

## INTRODUCTION TO THE 1998 EDITION THE LIFE OF SWAMI RAMDAS

It was during my student days that I first came across the writings of an interesting Indian spiritual teacher called Swami Ramdas. Reading his articles in various periodicals became one of my favorite pastimes. His lucid explanations, devoid as they are of philosophical and rhetorical hocus-pocus, resulted in my gradually acquiring a new outlook on life, and his direct and devotional approach to the Absolute rekindled my flagging interest in religion.

Great was my joy when I heard in 1954 that the distinguished Swami was going to give some talks in Colombo (Sri Lanka) where I was studying at that time. Naturally I seized this golden opportunity of seeing him in the flesh and savoring the sight of his holy face. I was influenced by the Hindu belief that the *darshan* or the mere act of seeing a spiritual master and being in his presence is itself a blessing, regardless of whether one actually comprehends his message. Such a *darshan* is regarded as a factor that furthers one's spiritual progress. Therefore I attended a crowded meeting in which Ramdas was going to speak. On this occasion I was accompanied by a friend who was an atheist. The tall bald-headed sage was seated on a dais. His upright and noble bearing bespoke confidence and inner peace. His large ears and prominent nose harmonized with his roundish face. Spotlessly dressed in white Indian clothes and clean-shaven, Ramdas radiated love and happiness from the very core of his being. I felt very comfortable and as it were bathed in the affection which emanated from him when I was in his presence. It was an emotion I shared with many of the others who were present. His all-embracing love endeared him to his disciples who affectionately addressed him as "Papa." He was wearing glasses, which subtly enhanced his venerable and professorial appearance.

Sometimes he looked serious or solemn but whenever he smiled or laughed, which he frequently did, the eyes of Ramdas sparkled cheerfully and his face assumed an expression of innocence and childlike simplicity. Ramdas was surrounded by numerous disciples and admirers, who were gazing at him with awe. He spoke English so fluently that listening to him was a sheer pleasure. Occasionally he would crack a joke or tell an instructional anecdote. His talk was punctuated with many references to Ram (i.e. God). He assured the audience that God can be realized by the constant repetition of His name. My atheist friend became very restless and complained: "I can't continue listening to all this nonsense!"

I held his hand and whispered: "Please be patient! A God-realized man can't help talking about God, can he? Ramdas is true to his name because 'Ram' means 'God' and 'das' stands for 'servant.' Servant of God—what an appropriate name!" My friend was so furious with me that he sighed with disgust and walked out of the lecture hall.

Revered as one of the greatest saints and spiritual teachers of modern times, Ramdas was born on April 10th 1884 in Hosdrug (Kerala, India). The boy was given the name Vittalrao.

The extraordinary luster in his eyes was so striking that it was generally regarded as the most remarkable thing about Vittalrao. Such eyes often bespeak brightness of mind and in fact a wandering *sannyasin* foretold a brilliant future for the boy. Concerning this rare light in his eyes, years later Ramdas modestly remarked: "This may mean anything or nothing."

His father, Balakrishnarao, began his career by working as a clerk for the government. Balakrishnarao's large family consisted of his wife and their thirteen children. Vittalrao, their sixth child, wrote appreciatively about his parents: "This divine couple, by their ideal life of householders, held up before the world an example as to how life in the world could be made supremely blessed and glorious. Selfless service at home and of the guests that poured into their house, was the keynote of their lives."

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Vittalrao disliked the discipline of school life and “the so-called education of those days.” His spirit yearned for freedom and adventure. Often he played truant. He not only distanced himself from school but also from arithmetic which was his pet aversion. He used to draw caricatures of his teachers in the classroom. From his teachers he received the most cruel chastisement although he loved them and his school-mates. He was punished even at home. Full of pranks and mischief, he preferred climbing trees to attending school. How he enjoyed hopping from branch to branch in a monkey-like manner! How he amused himself by somersaulting continuously before a merchant who used to reward him with pieces of jaggery<sup>1</sup>! His childhood was evidently an interesting blend of happy moments and trying experiences.

The religious atmosphere of his home was particularly suitable for the development of his soul—his grandfather’s regular *puja*, the singing of saints’ songs by his grandmother, the devotions and prayers of his father, his mother’s daily *japa* and the reading of the Puranas by an aunt. Between the ages of six and ten he was drawn towards trees, solitary spots and vast spaces. Like Wordsworth he was a child of nature.

One of his favorite haunts was the old dilapidated fort of Hosdrug. The cool shade of the trees there and its silence was for him an elevating environment. Inside this fort was an ancient temple. He used to hover around this temple in a state of abstraction under the spell of nature’s serenity. During his childhood there was not in Vittalrao the least ambition for any worldly position or reward. It is significant that he already had the makings of a *sannyasin*. He loved children and wished to remain one throughout his life. His favorite hobby was drawing pictures of persons and objects, which he was able to do because of an inborn talent for art. He also liked modeling with clay.

<sup>1</sup> A coarse, dark sugar, especially that made from the sap of East Indian palm trees.

When Vittalrao was sent to Mangalore for his higher studies, although his indifference to school education still continued, there now grew in him a thirst for general knowledge, gained either from day to day experience or by reading books. He passed no examinations during the period of his primary and secondary education. He eschewed all games and scarcely mixed with the other boys, though his classmates and teachers had some affection for him. Neither did he read the textbooks nor attend classes regularly. He spent his time as a voracious reader of books from his school library. He developed a liking for English literature and read the works of the great masters with the result that quite early in life he achieved a high degree of proficiency in English.

He was a good conversationalist and a raconteur with a fine sense of humor. Even in later life he would raise roars of laughter in his listeners through his keen sense of the comic. What appealed to him was not the serious side of life but the lighter. He was however by no means a superficial person. Another conspicuous early trait of his was a spirit of independence which enabled him to have his own distinct outlook on life. Both during his childhood and during his youth he did not care much what clothes he wore or how he wore them. He was so unconventional that he became indifferent to his external appearance. Throughout his life he remained extremely simple in his tastes and attitudes.

Vittalrao next joined the Christian High School at Udipi. It is hardly surprising that he failed the matriculation examination; thereafter he returned home where, in his own words, he “enlisted himself to the sublime profession of idleness!” For a time he immersed himself in the activities of the Amateur Drama Society in which he played a prominent part. Vittalrao played a minor part in Shakespeare’s *King John*; later when he played the role of a clown in another play he brought down the house; finally, in a drama dealing with the life of Shivaji he acted the part of Samarth Ramdas, the great Maharashtrian saint and *guru* of Shivaji.

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The time spent in school was not altogether wasted because it enabled him to become intimately acquainted with the Bible. He made the following observation about his own religious evolution: "The old Bible of the Christians, and the ancient religion of the Hindus in several parts of it, depicted God as a God of retribution, who cursed those who acted contrary to His commands. Ramdas knew the power of the *bhakti* cult of the Hindus and the teachings of Buddha and Christ. All these presented before us a God who is compassion, kindness, and forgiveness. To trust Him means to be entitled to His grace, and this Grace frees us from all hate, anger, and lust and converts us into His likeness. Ramdas had now begun to understand dearly the meaning and purpose of human life. This great ideal of God as love fired his heart and was slowly influencing his life."

In his writings, as in the above-mentioned quotation, Swami Ramdas refers to himself as "Ramdas" instead of "I." He always speaks of himself in the third person. On many occasions he has mentioned that Ram and Ramdas are actually one because he has realized his oneness with Ram.

Vittalrao's parents sent him to the Madras Arts School where he studied drawing and engraving. As he was fond of art he progressed remarkably well there. Afterwards he went to Bombay where he studied textile manufacturing in the Victoria Jubilee Technical Institute. His reminiscences of this period are interesting: "God's ways are inscrutable. The subject in which he had great interest and for which he had great love was given up and he had come to Bombay to study another subject for which he had absolutely no liking. Still three years were spent, not with the object of gaining any pass or distinction in the Institute training, but in studying life in close grips, studying men with intimate touch and association, reading books from libraries which could provide any and every kind of book on any and every conceivable subject. He saw life in its highest heights and in its lowest depths."

During the first two years of his stay in Bombay, Vittalrao lived with his best friend, Vadiraj, an employee in a German

dye firm. Vadiraj looked after him with tender loving care. Vittalrao reciprocated his friend's love with the same ardor. Theirs was a platonic relationship. Vittalrao has stated "Ramdas has seen brother loving brother, mother loving her sons, and friend loving a friend, but the love which this friend bore for Ramdas was something very rare. It can be compared to all the love of these three persons and much more. There was not a day when he returned from his office without a great longing to see Ramdas.... Whenever he got anything for himself, he would also get the same for Ramdas."

Vittalrao has also left us a moving description of his beloved friend's demise and how this loss caused him much sadness: "... the friend who was all love and kindness to him and under whose loving care and affection Ramdas spent his years in Bombay, had a severe attack of typhoid. His mother, two wives and some other friends were in his house at the time. When his condition began to deteriorate, he did not wish that any of his relations should go to his room except Ramdas and the doctor. Medicines and food were given to him by Ramdas as he would not accept them from the hands of others. Ramdas used to be with him almost the whole day. He stopped going to the Institute during these days. Till then Ramdas had not been near any person at the last stage when life was going out of the body. Ramdas did not leave the friend's bedside and he saw how gradually the disease was gaining the upper hand and wringing out his life.... When death claimed the friend, Ramdas' heart was agitated with great sorrow. He started crying like a child which had lost its mother. In fact, some years later he lost his mother, but the pain of that loss was not as severe as this.... The impression which this sad event left on him deepened his indifferent attitude towards the high aims and ambitions of this transitory earthly life. When circumstances force the soul to turn to its immortal, changeless existence, full of light, peace, and joy, it gets now and again glimpses of this supreme state, just as one gets flashes of light from the sun for a brief period whenever the clouds that cover it pass on." This heart-rending experi-

ence was an important landmark in the path leading towards his eventual spiritual Liberation: it turned his attention from the ephemeral to the eternal.

It was through his friend Vadiraj that he gained access to a library containing the great treasures of English literature. He continued reading widely, beginning with historical works and then changing over to poetry. Some of the poets whom he greatly admired were Shakespeare, Goldsmith, Byron, Browning, Cowper, Wordsworth, Shelley, Southey, Tennyson, and Keats. Next, he read the works of Burke, Carlyle, Ruskin, Schopenhauer and Emerson. He read them with great avidity but “could not find any suitable principles on which life could be safely founded though they did provoke thought and kindle an enquiry after Truth.” One senses a certain disappointment in Vittalrao: it was not mere intellectual stimulation that he was seeking but something else—a sound philosophy of life perhaps—which he had so far failed to find in books. It was then that he discovered the publications of the Rationalists’ Press Association of America. After reading the works of Ernst Haeckel, Grant Allen and others “the faith created and nourished during his childhood vanished at a sweep, and he turned into a skeptic. He felt that whatever he had read or heard from the scriptures about God and His worship, belonged to mental hallucinations. God was merely an idea conceived in the human brain. In reality there was no God; Nature alone caused all movements, and the two had no relationship or connection with each other. Ramdas remembers the expression often used in this regard—‘a fortuitous concourse of atoms.’ Everything happens by chance and there is no such thing as an immanent and overruling power that guides the destinies of all things. The scientific manner in which the Rationalists sought to prove that God did not exist, dashed his faith in God to pieces.... It is no doubt easy to slip from faith in God to atheism; the path being downward and slippery, the time taken for the change is short and quick.” He continued his reading, which included the Greek philosophers, Roman orators, German and French dramatists,

American and English humorists, and books on crime and detection.

His religious faith had almost disappeared but it revived when he came across the works of Swami Vivekananda, Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Swami Rama Tirtha. This renewed faith took deep root in him but in a different form because the ceremonial and ritualistic aspects of religion no longer appealed to him. "His ideal was a spiritual life built upon a sure and pure foundation of a strictly moral life and action. The idea of caste and creed vanished from his mind. He believed in a God who is the father of all members of the human race. God is universal, the divine source of all that exists. His heart bent before such a God." From now onwards he concentrated on the Hindu and Christian scriptures and when he read a translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* it was for him a spellbinding experience.

All this extensive reading was at the expense of his studies at the Institute! Although he had been treating his studies with indifference, he managed to pass the final examination by studying intensely for a month or two prior to it. Thereupon Vittalrao obtained his diploma in textile manufacture.

Vittalrao was resolutely against marriage when a matrimonial proposal was first made to him. But in 1908 at the age of twenty-four, after some hesitation, he married Rukmabai, a cultured and religious lady, because he did not want to displease his parents who had arranged the union, especially his sick and bedridden mother. He viewed the institution of marriage from a spiritual standpoint: "Marriage is considered to be a sacrament. It is to bring about the union of two souls so that they can walk hand in hand, as it were, on the path that leads to Divinity. But this significance is nowadays completely absent in the alliance of the two persons brought about by the ceremony or ritual of wedlock. In Ramdas' case the marriage was not a success as he fully expected it. But that life gave him an experience which was needed for the complete understanding of life and its implications. Just as the harmo-



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nious mingling of two souls provides us with opportunities to realize the beauty of life, so also the constant friction between two souls removes all the dross that covers the soul so that it may appear in all its nakedness before the Great Being from whom it has manifested.”

Vittalrao now entered an unsettled phase in his life. His checkered career consisted of short periods of employment which were interspersed with longer periods when he was out of work. When his elder brother started a handloom and soap-making business in Madras, Vittalrao helped him a great deal, although his training in textile manufacture was more appropriate for a power-driven cotton mill. For a short time he secured employment as a spinning master in a cotton mill at Gulbarga. He lost this job when the management of the mill changed hands.

It is an interesting fact that adverse circumstances did not depress him; on the contrary, he tended to become more optimistic. Life is full of challenges and he was willing to accept them cheerfully. He regarded the movement of life as a huge joke: whatever happened, favorable or unfavorable, he gladly accepted it, seeing it as the *lila* of the Lord. This attitude prevailed throughout his life, even prior to his spiritual metamorphosis, which will be described later in this account. Wherever he worked, Vittalrao was appreciated by his superiors, subordinates and colleagues for he was efficient and painstaking. He also desired to help the less privileged workers.

Once when Vittalrao was holding the position of spinning master in a mill at Gadag, a certain disciplinary action that he took against a worker resulted in some of them wanting to assault him as he left the mill in the evening. Although some of the assistants warned him of their violent intentions, he ignored these warnings, and walked towards the gate where he confronted a group of workers who were armed with sticks. He simply smiled and remained unruffled and they did not attack him!

Next he worked in a mill at Quilon, where he was later promoted to the position of manager. The mill was in dire financial straits. There he was badly off for he did not get the full salary that was his due. He was so hard-pressed for money that he had to close down his own house and send his wife back to Mangalore. One Sunday when Vittalrao was alone in his office, a fitter who had not received his wages for several months, stood at the entrance to his office with a large knife and threatened that unless his wages were given immediately he would not allow Vittalrao to leave the place. Vittalrao not only told the desperate man that he was prepared to fight his way out but he also brandished a heavy rosewood ruler. This attitude quite surprised the fitter who, noticing Vittalrao's grim determination, fled in fear. Vittalrao was a brave person who did not mind facing dangers and risking his own life.

Five years after Vittalrao's half-hearted marriage his daughter Ramabai was born. His professional career, like his domestic life, was not without troubles and he was sometimes out of work. When he was employed at a waste mill in Madras for a period of two years the mill's proprietor cheated Vittalrao, who was deprived of more than half his salary. Whenever Vittalrao pressed for his money, the dishonest proprietor would say "Brother, God will give; God will give" but the Almighty failed to provide it! Next he got a job as a spinning master in the Coimbatore Spinning Mills whither he moved with his wife and child. The European managers of the mill became displeased when he championed the cause of his subordinates, especially that of the mill-hands. During this period the death of his beloved mother was an event that affected him very deeply. He had to rush to Hosdrug for the funeral. When he returned to Coimbatore he was asked to quit his job. He was again in search of employment, soon after the emotional crisis caused by the loss of someone so near and dear.

On one occasion Vittalrao found work in a mill owned by an irascible old man who was given to using violent and abusive language. None of his employees escaped his verbal

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attacks. Vittalrao's contract was only for a period of four months. When Vittalrao warned his boss that his violent words would not be tolerated even for a moment, within two months of his commencing work the proprietor paid his full salary for the stipulated term and dismissed him. This incident illustrates Vittalrao's daring and his sturdy independence.

At a time when he was filled with disgust because of the need to look for employment every now and again, he received an invitation from his father-in-law at Mangalore to join him in his cloth business. The offer was accepted towards the end of 1917. Their commercial partnership foundered before long because Vittalrao disliked the chicanery and subterfuge usually associated with trade.

Inside a room he started dyeing and printing saris. When his wife was critically ill with a severe attack of smallpox, Vittalrao knelt before a photo of Sri Pandurangashram Swamiji of Chitrapur Math, Shirali, and prayed for her recovery. Tears rolled down his cheeks as he prayed and he experienced a certain peacefulness of mind. From that moment the patient's condition began to improve and she was soon back to normal. This experience resulted in an important change in Vittalrao. He became increasingly religious and would talk only of God and the teachings of the saints. He would also pour out his heart, especially to his elder brother Sitaramrao who was also devotionally inclined. His business expanded and flourished and the two brothers cooperated to establish the firm Sri Sitaram Vittal Co. Later their brother Narsingrao also joined the enterprise as a partner. The goods produced by this company were highly appreciated and even won a gold medal at an exhibition. But the business seemed doomed to disaster: the wages paid to his workmen were too high; members of staff received frequent increments; the profits were canceled out by the overheads; there was no capital to back up the firm or reserves to draw on in times of financial hardship. Vittalrao was generous to a fault and he lacked the calculating shrewdness that is characteristic of many a successful businessman.

Adversity was his constant companion. Not only was his business deteriorating but his wife had become a chronic asthmatic. Such misfortunes were counterbalanced by the joy of caring for his only child. He loved his daughter with all his heart, taking her to school in the mornings and bringing her back in the afternoons, playing games with her and answering all her questions. But before long this love for his only offspring was going to be superseded by his universal vision—his own child and all other children would be viewed with the same all-embracing love, unblemished by any feeling of partiality or discrimination whatsoever.

He spent an hour every evening at the house of his brother Sitaramrao with whose children he would participate in the communal singing of hymns before an image of Sri Krishna. During the *bhajan* he would experience a state of ecstasy. He also began studying anew the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, Swami Rama Tirtha and other classics such as *Yoga Vasishtha*. These pursuits quickened his spiritual evolution.

This was the time when Vittalrao began the spiritual practice of frequently repeating “Ram”—the sacred name of the Lord. It was a *sadhana* that brought him much peace and happiness. His business was faring so badly that creditors were insisting on the settlement of their dues. Only a miracle could save him from financial ruin. Then, providentially a prosperous lawyer turned up at Vittalrao’s house and offered to be his business partner. This person had recently given up his practice at the Bar in response to Mahatma Gandhi’s call to boycott the courts. Such was Vittalrao’s honesty that he did not withhold any information from him concerning the penurious state of the company’s affairs. The lawyer not only became a partner in the firm but also liquidated all its debts and even invested a large sum of money in new machinery for the production of *khaddar*.

At a time when fortune was at last beginning to smile on his business enterprise, Vittalrao did not cash in on his luck to become rich or accumulate capital as indeed many a normal

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entrepreneur would have done. Instead his mind was turning increasingly towards the Supreme Being whose name he kept on repeating continuously, even during the greater part of the night. He gave up taking his night meal and his lifestyle became austere. Neither his alarmed wife nor his daughter succeeded in dissuading him from following this new course of life. He strongly felt that it was God who had chosen this particular path for him.

An important stage in his spiritual growth was reached when he received spiritual initiation from his own father. How Vittalrao's unshakeable trust in Ram sustained him during this time is best described in his *In Quest of God*:

For nearly a year, Ramdas struggled on in a world full of cares, anxieties and pains. It was a period of terrible stress and restlessness—all of his own making. In this utterly helpless condition, full of misery, "Where is relief? Where is rest?" was the heart's cry of Ramdas. The cry was heard, and from the Great Void came the voice "Despair not! Trust Me and thou shalt be free!"—and this was the voice of Ram. These encouraging words of Ram proved like a plank thrown towards a man struggling for very life in the stormy waves of a raging sea. The great assurance soothed the aching heart of helpless Ramdas, like gentle rain on thirsting earth. Thenceforward, a part of the time that was formerly totally devoted to worldly affairs was taken up for the meditation of Ram who, for that period, gave him real peace and relief. Gradually, love for Ram—the Giver of peace—increased. The more Ramdas meditated on and uttered His name the greater the relief and joy he felt. Nights, which are free from worldly duties were, in course of time, utilized for Ram *bhajan* with scarcely one or two hours' rest. His devotion for Ram progressed by leaps and bounds.

During the day, when cares and anxieties were besetting him due to monetary and other troubles, Ram was coming to his aid in unexpected ways. So, whenever free from worldly duties—be the period ever so small—he would meditate on Ram and utter His name. Walking in the streets he would be uttering, "Ram, Ram." Ramdas was now losing attraction

for the objects of the world. Sleep, except for one or two hours in the night, was given up for the sake of Ram. Fineries in clothes and dress were replaced by coarse *khaddar*. Bed was substituted by a bare mat. Food, first two meals were reduced to one meal a day and after some time this too was given up for plantains and boiled potatoes—chilies and salt were totally eschewed. No taste but for Ram; meditation of Ram continued apace. It encroached upon the hours of the day and the so-called worldly duties.

At this stage one day, Ramdas' father came to him, sent by Ram, and calling him aside, gave him the *upadesh* of Ram *mantram*—"Sri Ram, Jai Ram, Jai Jai Ram!" assuring him that if he repeated this *mantram* at all times, Ram would give him eternal happiness. This initiation from the father—who has thereafter been looked upon by Ramdas as *gurudev*—hastened on the aspirant in his spiritual progress. Off and on he was prompted by Ram to read the teachings of Sri Krishna—the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Buddha-Light of Asia*, Jesus Christ-New Testament, Mahatma Gandhi-*Young India* and *Ethical Religion*. The young plant of *bhakti* in Ram was thus nurtured in the electric atmosphere created by the influence of these great men on the mind of humble Ramdas. It was at this time that it slowly dawned upon his mind that Ram was the only Reality and all else was false. Whilst desires for the enjoyment of worldly things were fast falling off, the consideration of *me* and *mine* was also wearing out. The sense of possession and relationship was vanishing. All thought, all mind, all heart, all soul was concentrated on Ram, Ram covering up and absorbing everything.

From time immemorial men and women from the Indian subcontinent and elsewhere have forsaken their worldly possessions to find God or Truth. They have endured tremendous hardships and privations in the course of their spiritual quest. Of the countless thousands who renounced the world only a few like the Buddha, Mahavira and Ramana Maharshi in modern times were conspicuously successful but many never seemed to accomplish anything. It was towards this well-trodden spiritual path that Vittalrao was moving.

He was becoming more and more ascetical. Dressed simply in a *dhoti* and a collarless shirt as well as a white cap, he happily walked the streets, constantly repeating the sweet and sacred *mantra* "OM. Sri Ram, Jai Ram, Jai Jai Ram." (Interestingly enough, Ramdas had prefixed "OM" to the *mantra* given to him by his father. Ramdas was much attached to Swami Rama Tirtha whose *mantra* was OM—the primary or original sound from God.)

Outwardly he was thin and pale but inside he was in a state of ecstasy on account of this ceaseless chanting. After rising at four o'clock in the morning he would have a bath and thereafter meditate until about seven. Such was his austerity that he ate only when he experienced pangs of hunger. Anxious relations of Vittalrao, who were naturally concerned about his well-being, tried to dissuade him from a life of self-mortification but he remained adamant.

Steeped though he was in religious devotion, this zealotness was certainly not at the expense of his daily duties for he conscientiously attended to his work at the weaving establishment. Devotion to the Deity had the effect of softening his heart, so he treated his workmen kindly and regarded his subordinates as his equals. He felt great compassion for those in pain. When, for instance, he once saw a carter mercilessly beating the bullocks he begged the man not to strike these poor dumb animals but his words were ignored. Vittalrao had to run away from the scene for he could not bear to see such cruelty. He advised his wife and daughter never to injure or cause any harm to any creature.

He was vaguely conscious that the time was fast drawing nigh when he would renounce everything but he did not know how or exactly when this would happen. He was eagerly awaiting the severance of all his earthly ties and his subsequent merging with the Divine.

The factors that induced Vittalrao to renounce the world and dedicate himself to Ram have been described in his *In Quest of God*:

So, one night while engaged in drinking in the sweetness of His name, Ramdas was made to think in the following strain:

“O Ram, when Thy slave finds Thee at once so powerful and so loving, and that he who trusts Thee can be sure of true peace and happiness, why should he not throw himself entirely on Thy mercy, which can only be possible by giving up everything he called ‘mine’? Thou art all in all to Thy slave. Thou art the sole Protector in the world. Men are deluded when they declare, ‘I do this, I do that. This is mine—That is mine.’ All, O Ram, is Thine, and all things are done by Thee alone. Thy slave’s one prayer to Thee is to take him under Thy complete guidance and remove his ‘I-ness.’”

This prayer was heard. Ramdas’ heart heaved a deep sigh. A hazy desire to renounce all and wander over the earth in the garb of a mendicant—in quest of Ram—wafted over his mind. Now Ram prompted him to open at random the book *Light of Asia* which was before him at the time. His eyes rested upon the pages wherein is described the great renunciation of Buddha, who says:

For now the hour is come when I should quit  
This golden prison, where my heart lives caged,  
To find the Truth; which henceforth I will seek,  
For all men’s sake, until the truth be found.

Then Ramdas similarly opened the New Testament and lighted upon the following definite words of Jesus Christ:

And everyone that hath forsaken houses or brethren, or sisters, or father or mother or wife or children or lands for my name’s sake, shall receive a hundredfold and shall inherit everlasting life.

Then again he was actuated in the same way to refer to the *Bhagavad Gita*—and he read the following *sloka*:

Abandoning all duties come to Me alone for shelter,  
sorrow not, I will liberate thee from all sins.



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Ram had thus spoken out through the words of these three great *avatars*—Buddha, Christ and Krishna—and all of them pointed to the same path—renunciation. At once Ramdas made up his mind to give up for the sake of Ram, all that he till then hugged to his bosom as his own, and leave the samsaric world. During this period, he was very simple in his dress which consisted of a piece of cloth covering the upper part of the body and another wound round the lower part. Next day, he got two clothes of this kind dyed in *gerrua* or red ochre, and the same night wrote two letters—one to his wife whom Ram had made him look upon for sometime past as his sister—and another to a kind friend whom Ram had brought in touch with Ramdas for his deliverance from debts. The resolution was made. At five o'clock in the morning he bade farewell to a world for which he had lost all attraction and in which he could find nothing to call his own. The body, the mind, the soul—all were laid at the feet of Ram—that Eternal Being, full of love and full of mercy.

He wrote his wife a touching letter in which there are references to “Rame” which is the pet name of his daughter Ramabai:

Dear Sister,

You are to me only a sister in future. Sri Ram, at whose feet I have surrendered myself entirely has called me away from the past sphere of life. I go forth a beggar into the wide world chanting the sweet Name of Sri Ram. You know I have no ambition in life except to struggle for the attainment of Sri Ram's Grace and love. To that aim alone I dedicate the rest of my life and suffer for it—suffer to any extent. We may not meet again—at least as husband and wife. Walk always in the path of God and truth, and make Rame do the same.

Don't give up the spinning-wheel. It will give you peace and happiness. Let Rame also work it.

Sri Ram's blessings on you and Rame. He protects you both.

Yours affectionately

—P. Vittalrao

27-12-22

On December 27th 1922 whilst still a young man of 38 he severed all his worldly ties and became a religious mendicant, turning his back on the comforts of hearth and home and preferring instead the humility and insecurity of a homeless life.

After bathing in the sacred Kaveri River at Srirangam, he cast his white clothes into the waters as an offering and wore the simple orange-colored clothes of a renunciate. Next, he prayed to Ram:

O Ram! O Love infinite—Protector of all the worlds! It is by Thy wish alone that Thy humble slave has been induced to adopt *sannyas*. In Thy name alone, O Ram, he has given up *samsara*, and cut asunder all bonds, all ties.

O Ram, bless Thy poor devotee with Thy grace. May Ramdas be endued with strength, courage and faith to carry out in Thy name, Ram, the following vows and bear all trials and all kinds of privations that may beset the path of a *sannyasi* in his passage through the rough and perilous life of a mendicant:

1. This life be henceforth entirely consecrated to meditation and the service of Sri Ram.
2. Strict celibacy be observed, looking upon all women as mothers.
3. The body be maintained and fed upon the food procured by *bhiksha* or on what was offered as alms.

From now onwards Vittalrao is called Ramdas or “Servant of God”: it is a singularly appropriate name for it marks his spiritual rebirth.

This inner regeneration filled him with extreme happiness. Freed of the past with all its problems and sorrows, Ramdas described the consequent state of bliss in these words:

The thrills of a new birth, a new life, filled with the sweet love of Ram, were felt. A peace came upon the struggling soul of Ramdas. The turmoil ceased. Ram’s own hands seemed to have touched the head of his slave—Ram blessed. O tears, flow on, for the mere joy of deliverance!

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Sorrow, anxiety and care—all vanished, never to return.  
Glory be to Ram!

In 1923 Ramdas had the privilege of seeing Ramana Maharshi and being in personal contact with this great saint for about five minutes. This memorable meeting proved to be a turning point in the life of Ramdas as he himself gratefully acknowledged in his *The Divine Life*:

Ramdas thinks it will not be inappropriate to recall here his own experiences ... at Tiruvannamalai, and to describe how, by having *darshan* of Sri Ramana Maharshi, he was prepared for the Universal Vision he had a few days afterwards on the sacred Arunachala Hill. It came about in this way. Soon after Ramdas had the *sagun darshan* of God in the form of Sri Krishna, he left Mangalore, as prompted by the Lord, and went about wandering from place to place. In the course of these wanderings, God in His own mysterious way took Ramdas to Tiruvannamalai. Ramdas' condition those days was like that of a child, waiting always for the mother's guidance. He had absolutely no *sankalpas* or plans of any sort. So when a Tamilian *sadhu* asked Ramdas to accompany him to Tiruvannamalai, Ramdas readily obeyed and simply followed the *sadhu*. The latter took him to Sri Ramana Maharshi. The very sight of the Maharshi left an indelible impression on Ramdas. Ramana Maharshi stands for *nirguna* Brahman and Universal Vision. So he poured into Ramdas, the necessary power and grace to obtain this vision.

When Sri Ramana intently gazed on Ramdas and the eyes of both met, Ramdas felt He was pouring into him His spiritual power and grace in abundance, so much so that Ramdas was thrilled, as His divine light shone on his mind, heart and soul. Sri Ramana's eyes always radiated a splendor, which was simply unique and irresistible—a splendor mingled with infinite tenderness, compassion and mercy. The few minutes that Ramdas spent in His holy company meant a momentous impetus in his spiritual career.

*The Essential Swami Ramdas*

After obtaining Maharshi's *darshan*, Ramdas went up the Arunachala Hill and remained there in a cave. During his stay in the cave, Ramdas was chanting Ram *mantra* day and night. He had absolutely no sleep and for food he used to take only a small quantity of boiled rice, which he himself prepared out of the alms he got. After twenty days' stay in the cave, in the above manner, one morning Ramdas' eyes were filled with a strange dazzling light and he realized the Presence of the Divine everywhere. This new vision of the Universal gave him such waves of ecstatic Bliss that he started running about here and there on the hill, embracing trees and rocks, shouting in joy "This is my Ram, this is my Ram!" He could not resist the rising ecstasy. This was his first experience of Universal Vision.

As a wandering mendicant Ramdas went to all parts of India. He had a large number of followers who were fascinated by his life and teachings. Posterity is indebted to him because he has fortunately left detailed descriptions of his travels and experiences, which have been published as two books entitled *In Quest of God* and *In the Vision of God*.

A feeling of triumphant ecstasy pervades much of the poetry of Ramdas:

O Ram, I see Thy form on every side;  
In all the worlds Thy light and glory abide.  
O Ram, Thou art the sun that shines on high;  
Thou art the moon and stars that deck the sky.

O Ram, Thou art the life that fills all space,  
And sets the whirling universe in its race.  
O Ram, I see in hills Thy form divine,  
In waters vast that flow and wave and shine.

O Ram, I see Thy light in jungles wild,  
In trees and plants and verdure mild.  
O Ram, all life reflects Thy godly light,  
Thou art all in all—Love, Bliss and Might.

—OM—

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Is there any connoisseur of devotional literature who would not like to savor the poetry of Ramdas and find spiritual sustenance therein? *Poems*, by Ramdas, consists of the bulk of his poems which were composed at different times for *The Vision*, an international monthly dedicated to “Universal Love and Service,” which was founded by Ramdas in October 1933 and personally edited by him during the first two years. In a letter to a Western devotee he stated that “Ramdas’ spiritual experiences have reached such a stage that he can hardly give expression to them. However in the poems in *The Vision* from month to month, he is struggling to give utterance to them.” His lyrical lines are the sweet outpourings of a heart that is inseparably linked to the Divine.

From the far corners of the globe people flocked to the feet of Ramdas, seeking his fatherly advice on the problems of life in general and spiritual matters in particular. Many also chose to correspond with Ramdas and his written answers to questions have been published in 2 volumes entitled *Letters of Swami Ramdas*. He certainly had the gift of lucid exposition. An extract from a letter written in 1928 illustrates the kind of spiritual guidance he provided:

Ours is to remain ever in complete surrender to Him. He does everything for our best. No condition is miserable for us, if we put full faith in this truth. Kings and potentates are unhappy in spite of their wealth and external glory, because of their lack of faith in the beneficent providence of God. The Almighty Lord of the worlds seated in our hearts is the sole doer. We are mere puppets. Let Him make us dance as He wills. Ours is not to question why. Difficulties and worries are not due to outside causes. They are due to a mind not surrendered up to God.

The world tour that was undertaken by Ramdas, lasting from August 1954 until January 1955, was one of the highlights of his later years. All his speeches and talks during these travels, including his answers to questions, were first pub-

lished in 10 volumes by Anandashram. The following extract is from a famous speech by Ramdas delivered in Bombay on the eve of his departure to Europe:

It was thirty years ago that Ramdas was first taken up by God and made to do everything as He willed. From that time onwards, Ramdas has been going round India, propagating the message of love and peace to all people who come in contact with him. But now it is His will that Ramdas should go outside India and move about in the world so that he can meet more of His manifestations in order that he may see in them also the same Beloved One he sees here, and has been seeing all along during his tours in different parts of India.

Now, the object of his going to foreign countries, as willed by the Divine—Ramdas uses the word “foreign” as it is a common usage, but in fact there is nothing foreign to him as the whole world is his home—is to propagate the ideal of Universal Love and Service. Ramdas can spread this message only in one way; and that is by beholding his Beloved in all, so that his love may flow out and inundate the entire world, removing all man-made distinctions and enabling us all to stand united as one world family. It is one Truth that pervades everywhere and all humanity is the expression of that Truth. Ramdas is going abroad to show all how it is possible to achieve this exalted experience. Everyone must realize that the Divine is within him.

Papa’s foremost disciple was Mother Krishnabai who first came into contact with him in 1928. At that time she was eagerly searching for a *guru*. The shocking news of her husband’s sudden death, leaving her and her two sons behind, filled this poor widow with sorrow. It was a major crisis in her life. She was deeply affected by the thought that she could not be present at her husband’s bedside during his last moments. Her spiritual progress was so rapid that in 1930 Mother Krishnabai realized her oneness with the Absolute. Thereafter she dedicated her entire life to the service of Papa and his mission. She played a very important role in the founding of the

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Anandashram at Kanhangad, which was inaugurated on May 15th 1931. When she accompanied Papa on his world tour in 1954, many friends and devotees felt they had been blessed by the experience of meeting them personally. After Papa's *mahasamadhi* she guided the affairs of the *ashram* and ministered to Papa's worldwide spiritual family until her own *mahasamadhi* on February 12th 1989.

Mother Krishnabai's autobiography, entitled *Guru's Grace*, describes her ordeals and years of struggle as well as her meeting with Papa, which culminated in her realization of the Supreme. This book was rendered into English by Papa himself from the Kannada. It was his last literary legacy to the world. Papa paid many tributes to her remarkable qualities in his Introduction to this work. "Krishnabai's life presents," he wrote, "a practical illustration of how an individual can live a life of spontaneous and intense activity while ever fixed in the Divine Consciousness born of complete self-surrender." This autobiography is unusual in that it is addressed entirely to Papa and all the persons mentioned in it are regarded as Papa himself in different forms.

The following passage from the autobiography is representative of the spirit of surrender and devotion that is characteristic of this book:

O love-incarnate Papa! Wherever we went, thousands of people used to come to you for *darshan*. As their hearts were filled with great love and devotion for you, the moment they had your *darshan* their hairs would stand on end and tears of joy would flow down their eyes. Some devotees, finding you in their homes, were so transported with joy that they forgot their bodies and sat still without knowing what to do.

Papa's numerous discourses and conversations as well as his pithy and sparkling answers to questions in India and elsewhere were faithfully recorded by Swami Satchidananda. These have been published in several volumes, notably *Ramdas Speaks*, *Ramdas' Talks* and *The Gospel of Swami Ramdas*.

These invaluable books are a source of inspiration to spiritual aspirants. Swami Satchidananda was very intimately associated with Papa from 1947 to 1963. For a time he served Papa as his secretary. He also looked after him with loving care: massaging Papa's body, applying medicated oil on his head and legs, giving him insulin injections (Papa was a diabetic and a rheumatic), shaving him and even preparing *roti* (home-made wheat bread) for Papa. A man who selflessly dedicated his life to Papa, the Swami is today the Managing Trustee of Anandashram.

It was Papa's 80th year. On the evening of July 25th 1963 he had a severe heart attack. He felt a choking sensation. He was collapsing, but his two closest disciples, Mother Krishnabai and Swami Satchidananda, managed to take him to his cot. While lying down there, he would suddenly sit up, chanting "Hari, Hari, Hari Ram." With the name of God on his lips Papa breathed his last. With all his mind and heart Papa had adored the sheer sound of the Divine name and it is significant that he even chanted it when he was sinking fast. The devotees were stunned and heartbroken by the suddenness of the end.

Placed on a perfumed bed of fragrant flowers, Papa's body lay in state. Those present were quick to notice that the saint's face had a certain serene and sublime radiance. Friends and devotees poured in and offered flowers, sandalwood and incense. People gathered to pay their last homage

—SUSUNAGA WEERAPERUMA

"Introduction to The Essential Swami Ramdas" by Susunaga Weeraperuma

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