



The greatest error of a man is to think that he is weak by nature, evil by nature. Every man is divine and strong in his real nature. What are weak and evil are his habits, his desires and thoughts, but not himself.

Sri Ramana Maharshi



Above: Views of Virupaksha Cave after 1903

Left: Skanda Ashram

Right top: Skanda Ashram view from summit path

Right centre: Sri Ramana and the Mother around 1920

Group with the Mother and Kunju Swami (sitting far right) at Skanda Ashram 1916-18

Bottom: Classic Arunachala south face





CHAPTER I

Excerpt

Sri Ramana's Life at Arunachala

*David Godman in dialogue
with Premananda*

[Sri Ramana's direct words are in bold]

David takes us through the various stages of Sri Ramana's life. The chapter begins with Sri Ramana born into a family in South India in Tamil Nadu in 1879. This family life came to an end after his sudden spiritual realisation at age sixteen. The call to his beloved Arunachala, the holy mountain in Tiruvannamalai, was too strong to resist. David tells us the details of Sri Ramana's life at Arunachala from his period of deep samadhi in Arunachaleswara Temple to his time living up on the mountain in Virupaksha Cave and then at Skanda Ashram; later as a world-renowned Master in the ashram he constructed at the foot of the mountain.

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

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

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

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

The place where Bhagavan's mother was buried was actually owned by a math, a religious institution, in town. When she died, the devotees had to get permission from the head of this math to bury her on this land, but there was no problem since he was also a devotee. He had a high opinion of Bhagavan, so he handed over the land to the emerging Ramana Ashram.



And the first building, was it the shrine over the Mother's grave?

Well, shrine is a bit of a fancy word. A really wonderful photo was taken here in 1922, shortly after Bhagavan settled here. The only building is a coconut-leaf hut.

It looks as if one good gust of wind would blow it over. People who came to see him that year have reported that there wasn't even room

for two people in the room where Bhagavan lived. That was the first ashram building here: a coconut-leaf hut that probably leaked when it rained.

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

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

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

I don't think he built the first coconut-leaf hut himself, but once he moved here he was very much a hands-on manager. The first proper building over the Mother's *samadhi* (burial shrine) was organised and built by him.

Have you seen how bricks are made around here? It's like making mud pies. You start with a brick-shaped mould. You make a pile of mud and then use the mould to make thousands of mud bricks that you put out in the sun to dry. After they have been properly dried, you stack them in a structure the size of a house that has big holes in the base for logs to be put in. The outside of the stack is sealed with wet mud and fires are lit at the base. Once the fire has taken, the bottom is sealed as well. The bricks are baked in a hot, oxygen-free environment, in the same way that charcoal is made. After two or three days the fires die down, and, if nothing has gone wrong, the bricks are properly baked. However, if the fires go out too soon, or if it rains heavily during the baking, the bricks don't get cooked properly. When that happens the whole production is often wasted because the bricks are soft and crumbly – more like biscuits than bricks.

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

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

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

He had the attitude that anything that came to the ashram was a gift from God, and that it should be properly utilised. He would pick up stray mustard seeds that he found on the kitchen floor with his fingernails and insist that they be stored and used; he used to cut the white margins off proof copies of ashram books, stitch them together and make little notebooks out of them; he would attempt to cook parts of vegetables, such as the spiky ends of aubergines, that are normally thrown away. He admitted that he was a bit of a fanatic on this subject. He once remarked, 'It's a good thing I never got married. No woman would have been able to put up with my habits.'

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

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

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

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

'Got to go sit on the couch.'

Yes. 'Got to go and sit on the couch and tell people how to get enlightened.'

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

I think what you've just been speaking about is very important. People tend to have an image of him as a man who sat on a couch, looking blissful and doing nothing. You are describing a completely different man.

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

In a way you're debunking a lot of spiritual myths.

Bhagavan never felt comfortable with a situation in which he sat on a couch in the role of a 'guru', with everyone on the floor around him. He

liked to work and live with people, interacting with them in a normal, natural way, but as the years went by the possibilities for this kind of life became less and less.

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

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

So he saw himself as a friend not as the master?

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

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

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

There is a Tamil phrase that translates as ‘mother-father-guru-God’. A lot of people felt that way about him. Bhagavan himself said he never felt that he was a guru in a guru-disciple relationship with anyone. His public position was that he didn’t have any disciples at all because, he said, from the perspective of the Self there was no one who was different or separate from him. Being the Self and knowing that the Self alone exists, he knew that there were no unenlightened people who needed to be enlightened. He said he only ever saw enlightened people around him.

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

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

The ashram started to change from coconut-leaf structures to stone buildings around 1930. The big building phase was from 1930 to 1942. The Mother’s Temple was built after that, but Bhagavan wasn’t supervising the design and construction of that so much. That work was subcontracted to expert temple builders. Bhagavan visited the site regularly, but he wasn’t so involved in design or engineering decisions.

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

It would have depended on when they came. Bhagavan had a routine that he kept to. He was always in the hall for the morning and evening chanting – two periods of about forty-five minutes each. He would be there in the evening, chatting to all the ashram’s workers who could not see him during the day because of their various duties in different parts of the ashram. He would be there if visitors arrived who wanted to speak to him. He walked regularly on the hill, or to Palakottu, an area adjacent to the ashram. These walks generally took place after meals. He would

fit in his other jobs around these events. If nothing or no one needed his attention in the hall, he might go and see how the cooks were getting on, or he might go to the cowshed to check up on the ashram's cows. If there was a big building project going on he would often go out to check up on the progress of the work. Mostly though, he did his tours of the building sites after lunch when everyone else was having a siesta.

He supervised many workers, not just the ones who put up the buildings. Devotees in the hall would bind and rebind books under his supervision, the cooks would work according to his instructions, and so on. The only area he didn't seem inclined to get involved in was the ashram office. He let his brother, Chinnaswami, have a fairly free rein there, although once in a while he would intervene if he felt that something that had been neglected ought to be done.

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

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