

Ramana Maharshi

Background and Self Realization*

I. Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950)

A. Modern Indian guru in the philosophical tradition of Vedanta and the devotional tradition of Shaivism (the worship of Shiva). Ramana's spiritual teachings represent a modern development of traditional advaita Vedanta: reality as non-duality and identical with the real Self (atman) of each individual ego.

B. Vedanta. Based on the teachings of the sacred *Upanishads*, the focus of Vedanta is the realization of God or the Self, these two either being the same (in advaita Vedanta) or intimately associated with each other (in other Vedantin schools). Yoga (meaning "union")—the name given to practices that lead to realization—takes on differing forms: bhakti (devotion), jnana (knowledge), dhyana (meditation), and karma (selfless or non-attached action).

C. Ramana's distinctive contribution. Unlike traditional advaita, Ramana did not promote (in fact discouraged) a lifestyle of renunciation, which involves a monastic life withdrawn from society, nor the necessity of traditional spiritual practices associated with the life of a renunciate, for the realization of the Self. His method is often called the "direct method" or "direct path," which simply involves asking *Nan Yar* (tamil), "Who Am I?" and tracing the "I" back through various mental constructs to its source in the Self. No protracted spiritual practices or mental training is needed for this process, which Maharshi called *self-inquiry* (atma-vichara). As Maharshi said: "When the mind unceasingly investigates its own nature, it transpires that there is no such thing as mind. This is the direct path for all". And again, "When the "I" is dissolved, only the "I" remains."

II. Terminology

David Godman concisely summarizes as Maharshi's teachings as follows:

"The essence of Sri Ramana's teaching is conveyed in his frequent assertions that there is a single immanent reality, directly experienced by everyone, which is simultaneously the source, the substance and real nature of everything that exists" (Godman, p. 8).

The following are the names given to this reality:

A. The Self: pure consciousness or awareness, which is all-inclusive and ever-present. The Self is the "I am" inherent in all experience, but yet obscured through the limiting tendencies of the mind, which says, "I am this" or "I am that,"

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which results in our individual ego or personality. Self-realization just is the dismantling of this false ego.

- B. Sat-Chit-Ananda: Literally, “enduring being-consciousness-bliss,” the name of the ultimate reality in Vedanta. As wetness, transparency, and liquidity are inseparable properties of water and thus form a unitary whole, so sat-chit-ananda is a unitary whole that is identical with the Self.
- C. God: In the tradition of *the Upanishads*, Ramana speaks of the Supreme Reality as Brahman, and also as the god Shiva (in accordance with the devotional tradition of Shaivism). However, for Ramana, “God” is not a personal being (a being with individuality or qualities of personhood), but the formless reality (nirguna Brahman) that underlies and manifests in the universe.
- D. The Heart: Ramana’s way of speaking of “the center” of reality and hence the Self, which is the source from which all appearances take name and form.
- E. Jnana: Literally, “knowledge,” not as something a person knows as an object of thought or experience, but the direct experience of the cessation of subject-object relations. More precisely, it is simply being the presence of awareness, which is the only abiding reality.
- F. Turiya and Turyatita: the state of consciousness distinct from waking, dreaming, and deep sleep, which underlies all three. Identical to the Self.

III. The Self and Reality

- A. What is real is *sat*, enduring or ever-present being. What is real is limitless and boundless. Every object of experience is nama rupa (name and form). These come and go. Hence, every thought, perception, and sensation is temporary.
- B. Thoughts, perceptions, and sensations are known by the Self, which is the underlying and enduring Awareness inherent in “I am,” but veiled by “I am this” or “I am that,” which arises from attachment to the world of sense objects.
- C. The Self is sat-chit-ananda: the peace (ananda) that is inherent in the union of being (sat) and knowing (chit) that underlies all experience. (Godman, pp. 15-16)

IV. The Nature of Self-Realization

- A. To Realize the Self is simply to be knowingly the presence of Awareness.
- B. Self-realization does not involve entering a new state or acquiring something not presently real. It is simply dissolving the false ego. It is the subtraction of the “this” and “that” in the personal narratives expressed through “I am a man,” “I am a woman,” “I am a teacher,” “I am an American,” etc. “The state of Self-realization, as we call it, is not attaining something new or reaching some goal

which is far away, but simply being that which you always are and which you always have been”– Maharshi (Godman, p. 12). When the awareness of objects is dissolved, the separate self is dissolved, and when the separate self is dissolved, only pure awareness remains.

- C. In a sense, then, it is false to speak of realization (Godman, p. 13), inasmuch as this suggests something new arising.
- D. Liberation or mukti (from suffering and rebirth) is thus also our essential nature (Godman, pp. 13, 19, 29), for the Self is unbound, and unlimited, and hence not subject to death or rebirth.

V. Three States of Consciousness (Godman, pp. 14-15)

- A. The waking state, dream state, and state of deep sleep are each states of consciousness when viewed from the perspective of pure awareness. Unlike the waking state and dream state, in deep sleep the mind is not present in the state of deep sleep. But this no more suggests the absence of awareness during deep sleep than it does the disappearance of the film on a screen when a character in the film is not present.
- B. Waking, dreaming, and deep sleep states are impermanent. They come and go. Awareness persists throughout. That awareness persists through all three states is suggested by our sense of continuity after waking up from sleep, but also from the unbounded and unlimited nature of awareness. (Godman, pp. 20-21)
- C. Turiya is the fourth state of consciousness, which simply refers to the awareness that persists throughout the three states (avasthas) of consciousness. Technically, it is not a “state” (avastha), but the underlying reality in all three states and thus transcendental, turiyatita. (Godman, p. 15)

VI. Attaining Self Realization

- A. In a sense, self-realization is not something attained. Since we already are *that* which we seek, there is nothing to be gained not already present to us, nothing to become that we already are not. (Godman, pp. 18-19, 22). Maharshi said, “The Self is already realized. It is not necessary to seek to realize what is already and always realized” (Godman, p. 30).
- B. “There is no goal to be reached. There is nothing to be attained. You are the Self. You exist always. Nothing more can be predicated of the Self than that it exists. Seeing God or the Self is only being the Self or yourself. Seeing is being.” – Maharshi (Godman, p. 24)
- C. What must be done is merely to *eliminate* or *dissolve* the non-Self we have mistaken for the Self. “When the not-Self disappears, the Self alone remains.” – Maharshi (Godman, p. 19) Similarly, jnana (knowledge) is the removal of ignorance, not learning something new (Godman, p. 20)

- D. Bliss or peace (ananda) is also not something added to our nature. It is what we essentially are. At the best we can speak of it being revealed to us, but it is always present. (pp. 23-24).
- E. A realized being sees only the Self, and thus sees the Self in all beings, and all beings as manifestations of the Self. (Godman, p. 26)
- F. Realization is prevented by samskaras (innate mental tendencies) born of attachment to sense objects and which perpetuate the illusion of separateness (bheda bhava, the feeling of difference). Our true nature and thus happiness is veiled by the ego sense. (pp. 28-29). Inherent in this is the recipe for realization. Remove the ego, and there is only limitless awareness and thus peace or happiness.