

The Sage of the Century

Foreword to *Talks with Ramana Maharshi*

I am often asked, “If you were stranded on a desert island and had only one book, what would it be?” The book you are now holding in your hands—*Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*—is one of the two or three I always mention. And the *Talks* tops the list in this regard: they are the living voice of the greatest sage of this century and, arguably, the greatest spiritual realization of this or any time.

One of the many astonishing things about these *Talks* is how remarkably unwavering is the tone and style, the voice itself—not in the sense that it is fixed and rigid, but rather that it speaks with a full-blown maturity from the first word to the last. It is as if—no, it is certainly the case that—Ramana’s realization came to him fully formed—or perhaps we should say, fully formless—and therefore it needed no further growth. He simply speaks from and as the absolute, the Self, the purest Emptiness that is the goal and ground of the entire manifest world, and is not other to that world. Ramana, echoing Shankara, used to say:

The world is illusory;

Brahman alone is real;

Brahman is the world.

This profound realization is what separates Ramana's genuine enlightenment from today's many pretenders to the throne—deep ecology, ecofeminism, Gaia revivals, Goddess worship, ecopsychology, systems theory, web-of-life notions—none of which have grasped the first two lines, and therefore, contrary to their sweet pronouncements, do not really understand the third, either. And it is exactly for all of those who are thus in love merely with the manifest world—from capitalists to socialists, from green polluters to green peacers, from egocentrics to ecocentrists—that Ramana's message needs so desperately to be heard.

What and where is this Self? How do I abide as That? There is no doubt how Ramana would answer those—and virtually all other—questions: Who wants to know? What in you, right now, is aware of this page? Who is the Knower that knows the world but cannot itself be known? Who is the Hearer that hears the birds but cannot itself be heard? Who is the Seer that sees the clouds but cannot itself be seen?

And so arises *self-inquiry*, Ramana's special gift to the world. I *have* feelings, but I am not those feelings. Who am I? I *have* thoughts, but I am not those thoughts. Who am I? I *have* desires, but I am not those desires. Who am I?

So you push back into the source of your own awareness—what Ramana often called the "I-I," since it is aware of the normal I or ego. You push back into the Witness, the I-I, and you rest as That. I am not objects, not feelings, not desires, not thoughts.

But then people usually make a rather unfortunate mistake in this self-inquiry. They think that if they rest in the Self or Witness, they are going to see something, or feel something, something really amazing, special, spiritual. But you won't see anything. If you

see something, that is just another object—another feeling, another thought, another sensation, another image. But those are all objects; those are what you are *not*.

No, as you rest in the Witness—realizing, I am not objects, I am not feelings, I am not thoughts—all you will notice is a sense of Freedom, a sense of Liberation, a sense of Release—release from the terrible constriction of identifying with these little finite objects, the little body and little mind and little ego, all of which are objects that can be seen, and thus are not the true Seer, the real Self, the pure Witness, which is what you really are.

So you won't see anything in particular. Whatever is arising is fine. Clouds float by in the sky, feelings float by in the body, thoughts float by in the mind—and you can effortlessly witness all of them. They *all* spontaneously arise in your own present, easy, effortless awareness. And this witnessing awareness is not itself anything specific you can see. It is just a vast, background sense of Freedom—or *pure Emptiness*—and in that pure Emptiness, which you are, the entire manifest world arises. You *are* that Freedom, Openness, Emptiness—and not any little finite thing that arises in it.

Resting in that empty, free, easy, effortless witnessing, notice that the clouds are arising in the vast space of your awareness. The clouds are arising within you—so much so, you can taste the clouds, you are one with the clouds, it is as if they are on this side of your skin, they are so close. The sky and your awareness have become one, and all things in the sky are floating effortlessly through your own awareness. You can kiss the sun, swallow the mountain, they are that close. Zen says “Swallow the Pacific Ocean in a single gulp,” and that's the easiest thing in the world, when inside and outside are no longer two, when subject and object are nondual, when the looker and looked at are One Taste. And so:

The world is illusory, which means you are not any object at all—nothing that can be seen is ultimately real. You are *neti, neti*, not this, not that. And under no circumstances should you base your salvation on that which is finite, temporal, passing, illusory, suffering-enhancing and agony-inducing.

Brahman alone is real, the Self (unqualifiable Brahman-Atman) alone is real—the pure Witness, the timeless Unborn, the formless Seer, the radical I-I, radiant Emptiness—is what is real and all that is real. It is your condition, your nature, your essence, your present and your future, your desire and your destiny, and yet it is always ever-present as pure Presence, the alone that is Alone.

Brahman is the world, Emptiness and Form are not-two. *After* you realize that the manifest world is illusory, and *after* you realize that Brahman alone is real, *then* can you see that the absolute and the relative are not-two or nondual, then can you see that nirvana and samsara are not-two, then can you realize that the Seer and everything seen are not-two—all of which really means, the sound of those birds singing! The entire world of Form exists nowhere but in your own present Formless Awareness: you can drink the Pacific in a single gulp, because the entire world literally exists in your pure Self, the ever-present great I-I.

Finally, and most importantly, Ramana would remind us that the pure Self—and therefore the great Liberation—*cannot be attained*, anymore than you can attain your feet or acquire your lungs. You are *already* aware of the sky, you *already* hear the sounds around you, you *already* witness this world. One hundred percent of the enlightened mind or pure Self is present right now—not ninety-nine percent, but one hundred percent. As Ramana constantly pointed out, if the Self (or knowledge of the Self) is something that comes into

existence—if your realization has a beginning in time—then that is merely another object, another passing, finite, temporal state. There is no reaching the Self—it is reading this page. There is no looking for the Self—it is looking out of your eyes right now. There is no attaining the Self—it is reading these words. You simply, absolutely, cannot attain that which you have never lost. And if you do attain something, Ramana would say, that's very nice, but that's not the Self.

So, if I may suggest, as you read the following words from the world's greatest sage: if you think you just don't understand Self or Spirit, then rest in that which doesn't understand, and just that is Spirit. If you think you don't quite “get” the Self or Spirit, then rest in that which doesn't quite get it, and just that is Spirit.

Thus, if you think you understand Spirit, that is Spirit. If you think you don't, that is Spirit. And so we can leave with Ramana's greatest and most secret message: the enlightened mind is not hard to attain but impossible to avoid. In the dear Master's words:

There is neither creation nor destruction,

Neither destiny nor free-will;

Neither path nor achievement;

This is the final truth.