

## Sri Ramana Maharsi

### Biography

Venkataraman (later shortened to Ramana) Maharsi was born on December 30, 1879 to a couple from the brahmin class in Tirucculi, South India (see Herman 8). It may have been his family's "curse" which led Maharsi to liberation and renunciation of normal life. "His household, according to tradition, was 'cursed' into surrendering one member of the family in each generation to become a monk or sannyasi (a 'renunciate') who would break all attachments to the world and live a life of holy solitude" (see Herman 8-9). After the death of Ramana's father in 1891, the Maharsis moved to Madurai to live with the boy's uncle (see Herman 9 and Godman 1). Here Ramana attended Scott's Middle School and the American Mission High School, learned English and participated in outdoor sports and games (see Herman 9).

At the young age of sixteen Ramana underwent the sudden and irreversible transformation to a *jivanmukta* ("one who is liberated while still alive") (see Herman 9-10 and Forsthoefel 246). On August 29, 1896 he was sitting alone in a room when he was abruptly struck with an overwhelming fear of death (see Herman 9 and Godman 1). He promptly lay down and essentially became "a corpse" by "stopping his breathing and closing his eyes" (see Herman 9). It was in this state that he became aware of the true nature of the Self. His attainment of *moksa* ("release" or "liberation") drastically altered the rest of his life as he also realized the futility of carrying out everyday tasks (see Godman 2). Six weeks after his liberation, Ramana followed what he considered to be his destiny, left his family, threw away his money and worldly possessions and made his way to the sacred mountain of Arunacala (see Godman 1-2 and

Sharma 1984:616). It was here that he spent the rest of his life “attracting loving attention, admirers and devotees from around the world...” (see Herman 10).

The first two or three years of his new life were spent in a state of intense absorption into his realized awareness. So much so that parts of his body were eaten away by insects, his fingernails and hair grew to incredible lengths and he scarcely ate. Slowly, over a period of several years he regained a state of physical normalcy without ever losing touch with his liberated consciousness which began to manifest itself as an “outer spiritual radiance” (see Godman 1). As word spread about the Hindu sage, people came from the far reaches of the world with their “questions, problems and concerns” (see Herman 11). Most of his teachings were conducted in a non-verbal manner. Ramana sent out a “silent force or power which stilled the minds of those who were attuned to it” and gave insight into the liberated state (see Godman 2). He felt this was the way in which people could understand his lessons in the most concentrated and forthright manner (see Godman 2). However, for those who were unable to understand his silent knowledge, Ramana occasionally gave verbal teachings (see Godman 2). He made himself available to visitors twenty-four hours a day and spent the rest of his life living in a small communal hall and delivering spiritual guidance (see Godman 3). In 1950, Ramana Maharsi contracted cancer and passed away at the age of 71 (see Herman 10).

### **Beliefs and Teachings**

The attainment of Self-realization and liberation is the ultimate goal of the teachings of Ramana Maharsi (see Sharma 1984:619). The process by which this is to be achieved was one of the distinctions of Ramana’s beliefs. He advocated the importance of an individual “inward quest” to realize the “ultimate source of the limited ego” (see Forsthoefel 243-246). This quest

was centered around the constant search into the question “Who am I?” (see Forsthoefel 246). Earnest inquiry into this question would bring a person to the awareness that the ego, or “I”, does not exist, thus destroying it (see Godman 53). In other words, “when the mind unceasingly investigates its own nature, it transpires that there is no such thing as the mind” (see Godman 50).

During one’s quest for liberation, and once Self-realization occurred, Ramana advocated assuming a “still” or “silent” mental state (see Herman 34 and Godman 13). Stillness during meditation on the question “Who am I?” allows for concentration on this topic only. This creates a “firm base for liberation” (see Godman 160). Once Self-awareness is known, an individual will have a “still mind which is adorned with the attainment of the limitless supreme Self” (see Godman 156). In other words, silence and stillness allow the identity of the Self to become assured (see Herman 13). Stillness is also strongly connected to Ramana’s emphasis on the individuality of the path to liberation.

Ramana insisted on the importance of personal experience in gaining liberation. He taught that learning from books was ultimately useless due to the fact that “no words, categories or concepts can apprehend the limitless Self” (see Forsthoefel 248). He also deemed the guidance of a spiritual *guru* (including himself) to be superficial and futile because a *guru* could not give an individual anything which they did not already have (see Godman 32). Each person has the ability to gain liberation; “all that is needed is that you give up your realization of the not-true as true” (see Godman 12). For Ramana, spiritual truth was unaffected by social and cultural differences. He promoted the thought that liberation is “here and now, available to any person, regardless of caste, stage, nationality or religion” (see Forsthoefel 245). On the subject of

non-Hindu traditions he believed that "...their expression is the same. Only the modes of expression differ..." (see Forsthoefel 251).

Ramana's teachings are considered to exemplify the *jnana* yogic path (see Godman 34 and Sharma 1984:623). *Jnana* yoga is "the way of knowledge" which is exactly what is gained through the destruction of the mind: true knowledge of the divine Self (see Herman 120 and Forsthoefel 247). However, this knowledge is not separate from the knower, nor is it an experience, it is "a direct and knowing awareness of the one reality in which subjects and objects have ceased to exist" (see Godman 10).

Ramana Maharsi's life took place in the context of the Indian Independence Movement. However, his views on social activism did not match other Hindu sages alive at that time (ie. Mohandas Gandhi). Ramana did not support Indian nationalism nor did he support any kind of social involvement (see Sharma 1999:102). It was of his opinion that individuals should focus on Self-realization instead of on social action (see Herman 14 and Godman 213). It was in this way that they would realize that the world is not different from Themselves and ultimately, "there are no others to be helped" (see Herman 14). This is a view which Ramana had to defend many times (see Sharma 1999:100).

## **Influence**

Ramana Maharsi is the only modern Hindu sage who is widely considered to be a genuine *jivanmukta* and who has spoken about this enlightened state at great length (see Sharma 1999:93). The sage "embodied the supreme excellence, the highest ideal represented in so many epic accounts, mythologies, and philosophical texts in the history of Hinduism" (see Forsthoefel 243). This gave him incredible appeal to not only the elite Indian classes but to lower castes and

non-Hindus alike (see Forsthoefel 251). He represented an intense spirituality which seemed to manifest itself in a radiating “presence” (see Forsthoefel 255). This presence provided legitimacy for Ramana’s religious teachings, added to his popularity and quickened the spread of his ideas (see Forsthoefel 252 and Herman 10). In this way, he was extremely important wealth of information for students and scholars interested in the state of a *jivanmukta* (see Forsthoefel 257).

In addition, Ramana was influential in that his religious philosophy was accessible to all people, in their present lifetime (see Forsthoefel 242, 248). These ideas were particularly progressive during the time period and thus were highly influential to Hinduism as a whole (see Forsthoefel 248, 257). The cross cultural aspect of Ramana’s ideas also added to the attention he received from other religious groups around the world (see Forsthoefel 250). His ideas and unique life experience inspired many people and were highly regarded on a worldwide scale (see Forsthoefel 251).

## REFERENCES AND FURTHER RECCOMENDED READING

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<http://www.arunachala-ramana.org/>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ramana\\_Maharshi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ramana_Maharshi)

<http://www.sriramanamaharshi.org/>

<http://www.realization.org/page/topics/ramana.htm>

<http://www.cosmicharmony.com/Sp/Ramana/Ramana.htm>

<http://www.angelfire.com/realm/bodhisattva/ramana.html>

<http://www.nonduality.com/ramana.htm>

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