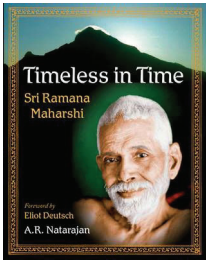


Book Reviews



TIMELESS IN TIME: Sri Ramana Maharshi

A.R. NATARAJAN. FOREWORD BY ELIOT DEUTSCH. WORLD WISDOM (WWW.WORLDWISDOM.COM), 2006. PP. 160. \$21.95. PAPER

Reviewed by Samuel Bendeck Sotillos

“Under whatever name and form one may worship the Absolute Reality, it is only a means for realizing It without name and form. That alone is true realization, wherein one knows oneself in relation to that Reality, attains peace and realizes one’s identity with it.”¹
— Śrī Ramana Maharshi

ŚRI RAMANA MAHARSHI (1879-1950), KNOWN AS THE SAGE OF ARUNACHALA, was a spiritual paragon of the twentieth century.

He was revered by millions of people around the world because his teachings transcend all forms of religious exclusivism and are not limited to Hindu spirituality, as people of all faiths and walks of life came to sit in his presence. He assisted individuals to inquire into the deepest truths and did so using very few words. His teachings were many times taught in silence. This was often his preferred method of instruction in order to transmit to the human being in his company the essence

of non-duality or Advaita Vedānta. He embodied what is known as the *sanātana dharma* or “eternal religion” that is found at the heart of each of the world’s religions.

This book by A.R. Natarajan combines biographical material gathered from direct sources and the essential teachings of Ramana Maharshi. Also, included in this volume is a Foreword by Eliot Deutsch, a leading authority on Hindu thought. The reader can find therein 160 photographs documenting the span of Ramana Maharshi’s lifespan.

The Sage of Arunachala was born as Venkataraman Iyer, in what is now Tiruchuli, Tamil Nadu, India, into an orthodox Hindu Brahmin family. On July 17, 1896, at the age of sixteen, Venkataraman for no apparent reason was overwhelmed by a sudden, violent fear of death. He provided the following description of this event:

I stretched myself like a corpse, and it seemed to me that my body had actually become rigid—“I” was not dead—“I” was on the other hand conscious of being alive, in existence. So the question arose in me, “What was this ‘I?’” I felt that it was a force or current working, despite the rigidity or activity of the body, though existing in connection with it. It was that current or force or center that constituted my personality, that kept me acting, moving etc. The fear of death dropped off. I was absorbed in the contemplation of that current. So further development or activity was issuing from the new life and not from any fear.

From this event emerged his true identity as the Self (*Ātmā*) that is beyond birth and death (*saṃsāra*) and prompted his self-enquiry (*ātma-vichāra*) of “Who am I?”

Who can understand the state of the one
Who has dissolved his ego and
Is abiding always in the Self?
For him the Self alone is.
What remains for me to do?

Nearly six weeks later, on August 29, 1896, Venkataraman left his uncle’s home in Madurai, and traveled to the holy mountain Arunachala, in Tiruvannamalai. Since his arrival to the holy mountain on September 1, 1896, he remained there for the rest of his life. He emphasizes that this process was not of his own ego-bound will, but rooted in the Divine Will, being as he considered it an act “in obedience to his command”.

It needs to be emphasized that while Ramana Maharshi left home and became a renunciate at an early age he did so with the highest regard and love for his parents and credits them for his spiritual search:

As mother and father both, you gave birth to me and tended me. And before I could fall into the deep sea called *jaganmaya*, and get drowned in the universal illusion, you came to abide in my mind, you drew me to yourself. O Arunachala, you whose being is all Awareness. What a wonderful work of art your Grace has wrought, my Mother-Father-Lord!

In fact, Ramana Maharshi’s mother, Azhagammal or Alagammal (1864-1922), followed her son to live on the holy mountain with him during the last years of her life and was very devoted to him. The Matrubhuteswara Temple was built over her burial place and daily worship continues to be carried out until this day. Ramana Maharshi in no uncertain terms emphasized that “liberated women are on a par with liberated men” and viewed all women

as being his mothers. At the *ashram*, according to Ramana Maharshi, “All are equal here.”

Upon arriving in Tiruvannamalai he initially stayed at the Arunachaleswara Temple and while he subsequently stayed at various sites on the sacred mountain, he is reported to have stayed the longest period in the Virupaksha Cave—for seventeen years, from 1899 to 1916. He in no way downplayed the householder life as he viewed it as being equal with a renunciate life. He adds, “There is no difference between domestic life and that of hermits. Just as you avoid the cares of home when you are here, go home and try to be equally unconcerned and unaffected at the circumstances amidst home life.”

This early period of Ramana Maharshi’s *sādhana* or spiritual practice occurred in a remarkable fashion and demonstrated his total and utter surrender to the path for he underwent many physical and psychological austerities:

Days and nights would pass without my being aware of their passing. I entertained no idea of bathing or cleaning of teeth or other cleansing activities even when I had defecated and had no baths. The face got begrimed, the hair had become one clotted mass like wax and the nails grew long. When anyone thought that I should have food, I would stretch a hand and smoothing would drop on my hand. My hands were not useful for any other purpose. I would eat and rub my hand on my head or body and drop again into my continuous mood. This was my condition for some years from the time of my arrival.

Because of his non-dual point of view, he denied having engaged in any form of

spiritual practice as it would affirm the insurmountable split of duality which was itself an illusion (*māyā*). It could be alternatively viewed as spontaneous penance as he affirms, “I have never done any sadhana.” For Ramana Maharshi there was no otherness—no devotee or pilgrim—coming to visit him or asking questions as this would again denote a fundamental duality and would further perpetuate the notion of separateness, when in reality there is only the Absolute or non-dual Essence. According to Hindu metaphysics the notion of the spiritual aspirant (*sādhaka*) and the realized, the enlightened and the unenlightened or *moksha* and *samsāra* are illusory as they perpetuate this duality that is imaginary in nature. From the relative point of view, duality is all that exists, but from that of the Absolute such constructs are unreal. This is reflected in his dialogues with visitors and devotees, when he expressed: “What you seek is that which is already at hand, ever existent.” Likewise, “Is there any way of adoring the Supreme who is all, except by abiding firmly as That!”

Because Ramana Maharshi emphasized like many other saints and sages before him that “the Guru is always within you,”² this powerful non-dual teaching has been fundamentally misinterpreted and distorted. While this teaching is undoubtedly true and orthodox according to the different ways that immanence is expressed throughout the sapiential traditions, without prior transcendence there is no immanence. Meaning that without there first being an external guru it is improbable that the seeker will come to know the internal guru. For Ramana Maharshi, his relationship with the holy

mountain of Arunachala took on the disciple-guru relationship. He describes this remarkable bond in the ensuing:

O Arunachala, you who stand and shine before me in the form of my *guru*, destroy utterly my faults, cure me and convert me, and as your servant govern me.

Look at me! Think of me! Touch me!
Make me fit, ripen me! Then be my Master, govern me, O Arunachala.

Oh Lord in the form of hill,
You are the remedy for the endless chain of births.
For me your feet alone are the refuge.
Your duty it is to remove my mother's suffering and govern her.
O Conqueror of Time!
Your lotus feet are my refuge,
Let them protect my mother from death.
What is death if scrutinized?
Arunachala, blazing fire of knowledge,
Burn away the dross.
Absorb my sweet mother in you,
What need would there be then for cremation?
Arunachala, dispeller of *Maya's* veil,
Why then the delay in curing my mother's delirium?
O Mother of those who seek refuge in you,
Is there a better shield than you from fate's blows?

Ramana Maharshi discusses the traditional sources documenting the sacredness of Arunachala as the embodiment of Shiva:

There is an *aitikya* (tradition) that this hill is *linga swarupa*, that is to say, that this hill itself is God. This *aitikya* is not to be found anywhere else. That is the cause of the glory of this place. The tradition of this place is that this hill is the form of God and that in its real nature it is full of light. Every year the Deepam festival

celebrates the real nature of the mountain as light itself. Authority for this is found in the Vedas, the Puranas, and in the *stotras* (poems) of devotees. Because this tradition maintains that the hill is Siva swarupa, the practice of *giripradakshina*, walking clockwise around the mountain as an act of reverence or worship, has risen, I also have faith in *giripradakshina* and have had experience of it.

He encouraged seekers that visited to walk around the sacred mountain, which is a custom that is common to many of the world's religions, known in Sanskrit as *pradakshina*. Ramana Maharshi describes the function of circumambulation for the spiritual aspirant:

For every body it is good to do *pradakshina*. It does not matter if one has faith in the *pradakshina* or not. Just as fire will burn on touching it, whether they believe or not the hill will do good to all those who go around it.

Ramana Maharshi clarifies the mistaken belief that he never had a teacher: "I have never said that there is no need for a guru." He affirms that while he had a guru, it was not a human guru, in the traditional sense. He states this here: "a Guru need not always be in human form."³ Yet this does not mean that other seekers can follow in his footsteps, as his Spiritual Realization was due to his unique disposition given his *jnānic* nature that allowed him to attain deliverance or liberation (*moksha*) without the traditional requirement of initiation (*diksha*), which likens him to what is referred to in Islamic esoterism as a *fard*, a "solitary" or someone who awakens spontaneously and outside the normal channels of tradition. He elaborates further on the mistaken

notion that he has not had a *guru*:

That depends on what you call a guru. He need not necessarily be in the human form. Dattatreya had twenty-four *gurus*—elements, etc. That means that every form in the world was his guru. A guru is absolutely necessary. The Upanishads say that none but a guru can take a man out of the jungle of mental and sense perceptions, so there must be a guru.

The Sage of Arunachala welcomed all and everyone who visited the ashram. He received Hindus, non-Hindus or even the non-religious in the same manner, for he did not want to withhold his *darshan* from anyone who desired it. However, this should not be then taken to suggest that to have a religion was unnecessary; on the contrary, for having a religion and committing oneself to it may very well have provided individuals with the framework needed to assimilate his teachings in a more integral way.

Ramana Maharshi's compassion and blessing extended to all of creation. All sentient beings were in their essential nature the Self and the notion of "other" or "otherness" was again non-existent and illusory (*māyā*). He had special relationships with squirrels and peacocks, and there was the well-known and highly esteemed Cow Lakshmi, who came to the ashram as a calf in 1926 until her awakening or *mukti* in June 1948. When asked if the Cow Lakshmi had indeed been liberated Ramana Maharshi confirmed that she had been. He emphasized that happiness is the longing and natural state of all sentient beings:

Every living being longs always to be happy, untainted by sorrow: and

everyone has the greatest love for himself, which is solely due to the fact that happiness is his real nature. Hence, in order to realize that inherent and untainted happiness, which indeed he daily experiences, when the mind is subdued in deep sleep, it is essential that he should know himself. For obtaining such knowledge the enquiry "Who am I?" in quest of the Self is the best means.

The Sage of Arunachala recognized the transcendent unity of all faith traditions. He went so far as stating that of all the non-dual Vedāntic statements none could match the one found within the Old and New Testaments:

Of all the definitions of God, none is indeed so well put as the Biblical statement "*I AM THAT I AM*" in EXODUS (Chap. 3). There are other statements, such as *Brahmaivaham*, *Aham Brahmasmi* and *Soham*. But none is so direct as the name *JEHOVAH = I AM*. The Absolute Being is *what* is—It is the Self. It is God. Knowing the Self, God is known. In fact God is none other than the Self.⁴

A noteworthy parallel has been made between Śrī Ramana Maharshi and Shaykh Ahmad Al-'Alawī (1869-1934), two principle spiritual lights in the contemporary world.⁵ This is also an example of how two analogous spiritual traditions manifest themselves distinctly within the temporal cycle, one within Hinduism, a religion that traces itself back to the beginning of the *Manvantara* or the temporal cycle known as the *Krita-Yuga* or *Satya-Yuga* (Golden Age), and the other Islam, which represents the closing of the current temporal cycle known as the *Kali-Yuga* (Iron Age).

Ramana Maharshi provides an astute and sobering instruction on

how to benefit others and the world when questioned on this point, “Help yourself, you will help the world.” Likewise, he taught to always live and abide in the now or present moment, “Do what is right at a given moment and leave it behind.”

This book depicting the life and teachings of one of the most celebrated spiritual luminaries of the twentieth century, the Sage of Arunachala, Ramana Maharshi, conveys the magnitude of his teachings in an era that has become increasingly disconnected from the sacred, finding itself in a continued and alarming state of disarray. A.R. Natarajan has done a commendable job in presenting these timeless teachings in a manner that makes them relevant and accessible for contemporary seekers. Throughout the book there are wonderful photographs that provide a darshan-like experience of being in the presence of this remarkable sage. It is the unborn and eternal essence within all sentient beings known as the Self that Ramana Maharshi unshakably identified with, as his memorable words capture so eloquently: “Where can I go? I am here.” ♦

whose teaching was essentially the same as his own [Shaykh Ahmad Al-‘Alawī].” (Martin Lings, “The Spiritual Master,” in *A SUFI SAINT OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: SHAIKH AHMAD AL-‘ALAWI, HIS SPIRITUAL HERITAGE AND LEGACY* [Cambridge, UK: Islamic Texts Society, 1993], p. 80). ♦

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¹ Ramana Maharshi, “Forty Verses,” in *THE COLLECTED WORKS OF RAMANA MAHARSHI*, ed. Arthur Osborne (Boston, MA: Weiser Books, 1997), pp. 72-73.

² Ramana Maharshi, “The Guru,” in *THE TEACHINGS OF RAMANA MAHARSHI IN HIS OWN WORDS*, ed. Arthur Osborne (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1978), p. 102.

³ A. Devaraja Mudaliar, “30-10-45 Afternoon,” in *DAY BY DAY WITH BHAGAVAN* (Tiruvannamalai, India: Sri Ramanasramam, 2002), p. 33.

⁴ Śrī Ramana Maharshi, “November 29th, 1935,” in *TALKS WITH SRI RAMANA MAHARSHI* (Tiruvannamalai, India: Sri Ramanasramam, 1996), p. 102.

⁵ “Sri Ramana Maharshi of Tiruvannamalai,