

An Interview with David Godman

By Rob Sacks for Realization.org

David Godman is best known for his anthology of Ramana Maharshi's writings, *Be As You Are*, which has become a popular reference on the great sage's teachings. But few people know that David has written nine other books, and each one is equally remarkable in its own way. Two of these books have just come out, providing a good excuse for an interview. Since David lives in Tiruvannamalai and the editor of this website lives in New York, the interview was conducted by e-mail.

RS: You have just brought out two new books on Ramana Maharshi. Can you tell me something about them?

DG: In the late 1980s I began to collect first-person accounts by people who had spent time with Ramana Maharshi. It was my intention to make an anthology of accounts that hadn't been published before. To find original material I did extensive research on books that had appeared in various Indian languages but not in English. I also found some good material written in English that had never been published. At some point during this research I went to see Annamalai Swami, a devotee of Sri Ramana who had moved intimately with him for many years. His account proved to be so interesting and so long, I ended up doing a whole book just about him. Then I went to Lucknow to interview Papaji. His story fascinated me so much, I spent four years in Lucknow and eventually wrote a massive 1,200-page biography. The original project got put on the back burner, and I only came back to it about a year ago. I have changed my original criteria. I am now using some material that has been published before. However, since most of this material is rarely sold outside India, I think non-Indian readers of these books, even devotees of Sri Ramana, will find that most of the material is new to them.

RS: What made you decide to take this particular approach to Sri Ramana?

DG: Sri Ramana is all things to all people. There is no standard Ramana Maharshi who is the same for all people. People who approached him brought their minds with them, and Bhagavan, being a non-person with no mind of his own, magnified and reflected back all this incoming mental energy. So, different people saw him and experienced him in many different ways. If I wanted to write about Sri Ramana myself, I would have to put my own editorial overlay on top of all these differing experiences and impressions. So, I thought, 'Let people speak for themselves. Let people explain who their particular Ramana is.'

There is a fictional detective, Hercule Poirot, who appears in many of Agatha Christie's books. In one story, when he was completely stuck, he just started talking to everyone who was involved, and spent many hours just listening to what they had to say. Poirot's theory was, 'If you let people talk about themselves for long enough, sooner or later they give themselves away'.

This was my approach. I didn't want to edit or shorten anyone's story. On the contrary, I wanted to make it as detailed as possible. So, I just let them talk and say what

they wanted to say. If you give someone thirty pages to talk or write about their relationship with Sri Ramana, they have to reveal who they are in a very intimate way. This was my aim: to have a gallery of intimate portraits of Sri Ramana, each one drawn lovingly by a person who had a personal and very unique perspective on this great being.

RS: Could you describe one of your favorite sections from either of these books?

DG: When I made the first drafts of some of these chapters back in the 1980s, I circulated copies to all my friends in Tiruvannamalai. I asked everyone to give marks out of ten on how interesting they found each account. Some chapters that were given ten by one person would get zero from someone else. This illustrates what I was just saying: everyone has a different idea of who Sri Ramana is, and because people relate to him in different ways, they react differently to stories about him. My favorites were not so popular with many of my friends.

It's fashionable nowadays to be very positive about one's spiritual experiences. People like to jump up and down and exclaim, 'I'm free! I'm free!' I prefer the refreshing honesty of a devotee, Sivaprakasam Pillai, who, after fifty years of being with Sri Ramana, was still lamenting about his faults and his lack of progress. This is the person who first got Bhagavan to record his teachings on self-enquiry in 1901. I admired his honesty, his humility and his integrity in admitting that he still couldn't control his mind. I also enjoyed some of the teachings of Sri Ramana that were recorded by Sadhu Natanananda, whose account also proved to be not too popular with my friends. This is an extract that I particularly liked:

A certain lady who had a lot of devotion performed a traditional ritual for worshipping sages whenever she came into Bhagavan's presence to have *darshan*. She would prostrate to Bhagavan, touch his feet and then put the hands that had touched Bhagavan's feet on her eyes. After noticing that she did this daily, Bhagavan told her one day:

Only the Supreme Self, which is ever shining in your heart as the reality, is the *Sadguru*. The pure awareness, which is shining as the inward illumination 'I', is his gracious feet. The contact with these [inner holy feet] alone can give you true redemption. Joining the eye of reflected consciousness [*chitabhasa*], which is your sense of individuality [*jiva bodha*], to those holy feet, which are the real consciousness, is the union of the feet and the head that is the real significance of the word '*asi*' ["are", as in the *mahavakya* 'You are That']. As these inner holy feet can be held naturally and unceasingly, hereafter, with an inward-turned mind, cling to that inner awareness that is your own real nature. This alone is the proper way for the removal of bondage and the attainment of the supreme truth.

I appreciate and applaud anyone who has devotion to Bhagavan's form, but at the same time I love the purity of Bhagavan's advaitic response to this woman.

RS: Can we backtrack a little? Can you tell me something about your own background... some details of your family and how you came to be interested in Ramana Maharshi?

DG: I was born in 1953 in Stoke-on-Trent, a British city of about 300,000, located about halfway between Birmingham and Manchester. My father was a schoolmaster and my mother was a physiotherapist who specialised in treating physically handicapped children. Both of my parents are dead. I have one sister who is a year older than me. She is a former professional mountaineer who now teaches mountain and wilderness skills and occasionally leads groups to exotic and inaccessible places. My younger sister, now 43, used to teach in a college in England. Nowadays, though, she apparently spends most of her time assessing the quality of education on offer in different colleges.

I was educated at local schools and in 1972 won a place at Oxford University, where I did very little academic work, but had an enormous amount of fun. Sometime in my second year there I found myself getting more and more interested in Eastern spiritual traditions. I seemed to have an insatiable hunger for knowledge about them that resulted in massive bookstore bills, which I couldn't really afford, but not much satisfaction. Then, one day, I took home a copy of Arthur Osborne's *The Teachings of Ramana Maharshi in his Own Words*. Reading Ramana's words for the first time completely silenced me. My mind stopped asking questions, and it abandoned its search for spiritual information. It somehow knew that it had found what it was looking for. I have to explain this properly. It wasn't that I had found a new set of ideas that I believed in. It was more of an experience in which I was pulled into a state of silence. In that silent space I knew directly and intuitively what Ramana's words were hinting and pointing at. Because this state itself was the answer to all my questions, and any other questions I might come up with, the interest in finding solutions anywhere else dropped away. I suppose I must have read the book in an afternoon, but by the time I put it down it had completely transformed the way I viewed myself and the world. The experiences I was having made me understand how invalid were the academic techniques of acquiring and evaluating knowledge. I could see that the whole of academia was based on some sort of reductionism: separating something big into its little component parts, and then deriving conclusions about how the 'big something' really worked. It's a reasonable approach for comprehending mechanical things, such as a car engine, but I understood — and knew by direct experience — that it was a futile way of gaining an understanding of oneself and the world we appear to be in.

When I went through my academic textbooks after having these experiences, there was such a massive resistance both to their contents and to the assumptions that lay behind them, I knew I could no longer even read them, much less study them in order to pass exams. It wasn't an intellectual judgement on their irrelevance; it was more of a visceral disgust that physically prevented me from reading more than a few lines. I dropped out in my final year at Oxford, went to Ireland with my Ramana books, and spent about six months reading Ramana's teachings and practising his technique of self-enquiry. I had just inherited a small amount from my grandmother, so I didn't need to work that year. I rented a small house in a rural area, grew my own food, and spent most of my time meditating. This was 1975. At the end of that year my landlady reclaimed her house and I went to Israel. I wanted to go somewhere sunny and warm for the winter, and then return to Ireland the following spring. I worked on a kibbutz on the Dead Sea and

while I was there decided I could have a quick trip to India and Ramanasramam before I went back to Ireland. I figured out the costs and realised I couldn't afford it unless another £200 appeared from somewhere. I decided that if Bhagavan wanted me to go to India, he would send me the money. Within a week I received a letter from my grandmother's lawyer saying that he had just found some shares that she had owned, and that my share of them would be £200. I came to India, expecting to stay six weeks, and have been here more or less ever since.

RS: I've always wondered about your name. Is Godman your birth name or did you change it?

DG: It's my family name. I never had any desire to take a new name, and no one has ever tried to give me one.

RS: You said that you spent six months practicing self-enquiry based on your reading of Sri Ramana's books. Were you able to get a good understanding of the method from your reading? I ask because this seems to be difficult for most people. Did you need to modify your understanding later when you went to Sri Ramanasramam?

DG: I did find it hard to practise self-enquiry merely by reading books simply because I did not have access to much material. I had at that time only managed to find Arthur Osborne's three books on Ramana. Though they explained most aspects of the teachings quite well, I don't think that Osborne had a good understanding of self-enquiry. He seemed to think that concentrating on the heart-center on the right side of the chest while doing self-enquiry was an integral part of the process. When I later read Bhagavan's answers in books such as *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi* and *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, I realised that he specifically advised against this particular practice. Overall, though, I got a good grounding from these books. I had a passion to follow the practice and a deep faith in Bhagavan. I think that this elicited grace from Bhagavan and kept me on the right path. If the attitude is right and if the practice is intense enough, it doesn't really matter what you do when you meditate. The purity of intent and purpose carries you to the right place.

RS: If someone wants to learn self-enquiry, what should they read?

DG: I don't know what book I would recommend to new people who want to start self-enquiry. *Be As You Are* is certainly a good start since it was designed for Westerners who have had no previous exposure to Bhagavan and his teachings. There is also a book by Sadhu Om: *The Path of Sri Ramana Part One*. It is a little dogmatic in places but it covers all the basic points well. Self-enquiry is a bit like swimming or riding a bicycle. You don't learn it from books. You learn it by doing it again and again till you get it right.

RS: Could you briefly describe what your life has been like in Tiruvannamalai? What work have you done at Sri Ramanasramam?

DG: I spent my first eighteen months just meditating, practising self-enquiry, and occasionally walking round Arunachala. In 1978 I began to do voluntary work for Sri Ramanasramam. I looked after their library from 1978 to 1985, edited their magazine for a short period of time, and from 1985 onwards did research for my various books. In the later 1980s and early 90s I also devoted a considerable amount of time to looking after Lakshmana Swamy and Saradamma's garden. They bought land in Tiruvannamalai in 1988 and I ended up helping to develop it. In 1993 I went to Lucknow and spent four years with Papaji, where I wrote *Nothing Ever Happened*. Since my return to Tiruvannamalai in 1997 I have been writing and researching new books on Ramana.

RS: How have you supported yourself in India all these years?

DG: I didn't. Grace supported me. I have found that if you give all your time to God and his work, then he looks after you. I came here with \$500 in 1976. I didn't earn money for twenty years, but I always had enough to live on. Until I left Lucknow I gave the proceeds from all my books to the various organisations that supported me while I was writing them.

When I first came to Arunachala I fell in love with the place and wanted to stay as long as I could. I knew I didn't have much money, but I wanted to make it last as long as possible. There was a meter ticking away in my head: I have so much money, I am spending so much per day, and that means I have so many more days here. Those numbers, those equations were there all the time. Then, one day, as I was doing *pradakshina* of Arunachala, it all dropped away. It wasn't a mental decision. I stopped walking, turned, and faced the hill. I knew in that moment that whatever power had brought me here would keep me here until its purpose was finished, and that when it was time to go, it wouldn't matter if I was a millionaire or not, I would have to leave. From then on I stopped caring about money. In the period that I was worrying about money, all I did was spend. When I stopped caring, complete strangers would come up to me and give me money. Whenever I needed money, money just appeared out of nowhere.

RS: Can you give me an example of how this worked?

DG: When I volunteered to look after Lakshmana Swamy's land in the late 80s, I had about \$20 to my name. Somebody in Canada whom I had spoken to for about ten minutes two years before got out of bed and suddenly felt that he should give me some money. He sent me \$1,000, which was enough to get the garden going. I lived like that for years. When you work for Gurus, God pays the bills. That's my experience anyway. It was Papaji who encouraged me to start working for myself. He himself was a householder who spent decades supporting his family. He generally wouldn't let anyone give up his or her worldly life until retirement age, which in India is around 55. When I started work on *Nothing Ever Happened*, I assumed that all the proceeds would go to him, or to some organisation that was promoting his teachings. At some point during the research though, he let me know that he wanted me to accept royalties from the sale of the book.

Nowadays, I am not supported by any institution, so I publish my own books and live off the proceeds, which I have to say are minimal. I can live fairly comfortably in a

third world country such as India, but if I tried to live in America on what I earn from my books, I would be several thousand dollars a year below the poverty line.

RS: What effect do you feel in the presence of Arunachala?

DG: Arunachala brought me here in the same way it brought Ramana here. And it has kept me here for most of the last 25 years. I have occasionally left to be with teachers in other places: Nisargadatta Maharaj in Bombay, Lakshmana Swamy in Andhra Pradesh, Papaji in Lucknow, but Arunachala has always brought me back here afterwards. It's my spiritual center of gravity. I can make an effort to be somewhere else if I feel I would spiritually benefit from it, but when I stop making that effort, the natural pull of Arunachala brings me back here again. It's the only place in the world that I feel truly at home.

Arunachala has been attracting people for well over 1,500 years. Ramana liked to quote a saint of about 500 years ago who wrote in one of his verses, 'Arunachala, you draw to yourself all those who are rich in *jnana tapas*'. *Jnana tapas* can be translated as the extreme efforts made by those who are in search of liberation.

There are dozens of teachers nowadays who tour the world touting their experiences and their teachings. Many of them trace their lineage back to Ramana Maharshi via Papaji. And where did Ramana Maharshi's power and authority come from? From Arunachala, his own Guru and God. He explicitly stated that it was the power of Arunachala that brought about his own Self-realisation. He wrote poems extolling its greatness, and in the last 54 years of his life, he never moved more than a mile and a half away from its base. So, it is the power of Arunachala that is the true source of the power that now appears as '*advaita* messengers' all over the world.

For me, this is the world's great power spot. Arunachala has brought about the liberation of several advanced seekers in the past few centuries, and its radiant power remains even today as a beacon for those who want to find out who they really are.

RS: Have there been living people whom you regarded as your Gurus, or who had an especially strong impact on you spiritually?

DG: I think the four key spiritual figures would be Lakshmana Swamy, Saradamma, Nisargadatta Maharaj and Papaji. I have to include Ramana Maharshi on this list, even though I never met him while he was alive. I feel him as strongly as I have felt any other teacher. The Self that took the form of Ramana Maharshi is my Guru. He lit the lamp of enlightenment in the Heart of a few of his devotees, and when I sit in the presence of these beings I am receiving the luster, the light of Ramana Maharshi through them. So I will not say that my Guru has a particular form. I will say that the light of Arunachala became manifest in Ramana, and through him it was passed on to Lakshmana Swamy, Papaji, and Saradamma. When I bask in their light, I am basking in the living, transmitting light of Arunachala-Ramana.

Nisargadatta does not belong to this lineage, but he was an enormously beneficial presence in my life in the late 1970s and early 80s. I used to go and see him as often as I could. He repeatedly told me 'you are consciousness' and on a few rare, glorious occasions I understood what he was talking about. He was not simply giving me

information; he was instead describing my own state, my own experience in that moment. That was his technique. He would talk endlessly about the Self until you suddenly realised directly, 'Yes, this is what I am right now'.

RS: Have you used any practices in addition to those associated with Sri Ramana?

DG: No. From the moment I first encountered Bhagavan and his teachings in the 1970s I have never found myself attracted to any other teachings or practices.

RS: I often wonder whether Westerners misunderstand Ramana Maharshi. What are the most common misconceptions about his teachings?

DG: I am not sure how much understanding there is of Ramana Maharshi and his teachings in the West. He is an iconic figure to a vast number of people who are following some sort of spiritual path. I think that for many people he epitomises all that is best in the Hindu Guru tradition, but having said that, I think that very few people know much about him, and even fewer have a good grasp of his teachings. Not many people read books about him nowadays — I know that from trying to sell my own — and even fewer would profess themselves to be his devotee. I find there is very little interest in his teachings even among the people who come to visit Ramanasramam. Nowadays, many of the people who come are spiritual tourists, pilgrims who just travel round India, checking out all the various ashrams and teachers. About twenty years ago I met a foreigner here who had come to the ashram for advice on how to do self-enquiry properly. For several days he couldn't find anyone who was practising it, even in Ramanasramam. The people he asked in the ashram office just told him to buy the ashram's publications and find out from them how to do it. Eventually, he had what he thought was a bright idea. He stood outside the door of the meditation hall at Ramanasramam, the place where Sri Ramana lived for over twenty years, and asked everyone who came out how to do self-enquiry. It transpired that none of the people inside were doing self-enquiry. They came out one by one and said, 'I was doing *japa*,' or 'I was doing *vipassana*,' or 'I was doing Tibetan visualisations'.

How can there be misunderstandings among people who have never even bothered to find out the teachings in the first place, or put them into practice?

RS: I think that some people who are now teaching in the West are creating misunderstandings about his teachings. Some of them seem to confuse glimpses of nonduality and feelings of relative selflessness with Self-realisation. Since a number of these teachers trace their lineage back to Sri Ramana, their students project the ideas of these teachers onto Sri Ramana. What do you think about this?

DG: What are Sri Ramana's teachings? If you ask people who have become acquainted with his life and work, you might get several answers such as '*advaita*' or 'self-enquiry'. I don't think Sri Ramana's teachings were either a belief system or a philosophy, such as *advaita*, or a practice, such as self-enquiry.

Sri Ramana himself would say that his principal teaching was silence, by which he meant the wordless radiation of power and grace that he emanated all the time. The words

he spoke, he said, were for the people who didn't understand these real teachings. Everything he said was therefore a kind of second-level teaching for people who were incapable of dissolving their sense of 'I' in his powerful presence. You may understand his words, or at least think that you do, but if you think that these words constitute his teachings, then you have really misunderstood him.

RS: There are some aspects of his spoken teachings that appear to be unique. For example, his reference to the heart center on the right side of the chest. He said that this was the source of the 'I' and the place in the body where the sense of 'I' had to return in order for realisation to take place. People who talk about his teachings in the West rarely seem to mention this point.

DG: Ramana didn't mention it much either. On a few occasions when he was asked about it, he said it was more important to have the experience of the Self, rather than locate it in some part of the body. It is true that no teacher who came before him ever mentioned this, but I would not say that this is a major aspect of his teachings. Nor would I say that it is necessary to have this knowledge in order to have an experience of the Self.

RS: How did you choose the subjects for your three biographical books?

DG: In two of the three cases the subjects chose me. When I went to Lakshmana Swamy's ashram in the early 1980s, he asked me to write a brief biography of Saradamma, a project that eventually turned into a book-length account of both of them. A few years later, when I wrote a fifty-page account of Papaji's experiences with Ramana, intending to use it in a book about Ramana's disciples, Papaji liked it so much, he invited me back to Lucknow to do a complete biography on him. As for the third biography, I approached Annamalai Swami in the late 1980s, hoping to interview him in order to get enough material for a chapter in the same book that was going to feature Papaji's account. His story turned out to be so engrossing, so detailed, so unlike anything I had come across in the existing Ramana literature, it soon expanded into a book-length project.

RS: All these people seem to be Self-realised. Did you pick them for this reason? How did you know that they are Self-realised?

DG: The simple answer is that no one who is not a *jnani* can really tell who is in that state, and I would not claim to be in that state myself. Ramana told people that the peace one feels in the presence of such beings is a good indication that one is in the presence of an enlightened being, but this is a sign not a proof.

When I first went to see Lakshmana Swamy in the late 1970s, I did not go there with any intention of evaluating him. But as soon as I looked into his eyes, something inside me said, 'This man is a *jnani*'. Nothing has ever caused me to doubt that first impression. I don't know how I came to that conclusion because I had never had that kind of thought before with anybody else. Something inside me just knew. Up till the time I first met him, I had been meditating intensively for most of the day for a period of about eighteen

months. My mind was fairly quiet most of the time and I really felt that I was making good progress on the road to Self-realisation. However, within a few seconds of being looked at by Lakshmana Swamy, I was in a state of stillness and peace that was way beyond anything that I had experienced through my own efforts. That one *darshan* effectively demonstrated to me the need for a human Guru, and it also demonstrated to me that there were still people alive in the Ramana lineage who seemed to have the same power and presence that I had read about in so many Ramanasramam books. Since that day a large portion of my life and energy has been devoted to serving such beings and writing about their life and teachings.

RS: What is Self-realisation? The terms ‘glimpse’ and ‘waking-up experience’ appear in *Nothing Ever Happened*. Did you invent these terms? What is the relationship between a glimpse or waking-up experience and Self-realisation?

DG: I would say that Self-realisation is what remains when the mind irrevocably dies in the Heart. The Heart is not a particular place in the body. It is the formless Self, the source and origin of all manifestation. Self-realisation is permanent and irreversible. I also suspect that it is quite rare. Many people have had glimpses or temporary experiences of a state of being in which the mind, the individual ‘I’, temporarily stops functioning, but I don’t think that there are many people in the world in whom the ‘I’ has died.

Papaji used to say, ‘What comes and goes is not real. If you have had an experience that came and went, it was not an experience of the Self because the Self never comes and goes.’

I think this is an interesting comment. If it is true, it means that most waking-up experiences are merely new states of mind. It is only when the mind dies completely, never to rise again, that the Self really shines as one’s own natural state.

The terms ‘glimpses’ and ‘waking-up experiences’ that you refer to are temporary. They come and they go because the ‘I’ itself has not been permanently eradicated. A powerful Guru may be able to give a glimpse of the Self to just about anyone, but it is not within his power to make it stick. If the person has a mind that is full of desires, those desires will eventually rise again and cover up the glimpse.

RS: Do Westerners tend to have an exaggerated idea of the significance of these preliminary experiences?

DG: When these temporary no-mind states are being experienced, their importance can be greatly exaggerated by people who think that they have attained permanent enlightenment. But in most cases the feeling of self-importance vanishes along with the experience.

RS: I think you quote Papaji as saying that he met only two Self-realised people in his entire life, Sri Ramana and a Spanish priest. But he also met Nisargadatta Maharaj. Does this mean that he didn’t think Maharaj was Self-realised? Can you shed any light on this?

DG: When I first talked to Papaji in 1992, I asked him how many *jnanis* he had met in his life. He scratched his head and came up with three names: Ramana Maharshi, a Sufi *pir* he met in Madras and Tiruvannamalai, and a wandering *mahatma* who lived in the forests between Tiruvannamalai and Bangalore. When I got to know him better, he would sometimes add names to the list, and Nisargadatta Maharaj was one of them. He went to see him many times in the 1970s and was very impressed with him. J. Krishnamurti also made the list, although Papaji didn't think much of him as a teacher. The Spanish priest never appeared on his list. Papaji said he was the best Christian he had ever met, but he never said he was enlightened.

This list might expand or contract according to his mood or memory, but it never exceeded seven. These were all people he had met on his travels. What I found curious about this was that he never ever included any of his own disciples on this master list, an omission that might lead one to infer that none of his disciples had actually attained the final *sahaja* or natural state of the *jnani*. This is both interesting and paradoxical since many of his disciples were told very categorically by him, 'You are enlightened. You are free.' When I wrote his biography, I recovered several thousand letters Papaji had written to devotees all over the world. I would say that at least fifty of them could produce a hand-written letter from Papaji congratulating them on their enlightenment.

In the vast majority of cases these experiences were temporary. I often wondered why Papaji was so enthusiastic about these temporary experiences, and many other people felt the same way. Lots of people asked him about this, but I don't know anyone who got a straight answer, including me. When I asked him about this phenomenon, he said that he lived in the silence and that when silence spoke, it always said the most appropriate thing, even though it might not be factually accurate. He added, 'I have spent all my life in that silence. I have learned to trust what it says.'

Implicit in this statement is a recognition that Papaji is sometimes telling people that they are enlightened when he can see clearly that they are not. He trusted the source of these statements, but he could never give a good explanation of why the silence was making him say these things.

RS: Here's a question from a reader which I pass along to you: 'Papaji says that the only thing that needs to be done is to stop all effort. When this happens, there is quiet and a sense of egolessness. But in that state, it is possible to ask "Who am I?" and find an observer whose source is yet to be found. In other words, in that state, it seems that self-enquiry is still needed. Does this mean that Papaji is teaching something different from Ramana Maharshi? What is the connection between this effortless state and the state of abiding in the heart?'

DG: When Papaji said in satsang, 'Make no effort,' he was trying to put the person in front of him into a state of no-mind in which no effort is necessary or possible, since the 'I' has temporarily gone. He was not trying to put the person in a halfway stage in which further effort is needed

Here is a paradox for you. Ramana Maharshi realised the Self without any effort, without being interested in it, and without any practice, and then spent the rest of his life telling people that they must make continuous effort up till the moment of enlightenment. Papaji spent a quarter of a century doing *japa* and meditation prior to his climactic

meetings with Ramana, but when he began teaching, he always insisted that no effort was necessary to realise the Self.

Papaji's attitude to self-enquiry was, 'Do it once and do it properly'. Ramana's was, 'Do it intensively and continuously until realisation dawns'. Although you could never get Papaji to admit that there were differences between his teachings and those of his Guru, they clearly didn't agree on the question of effort.

With regard to the question of the difference between the effortless state and the state of abiding in the Heart, I would refer to Lakshmana Swamy. He agrees with Ramana that hard, continuous effort is needed up till the moment of realisation. He also says that by effort the mind can reach the effortless thought-free state, but no further. If that state has been achieved, and if one has the good fortune to be with a realised Guru, then the power of the Self will pull the mind into the Heart and destroy it. In the effortless state, mind is still there, but when one abides in the Heart it is gone.

Papaji conceded that meditation and effort had a limited use. He would sometimes say that intense meditation would earn the *punyas* or spiritual merit necessary to have the opportunity to sit with a realised being. Once that has happened, effort is no longer necessary. In fact, it is counter-productive. When one meets the Guru, the power of the Self that is present in an enlightened being's satsang takes over and gives the results and experiences that the mind is ready for.

All this probably appears to be confusing and contradictory. The teachers I have written about disagree profoundly on the question of effort and its role in Self-realisation, but they all agree that being in the presence of a realised being is the greatest aid to enlightenment. I can say from my own experience that when one is in the presence of such beings, mind drops away of its own accord.

RS: In his book *Relaxing Into Clear Seeing*, Arjuna Nick Ardagh says, 'In the past few years, there has been a dramatic increase in the ease with which Self-realisation can occur. Indeed, a kind of "epidemic" has begun in the West whereby the awakened view is becoming increasingly available.' It seems to me that Arjuna is referring here to glimpses, not Self-realisation, and I wonder if they are any more common today than they have been in India for millennia. Perhaps the real difference is that Indians didn't regard these glimpses as particularly unusual or worth noting.

DG: I don't think that there is an epidemic of Self-realisation in the West or anywhere else. I think full realisation is a rare phenomenon. There are certainly more people who think that they have realised the Self, but I think that they are deluding themselves.

RS: According to some Western *advaita* teachers who claim to follow Sri Ramana's teachings, Self-realisation is a two-part process. First, there is an awakening, a temporary experience of non-duality and egolessness. The second step is to stabilise the experience of this awakening, or in other words, make it permanent. But when I read about Mathru Sri Sarada in your book *No Mind — I Am the Self*, I seem to get a completely different picture. In her case, a permanent awakening experience may have been necessary, but by itself was not sufficient. For her, Self-realisation happened only when her mind descended into her Heart center and dissolved permanently. I get the impression that she

could have remained in the 'awakened state' indefinitely without this descent into the Heart. Would you comment on this?

DG: When egolessness is there, there is no one left who can stabilise or lose the experience. These experiences come and go. They go because the *vasanas* of the mind reassert themselves. When they arise and take over, you resume the practice again. This is the classic prescription of the *Gita*, and it is also what Ramana taught. Stay awake, stay mindful, and whenever you catch the mind straying, take it back to its source.

As regards Mathru Sri Sarada, I think you are referring to the experience she had just before she realised the Self. She felt that her mind had died because she was temporarily abiding in the Heart, but her Guru, Lakshmana Swamy, could see that her 'I' was not dead, which meant that this was a temporary experience. She was talking about her experiences and genuinely felt that her 'I' was dead, but it was not a real, permanent awakening.

A few minutes later, with the help of her Guru, the 'I' went back to its source and died forever. There was no fully awakened state prior to this experience. The final death of the 'I' in the Heart was necessary to complete the realisation process

RS: Can you name any people who are teaching today who are Self-realised?

DG: I could hide behind my earlier statement and say that I am not qualified to say who is enlightened and who is not. That is true, but I have absolute faith that Lakshmana Swamy and Saradamma are in that state. I don't want to make comments about anybody else.

RS: What plans do you have for future books and other works?

DG: I am working on a third volume of *The Power of the Presence*, and I hope to see it published in a few months. After that, I have a project to translate and publish some of Muruganar's poetry from Tamil into English. He recorded many of Bhagavan's teaching statements in short Tamil verses, and most of them have never been translated. This will be a major undertaking that may take a year or two. I also hope to get back to working on Papaji in the near future. I particularly want to edit the Lucknow satsang dialogues from the early 1990s. That's a big job, though, and would probably take years. I recently volunteered to make a book of all Sadhu Natanananda's writings on Bhagavan for Ramanasramam. I will fit that in between all my other projects.

When I sit down in front of my screen in the morning I often have no idea what I will be working on ten minutes later. I might look at something I have edited recently, move on to something else, and then find another chapter of another book that suddenly grabs my attention and interest. Or I might switch the machine off and go outside and do some gardening instead.

I have come to the conclusion that Bhagavan brought me to Tiruvannamalai to write about him and his disciples. I have learned this the hard way. I went back to England twenty years ago, hoping to earn enough money to come back to India and not do any work here. Nobody was willing to hire me to do anything. I even flunked an interview for picking up litter in the London zoo. But as soon as I had the idea of writing a book about

Bhagavan, everything fell into place. Though I had never written anything in my life, I was given a contract by a major publisher and sent back to India to write about him. That's how *Be As You Are* came into existence.

A few years before that I gave up editing the Ramanasramam magazine and went to Andhra Pradesh to be with Lakshmana Swamy. My intention was just to meditate there. I had had enough of writing, but within a few weeks of my arrival he asked me to write *No Mind — I am the Self*. Whenever I do work on Bhagavan or his disciples, everything goes well. Whenever I try to do something else, so many problems come up, nothing ever gets accomplished or completed.

Having learned this from experience, I have now surrendered to this destiny. I enjoy the work, and many, many people seem to appreciate the books. I asked Papaji years ago whether writing all these books on Bhagavan was a distraction for the mind.

He replied, 'Any association with Bhagavan is a blessing'. I took that as an instruction to carry on with the work.

RS: Thanks very much for this interview, David. I learned a lot from it, and you have been extraordinarily generous.

DG: You're welcome.