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Section III: Virupaksha Years

Virupaksha Years, 1899-1916

The formless and imperishable Real stands revealed in the Aruna Hill, the embodied Presence of the three-eyed God. Since the Cave named Virupaksha sustains the very devotees who dwell within the Heart-cave of that God, well may we call it Mother.[1]

—Bhagavan Ramana

Ramana stayed in the Virupaksha Cave for seventeen years from 1899 to 1916. Ramana was just a young lad of twenty years when he shifted from Gurumurtam to the Virupaksha Cave. Ramana's feelings towards this cave are expressed in the stray verse extracted above. He considers it appropriate to call it "Mother" because it sustains the very devotees who give themselves wholly to the Aruna Hill, the embodied form of Lord Siva.

This cave is situated on the eastern slopes of the Aruna Hill. It is a unique cave, which has the shape of the mystic syllable "Om." It is named after Virupaksha Deva, a saint who lived and has been buried there in the 13th century. Many momentous events in Ramana's life took place during the years of his stay here. It was here that his mother Azhagammal came to live with him permanently in the last years of her life. She surrendered herself totally to him and was guided by him on the inward path. Her liberation at the sacred hands of Ramana is an epoch-making event.[2]

Another event of immense significance is Ramana's "first spoken *upadesa*" to a disciple, which was given to Ganapati Muni in 1907.[3] Till then Ramana had remained silent outwardly as well.

It was again at Virupaksha that Ramana communicated the experience of his enlightenment through his spiritual instructions to Gambhiram Seshier and Sivaprakasam Pillai.[4]

In writing about the Virupaksha years of Ramana, one might say that it is not a biographer's account but almost an autobiographical account by Ramana himself.

Hornets

In the initial years an attempt was made by the trustees of the Virupaksha Math, who owned the cave, to levy a small charge for the entry. Ramana did not want any kind of interference with his accessibility. Hence he moved out of the cave to a level path of ground outside it and sat under the shade of a tree there. When the agent tried to levy a fee there also, Ramana shifted to the nearby Sadguruswami cave for a short time. The trustees, realizing the inconvenience caused, stopped levying the fee so that Ramana could return to the Virupaksha Cave.

An event while at this cave as narrated by Ramana is fascinating. *"In those days I used to go all by myself. For answering calls of nature I used to stroll along taking no water with me, but going wherever water may be available.*

Virupaksha Cave

It was on one such occasion, on one morning, that I came across the banyan tree of which I have spoken often.

"As I was walking on the bed of a hill stream, I saw a big banyan tree on a boulder, with big leaves. And crossing the stream, I wanted to get to the other bank and view from there this big tree. When I accidentally put my left foot near a bush on the way to the other bank, so that the hornets clustered round my left leg up to the knee and started stinging it. They never did anything to my right leg.

I left the leg there for some time, so that the hornets could inflict full punishment on the leg which had encroached on their domain. After a time, the hornets withdrew and I walked on. The leg got swollen very much and I walked with difficulty and reached 'Ezhu Sunai' (Seven Springs) about 2 a.m.

"Jadaswami, who was camping there then, gave me some buttermilk mixed with jaggery, which was all that he could provide by way of food. This is what actually happened. But afterwards, people have gone and written that I had purposely set out to explore and find the banyan tree described in the purana *as the one on the northern peak of the Hill, where Arunachala is said to be residing as a* siddha*. I never had any such idea. When I saw for the first time a remarkable banyan tree on a huge and precipitous boulder, I was prompted by curiosity to have a look at it. Meanwhile, the hornets stung me and I forgot all about the tree."*[5] The last words, *"I forgot all about the tree,"* show Ramana's sense of humor.

Ramana also composed a stray verse on this incident, which is extracted below:

Apology to Hornets

When I was stung by hornets in revenge
Upon the leg until it was inflamed,
Although it was by chance I stepped upon
Their nest, constructed in a leafy bush,
What kind of mind is his if he does not
At least repent for doing such a wrong?[6]

Composition of the *Five Hymns*

We have an account of how the *Decad on Arunachala* and *Eight Verses on Arunachala* came to be composed by Ramana spontaneously.

"One morning, when he was sitting on the verandah in Virupaksha Cave, the words *'Karunaiyal Ennai'* came to him very insistently, but he took no special notice of them. It seems the same thing happened the following morning also. Then Bhagavan composed the first stanza of *The Decad on Arunachala*. The next morning the words beginning the second stanza similarly came to him and he composed the second stanza; and so the thing went on every day, till the last two stanzas were composed on one day. On that day, after composing the two last stanzas, Bhagavan, it seems, started for *giripradakshina* (going round the hill). One of his disciples, Aiyaswami, brought a piece of paper and pencil and told another disciple who was going with Bhagavan, 'Bhagavan has been composing one stanza every morning for some days now, and today he has composed two stanzas. More may come to him today. In case they do, have this paper and pencil with you so that the same may be recorded.' Bhagavan actually composed the first six stanzas of the *Arunachala Ashtakam* (*Eight Verses on Arunachala*). It seems Echamma first got "The Marital Garland of Letters" published. Narayana Reddi came to know of the *Padikam* and *Ashtakam* soon afterwards and wanted to publish them. Then Bhagavan composed two more stanzas for completing the *Ashtakam* and the *Decad* (*Padikam*) and *Eight Verses* (*Ashtakam*) were published by Narayana Reddi. This is how the *Padikam* and *Ashtakam* in the *Five Hymns on Arunachala* came to be composed."[7]

The most famous of Ramana's *Five Hymns on Arunachala* is "The Marital Garland of Letters" with the refrain *Arunachala Siva*. This was also mostly composed during Ramana's circuits of Arunachala. The story of the need for composing these 108 verses has been mentioned by Ramana. In order to feed Ramana and the fellow devotees at the Virupaksha Cave it became necessary to beg for alms in the streets of Tiruvannamalai. Palaniswami wanted Ramana to compose a new devotional hymn so that Ramana's group may be identified by the people of the town. After it was composed a party of four led by Palaniswami would start out to town, blow a long blast on their conches, and start chanting "The Marital Garland of Letters." This was an announcement to the town's people that Bhagavan's party had left the cave on their begging mission. The party would give another blast when they reached the foot of the hill. A third call would be sounded at the entrance of the street. All the residents of the street would be ready with their offerings and the party would march along the street singing and some collecting the offerings. The food collected was ample, it seems, for all who gathered near Bhagavan and even all of the monkeys etc. "The Marital Garland of Letters" was specially composed for use by the begging party. Bhagavan humorously added, "'Marital Garland of Letters' *fed us for many years.*"[8]

Ramana with Children

Even though Ramana remained silent in the first years of stay at Virupaksha Cave, many children would climb up to the cave and sit for long periods just to be in his presence. After 1907, sometimes Ramana would join the children in their play. He played marbles with them and referred to this later as follows: *"The holes dug for the purpose must be there even now. Those children sometimes used to bring packets of sweetmeats and we all used to share them. During Deepavali they used to put aside my share of the crackers and bring them up to me. We used to fire the crackers together."*[9]

Ramana has also narrated how two children were emotionally moved when he was about twenty-two and living in the Virupaksha Cave. It seems he was sitting on a rock near the cave and a boy about 8 or 10 came there, looked at Bhagavan and, not being able to bear the sight of such a young and bright person taking to such a hard life of penance, was so moved by compassion that he started to sob and sobbed violently for some time.

Bhagavan said, *"Who could say what was the reason for his sobbing and why tears flowed out of him merely at his seeing me?"* Bhagavan continued in a reminiscent mood later in the day and added that another boy, also about 8 or 10 years old, met Bhagavan another day at Virupaksha Cave. He took such pity on Bhagavan that the following conversation took place between them. Bhagavan was sitting on a rock near the cave, all alone, and the boy met him there.

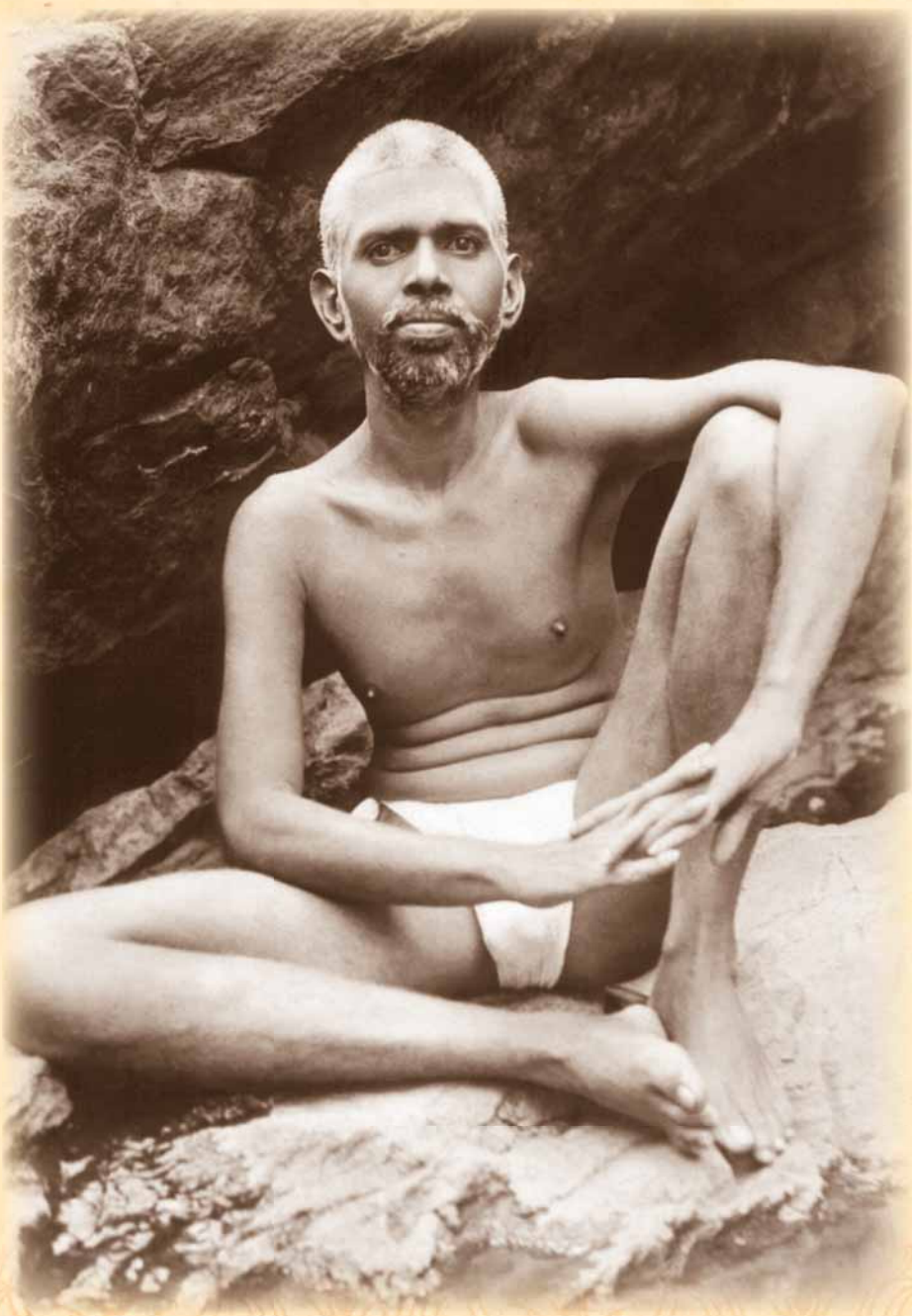
Boy: Why are you here all alone, like this?

Bhagavan: *I had some trouble at home and so have come away like this.*

Boy: Then how about your food?

Bhagavan: *I eat if anybody gives me anything to eat.*

Boy: I have a good master. I shall take you to him. First, you may have to volunteer your services free. If he approves of your work, he will give three pies a day and gradually increase it to six pies, and so on.



Bhagavan added, *"There was no doubt that the boy was very much concerned over what he considered my sad plight and that he was moved by great and genuine pity."*[10]

Some Other Incidents

One day Ramana was doing a small masonry job when some visitors came up in order to see the Swami. He told them, *"Swami has gone out."* When they were returning down the hill, they met Echamma who told them that the person whom they had met was none other than the Swami. She later asked Ramana why he had misled the men, to which Ramana replied, *"Do you want me to go about with a bell around my neck announcing 'I am the Swami' or to have a label on my forehead that 'I am the Swami'?"*[11]

In 1912, a group of devotees headed by Vasudeva Sastri, wished to celebrate Ramana's birthday for the first time. Ramana opposed it saying that the true birth is only when one becomes

The inside of the Virupaksha Cave as it is today

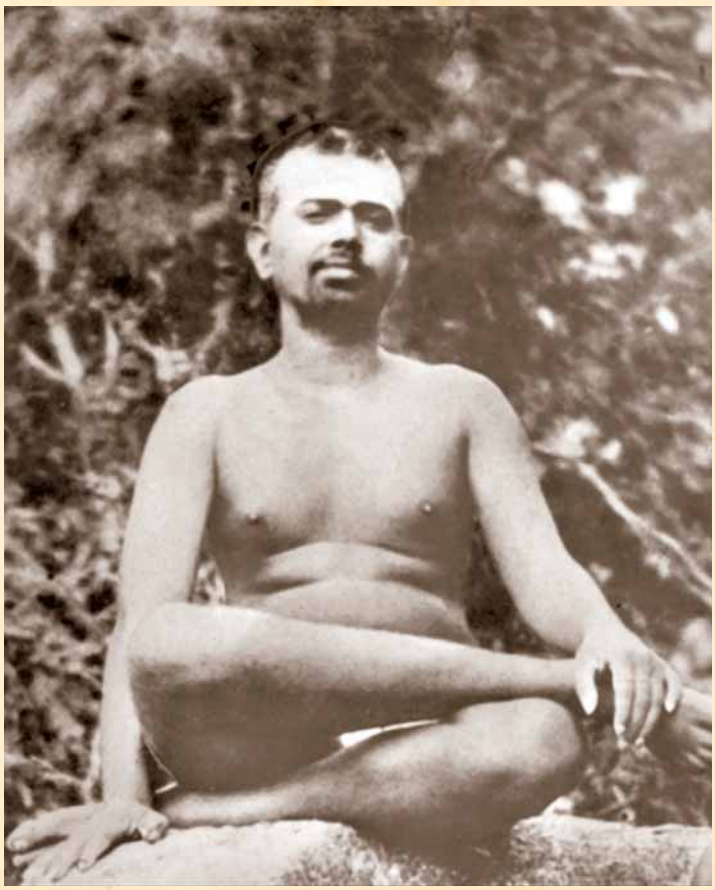
Self-aware. But Vasudeva Sastri pleaded with him saying, "It is for our sake and Bhagavan should not object."[12] Thus they celebrated it that year for the first time. Since then the celebration known as *jayanti* has been a very important occasion for all the disciples and devotees of Ramana. Once Ramana's grandmother came to see him. This is Ramana's account of it. *"She came while we were there and said that she would cook food for herself. We told her that she could do so in the cave nearby. She agreed and started cooking. She said to me, 'Venkatarama, I am cooking today. You should not take any other food!' I said yes, but after she left, I ate with the others as usual. When she had cooked, I ate that food also."*[13]

An old relative of Ramana's known for his abusive tongue came along. He was really a good-natured man and meant no ill to anybody. Soon after he came, he asked jocularly, "What Venkataraman, it seems you have become a big Swami! Have you grown horns on your head?"[14]

While at Virupaksha, Ramana also wrote in prose a Tamil translation of *Vivekacudamani*, a sacred scripture composed by Adi Sankara. Right from Gurumurtam days, Palaniswami used to bring Ramana spiritual books from the library in the town. At Virupaksha also he continued to do so. Thus Ramana became more and more acquainted with the sacred lore of Vedanta. In his early years in Virupaksha Cave, he would occasionally visit Padmanabha Swami, popularly called Jatai Swami because of his matted hair. The Swami had several Sanskrit books through some of which Ramana would glance, and remember all that he had read. We have already seen that even

Samadhi of Virupaksha Deva

as a boy at school he was remarkable for his prodigious memory. A scholar once came to the cave and left a copy of Sankaracharya's *Vivekacudamani*, a metrical manual of Vedanta, which expounds the truth of Advaita in a clear and comprehensive manner. Ramana read it and also a metrical Tamil version produced by Palaniswami. Then it occurred to him that a prose translation would be very useful for aspirants who did not know Sanskrit, so he undertook the translation which came to be printed and published under the following circumstances. "Uddandi Nayanar, who was the first regular devotee to be attached to Ramana, was called away in 1897 to the headquarters of the ascetic order to which he belonged. Seven years later, he returned with a hundred rupees as his offering. The Master refused to accept it, since he had no use for money and would not touch it. Nayanar left the money with a devotee asking him to utilize it for any good cause of which the Master approved. It was spent on printing the translation of the *Vivekacudamani*."[15]



In those years there used to be tigers and leopards on Arunachala. Ramana had no fear because the sign of a *jnani* is desirelessness and fearlessness. Hence the wild animals would not be frightened of him. An interesting incident is recorded by Vasudeva Sastri. "In the broad daylight Swamiji and I were seated on the rock outside the cave. In the valley below, a tiger and a leopard were playing with each other and Bhagavan was smiling as he watched the friendly movements of the two animals. I was however in a terrible fright and requested Bhagavan to come into the cave. He was adamant and sat there motionless. As for myself, I sought the shelter of the cave. The two animals played about for a while, looked at Swamiji in the same way pets do, and without any fear or expression of anger went their own way, one going up the hill and the other down. When I came out of the cave and asked, 'Swamiji, weren't you afraid when the two animals were playing so close to you?' Bhagavan said with a smile, *'Why have fear? I knew as I saw them that, after a while, one of them would go up the hill and the other down. And they did. If we get frightened and say, "Oh! A tiger!" They will also get frightened and say, "Oh! A man!" and will rush forward to kill us. If we do not have fear, they too will not have any fear, and will then move about freely and peacefully.*'" In spite of all that Bhagavan had said, Sastry added, "My fear never left me."[16]

Ramana would never take anything without sharing it with all those present. As a result often there would not be enough food to go around. Ramana has narrated what used to happen. *"When I was in Virupaksha Cave, Sundaresa Iyer used to go out into the town for* bhiksa *and bring us food. At times, there used to be no curry or chutney. People to eat were many while the food obtained was limited. What were we to do? I used to mix it into a paste and pour hot water over it to make it like gruel, and then give a glassful to each and take one myself. Sometimes we all used to feel that it would be better if we had at least some salt to mix with it. But where was money to buy salt? We should have had to ask someone for it. If once we began to ask for salt, we would feel like asking for dhal, and when we ask for dhal, we would feel like asking for payasam, and so on. So we felt that we should not ask for anything, and swallowed the gruel as it was. We used to feel extremely happy over such a diet. As the food was sattvic, without spices of any kind, and there was not even salt in it, not only was it healthy for this body, but there was also great peace for the mind."*[17]

The entrance to Virupaksha Cave

The Most Significant Event After Enlightenment

The first biographer, B.V. Narasimha Swami, had interviewed Ramana about an incident which happened in 1912 while he was staying at the Virupaksha Cave. This interview is given as an appendix to Narasimha Swami's biography under the heading, "A strange and remarkable incident in the life of Sri Maharshi."[1] The significance of this event is therefore likely to be lost sight of.

In 1912, Ramana, Palaniswami, and Vasudeva Sastri, and a few others went from Virupaksha Cave to Pachiamman Koil for taking an oil bath as facilities for such a bath were available in plenty in that place. After bathing they returned cutting a path across the hill for themselves.

The sun was fairly hot even at about 10 a.m. when they reached the tortoise rock. Ramana began to feel faint and what happened is best stated in his own words. *"Suddenly the view of natural scenery in front of me disappeared and a bright white curtain was drawn across the line of my vision and shut out the view of nature. I could distinctly see the gradual process. At one stage I could see a part of the prospect of nature yet clear, and the rest was being covered by the advancing curtain. It was just like drawing a slide across one's view in the stereoscope. On experiencing this I stopped walking lest I should fall. When it cleared, I walked on. When darkness and faintness overtook me a second time, I leaned against a rock until it cleared. And again for the third time I felt it safest to sit, so I sat near the rock. Then the bright white curtain had completely shut out my vision, my head was swimming, and my blood circulation and breathing stopped. The skin turned a livid blue. It was the regular death-like hue and it got darker and darker. Vasudeva Sastri took me in fact to be dead, held me in his embrace and began to weep aloud and lament my death. His body was shivering. I could at that time distinctly feel his clasp and his shivering, hear his lamentation, and understand the meaning. I also saw the discoloration of my skin and I felt the stoppage of my heartbeat and respiration, and the increased chilliness of the extremities of my body. Yet my usual current was continuing without a break in that state also. I was not afraid in the least, nor felt any sadness at the condition of my body. I had closed my eyes as soon I sat near the rock in my usual posture but was not leaning against it. The body which had no circulation nor respiration maintained that position still. This state continued for some ten or fifteen minutes. Then a shock passed suddenly through the body, circulation revived with enormous force, as also respiration; and there was perspiration all over the body at every pore. The color of life reappeared on the skin. I then opened my eyes, got up and said, 'Let us go.' We reached Virupaksha Cave without further trouble. That was the only occasion on which both my blood circulation and respiration stopped."*[2]

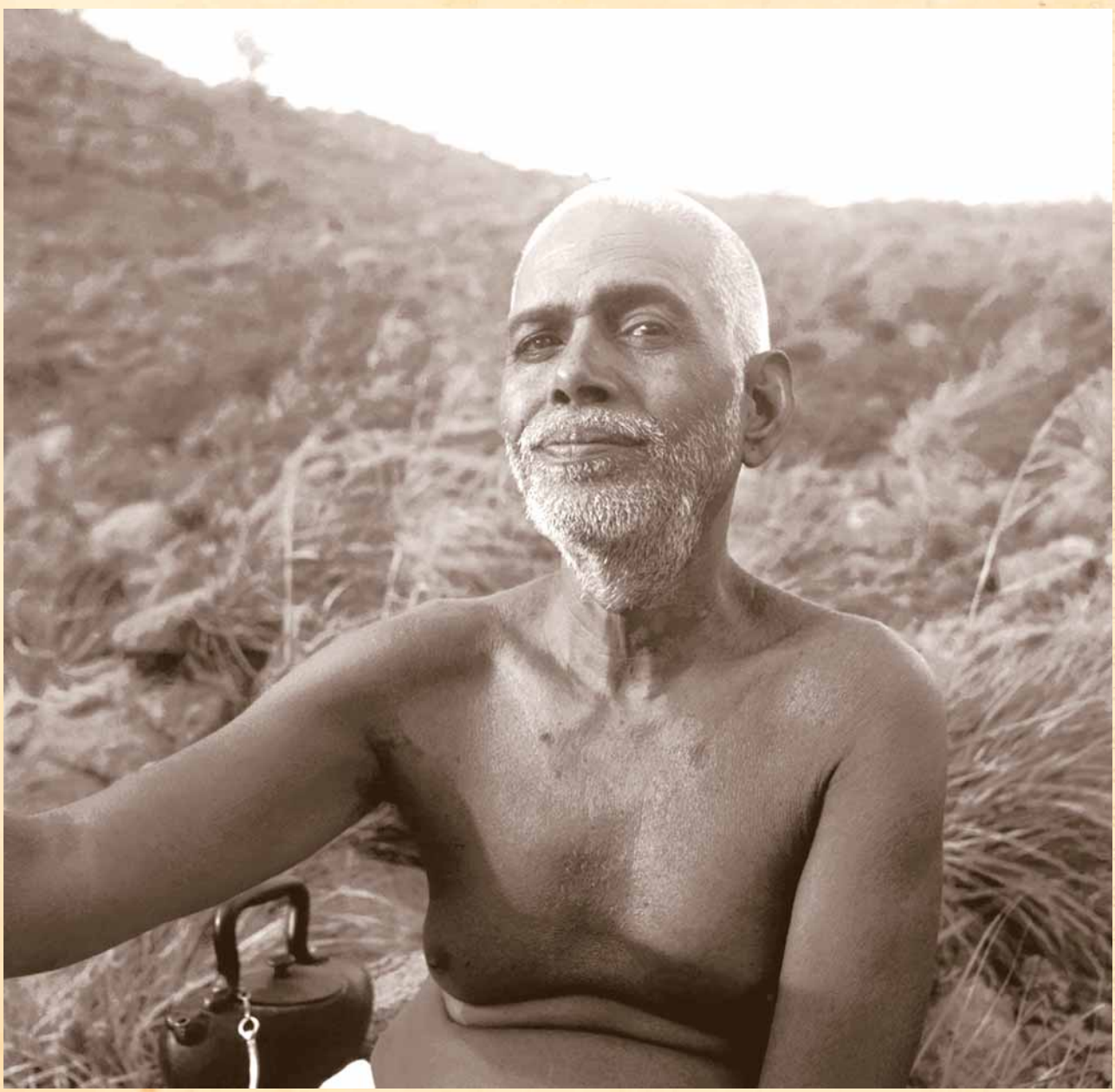
At the time of enlightenment, which happened on July 17, 1896, Ramana had only the sudden fear of death. However, in order to go through the experience of what death means, "he stretched himself like a corpse as though rigor mortis had set in and held his lips tightly together and his breath." It was not a physical death but an experience of death intensely felt as part of investigation to find out and discover *"Who am I? Still I felt within myself the 'I' was there, the sound was there, the feeling itself 'I' was there. What was that? I felt that it was a force or current, a center of energy playing on the body working on despite the rigidity or activity of the body though existing in connection with it."*[3] This experience that the true "I" was a current or a force or center that constituted the real "I" stayed with him for the rest of life.

The second experience is different in that there was a physical death for 10 or 15 minutes. The heart beat and the blood circulation had stopped and the body had become cold and blue. But the experience of awareness of the heart current as the "I" remained. This is the most significant aspect of this experience. Even while narrating the experience Ramana has clearly stated, *"Yet my usual current was continuing as usual without a break in that state also."*

Ramana himself has referred to this incident in the course of his conversation with B.V. Narasimha Swami, years later, in 1937. The relevant portion reads as follows: *"I used to feel the vibrations of the Heart, which resemble those of a dynamo, even in school. When I developed rigor mortis many years ago in Tiruvannamalai, every object and sensation disappeared, except these vibrations. It was as if a dark screen was drawn before my eyes and shut the world completely from me, but of course I was all along conscious of the Self, with a vague feeling that someone was crying near me. This state continued till just before I re-gained physical consciousness, when I felt something rush from the Heart to the left chest and re-establish life in the body."*[4]

One shudders at the thought as to what would have happened if the life force had not re-established itself in Ramana's body.

But then it had to happen only in that way in the divine scheme of things. One who is aware of the life of Ramana will also be aware that the earmarked role for Ramana in the divine scheme was to guide seekers of truth, as the inner and outer *guru*, on the direct path of self-enquiry for Self-knowledge. This role as the *sadguru* was to be for about another five decades in the body from



the date of this experience. Ramana's steady Self-awareness and accessibility ensured this.

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