



Enquiry in the form 'Who am I?' alone is the principal means. To make the mind subside, there is no adequate means other than Self-enquiry. If controlled by other means, mind will remain as if subsided, but will rise again.

Sri Ramana Maharshi



Above: Classic full Arunachala south face



Left: Sri Ramana with children

Below: Temple cart
Ramana Ashram peacock

Right centre: Celebration in the
New Hall

Right bottom: Sri Ramana with rabbit
and visitors in Old Hall about 1930





CHAPTER 6

Excerpt

Commentary on Sri Ramana's Teachings 'Who Am I?' (Nan Yar) from a Vedanta point of view

*James Swartz in dialogue
with Premananda*

[Sri Ramana's direct words are in bold]

James begins by introducing us to Vedanta. He points out that Sri Ramana had respect for the Yoga and Vedanta traditions even though he wasn't a traditional teacher. James explains that as we are not able to remove the world, what is meant by removal is the removal of our ignorance. Our beliefs have to go, not our mind. He points out that Sri Ramana knew he was the Self, hence his realisation. There was no duality in his understanding of himself.

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Many Western people have no idea what *sadhana* (spiritual practice) is. They actually think that they can just get a ticket to India and get on the spiritual circuit and attend a *Satsang* (meeting in Truth) or two and they will get 'awakened'. They may have some experiences but if they get 'awakened' they will certainly fall back to sleep, usually because there is no *sadhana* in place. And there are gurus who themselves did *sadhana* but are loath to insist that their disciples do it – for fear of losing them, I suppose. You see many people who have been to Ramesh Balsekar coming through Tiruvannamalai and what they seem to have got is the idea that they are not 'doers'. So their *sadhana* is 'no *sadhana*'. Why? Because they have been told there is nothing you can do because your enlightenment is not up to you. It's all up to 'grace'. I'm not sure why the resolve to do vigorous *sadhana* is not the grace of God, but there you are.

It's true that you are not a doer, but the you that is not a doer is the Self. The ego doesn't become a non-doer by trying not to 'do' anything. This sort of teaching is very misleading because it is tailor-made for the ego.

Sri Ramana is completely in line with traditional *Vedanta* on this issue of *sadhana*. Purification is at least as important as knowledge, perhaps more so, because without a clear mind, you will not get knowledge, *jnanam*. This idea does not sit well with people nowadays. They want it handed to them on a platter. This accounts for the popularity of the *shaktipat* (spiritual energy transmitted from guru to student) gurus like Amachi, and the miracle makers like Sai Baba. Around them you have a whole class of people who actually believe that the guru is doing the work for them!

But Sri Ramana didn't do sadhana to get enlightenment.

That's true, but he certainly did *sadhana* after it. Knowing who he was, he need not have sat in meditation in caves for many years; he could have gone home and eaten his mum's *iddlys* (rice cakes) and played cricket. It

was all the same to him. But he didn't. He decided to purify his mind. The glory of Sri Ramana is not his enlightenment. It was just the same as every other enlightenment that's ever been. His glory was his pure mind. He polished his mind to such a degree that it was particularly radiant, a great blessing to himself and everyone whom he contacted. That kind of mind you only get through serious *sadhana*, or *Yoga*, if you will. These modern gurus, particularly the so-called crazy wisdom gurus who seem to revel in gross mind, refuse to encourage people to develop themselves because they do not understand the tremendous pleasure that comes from a pure mind.

Who Am I? (Nan Yar) *is a small booklet containing the core teachings of Sri Ramana. See Chapter 4 for the complete original text. The numbers of the original questions are written in brackets. James, I would like to ask you to comment on these teachings.*

Who am I? [Q1]

Sri Ramana answers with a typical *Vedantic* teaching, called the *pancha kosas* or the five sheaths. This teaching is found in the *Upanishads*. He negates the five sheaths (erroneous notions about one's Self).

If I am none of these, then who am I? [Q2]

He replies 'After negating all of the above-mentioned as "not this", "not this", that Awareness which alone remains – that I am.'

What is the nature of Awareness? [Q3]

'The nature of Awareness is Existence-Consciousness-Bliss.'

When will the realisation of the Self be gained? [Q4]

'When the world which is what-is-seen has been removed, there will be realisation of the Self which is the seer.'

The question 'When will the realisation of the Self be gained?' is a *Yogic* type of thought. *Yoga* is for doers, achievers. He or she believes the Self

is something that is not available all the time, something to be gained. It is natural to want what you do not have if you think it will benefit you in some way. One of the meanings of the word *Yoga* is 'to obtain'. Obviously you can only obtain something you do not already possess.

Vedanta, the Science of Self-Enquiry, contends that the Self cannot be gained at some time in the future as a result of action. It is called the path of understanding and it employs a language of identity. For example, it says, 'You are consciousness.' It says that the Self cannot be gained because you are the Self already. If there is anything to gain it will be Self-knowledge, and Self-knowledge is only a loss of ignorance because you actually do know who you are.

This teaching is called the discrimination between the subject (the seer), and the objects (the seen). It establishes the understanding that what you 'see' meaning experience – including all mystic experiences – is 'not Self', and the one who sees them is you, the Self. He says that you will realise who you are, meaning understand that you are the Self, when you have separated you from your experience.

Sri Ramana's response is completely in harmony with traditional *Vedanta* – the *Upanishads*, *Bhagavad Gita*, and *Shankara's Drk-Drksha Viveka*. Sri Ramana had the greatest respect for the knowledge enshrined in *Vedanta*. Contrary to the popular notion, he was very scripturally astute. He even wrote a scripture that has been granted the status of an *Upanishad* by the traditional *Vedanta* community, a great honour.

One thing I admire about Sri Ramana is his refusal, unlike many of the modern teachers, to cook up a fancy personal teaching on the subject of Self-realisation. His statements were in harmony with the scriptures on either *Yoga* or *Vedanta*. Even though Sri Ramana died a half century ago he was a very 'modern' sage if you consider the fact that the *Vedic* spiritual tradition is thousands of years old.

Why did he refuse to do so? Because no fancy, modern teaching is required. The whole 'what is enlightenment and how to attain enlightenment' business was worked out a long time ago. Enlightenment is a very simple understanding of the Self and its relationship to experience, the ego-experiencer and the forms the ego experiences. In a nutshell it is the understanding that while the forms depend on the Self,

the Self does not depend on the forms. This freedom from experience is called *moksha*, liberation. This wisdom had been clearly stated long before Sri Ramana came on the scene and needs no interpretation or new terminology.

Sri Ramana probably knows that the question ‘When will the realisation of the Self be gained?’ is actually imprecise and that the person who is asking it will not understand if he attacks the question, so he takes it at face value and puts it in a traditional way. You have a copy of the booklet. Can you refresh my memory about how he answers?

He says, ‘When the world which is what-is-seen has been removed, there will be realisation of the Self, which is the seer.’

This statement is pure *Vedanta*. The operative words are, ‘has been removed’. How is one supposed to understand the words ‘has been removed’? What kind of removal is it? Is it the *Yogic* view that complete destruction of the unconscious tendencies, *vasanas*, allows you to ‘gain’ the ‘Self’? Or is it the *Vedantic* view – removal of the notion that the world is separate from the Self?

In Sri Ramana’s teachings you will find both ideas. The first is called the *vasana kshaya* theory of enlightenment by *Vedanta* and *manonasha* by *Yoga*. The word ‘world’ is actually a psychological term in *Yoga*. It does not mean the physical world. The physical world – in so far as it is physical – is the Self. No individual created it and no individual is going to remove it. But the ‘world’ that Sri Ramana says has to be removed consists of the psychological projections that make up our personal ‘worlds’, that is, ignorance. These projections are based on an incorrect understanding of the Self, on a belief that the Self is separate, inadequate or incomplete.

Sri Ramana’s teaching, which is *Upanishadic* teaching, is called *vichara*, enquiry. The purpose of enquiry is knowledge, not the ‘physical’ removal of the mind. If he had been teaching *Yoga* as a means of liberation he would not have encouraged enquiry because *Yoga* is committed to the experience of *samadhi*, not to understanding that one is the Self.

This is interesting. I never heard it stated this way before.

Well, it isn't really revolutionary. People read into Sri Ramana whatever fits with their beliefs. So from that point of view it may seem controversial. But if you know the tradition from which Sri Ramana comes this statement is pure *Vedanta*. *Yoga* is very popular and it always has been. I started out as a meatball businessman practising *Hatha Yoga* for muscles, and I worked my way up to some very high *samadhis* through meditation. Then I realised that the Self wasn't a state and with a bit of luck a guru came into my life and sorted me out. Mind you, I'm not attacking *Yoga*. *Yoga*, purification through *sadhana*, is essential for enlightenment but it is an indirect means.

But I thought the goal of the practices was sahaja samadhi.

This is what the *Yogis* say but it is only a means to liberation. Liberation is freedom from experience and *samadhi* is an experience. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the *samadhis* are not the final goal. *Sama* means equal and *dhi* is a contracted form of *buddhi*, intellect. So it means a mind that values everything equally. *Sahaja* just means 'continuous' and 'natural' so it is a mind that has continuous nondual vision. Perhaps you can gain this kind of mind by the long and difficult practice of *Astanga Yoga*. But why go to all this trouble when you actually have this *samadhi* naturally all the time without doing a lick of work?

Oh, how is that?

As the Self. This vision is not continuous because the Self is out of time, but it is natural to the Self. It is your nature. Anyway, no *samadhi* is equivalent to enlightenment because *samadhis* are only states of mind or no mind, no mind being a state of mind. *Nirvikalpa samadhi* (highest transcendent state of consciousness) is nondual but unfortunately it is a state that can easily be destroyed. And there is no individual there in that state. So when it ends, ignorance about the nature of the Self is not removed and a sense of limitation is experienced once more.

Samadhi helps to purify the mind by burning subconscious tendencies and is a great aid to enquiry, but if you remove the mind how will you make an enquiry? Who will make an enquiry? You make an enquiry with the mind for the mind, so it can shed its ignorance and no longer trouble you. The mind is a very useful God-given instrument. Would God have given a mind if He had intended for you to destroy it? And, in fact, *Yoga* isn't about killing the mind either because how will you experience a *samadhi* if you don't have a mind? The mind is the instrument of experience.

If you argue that you are aiming at *nirvikalpa samadhi* where there is no mind, fine, but the problem with *nirvikalpa samadhi* is that a fly landing on your nose can bring you out of it, not that there is anyone there to come 'out'. And when the 'you' who wasn't there does 'come back', as I just mentioned, you are just as Self-ignorant as you were before because you were not there in the *samadhi* to understand that you are the *samadhi*. If you are the *samadhi* you will have it all the time because you have you all the time. Therefore, there will be no anxiety about making it continuous or permanent.

Okay. You're saying that samadhi is not the goal, that it is just the means?

Yes. Not 'the' means, 'a' means. There are other ways to purify the mind. Misunderstanding this teaching is perhaps responsible for more despair, confusion, and downright frustration than any other. It is commonly believed that this 'removal' means that all the *vasanas* (tendencies of the mind) need to be physically eradicated for enlightenment to happen. And many people believe that Sri Ramana had 'achieved' that state.

If you study Sri Ramana's life you will see that by and large he was a very regular guy – a large part of his appeal – head in the clouds, feet firmly planted on the earth. He walked, talked, cooked, read and listened to the radio. I love the story of him returning to the ashram at one in the afternoon to see a sign saying the ashram was closed from noon till two. So he sat down outside and waited for it to open. If he did

not have a mind, who or what was doing all these things? No *vasanas* means no mind because the *vasanas* are the cause of the mind. How did he go about the business of life? So I think we need to look at the word 'removal' in a different way.

Sri Ramana was called a *jnani*, a knower of the Self, because he had removed the idea of himself as a doer – it is called *sarva karma sannayasa* – which happens when you realise you are the Self. Or you realise you are the Self when you realise you are not the doer. 'Not the doer' means the Self. It doesn't mean that the ego becomes a non-doer. The ego is always a doer. As the Self he understood that while the few non-binding *vasanas* he had left (which are not a problem even for a worldly person) were dependent on him, he was not dependent on them. So for him, as the Self, they were non-binding. How can a thought or a feeling affect the Self? For a person who thinks he or she is the doer, allowing the *vasanas* to express or not is not an option. Actions happen uncontrollably because the ego is pressurised to act in a certain way by the *vasanas*. For a *jnani*, *vasanas* are elective, for a normal person they are compulsory.

So the 'removal' that Sri Ramana talks about is only in terms of knowledge. He often uses another metaphor which he borrowed from *Vedanta*, the snake and the rope. In the twilight a weary, thirsty traveller mistook the well rope attached to a bucket for a snake and recoiled in fear. When he got his bearings and his fear subsided he realised that the snake was actually only the rope. There was no reason to take a stick and beat the snake to death (which is equivalent to trying to destroy the mind) because the snake was only a misperception. When he calmed down and regained his wits (did some enquiry) he enquired into the snake and realised that it was just a rope. And in that realisation the snake was 'removed'.

My understanding is that when he said 'When the world which is what-is-seen has been removed ...' he meant the removal of all the attachments to the conditioned mind.

How would that come about?

His disciples would sit for years. His attendant, Annamalai Swami, spent fifteen years with Sri Ramana and every minute when they were not working, they would be sitting quietly. Then, one day Sri Ramana said to him, 'Now, you stop working and you go away and sit quietly.' He then sat for fifty years in his room never again setting foot in Ramana Ashram. Sri Ramana himself sat for almost fifteen years in Virupaksha Cave. So it involved a lot of sitting, presumably witnessing whatever thoughts were coming up.

Well, sitting doing nothing is doing something. And you can get very attached to a meditation lifestyle. You can get attached to anything, even *sannyasins* (renunciates) get attached to their sticks and begging bowls. But yes, this idea is completely in line with traditional *Vedantic sadhana*. The texts support it. First you get the mind quiet and then you are capable of realising that you are the Self. There is no better way to get the mind quiet than staying in close proximity to a person like Sri Ramana whose mind was exceptionally quiet. It sets the tone and the disciple's mind becomes like it. The longer you do apparently nothing, the more you realise that you don't have to do anything to be what you are. So this practice gradually kills off the doer.

One of the misconceptions people have about *Vedanta* is that the talk somehow obscures the silence and therefore the words are just 'intellectual' and therefore of no use spiritually. But this is not true. My guru, Swami Chinmaya, was a famous *Vedanta* master who had many enlightened disciples and he spoke incessantly. But the words were all coming out of the silence, the Self, and pointed the person's mind at the Self. Words and silence are not necessarily opposed. Sri Ramana had a mind. He spoke. He used it efficiently all his life.

Yes.

So, he wasn't removing *vasanas*.

Perhaps he was removing the attachment to them? He must have had a pull to go back to his family. He didn't do that and when his mother first came he sent her away. He wasn't caught up in that anymore.

That was because he understood he was the Self. The way you lose attachment in one go is to understand you are the Self.

It is often called 'a constant experience'.

Sure, but the Self is 'constant experience' anyway. Or put it this way, if this is a nondual reality and this reality is the Self then each and every experience is the Self. So nobody is short of Self-experience, the ignorant and the enlightened alike. The problem is that very few people understand that everything is the Self. So they seek for all these incredible 'Self' experiences.

The Self is a constant experience?

No, the Self is constant experience, if there is such a thing. In fact 'constant experience' is a contradiction. The Self becomes experience but it does not sacrifice it's nature as a non-doing, non-experiencing witness to do it. That means you actually are free of your experiences. Let's put it a better way: experience is the Self but the Self is not experience.

When one says 'constant experience' would that mean remembering the Self constantly?

Yes, remembrance is helpful, up to a point. But you can never make remembrance constant. Knowledge is constant. When knowledge takes place, that's it. Remembering is a kind of mental activity that implies forgetting. Once you know you are the Self there is nothing to remember any more. How can you remember what you are? You are the one who is doing the remembering. You are prior to the act of remembrance. You cannot forget because you are always present. If you were somewhere else you could forget.

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