



## My Reminiscences of Ramana Maharshi

MAUD PIGGOTT

I HAD visited India before, but this was my first trip off the beaten track. Staying with friends or in the luxurious hotels of Bombay and Calcutta, provided with modern conveniences, can give little indication of the conditions to be met with when leaving highways. But this was an adventure in a cause, and nothing else mattered.

For some years it had been my wish to meet one of the real holy men of India, but so far it was a vain one. I had, it is true, spoken with a few saintly men and also some fakirs of the mediumistic type, who were no doubt sincere enough in their way. But they were not what I was seeking. Then I was told of Sri Ramana Maharshi. And even from the little I heard, I knew I would travel anywhere and put up with any inconvenience in order to reach him.

The friend who gave me the welcome news of his existence offered to take me to him, and so we arrived at Tiruvannamalai late one afternoon. We put up at that none too clean accommodation the "dak" bungalow or travellers' rest-house, which is all that is offered

to the wayfarer who strays from the cities. No bedding is provided and there is seldom much furniture. But we left my servant to wrestle with such details and made our way to the bazaar and then up to the *ashram* in a cart drawn by a pony. The end of our drive found us somewhat battered but full of expectation.

Several of the people living in the ashram, mostly devotees, came out to greet us. Amongst them was the younger brother of the Maharshi. He was dressed in the ochre robe denoting a *sannyasin*—one who has renounced the world. The others were not strictly monks in the western sense of the word, nor is an ashram a monastery. It is a place where people wishing to study or follow a spiritual life may live. Often there are no orders or binding rules, and anyone can come and go as he pleases. Even women, though not allowed to sleep on the premises, are welcomed.

Most of the people spoke English and greeted me in a most friendly manner. This was encouraging, for I was nervous, having been told that I was the first European woman so far to visit the Maharishi, or Maharshi, as he is generally called. We were then taken in at once to see the holy man, and after making the Indian salutation, by holding the two palms together and raising them thus joined to the forehead, we laid our offerings on the ground before him. He was seated on a divan upon which was spread a large leopard skin. In front of the divan sandal-sticks were burning and a small brazier of coals, on which a special kind of incense was constantly being thrown.

About a dozen people were present in the hall. They spoke in low tones to one another, and a child prattled to his mother. But soon these sounds ceased

and there was quiet. I sat cross-legged on the floor with the others, though a chair had been thoughtfully provided for me.

For a while nothing happened. I tried to concentrate my mind. Suddenly I became conscious that the Maharshi's eyes were fixed on me. They seemed, literally, like burning coals of fire piercing through one. They glittered in the dim light. Never before had I experienced anything so devastating—in fact it was almost frightening. What I went through in that terrible half hour, in a way of self-condemnation and scorn for the pettiness of my own life, would be difficult to describe. Not that he criticized, even in silence—of that he was incapable—but in the light of perfection all imperfections are revealed. To show how little responsible he was for my feelings, he told me later on that doubting, self-distrust, and self-depreciation are some of the greatest hindrances to the realization of Reality.

Presently the Maharshi got up and went for his evening walk. This was the signal for a general exodus, and we all trooped outside.

One of the devotees offered to show us around the ashram, a cluster of small whitewashed buildings and huts, all spotlessly clean, and joined together in some cases by a covered passageway. The ashram was picturesquely situated halfway up the famous holy mountain of Arunachala. It was on this mountain side that the Maharshi took up his abode more than thirty years ago, and ever since then it has been his home. He was, at the time of my visit, about fifty years, but looked older, owing no doubt to the privations and austerities practiced in early life.

It was dark when we returned for the evening meditation, and most of the people not living permanently in the ashram had left. The hall was compellingly still. The eyes of the holy one blazed no more. They were serene and inverted. All my troubles seemed smoothed out and difficulties melted away. Nothing that we of the world call important, mattered. Time was forgotten. Life was one, in its many aspects.

LATE the next afternoon my friend had to return to his home leaving me behind in charge of my elderly servant, a fatherly and trustworthy man, who saw to it that the water and milk were properly boiled, and that, on my return each night from the ashram, a suitable meal was waiting for me at the travellers' rest house.

From that time onwards started a routine that was to be the same for many weeks. The rickety cart would turn up at six in the morning. It took me up to the ashram and came back again at seven-thirty in the evening for the return journey. I soon acquired a technique of balance that promised safety if not comfort and the drive lost most of its original precariousness. However it was never peaceful owing to the small insect life inhabiting the straw on which I had to crouch!

Up at the ashram I was given a small hut, seven feet by seven, for my use during the day. In it were a wooden plank, a chair and a table on which were a basin, towel, and soap. Not luxurious, but the thought and care with which it had been provided touched me more than I can say. However, being a European, my bones were not accustomed to wood unrelieved by a

mattress, and the midday rest taken after the noon meal was hardly one so far as I was concerned.

There were two chief meals, one at eleven-thirty in the morning and the other around eight in the evening. I ate with the others at the morning one. The food was more or less the same at both—rice, with an assortment of vegetables and milk curd. Everybody sat on the floor in front of an individual strip of banana leaf.

Everyone gathered in the hall. Most people were quiet and taken up with their own thoughts. But sometimes there were visitors, travelling monks or devotees who came for the Maharshi's blessing, and they would sing sacred songs and tell allegorical tales.

Among those who turned up at the ashram for a short stay was an American author,\* whose books and translations of Tibetan manuscripts are well known. We had many enlightening talks, and I was glad of his presence for another reason. Asking questions in the open hall was rather an ordeal, but backed by him I lost some of my diffidence. We pooled our problems and came to the Maharshi with them, trivial or profound. An interpreter was always on hand, for although the Maharshi understood English he did not speak it with ease. He knew immediately, however, whether the exact shade of meaning had been accurately translated, and if not he persevered until one had understood him completely. One day we brought up the question of guruship.

"Is it necessary for spiritual attainment to have a *guru* or spiritual teacher?"

\* W. Y. Evans-Wentz

The Maharshi ordered a certain treatise to be read, in which it was stated that as in all physical and intellectual training a teacher or instructor is sought, so in matters spiritual the same principle holds good.

"And," he added, "it is hard for a man to arrive at the goal without the aid of such a one."

I turned to him. "But you had no guru?"

A rustle of shocked horror ran through the hall. But the Maharshi was not in the least disturbed by my audacious remark. On the contrary, he looked at me with a twinkle in his eye. Then he threw back his head and gave a joyous, wholehearted laugh. It endeared me to him as nothing else could. A saint who can turn the laugh against himself is a saint indeed.

My companion next wanted a ruling on the vexing question of vegetarianism. Everyone had something to say about that. The outcome boiled down to this: food affects the mind. Certain kinds make it more *sattvic*—alive, vibrant. For the practice of any kind of yoga, vegetarianism is absolutely necessary. But on my asking if one could experience spiritual illumination whilst normally eating flesh foods, the answer was "yes," qualified by the injunction to leave them off and gradually accustom the body to the purer types of food. "But in any case," went on the Maharshi, "once you have attained illumination, it will make little difference what you eat. It is the early stages that are important. On a great fire it is immaterial what fuel is heaped."

Another problem discussed was that of the different kinds of yoga, and the benefit of various methods.

The Maharshi said that in the end there was only one approach to the goal, and that was through the

realization of what the Self is. Why waste time on other roads which at best will only lead to the final path? Better be on that path itself all the time, and lose no precious moments. Meditate on the Self, on that alone. There is no other goal. The Maharshi's philosophy and teaching is the purest Advaita—non-dualism—as will be seen in a talk I shortly had with him.

I HAD been in despair of ever getting the Maharshi alone. It is hard to unburden the soul before a crowd. But early one morning I came into the hall and found him there unattended, emanating a wonderful stillness and peace. I asked quietly if I might talk with him. He nodded, smiling, and sent for someone to translate. On the arrival of a devotee I put my first question.

"What are the hindrances to the realization of the true Self?"

"Memory chiefly, habits of thought, accumulated tendencies."

"How does one get rid of these hindrances?"

"Seek for the Self through meditation in this manner: trace every thought back to its origin, which is only the mind. Never allow thought to run on. If you do, it will be unending. Take it back to its starting place—the mind—again and again, and it and the mind will both die of inaction. The mind only exists by reason of thought. Stop that and there is no mind. As each doubt and depression arises, ask yourself, 'Who is it that doubts? What is it that is depressed?' Go back constantly to the question, 'Who is the "I"? Where is it?' Tear everything away until there is nothing but the Source of all, left. And then—live always

in the present and *only in it*. There is no past or future, save in the mind."

"How can I help another with his or her problems and troubles?"

"What is this talk of another? There is only the One. Try and realize there is no 'I' no 'he' no 'you', only the one Self which is all. If you believe in the problem of another, you are believing in something outside the Self. You will help him better by realizing the oneness of everything than by any outward activity. The ego pertains to all the waking activities—the emotions and intellect. In deep sleep the body is still, and yet the Self is there. It is the distracting, active mind that veils the real Self."

"What meditation will help me?"

"No meditation on any kind of object is helpful. You must learn to realize the subject and object as one. In meditating on an object, whether concrete or abstract, you are destroying the sense of oneness and creating duality. Meditate on what you are in Reality. Try to realize that the body is not you, the emotions are not you, the intellect is not you. When all these are still you will find—"

"What?"

"You will discover. It is not for me to say what any individual experience will be. It will reveal itself. Hold to that."

"But in trying to still the mind, I am likely to fall asleep."

"It does not matter. Put yourself into the condition as in deep sleep. Then watch. Be asleep consciously, instead of unconsciously. There will be then only one consciousness."



As the days passed, I saw more and more clearly that this was no theoretical philosophy. He himself lived it continuously and joyously. He was one of the few I have met who were not only happy but untroubled. Not that the sorrows of the world left him untouched—on the contrary—but he knew where they belonged and was not identified with them. To any sufferer his compassion was unlimited.

One day a man rushed in and flung himself face down before the Maharshi in a paroxysm of weeping. Great sobs tore his body. The Maharshi said nothing, and no one else dared. I watched the Maharshi. His head was turned aside, and he seemed indifferent. After some time, the violence of the man's grief subsided and gradually he became quiet. Still no one spoke. Then, at last, the man rose reverently and made a deep salutation. The Maharshi turned his head and smiled upon him. I felt suddenly as if all the flowers of the world had poured their fragrance into our midst.

Another time a poor creature who had been bitten by a snake was brought in and laid before the holy man. We all watched, fear gripping our hearts. Not so he, who sat looking into the far distance, while the victim writhed in pain. Calm and compassion was in that look and infinite peace. After what seemed like hours, the twitching ceased and the man appeared to sleep. Then the one who had brought in the sufferer gently touched him. The man rose, prostrated himself before the Maharshi, and went out cured.

But this was unusual. The Maharshi did not heal, in the accepted term of the word. Talking about it one day, I asked him if one could use spiritual power for healing. He remarked, "Yes, if you think it worth-

while," but added that it required a great deal of force, which might be used more profitably in other directions.

I WAS told that the Maharshi had his finger on the pulse of the whole ashram. For instance: when in the hall, he was supposed to know what was going on, even in the kitchen—and incidentally I was surprised to find that he himself assisted in the cutting up of vegetables for the daily meal. I was also told that he knew what was passing in the minds of people. Of this latter ability, I had a small personal experience.

It was in the afternoon and I was in the far corner of the hall reading the translation of a collection of aphorisms written in—to me—a flowery and artificial vein. I was bored and slightly irritated. Suddenly one of the devotees stood before me with another book in his hand—all the ashram books were bound in brown paper and looked exactly alike—and said, "The Maharshi asks me to give you this. He thinks it will be more sympathetic to your type of mind." It was. How could the Maharshi know what I was reading? I was sitting far away, with many people in between us, blocking his line of vision. But I had previously noticed that many times he would answer a question in my mind, whilst it was only in the process of being formulated. This happened too often to be a coincidence.

Every experience has to end and the last day of my visit to the ashram arrived, and with it a great sadness filled my heart. I must go back to worries, problems, and irritations. Here all was peace. Here it was comparatively easy to live in the mood of the spirit. Is this why so many holy people retire to soli-

tude? I wondered. Is it only in conditions such as these that the hidden verities emerge from under the covering of distractions? Still, all of us cannot follow such a life. Is the answer to live in the world, if we must, but not be of the world? There was nothing new in the idea, yet in this place I seemed to understand it for the first time.

That afternoon I had my farewell talk with the Maharshi. He was so gentle and human. We discussed the difficulties of everyday life and mundane problems. I asked again about the relation of the body to the "I." He gave this simile.

"You came up from the bungalow this morning in a cart. Yet you do not say, 'The cart came up.' You say 'I came up.' You did not make the mistake of identifying yourself with the cart. In the same way, look upon your body as you do the cart. Treat it well, and it will be a good servant and instrument. But do not be deceived into thinking it is 'I.'" He again stressed the necessity to see only the Self in everything. "Act automatically, so to speak, and let 'It' do the work. And 'It' always will," he added. "Do not look for results. Do what is right in the given moment and leave it behind you."

At the end of our talk, he quoted that wonderful saying from the Upanishads, "When to the man who understands, the Self has become all things, what sorrow, what trouble, can there be, to him who has once beheld this unity?"

As I went to say goodbye in the evening the ashram people clustered round in sympathy for my departure. I felt I had made and was leaving true friends. They were so simple and yet so genuine.

There was a service taking place in the adjoining temple, and an old Sanskrit hymn was being chanted. Just as I stepped into the cart the temple bell rang. This brought a smile of happiness on everyone's face. Apparently, to hear a temple gong in the act of departure is a wonderful omen and brings peace.

As I left Tiruvannamalai in the dawn of the next morning, I caught a last glimpse of Arunachala, the Holy Mountain, on which lives one as one of the saints of earth. It was red and glowing in the rising sun.

I wept.