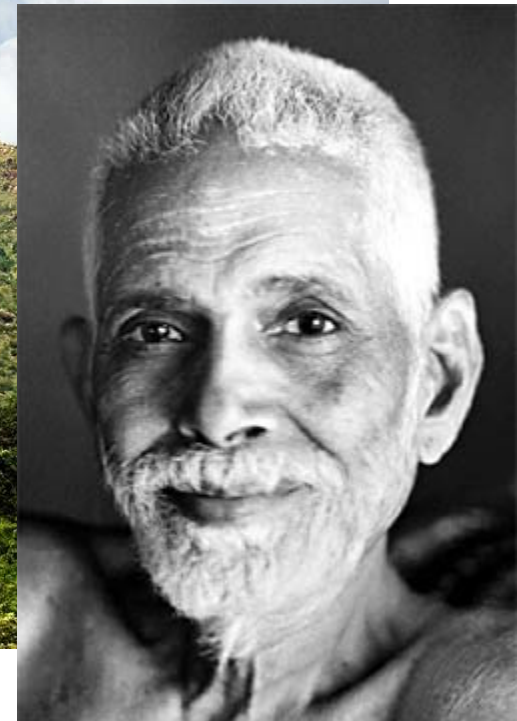
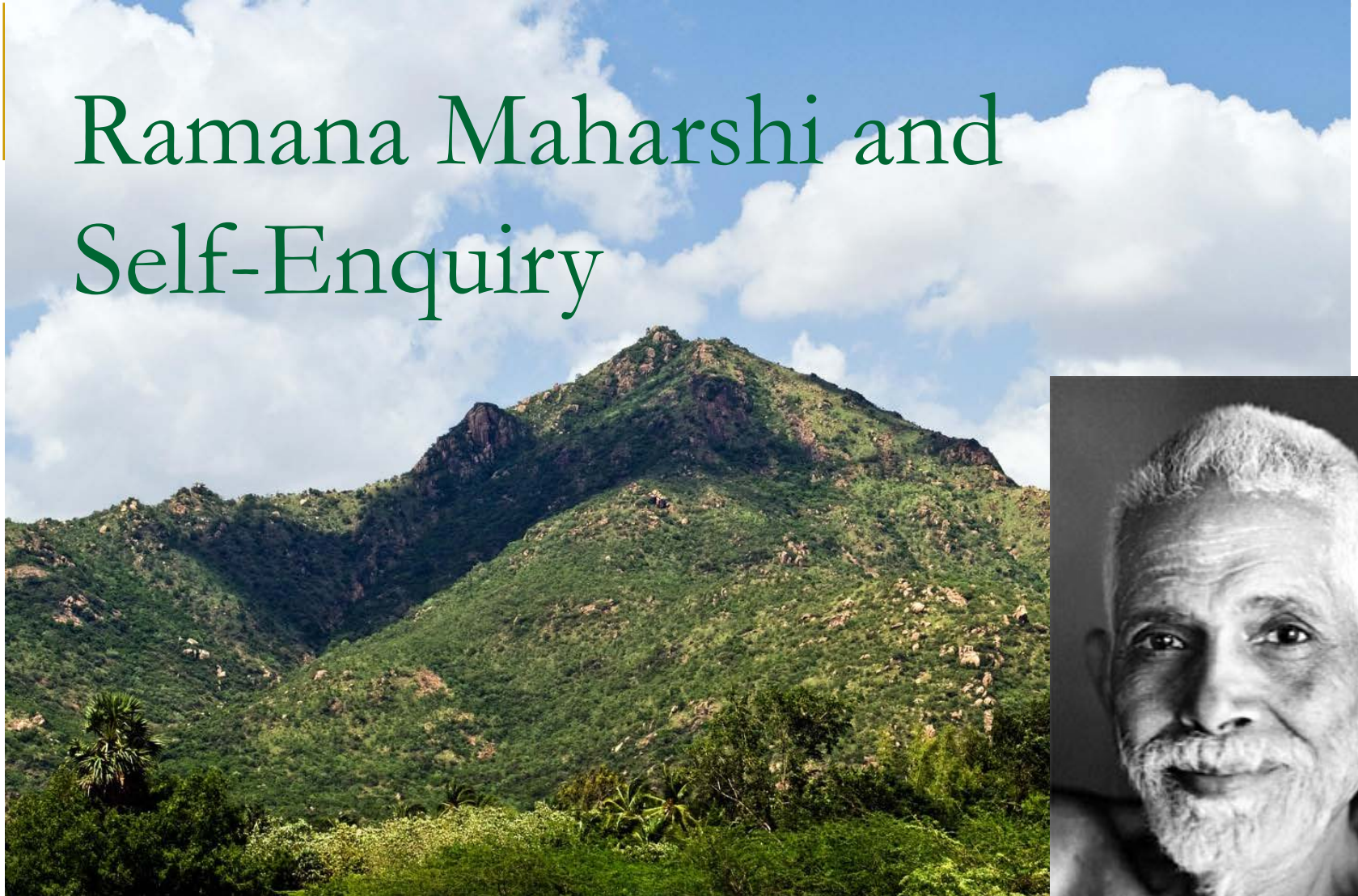


# Ramana Maharshi and Self-Enquiry



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# The Maharshi and the Mahatma

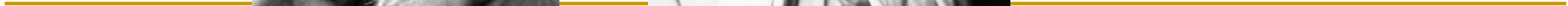
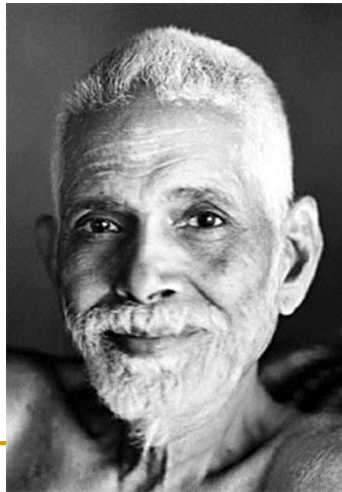
In the landscape of twentieth century Indian philosophy, Ramana Maharshi is often viewed as the spiritual counterpart of Mahatma Gandhi. People speak about 'the Maharshi and the Mahatma' as the two forces behind the spiritual upliftment of the nation. The term "Maharshi" means "Great Sage" and indeed he was. Speaking little, Ramana Maharshi radiated a spiritual brightness which seemed to extend far and wide. He made no speeches, wrote no books, nor was he in any way a "guru" or spiritual teacher. But by his life he seemed to demonstrate the reality of what we may call spiritual enlightenment, whatever that may be.

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# ‘Who am I?’

The existential question “who am I?” (in Tamil, *nān yār*) embodies the essential teaching of Sri Ramana Maharshi. As with all existential questions, there is of course, no simple answer. The question is the door towards a higher level of understanding. In the tradition of Advaita Vedānta, the method of *vichara* or inquiry has often been delineated as the foundational method of discovery. Ramana Maharshi taught that our misery and suffering is due to the fact that we do not know who we are. We have identified ourselves with this physical body and psycho-physical mind embodied by the ego personality. If we can transcend this limited self, we arrive at the Universal Self and thus perceive the unity of all existence.

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# Venkataraman Aiyar

Venkataraman Aiyar (the original name of Ramana Maharshi) was born on December 30, 1879 in Madurai located in the province of Tamil Nadu, India into what we may call a middle class Brahmin family. His long first name was shortened and people called him 'Ramana' or simply 'Raman'. As was common with all children born into such families, he read the mystical and devotional literature of the Shaivite tradition. This tradition identifies that the universe and all manifestation is the "cosmic dance" of Shiva and Shakti, or consciousness and energy. As explained earlier by Vivekananda, the tradition clothes deep philosophical ideas by colorful mythology, and so one has a tendency to anthropomorphise Shiva as a male deity and Shakti as a female deity. A long succession of saints and sages throughout the centuries added to these mythologies and the traditional lore consists of spiritual biographies of many of these saints.

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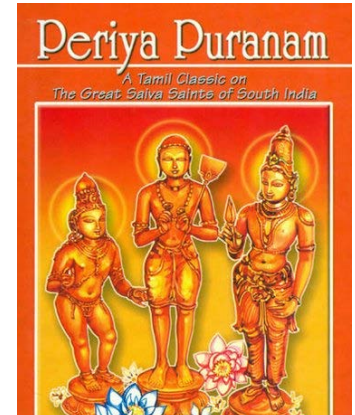
# Mount Arunachala



One such legend centered around Mount Arunachala which was viewed as the spiritual axis of the cosmos when Shiva created the world. Though Ramana Maharshi followed the path of Advaita Vedānta, he also seemed to have a devotional temperament that took these mythologies literally. Throughout his life, he seemed to venerate the mountain. He composed several poems extolling its spiritual power. Thus, his life was a strange combination of both dualism and non-dualism.

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# The *Periyapuranam*



When Raman was thirteen, his father died and this may have been the catalyst of what we may call the “death experience” that proved significant a few years later. While in high school, he learned a modest amount of English and became acquainted with Christianity, since the school was an English medium school. As was common with all children of that period, he was trying to fulfil the wishes of his parents by going to school so that he would eventually get a job in the British government administration. However, it was at that time he came across a Tamil spiritual classic called the *Periyapuranam*. This book was an anthology of 63 spiritual personalities called Nayanars and described their spiritual struggle to realise the Divine. Later in life, Ramana Maharshi told how the book made a deep impression on his life and that spiritual realization is open to all. He would often tell those stories to illustrate a subtle point of Vedānta. When telling these stories, he used to dramatize the characters in voice and gesture and seemed to identify himself fully with them. Both Ramakrishna and Vivekananda exhibited a similar talent for dramatization.

# The Meenakshi Temple in Madurai



While visiting the Meenakshi Temple in Madurai, he experienced a new blissful consciousness “transcending both the physical and mental plane and yet compatible with full use of the physical and mental faculties.” (Osborne, 6)

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## *Akrama mukti*

At the age of seventeen, he seemed to have had a spiritual experience which can be identified as a turning point in his life. One day, he suddenly felt a great fear of death. Later in life, he used the word *avesam* or “force” to describe this feeling. He called his experience *akrama mukti* or “sudden liberation” as opposed to *krama mukti* or “gradual liberation” which most spiritual aspirants experience in the course of their life. His philosophic mind wanted to understand where this feeling was coming from and why such a feeling made its entry into his mind. Lying very still, and outwardly showing all signs of physical death, he became stiff. In this state, he was aware of the movement of his mind. Thus emerged in his mind the existential question ‘Who am I?’ He seemed transcend layer upon layer of his own ego personality. He experienced the the truth of the Advaita teaching that he was not the body, because the body is changing. Nor can he be the waves of the mind, thoughts and emotions, because they too are constantly changing. Nor was he the ego personality that seems to latch onto these changes and identify with them. The ego too is temporal.

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# Who is the Seer?

He later described this experience. "Enquiring within Who is the seer? I saw the seer disappear leaving That alone which stands forever. No thought arose to say I saw. How then could the thought arise to say I did not see."

What was this experience? He himself did not know and conjectured that "after reading the language of the sacred books, I see it may be termed *suddha manas* (pure mind), *akhandakara vritti* (unbroken experience), *prajna* (true knowledge) etc.; that is, the state of mind of Iswara or the jnani" as described in the Bhagavad Gita or Patanjali's Yoga Sutras.



# Vichara

This process of physical and mental stillness, combined with the method of inquiry or *vichāra* brought him into what is traditionally described in the yoga texts as a state of pure delight, or *ānanda* or *samādhi*. How long this process lasted we do not know. But after this experience, his life changed. He renounced everything, shaved his head, and fled his village, magnetically attracted to Mount Arunachala where he became a recluse. He stayed there for the rest of his life until his death on April 14, 1950. He was seventy years old. In time, people heard about a great sage living on the mountain and slowly devout spiritual seekers gathered around him and an *ashram*, now called *Ramanāshramam*, was formed.



# The Hill of *Arunachala*



His attraction to Arunachala, and his ecstatic pining for spiritual enlightenment seem to be similar to the experience of Sri Ramakrishna, the teacher of Vivekananda. Ramakrishna too rejected what he called a “bread-winning education” and searched for spiritual enlightenment as a priest of the Kali Temple in Dakshineswar, Bengal. But there was a gap of forty years between these two personalities. Ramakrishna died in 1886. Ramana Maharshi fled to Arunachalam on September 1, 1896.

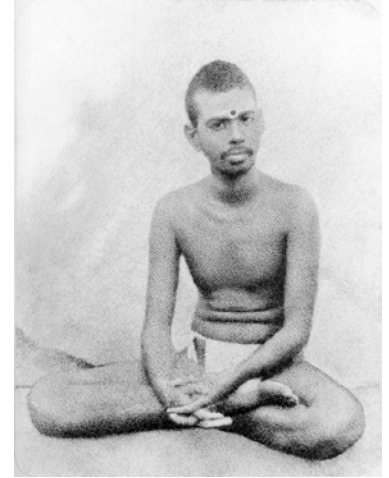
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# *Patala lingam*

The mountain was located near the town of Tiruvannamalai and on reaching the town, Raman went to the Arunachalam temple, and stayed in the thousand-pillared hall. He looked for a more secluded place in which to meditate and so moved to a section of the temple called the *patāla lingam* vault. The place was damp and infested with insects both harmful and harmless. Yet there he stayed in deep meditation, oblivious of the outer world. A local saint, Seshadri Swamigal, found Ramana absorbed in deep meditation in the underground vault and recognizing this as a yogic trance, tried to protect him. After six weeks in the Patala-lingam, he was physically carried out and cleaned. He was unaware of his body and surroundings that food had to be placed in his mouth or he would have starved. A similar experience is related in the life of Sri Ramakrishna.



# Encounters with uncle and mother



A monastic named Palaniswami realizing that Ramana was in a high state of consciousness, took it upon himself to protect him and feed him. In spite of his ardent desire for privacy, a group of devotees brought him food offerings and sang hymns of praise. News travelled to his family members as they were wondering where Ramana was. His uncle came to plead with him to return home and assured him that he can continue his meditation practice at home and no one will disturb him. Ramana sat motionless. The uncle had to return in frustration. A year later, his mother came to plead with him to return home. Ramana sat motionless and she too had to return home without him. At least, she thought, there were people looking after his food and shelter.

# Virupaksha Cave



To avoid further disturbances, Ramana moved to the mountain itself and took up residence in the Virupaksha Cave where he stayed for 17 years. In 1902, Sivaprakasam Pillai, a government official and spiritual seeker felt that Ramana had discovered some spiritual truths that needed to be recorded. With a slate in hand, he climbed up to the Virupaksha Cave and asked him what are now referred to as the “fourteen questions” to which Ramana replied. These replies are now recorded under the title ‘Nān Yār’ or “Who am I?” This is often referred to as Ramana Maharshi’s first book, but the Maharshi never wrote anything. His verbal responses to questions posed by “disciples” were collected together and published for the benefit of other seekers.

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# *Nan Yar?*

In English translation, here is a summary of this text. The method of self-enquiry seeks for the source of the 'I' thought that seems to underly all of our thoughts and emotions. What is this 'I'? The enquiry begins with the physical body, which is constantly changing. As a child, I identified with the baby body, as a teenager, with the teenage body and now as an adult, I identify with adult body, so I am not this body. Nor am I the five organs of sensory perception, nor the five organs of external action, nor the five vital forces (*pancha prānas*). Nor am I the mind with its incessant thoughts and emotions. Nor am I the unconscious mind, with its layers of *vasanas* or psychological tendencies. Reasoning thus, we arrive at Pure Awareness which by its very nature is the 'I am'.

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# The snake and the rope returns

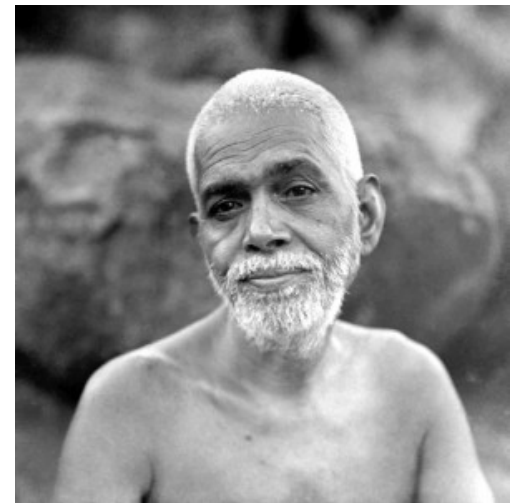
Expanding on this experience, he said, “If the mind, which is the instrument of knowledge and is the basis of all activity, subsides, the perception of the world as an objective reality ceases. Unless the illusory perception of the serpent in the rope ceases, the rope on which the illusion is formed is not perceived as such. Similarly, unless the illusory nature of the perception of the world as an objective reality ceases, the Vision of the true nature of the Self, on which the illusion is formed, is not obtained.” (CW, 40) The ‘snake and the rope’ image is an allusion to the classical example of Shankara in his writings of Advaita Vedānta.

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# The 'I' thought and the 'you' thought

Amplifying further regarding the 'I' thought that underlies all of our experience, he said, "The first and foremost of all the thoughts that arise in the mind is the primal 'I' thought. It is only after the rise or origin of the 'I'-thought that innumerable other thoughts arise. In other words, only after the personal pronoun, 'I', has arisen, do the second and third personal pronouns ('you', 'he', etc.) occur to the mind; and they cannot subsist without the former." (CW, 41)



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# The role of religious practices

Through such an enquiry, the mind learns the process of introversion and gains strength. "It is only when the subtle mind is externalized through the activity of the intellect and the sense organs [that] name and form constituting the world appear." (CW, 41) Commenting on the innumerable religious practices, he commented that "like breath-control (prānāyama), meditation on form, incantations, invocations and regulation of diet are only aids to control the mind." That is, they are not the determinants of any higher spiritual consciousness. Explaining further, he said, "Through the practice of meditation or invocation the mind becomes one-pointed. Just as the elephant's trunk, which is otherwise restless, will become steady if it is made to hold an iron chain, so that the elephant goes its way without reaching out for any other object, so also the ever-restless mind, which is trained and accustomed to a name or form through meditation or invocation, will steadily hold on to that alone." (CW, 43)

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## *Vishaya vasanas*

When many try to practice this method of self-enquiry, they often leave it due to frustration because of an underlying tendency of wanting to 'get something' or the habit of possession. This has been the nature of the mind from childhood. We try to grasp things and put them in our mouths, either literally or figuratively. This underlying tendency is one of the most formidable obstacles in the method of meditation. Amplifying this obstruction, Ramana Maharshi said, "Countless *vishaya vāsanās* (subtle tendencies of the mind in relation to objects of sense-gratification), coming one after the other in quick succession like the waves of the ocean, agitate the mind. Nevertheless, they too subside and finally get destroyed with progressive practice of *Atma dhyāna* or meditation on the Self." (CW, 44)

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# Each person is searching for happiness

Each person is searching for happiness. The mistake we make is that we think that happiness resides in a particular person, or a place, or some possession. In fact, all such desires are waves of the mind. When we gratify a desire, we falsely superimpose the idea of 'bliss' on the gratification and this in turn, creates a *vāsana* or psychological tendency that moves the mind again automatically in a cycle of recurrence. The truth of the matter is that the joy that we feel when the desire is gratified is because for that split second, the waves of the mind subside at the moment of gratification and our underlying blissful nature, *ananda*, or Pure Self, is experienced. If happiness resided in the gratification, then endless gratification should lead to eternal happiness, but it does not.



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# The Self is Bliss

Ramana Maharshi explains this phenomenon as follows. “That which is Bliss is also the Self. ... In no single one of the countless objects of the mundane world is there anything that can be called happiness. It is through sheer ignorance and unwisdom that we fancy that happiness is obtained from them. On the contrary, when the mind is externalized, it suffers pain and anguish. The truth is that every time our desires get fulfilled, the mind, turning to its source, experiences only that happiness which is natural to the Self.” (CW, 45)

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