended up getting a contract to write Be As You Are. Since there was additional information in that account that dovetails with some of the stories in the Michelle interview, I am adding it here.

In 1983 I was in London, staying in the house of a friend of mine. Her partner, Piers, knew a man in Hampstead who wanted someone to house sit for him while he went on holiday. Piers, who had been a devotee of Bhagavan for years, introduced me and gave me a recommendation. The man who owned the house was a retired professor of art, having taught for many years at a prestigious London art school. His main claim to fame in the academic world was discovering hidden Rosicrucian symbols in centuries-old paintings. In those days non-Christian groups had to transmit their ideas in unorthodox ways to avoid persecution by the church. I can't remember the professor's name, so I will continue to call him 'the professor'. He taught perspective, possibly the most boring subject in any art curriculum, but it was one that had always fascinated him. He had looked at an old painting of a ballroom scene in which the dancers were strutting their stuff on a black-and-white chessboard-like surface, which receded off into the distance. He noted how the squares had all the right angles and foreshortening to make the perspective look realistic. As an exercise in perspective, and just to amuse himself, he reconstructed the ballroom from the chandelier perspective: that is to say, he made a top view of the room in which all the squares became squares. When he did this, he discovered that the floor was covered with secret Rosicrucian teachings, which were not visible when the ballroom was viewed from the angle that the artist had painted it. This was great fun for the art historians, who

then spent the next few years checking out all the other floors in old paintings to see what might be hidden on them. Angles, optics and perspective fascinated this man, and he was rightly celebrated as a man who had opened up a whole new field in art history.

At our first meeting, which was a kind of interview for the job, we ended up talking about Plotinus, a neo-Platonist mystic. I knew about him from his writings on mysticism, and the professor knew about him because he had apparently written the world's first treatise on optics. The professor decided that anyone who could talk intelligently about Plotinus was OK with him, so I was given the job.

He took me to the house next door to introduce me to the neighbours because he didn't want them to call the police when they saw a strange man entering the house. I was introduced as someone who lived in an ashram in India, and who was in London on a long holiday.

'My brother went to live in an ashram in India,' said the neighbour. 'A place called Tiruvannamalai. Have you heard of it?'

I laughed and told her that this was my ashram as well. Curious to hear more about her brother, I asked what his name was, and when he lived there.

I learned that her brother had been stationed in India during the Second World War and that during his visit he had been to see Bhagavan in Tiruvannamalai. The visit had made a deep impression on him. When the war was over, he decided to go back to India and live permanently in Tiruvannamalai. He had stayed on after Bhagavan passed away and had apparently died there in the 1950s. His sister said that he had been buried somewhere near Ramanasramam.

She told me his name, and I was a little surprised that I had never heard of it. There were not many permanent foreign residents in Tiruvannamalai in the 1940s, and I thought I knew the names of all of them. I asked the woman if she was sure that her brother was staying near Ramanasramam, and not some other ashram. She went off to another room and came back with a folder of his letters that she had kept. They were headlined 'Ramanasramam' with 1940s and 50s dates, and other foreigners such as Cohen and Chadwick were mentioned in them.

I can't remember this man's name either, but I did write it down because I wanted to check in Ramanasramam to see if anyone remembered him there. On my return I spoke to Kunju Swami, Ramaswami Pillai and a few others, but none of them could remember this mysterious British ex-soldier who had fallen in love with Bhagavan, moved to Tiruvannamalai, and died there. S. S. Cohen could probably have told me all about him, but he had passed away a couple of years before.

We went back to the professor's house, where he gave me a quick briefing on my duties. They were not particularly onerous. He had inherited the house in the 1950s and part of the inheritance was a large tortoise who lived in the garden. He was several decades old, impressively large, but not very intelligent. The garden was terraced and the tortoise had a life-long habit of walking off the edge of the terrace walls and falling down to the next level, where he would often end up on his back. Ramps had been specially built for him to walk between the different levels, but he often forgot to use them. Tortoises apparently cannot live for more than twenty-four hours on their backs. My only household duty, said the professor, was to go out into the garden once a day, locate the tortoise, and make sure he was the right way up. For this, I had the run of a millionaire's mansion in one of the most expensive and desirable corners of London. At this particular time rich Arabs

were buying up the best houses in the city. Other than making sure that the tortoise was the right way up, my only other job was to say 'no' to the various agents who might knock on the door and offer huge amounts for the house. No one came while I was there, but the professor told me that he had been offered well over a million pounds for the place by visitors in the preceding weeks. That's 1983 prices. I would guess that a place like that would go for over 10 million today. That's about twenty million dollars.

It was a huge mansion, and everything in it seemed to be antique and valuable. The floors were covered in old Persian rugs; the bookshelves with leather-bound 18th and 19th century first editions; the paintings, unsurprisingly, were originals; and even the kitchen was stocked with valuable antiques. I found this out after I had had my first bowl of breakfast cereal. I washed up and left the spoon to dry on the draining board. A couple of hours later, when it had gone black, I realised that it was solid silver. I checked the hallmark and then turned over my bowl. It was Meissen china, and probably old as well. Not wanting any domestic accidents with valuable family heirlooms, I went off to Woolworth's and bought myself some cheap plates, bowls and cutlery to eat my food off during my stay.

Down in the cellar there were thousands of bottles of what I assumed was very good wine. That assumption was based on the prices on the unopened boxes, rather than any knowledge of the subject. I found out later from my friend Piers that one reason I was given the house by the professor was that he thought it unlikely that a *sadhu* from India would have a riotous party and end up drinking all his wine. Even so, I found his trust quite astonishing. He had given me the house after a twenty-minute chat, having never set eyes on me before. Even though the contents of his house may well have been worth almost as much as the house itself, I had been given the run of the place after the most cursory of evaluations.

There was a living room in the centre of the house, although I suppose its various owners had probably given it a more grandiose name. It had huge bay windows that overlooked the terraced garden, which sloped down away from the house. Hampstead is on a slight hill. Beyond the garden wall the whole of London spread itself out before me, with famous landmarks such as St Paul's cathedral clearly visible in the distance. Facing the window were an 18th century clavichord and a more modern harpsichord. Both were in tune and ready to be played. I decided to enter into the spirit of the occasion by learning a piece of old music and playing it on the antique clavichord as I faced this gorgeous panorama of London. I selected a simple section of a Bach piece from the sheet music I found inside the stool, and then, blowing the dust off the memories of piano lessons I had unwillingly endured when I was eight and nine, I spent three days mastering my little piece.

The professor, who had gone on holiday, was a creature of habit. Each year, in the same month, he headed off the Channel Islands to spend time with an old friend. That year the strange Ramana coincidences were uppermost in his mind when he arrived. My friend Piers had revealed that he was a Ramana devotee, which was the first time the professor had ever heard the name; I was then introduced as a devotee of the same Guru; finally, on our visit to his neighbour, he discovered for the first time that his neighbour's brother had lived at Ramanasramam and had eventually been buried nearby. He narrated this strange story to his host on their first evening together. His friend listened in silence and then left the room for a few minutes. He came back a few minutes later with a huge pile of Ramana

books; the professor's best and oldest friend had been a devotee for decades and had never bothered to tell him. It was something he liked to keep secret, but the professor's story had persuaded him to come out of the closet.

All this was told to me on his return. He had dismissed the story of his neighbour's brother being buried in Tiruvannamalai as an odd coincidence, but he was genuinely shocked when he discovered that his oldest friend had been a Ramana devotee for years and had never spoken to him about it.

I suppose the story should end with the professor seeing the light and turning to Ramana, but it was not to be. As I said, he was a creature of habit. He went back to his music and his art, and probably used his Ramana story as a conversation-filler on social occasions. I never saw him again.

With that story reaching a dead end, I will continue the narrative with Piers, the friend who had introduced me to the professor. I had met him in Tiruvannamalai in the 1970s, where he was a regular winter visitor. He worked as a gardener or a house painter in London, jobs that allowed him to take time off every winter and come to Tiruvannamalai. He lived, by western standards, an austere life in London. He slept on the floor in a sparsely furnished room. The few objects on view were Ramana portraits, God pictures and a few Ramana books. He liked to sit quietly in his room, absorbing himself in his inner silence. His needs were minimal since the room was in his mother's house. He generally walked to work, ate at home, and had no interest in spending money on the usual consumer items. He lived like a *sadhu* whether he was in London or Tiruvannamalai. He would work as many hours as were needed to meet his meagre financial obligations, and no more. Given his lifestyle, he could get by on working half a week or less, even at minimum wages. And how did he finance his trips to India? He told me that if Ramana wanted him to come to Tiruvannamalai in the winter, he would send him a big job offer around August or September. When such offers came, he took them as a sign that he should take them and save enough money for a trip to India. This happened almost every year.

There was one other aspect of his *sadhana* that impressed me. He would write letters to Ramana about all the things that were going on in his life. He would then 'post' the letters by putting them through the slit of a box that was under his Ramana photo. That way, Piers felt that Ramana would be up to speed on all the developments in his life.

Piers is about my age. A few years ago a thought suddenly popped into his head: 'What's going to happen to me when I get old?' He had a job that required physical stamina; he had no pension, no savings, and no home of his own. A sudden thought such as this might have induced some sort of panic in most people, but Piers decided that he would just tell Ramana that he had had this thought and leave it to him to deal with it. He wrote out his story and posted it in his box.

Meanwhile, his mother, who, incidentally, is also a Ramana devotee, was visiting a friend of hers in Hampstead, the same area where my art professor had had his house. This woman was in her early eighties and had no family. She asked Annie, Piers' mother, if she could leave her flat to her since she had no one else to pass it on to. Annie consulted her solicitor (another Ramana devotee) who suggested that for tax and inheritance reasons, it would be better to put the flat in her son Piers' name. Annie agreed. She did actually want him to have the flat as his personal property. It wasn't just a case of putting her own property in his name. Neither Annie nor her solicitor knew about the letter that Piers had

written and ‘posted’ to Bhagavan. When the woman passed away, Piers’ mother gave him the flat to live in.

So, after posting his letter to Ramana, a complete stranger indirectly left him a valuable flat in a very expensive area of London. Since the place needed major renovations, when the woman passed away Piers took a loan, fixed it up, and paid for the improvements by renting it out for a couple of years. I suppose the moral of this story is: if you really can hand over all your burdens to Ramana, he will be more than happy to take responsibility for them.

Piers, incidentally, was instrumental in launching my professional writing career. In 1983, around the time I lived in the millionaire’s house, I was unemployed and eagerly looking for work that would give me enough money to go back to India and live in Tiruvannamalai. I thought myself to be reasonably well educated and qualified, but I couldn’t find anyone who was interested in hiring me. I wasn’t aiming too high: I was, at one point, turned down for a job picking up litter in the London Zoo, apparently because I laughed at the wrong moment during the interview.

I was living in a millionaire’s mansion in Hampstead and getting turned down for litter-picking jobs, and every other kind of job I applied for.

At some point during that summer Piers introduced me to the owner of the house that was next to his mother’s. I was staying in this house at the time, camping out in a sleeping bag in the basement. The owner was a lecturer in philosophy at Leicester University, and so was his wife. He had come to London to hand in a manuscript on philosophy that his wife had written. When her editor discovered that he too was a philosopher, she said, ‘Why don’t you write a philosophy book as well? We are always interested in new books on philosophy.’

My ears pricked up when I heard this. I had at that time already written *No Mind – I am the Self* and had had a brief period as editor of *The Mountain Path*. Writing a book on Ramana was something I felt I was more than qualified to do. I obtained the editor’s phone number from the philosophy lecturer and called it, but with not much expectation of success. I had spent most of that summer being turned down for menial jobs, and my limited experience of authors was that, after writing your first book, you then spent the next year having it turned down by a succession of publishers.

However, far from being given the cold shoulder, the woman whom I gave my pitch to got very excited and said, ‘Put the phone down and come here at once! We want you. Don’t go anywhere else. Come and talk to me as soon as possible.’

Having being laughed at or ignored by potential employers for several months, I have to say that this made a very pleasant change. I went, was ushered into her office, and emerged half an hour later with a contract to come back to India and write *Be As You Are*. I know that the book has been a commercial and critical success – continuously in print for twenty-five years and translated into at least fifteen languages – but in retrospect I know the woman took a gamble on me. I was an unknown author, with no experience. I didn’t even have a synopsis of the book I wanted to write. I just made it all up on the spot as I sat in her office.

All I can say now is that I was destined to come back to India and write about Bhagavan, and whatever power had organised this script had also determined that this woman would say, in defiance of all sound commercial judgement, ‘Here’s a contract. Sign here. Go to India and write your book.’

I leave the last word on this to Bhagavan:

The feeling 'I work' is the hindrance. Ask yourself 'Who works?' Remember who you are. Then the work will not bind you; it will go on automatically. Make no effort either to work or to renounce; your effort is the bondage. What is destined to happen will happen. If you are destined not to work, work cannot be had even if you hunt for it; if you are destined to work, you will not be able to avoid it; you will be forced to engage yourself in it. So, leave it to the higher power; you cannot renounce or retain as you choose. (*Maharshi's Gospel*, page 5)