

# *The Unity of Surrender and Self-Enquiry*

*K. Swaminathan*



ne of Ramana Maharshi's most frequent comments was that there were only two reliable methods for attaining Self-Realization; one could either pursue self-enquiry or one could surrender.

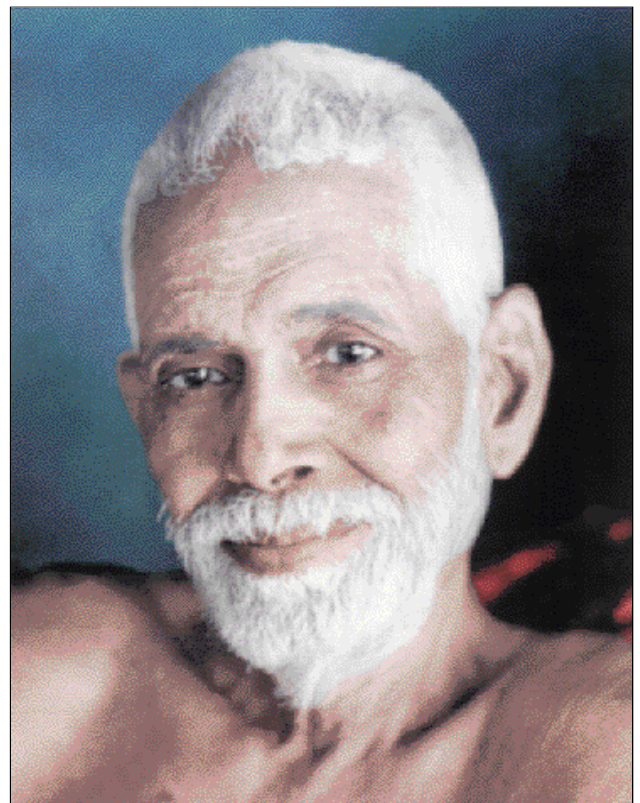
An almost equally common statement was that jnana and bhakti are ultimately the same. This second statement is usually interpreted to mean that whichever of the two paths one chooses to follow, the ultimate goal and the culminating experience will be the same. It is generally assumed that the two paths do not converge until the moment of realisation is reached. However if Ramana Maharshi's teachings are correctly interpreted, then it will be seen that the paths of surrender and Self-enquiry merge before Realisation, and that in the higher levels of practice, if one follows the path of surrender, then one's sadhana will be the same as that of someone who has chosen the path of Self-enquiry.

This may seem very radical at first sight, but this is only because of the general misconceptions that many people have about Ramana's teachings on the true nature, meaning and practice of surrender.

In order to eliminate these misconceptions, and to clarify Ramana's attitude and approach to surrender, it will be helpful to examine some of these commonly held ideas in the light of Ramana's statements on the subject, firstly to show how unfounded most of these ideas are, and secondly, by eliminating them, to illustrate



the profundity of Ramana's real teachings. The most convenient starting point for this enquiry is the relationship that exists between Ramana Maharshi, the Guru, and the thousands of people who call themselves his devotees.



There is a long tradition in this country (India) of people accepting certain teachers as their gurus, and then proclaiming immediately that they have surrendered to them. In most cases, this surrender is only a statement of intent, or at best, there is a partial surrendering to this new authority figure in the hope of acquiring some material or spiritual reward.

Ramana's opposition to this type of religious bribery was quite clear and it is best summed up in the following statement:

*'Surrender to Him and abide by His will  
whether he appears or vanishes;  
await His pleasure.*

*If you ask Him to do as you please,  
it is not surrender but command to Him.*

*You cannot have Him obey you and yet  
think that you have surrendered.*

*He knows what is best and when and  
how to do it. Leave everything to Him;*

*His is the burden, you no longer have any cares.*

*All your cares are His. Such is surrender.*

*This is bhakti".*

*(Talks, p. 425).*

This statement, typical of many that he made is a categorical refutation of the idea that one can surrender to one's God or Guru, and yet demand that the God or Guru fulfills one's desires or solves one's problems. Despite this often repeated refutation, it is probably true to say that the majority of Ramana's devotees both believe that they have surrendered to Ramana, yet at the same time, would not hesitate to approach him with their personal and material problems, especially if the perceived need required an urgent solution.

In Ramana's teachings on surrender, there is no room for stray desires, and no room for expectations or miracles, no matter how desperate the situation might appear to be.

Ramana says:

*"If you have surrendered,  
you must be able to abide by the will of God  
and not make a grievance  
out of what may not please you."  
(Talks p.115)*

Under Ramana's strict interpretation of absolute surrender, the only appeals which might qualify for approval are those where the devotee approaches the God or Guru with the attitude "This is your problem and not mine; please attend to it in any way you see fit."

This attitude bears the marks of partial surrender, for it fulfills the bare minimum requirements of Ramana's definition of true surrender. On this level of surrender, there is no longer any expectation of a particular solution, there is simply a willingness to accept whatever happens.

It is interesting to note in this connection that although Ramana clearly stated that devotees who wanted their problems solved were not practicing true surrender, he did admit that surrendering one's problems to God or to the Guru was a legitimate course of action for those who felt that they could not stick to His absolute teaching of complete surrender.

He was once asked:

"Is it proper that one prays to God  
when one is afflicted by worldly ills?"

and his answer was:

*"Undoubtedly."  
(Talks, p. 501).*

This admission that the Guru may be approached with personal problems should be seen as an extension of, and not a contradiction of his teachings on absolute and unconditional surrender. For those who are not ready for complete surrender, there is this intermediate practice of surrendering one's problems to the external "Higher Power." It is not a dilution of his notion that surrender must be complete and total to be effective, it is more an admission that for some devotees, such a massive step is impractical without some lesser intermediate stage.

If we can reach this point where we accept that we cannot ask Ramana to solve our problems and still claim that we have surrendered, then we move forward a few steps in our understanding of his teachings, but if we then try to put our new understanding into practice, we immediately encounter a new and apparently insoluble problem. The problem is that the desire to surrender is in itself a desire which we want fulfilled, and since, according to Ramana, true surrender cannot be accomplished without complete desirelessness, the presence of this desire in us is sufficient to prevent true surrender from taking place. It is the paradox of effort which is inherent in nearly all forms of sadhana.

Simply stated, the problem is that there is a perception that there is an individual self which wants to extinguish itself so that the state of Realisation will be revealed, but anything which this individual self tries to do to eliminate itself merely prolongs its own existence. If one sees spiritual practice as something that one does to attain Realisation, then there is no solution to this problem; there is no solution because the whole problem stems from the totally false assumption that this individual self has a real existence.

The first path along the path to true surrender is not to throw oneself at someone's feet and say "I surrender", it is the cultivation of the awareness and the understanding that there is no individual self to surrender, and that this individual self never at any time had, has, or will have any real existence.

When Ramana said on several occasions:  
"Who is to surrender what and to whom?"  
(Talks, p. 176),

he was trying to drive home this fundamental point that without this understanding that there is no individual self, then all spiritual practices are done under false pretences, and that meditation, surrender or self-enquiry done without this constant awareness are merely exercises in self-deception.

The best illustration of this point that I have come across appears in a recent publication called *The Secret of Arunachala*. In it, a devotee remarked to Ramana that a certain fellow devotee must be well advanced on the spiritual path because he meditated for eight to ten hours every day. (Page 73).

*"Oh," replied Ramana,  
"he meditates, he eats he sleeps.  
But who is meditating, eating, sleeping?  
What advantage is there in meditating for  
ten hours a day if in the end that only has  
the result of establishing you a little more deeply  
in the conviction that it is you  
who are meditating?"*

This aspect of Ramana's teachings, that one is already realised here and now is widely ignored when it comes to practice, but its importance cannot be overstated.

Ramana has said:

*"The removal of ignorance is the aim of practice  
and not acquisition of Realisation."  
(Talks p. 322).*

The most fundamental piece of ignorance is that there exists an individual self who is going to do sadhana, and that by doing sadhana, this individual self will disappear or be merged in some super-being.

Until this concept is eliminated on the mental level, it is not an exaggeration to say that one is wasting one's time in attempts to surrender or to enquire 'Who am I?' Correct attitude and correct understanding of this matter are of pre-eminent importance if the application of Ramana's teaching is to be successful.

Returning now to the practice of surrender, and bearing in mind the necessity of maintaining the right attitude with regard to the nonexistence of the individual self, there remains the problem of how to surrender since the mere desire to surrender invents an illusory person who is going to surrender.

The key to this problem and the key to all problems connected with the practice of Ramana's teachings, is to bypass the mind and move to the realm of being. One cannot truly surrender without escaping from that vast accumulation of ideas and desires we call the mind, and according to Ramana, one cannot escape or destroy the mind by any kind of mental activity.

Ramana's solution is to let the mind subside to the point where it disappears, and what remains when the mind has subsided is the simple, pure being that was always there.

In a conversation in *Talks* Ramana gives the following illuminating answer.

He says:

*"It is enough that one surrenders oneself.  
Surrender is to give oneself up to the original  
cause of one's being... One's source is within  
oneself. Give yourself up to it. That means that  
you should seek the source and merge in it."  
(Talks p.175).*

This is an immensely profound statement which not only sweeps away many of the myths that surround the practice of surrender – it also shows an indication that the route to the rediscovery of the Self is the same whether one chooses to label it "surrender" or "self-enquiry".

If we examine this statement closely it is possible to extract three important conclusions regarding Ramana's attitude and approach to surrender. Firstly, there is no external deity or manifestation to whom one must surrender; secondly, the source of one's being is within us; and thirdly, and most importantly, true surrender is to go back to the original cause of one's being and remain firmly and continually rooted there.

If this is translated into terms of practical advice, then surrender comes down to two words: being and stillness.

In *Talks* Ramana says:

*"Your duty is to be, and not to be this or that,  
'I am that I am' sums up the whole truth.  
The method is summed up in 'Be still'."  
(Talks, p.333).*

The stillness and the being which Ramana speaks co-exist with each other and reveal themselves in their full radiance whenever interest in one's thought stream dries up. Thus, for Ramana, the practice of surrender is to find within oneself this feeling of beingness and surrender oneself completely to it. On this level of surrender, practice consists of giving up wrong ideas by refusing to give them attention.

Ramana's statement that

*"The removal of ignorance is the aim of practice and not acquisition of Realisation"*  
(Talks, p. 322)

is extremely relevant in this connection, for it is only wrong ideas that separate us from a full awareness of our natural state. This final stage of surrender is simply a giving up of attachment to ignorance by bypassing the mental processes which cause and perpetuate it. The practice is the fruit of the conviction that there is nothing to surrender, for by denying attention to the mental processes, one is finally surrendering the erroneous idea that there is an individual self to surrender.

When one attempts to practice this conviction by putting attention on the feeling of being that is within us, thoughts and desires will initially continue to grow at their normal rate, but if attention is maintained over a period of time, the density of thoughts decreases, and in the space between them there emerges the clarity, the stillness and the peace of pure being. Occasionally this stillness and this peace will expand and intensify until a point is reached where no effort is needed to sustain the awareness of being, the attention merges imperceptibly with the being itself, and the occasional stray thoughts no longer have the power to distract.

When this point of surrender has been reached, all the ignorant misperceptions, which constitute the illusory ego, have disappeared. But this is not the final state of Realisation, because the misconceptions are only in suspension and sooner or later, they can emerge again.

Ramana has stated that the final, definite elimination of ignorance is a matter for Self. He says that effort can only take one to a certain point and then the Self takes over and takes one to the goal. In the case of surrender, the initial effort is the shifting of one's attention from the world of thoughts to the feeling of being. When there is no attention on it, the mind subsides revealing the being from which it came, then in some mys-

terious way, the Self eliminates the residual ignorance and Realisation dawns. Ramana summed it all up very neatly when he said:

*"Just keep quiet and Bhagavan will do the rest."*  
(Ramana Maharshi and the Path of Self-Knowledge p. 147)

This shifting of attention is the ultimate act of surrender. It is an acknowledgement that the mind, its concepts and desires are all ignorance, and that involvement in and attachment to the ignorance is all that prevents a full awareness of Reality.

It is an acknowledgement that nothing that is understood or believed is of any use; that no belief, theory, idea or mental activity will bring one any nearer to Realisation.

It is an acknowledgement and a final acceptance of the idea that all striving and all notions of attainment are futile and illusory. This simple shifting of attention constitutes the culmination of surrender because it is the final surrendering of the ignorant notion that there is an individual self to surrender. It is the final acceptance in practice of the conviction that there is only attachment to wrong ideas and that this attachment can be severed by refusing to give these ideas any attention.

This final level of surrendering ignorance represents the full flowering of Ramana's teachings on surrender, and any less absolute interpretation merely entangles one in the meshes of the ignorant ideas he was striving so hard to eliminate. It is admitted that as a concession to weakness, he occasionally permitted and approved lower levels of surrender such as devotion and worship, but for those who could comprehend and practice his more absolute teachings, he would be satisfied with nothing less than the total unconditioned surrender which is implied in the practice of being and the detachment from ignorance.

Bearing this in mind it will now be constructive to have a closer look at the practice of self-enquiry, and to focus attention on the large overlap that exists between enquiry and surrender. Ramana's advice on self-enquiry was clear, simple and direct, but like his advice on surrender, it has often been misunderstood and misrepresented. The easiest way to avoid errors is to remember three simple but fundamental tenets of Ramana's teachings; firstly, that we are all Realised here and now and that the only purpose of sadhana is to remove the idea that we are not; secondly, there is no individual self to extinguish because

the individual self never at any time existed; and thirdly no amount of mental sadhana is helpful because the mind cannot do anything except extend the frontiers of its own ignorance. If an awareness of these points is continually maintained, then the most obvious errors in practice can be avoided. One immediately sees that concentration on a point in the body is counterproductive because it involves mental effort. One can also eliminate the idea that self-enquiry is a mantra or an exercise in self-analysis because both of these approaches involve mental activity. On a more subtle level, if one maintains an awareness that the individual self at no time ever exists then one can avoid the dangerous but often deeply-rooted notion that self-enquiry involves one self looking for another self.

To cut through the entanglements of these and similar misconceptions, and to find out what positive practical advice Ramana had to offer on self-enquiry, one cannot do better than go back to the words of Ramana himself. In Maharshi's Gospel, he says that:

*"The purpose of self-enquiry is to focus the entire mind at its source".*  
(p.48).

The purpose of this focussing is the same as that which has just been outlined for the practice of surrender. According to Ramana the mind is only a connection of ignorant ideas and unless one steps completely outside this mental realm by keeping attention on the being from which the mind emerges, then the ignorance and the wrong ideas inevitably continue. It is important to note that Ramana never explains self-enquiry as a practice by which an individual self is eliminated, he always phrases his advice to indicate that when one looks for the source of the mind or the ego, they both disappear, and it is discovered that neither of them ever existed. This stepping outside the mind is as crucial to an understanding of self-enquiry as it is to an understanding of surrender.

In a passage in Talks he says:

*"The fact is that the mind is only a bundle of thoughts. How can you extinguish it by the thought of doing so or by a desire... Your thoughts and desires are part and parcel of the mind! The mind is simply fattened by new thoughts rising up. Therefore it is foolish to attempt to kill the mind by means of the mind.*

*The only way to do it is to find its source and hold on to it."*  
(p. 463).

This finding the source and holding on to it is the beginning, end and purpose of self-enquiry. The precise method is simple and well known. When thoughts arise one does not allow them to develop. One asks oneself the words "To whom do these thoughts occur?" And the answer is "To me," and then the question occurs "Then who am I? What is this thing in me which I keep calling 'I'?"

By doing this practice one is shifting attention from the world of thoughts to the being from where the thought and the thinker first emerged. The transfer of attention is simply executed because if one holds onto the feeling "I am" the initial thought of "I" will gradually give way to the feeling of "I" and then sooner or later this feeling "I am" will merge into being itself, to a state where there is no longer either a thinker of the thought 'I' or a feeler of the feeling 'I am'; there will only be being itself. This is the stage where attention to the feeling of "I am" has merged with the being from which it came so that there is no longer the dualistic distinction of a person giving attention to the feeling of "I am". There is only being and awareness of being.

If this practice is done persistently, then the verbal redirection of attention soon becomes redundant; as soon as there is the awareness of attachment to a particular thought then attention is immediately switched back to the being, from which the thoughts and the imaginary thinker came.

It is important to stress that the verbal preliminaries of asking "Who am I?" or "To whom do these thoughts occur?" are simply tools to redirect the attention; the real self-enquiry begins with the subsequent witnessing of the disappearance of the thoughts and the re-emergence of being as the mind subsides into temporary abeyance.

Ramana summarized this very succinctly when he said in Talks:

*"Abhyasa (spiritual practice) consists of withdrawal into the self everytime you are disturbed by thought. It is not concentration or destruction of the mind, but withdrawal into the Self".*  
(p. 464).

Since, in Ramana's terminology the terms being and Self are virtually synonymous, what he is

describing here is the practice of withdrawing into being, and remaining there undisturbed by the transient distractions of thoughts.

This practice may be viewed from two perspectives. On the higher levels of surrender maintaining awareness of being can be seen as a surrendering of wrong ideas including the wrong idea that there is someone to surrender, whereas in self-enquiry, one reaches this same point of being by actively discarding thoughts and by tracing back the feeling of "I am", until it finally subsides into the being from which it came.

Though the two descriptions might appear to be describing two completely different approaches, particularly in the preliminary stages, if the practices of surrender and self-enquiry are persistently and earnestly pursued, the two approaches finally merge imperceptibly into the single practice of being.

To surrender false ideas is simply to be and that same state of being is the point where thoughts and the idea of the thinker disappear.

This point, this state of being, is beautifully described in Talks when Ramana says:

*"It is the state of perfect awareness and perfect stillness combined.*

*It is the interval between two successive thoughts, and the source from which the thoughts spring...*

*Go to the root of the thoughts and you reach the stillness of sleep. But you reach it in the full vigour of search, that is with perfect awareness."*

*(p. 564)*

This point which Ramana describes so graphically is the point of convergence between the path of self-enquiry and the path of surrender. The final, definitive detachment from ignorance has not yet happened, for this final elimination is a matter for the Self. Until that elimination takes place one can only be, and once the awareness of being is maintained effortlessly, then the being of surrender in which one has given up all ideas, is the same being which results from witnessing the disappearance of the "I-thought".

This state of being is still a stage of sadhana, for it lacks permanence and the mind is liable to reassert its dominance at any time. However it is the final stage, and as such it is the purest and deepest level of both surrender and self-enquiry. It is a state which belongs neither to the world of ignorance nor to the Absolute Reality, but somehow, mysteriously, according to Ramana, it provides the link between the two.

When Ramana said on one occasion,

*"Do not meditate, BE, do not think that you are, BE",  
(Secret of Anurachala, p. 73),*

he was summarising the whole of his practical teachings, because for Ramana, it is only in this state of effortless awareness of being that the final Realisation will be revealed.

*(The Mountain Path, Vol.18, No.1, 1981)*

Om Sri Ramanarpanamastu