

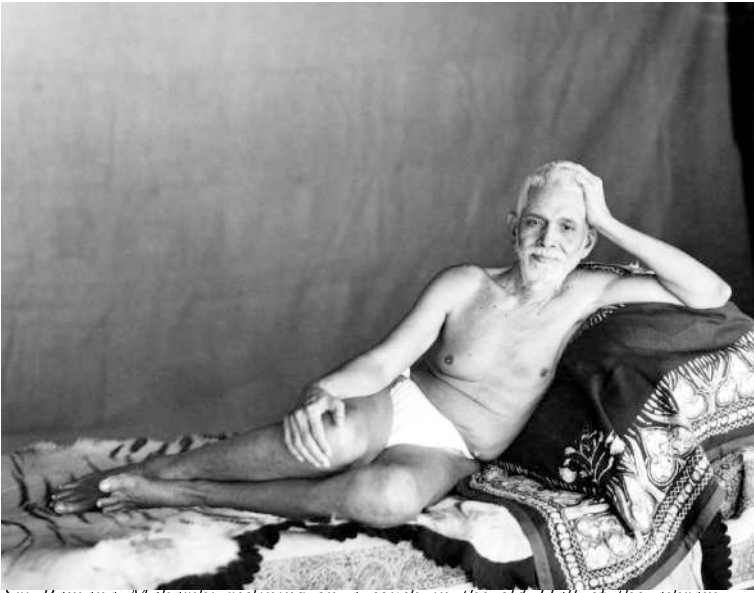
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*Two pilgrims pause for a rest on the holy mountain of Arunachala, to admire the breathtaking view of the temple town of Tiruvannamalai in the distance.*





*Sri Kamana Maharshi reclining on a couch in the old Hall of the ashram.*

## INTRODUCTION

Sri Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi is universally regarded as a great World Teacher and as the Supreme Guru. Tradition proclaims that every thousand or more years, a supreme guru, of the highest calibre, appears on this planet to set a new agenda for the coming millennium. This is Divine Grace, to assist all those perplexed men and women trapped in *samsara* – the endless cycle of suffering births and rebirths – and wishing to wake up and free themselves from this bondage.

The revered Adi Shankara was the last to fulfil this historic mission in the years between the 7th and 8th centuries AD. He clarified the eternal principles residing in the highest teaching of Advaita Vedanta which, when applied, leads to Self-realisation. In his commentaries on Sage Vyasa's *Brahma Sutras*, he lucidly codified the ancient

Non-dual Vedic and Upanishadic knowledge into a systematic form, easy for assimilation by the men and women of his day, and in the days to come. Now Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi has appeared, upholding the teaching of Shankara, but bringing certain important innovations for this current millennium and the generations to come.

Primarily, the Maharshi has made the great science of Self-Enquiry or *Atma Vichara* easier and brought it into the open, making it readily available for all, and no longer kept as a secret to be revealed only to the initiated brahmin pupils of traditional gurus. Sri Bhagavan let his Teaching encompass the Western world, as well as Asia, as it naturally did, leading to his being recognised as a true *Jagadguru*, the World Teacher.

The Maharshi was able to transmit his *Jnana* of Non-dual, Self-knowledge through Silence – a rare spiritual power, following the precedent set by the divine primeval guru, Lord Dakshinamurti, who was deemed a manifestation of Lord Shiva. He could readily converse with birds and animals, a unique gift possessed by only a few saints.

He also lived an impeccable life without any trace of blemish on his noble character, and was a veritable ocean of love, devotion, wisdom and compassion to all who came into his orbit.

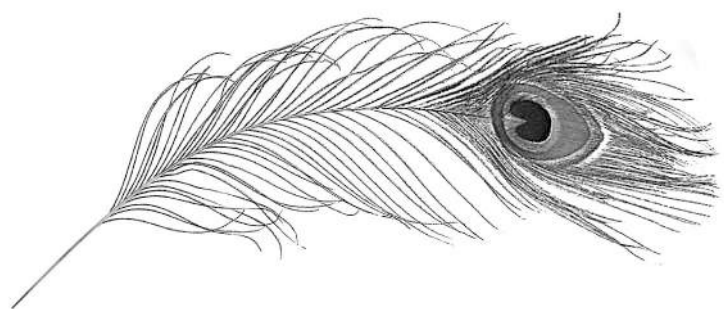
By his ineffable presence and Teaching, he created a global renaissance of interest in the high doctrines of Advaita Vedanta. He started a wild forest fire that is remorselessly burning down much of the dense forest of samsara, that is trapping humankind.

In this short and concise biography, I shall endeavour to portray his historic greatness and illustrate the tremendous advancements he has made towards the spiritual knowledge of mankind. At the same time, I will outline his important contribution towards the alleviation of the human condition on our troubled planet.

I also hope to, once again, make the fundamental principles of his great Teaching clear, for the benefit of those earnestly seeking the Truth about the nature of their real Self, and the apparent world in which we all live.

I have also included some poetry that is relevant to his great Teaching, an art that Sri Bhagavan himself loved, and in which he was a natural master.

– Alan Jacobs, President,  
Ramana Maharshi Foundation, UK  
London, January 2010





## FAMILY BACKGROUND

*“May Thou and I be one and inseparable like Alagu and Sundaram, O Arunachala!”*

– V. 2, The Marital Garland of Letters

The boy, later to become world famous as Sri Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi, was born into an ancient and revered brahmin family, one hour after midnight, on Monday, December 30, 1879, during *Ardra Darsanam* – the festival to celebrate Lord Shiva’s cosmic dance as Natarajan. This has always been commemorated as a highly auspicious day when, according to the *Puranas* – a collection of ancient Hindu religious texts, Lord Shiva appeared before his favoured devotees Gautama and Patanjali. The strong, healthy child born to Sundaram and Alagu was named Venkataraman, after their family deity.

He was the second of three sons of Sundaram Iyer, a highly respected, well-to-do brahmin who was a Court Pleader in the temple town of Tiruchuzhi in Tamil Nadu. Sundaram's father was Nagaswami Iyer of the Gothram lineage, issuing from the sage Parasara, from which the great Rishi Vyasa was also descended. Nagaswami had four sons, Venkateswaran, Sundaram, Subbiah and Nelliappier, and a daughter named Lakshmi Ammal. The eldest son, Venkatesa, bore the family responsibility for some time after his father's death, but later became a renunciate. The second son, Sundaram, then bore the family responsibility.

Venkataraman's mother, who was later to reach great spiritual heights in her own right, was named Azhagammal. Both parents' names coincidentally meant 'Beauty', his mother's in Tamil and his father's in Sanskrit. Tiruchuzhi is confirmed in the Puranas as a sacred place, where following three huge, threatening deluges, Lord Shiva miraculously intervened to save the town.

Venkataraman's mother and father were well known for their intense devotion to Lord Shiva. His mother knew many devotional songs, full of Advaitic truth, and was gifted with a delightfully melodious singing voice. From all that she has related about her son's birth, she said that during her



*Venkataraman's father Sundaram Iyer.*



*Venkataraman's mother Azhagammal.*

pregnancy she had experienced a most unusual pain in her abdomen. This was interpreted as being caused by the entry of a brilliant Being into her womb. At that time, she was said to have developed a wondrous lustre such as she had never displayed before. At the baby's birth, the midwife experienced a great blinding light. She told Azhagammal of her wonderful vision and said, "He who is born today in your house must be a Divine Being!" This event created much wonderment and speculation at the time: a prophecy that was to be perfectly fulfilled as the child grew up to adolescence and manhood.

He was brought up along with his elder brother Nagaswami, and Sundaram's deceased sister, Lakshmi Ammal's two children, Ramaswami and Meenakshi.

When Sundaram Iyer died prematurely in 1892, he left three sons and a daughter, Nagaswami aged fourteen, Venkataraman aged twelve, Nagasundaram aged six and a daughter Alamelu aged four. As our story unfolds, we shall see how this noble extended family played an important part in Venkataraman's remarkable and historic destiny.

## CHILDHOOD

*“In Thee, O Arunachala, all, having come into being and having stayed for a while, attain resolution. This is wonderful. In the heart, Thou dancest as ‘T’, as the Self. O Lord, they call Thee by the name ‘Heart’.”*

– V. 2, Arunachala Pancharatnam

The young Venkataraman’s childhood was as perfectly normal as any childhood could be. He was a well-built, robust lad, and had been breast-fed by his devoted mother until he was five years old.

There was also a motherless cousin, Meenakshi, living in the house at the same time. She was also breast-fed by mother Azhagammal. It later transpired that young Venkataraman gave comfort to his cousin Meenakshi at the



*The young Venkataraman attended the Sethupathi Elementary School in Tiruchuzhi.*

time of her unfortunate early death. The boy went near her and touched her. She rose up in surprise and said, “Who is it who has touched me?” This happened during the last moments of her life.

Young Venkataraman was exceptionally friendly and good natured, and was much loved by all the villagers. His open-mindedness, geniality and sense of humour were much admired. He attended the Sethupathi Elementary School in Tiruchuzhi for three years, where he learned the rudiments of Tamil, English and Arithmetic. As a young boy he had many playmates: one of his neighbour’s children Chellam, and his sister Subbukutty, were his close friends. Their aunt was very fond of Venkataraman and he was often invited into their home. There was also a boy called Kathirvelu whose name the young Venkataraman inscribed in his notebook, which is still there for all to see.

When he was eleven years old, he moved to the secondary school in Dindigul where his elder brother Nagaswami was known to be a diligent student. Venkataraman, although intelligent, did not seem to take much pleasure in school work. He was more interested in playing football and other sports. There, in the spacious Bhuminatheshwara temple corridors and the green open spaces surrounding the



*The tank of Bhuminatheshwara temple where the young Venkataraman swam with his friends.*

temple shrine, he and his friends took frequent dips in the *soola thirtha* – the temple tank. He possessed a truly compassionate heart, and this is illustrated by the following story that he later recounted when he helped a neighbouring boy. “One day a boy, three years younger, took a sugar cane together with a knife. As he could not cut it himself, he asked his brothers to assist him but they ignored his request. I felt sorry for him. I took the sugar cane and tried to cut it. My finger was cut in the process and began to bleed. The boy began to weep so I managed to cut the cane into slices. I tied my finger with a wet cloth, the bleeding however, did not stop right away.”

The rite of *Upanayama* or putting on the sacred brahmin



thread was performed when he was eight years old.

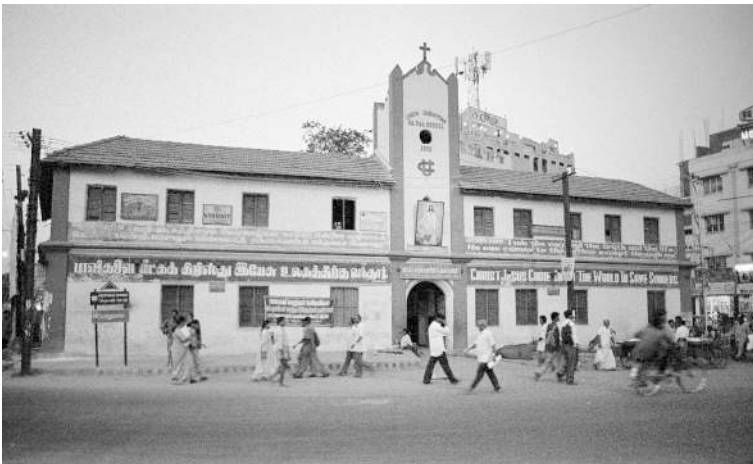
There was a family legend which now seems relevant to this account of his auspicious childhood. One day, long ago, a sadhu came to the ancestral house begging for food. Unfortunately, against tradition, he was not treated with the proper respect nor given a meal. The sadhu promptly issued a curse stating that from now on one member of each generation in this family would wander about, begging like himself. The 'curse' came true because in each generation one member renounced family life to become a wandering ascetic. One of Sundaram's uncles had donned an ochre robe, and his elder brother Venkatesa had also taken the same path. Little did Sundaram know that his son Venkataraman would also become a sadhu, but turn what was considered a 'curse' into a bountiful blessing for all humanity.

In 1892, the whole family suffered a grave shock. Sundaram, after a short illness, suddenly and without warning, died. He left behind three sons, his wife and a daughter. When the young Venkataraman returned from school to see his father lying dead, it made a tremendous impression upon him. He asked, "When Father is lying here, why do you say that he has gone?" This question must have been pondered upon considerably, as it was the question

of death, to which he was later to return with amazing consequences.

This sudden demise led to the division of this close-knit family. Azhagammal moved to Manamadurai with her two younger children. The two elder children, including Venkataraman, were taken into the care of a kindly uncle, Subbiah Iyer, and moved to his house overlooking the magnificent Meenakshi temple in the town of Madurai.

Here, Venkataraman was sent to Scott's Middle School, and later on to the American Mission High School. He was an average pupil who learned easily but showed very little interest in the worldliness of the lessons. Later, he recounted



*Venkataraman studied at the American Mission High School in Madurai.*

his memories of this time. “While the school lessons were being taught, lest I should fall asleep, I used to tie a thread to a nail on the wall, and tie my hair to it. When the head nodded, the thread pulled tight and used to wake me up. Otherwise, the teacher would twist my ears.”

He liked athletics and was stronger than most other boys of his age. He also enjoyed playing football, and people commented that somehow his team always managed to win, hence he earned the nickname of ‘Tangakai’ which means ‘Golden Hand’. In his uncle’s house at Madurai, a great change was soon to come over the lad who would influence the whole world for generations to come.

He was given a room on the top floor which was unused. Here he would play ‘throw ball’ with his friends and steal out at night to the Vaigai river, or the Pillaiyarpaliam tank, for a swim. He did not study Sanskrit, the *Vedas* or *Upanishads* (Hindu religious texts) in Madurai, as both the schools he attended were Christian, and he only learned about the Bible. As a youth, he was noted for his habit of sometimes falling into trance-like states. Once, one of his teachers told him to stand up on the bench for his failure to attend a lesson. Venkataraman gazed at him with such power and steadiness that his teacher’s will withered away and the lad was excused.

One of his best school friends in Madurai was a Muslim boy nicknamed ‘Sab Jan’ whose real name was M. Abdul Wahab. Venkataraman said they were almost ‘inseparable mates’. Later, Sab Jan recalled that, ‘as a student Venkataraman was intensely religious’, and most weekends they would visit Tiruparankunram and go around the beautiful Subramania Swami temple experiencing fervent ecstasy. Venkataraman would say, “God’s creation is all alike and there is no difference in creation. God is the same, the apparent differences are created by man.” Sab Jan said, “I then never felt any difference between a mosque and this temple.” They also visited mother Azhagammal from time to time, where Sab Jan was equally well received.

It was in this house in Madurai, opposite the great temple of Meenakshi, that the young Venkataraman experienced his momentous spiritual awakening, which was to have such a great impact on world spirituality in time to come. It began in November 1895, when at the age of sixteen, he first heard the whereabouts of a holy mountain called Arunachala.