

Dear Friends,

Many people ask me ‘what is it about India, and in particular the town of Tiruvannamalai that pulls you back time and again? What could I expect from such a place?’ I can only answer that from my own experience:

I will start with India itself: I have had the privilege of being able to travel all over the globe, and many times to places of spiritual pilgrimage in India such as Varanassi, Rishikesh, Haradwar, Vrindavan, and several ashrams. I have had many blessed meetings with extraordinary beings, all of which have enriched me. India is a culture whose greatest gift to the world has been its emphasis on the blossoming of the soul. Deep love of God is just part of everyday life, unlike the west where the spiritual dimension of life is often overtaken in our approach by material emphasis.

Then there is the love and beauty that is so alive within the local people of Tiruvannamalai. There is a beauty of heart that is uncontaminated there and you cannot but be touched by it. Tiruvannamalai has extreme poverty and practical hardship, like what you will find anywhere in India. However, without minimizing the suffering, and the invitation to reflect and respond from our deepest innate compassion, there is such light in the faces of the people that it brings one home to what life really is all about: love.

I first came to Tiruvannamalai in the spring of 2005, because I was drawn to be in the ashram of Sri Ramana Maharshi. It affected me profoundly. One day meditating in the cave that was his home for 16 years, a huge spiritual opening occurred that altered the whole course of my life. It took me into direct experience of the non-dual core of Reality, into the stillness of being, which I had known about intellectually, but not as the fullness of my own essence. The core of that awakening has been integrating through me ever since, growing in depth as it blossoms to grace and challenge every dimension of life. Interestingly, the awakening did not occur as a result of more spiritual learning, rather, a spontaneous inner surrender. This I believe was a combination of many years dedicated and sincere inner practice, greatly enhanced by a profound energetic resonance coming from the environment; from Ramana, from this sacred mountain which seemed to be so dynamically alive, and from the many great souls over the centuries who had sat with the same intention here before.

I am not the kind of person to make a big deal out of ‘special places’. In principle, one could realize enlightenment anywhere, and.....there seems to be something about this mountain – Arunachala that is very, very alive. Hindus consider it to be the home of Shiva (God as destroyer of ignorance). Every month at full moon about a million people come to walk ‘pradakshina’ – a pilgrimage of walking around the mountain as a practice of purification, concentration and devotion. Since it is considered so sacred, it has a long history of attracting saints who have lived in the caves up the mountain, near the main temple, or in the area around it. The whole place is teeming with sadhus, pilgrims and those devoted to awakening to the non-dual experience of

silence that pervades all things. There is an incredible spirit of devotion and surrender being lived in Tiruvannamalai.

The place abounds in support for direct experience of the sacred. So much is on offer for those who are genuine. There is the beauty of Sri Ramana Maharshi's ashram, a profoundly serene place, which unlike most ashrams in India is blessedly free of dogma and fixed rules. It is simply a place of serenity and presence that welcomes all. The daily rhythm that I guide participants through includes daily meditations and devotional practices in the ashram. The mountain itself, humming with extraordinary energy, perhaps because of some kind of unusual geological mineral composition or that it has so long been a focus for spiritual aspirants, who really knows? There are many caves and one can always find a place of solitude in nature - a wonderful focus for silence and walking meditation. For me, walking the mountain, either around it or up to the caves, fills my heart with joy.

Furthermore, there are opportunities to sit with some truly extraordinary beings. My favourite is a holy woman called SivaShakti Amma, a female saint who has lived in silence most of her life in deep dedication to Shiva. This is the most transparent being I have ever come across. She gives silent darshan (blessing) twice a day, where she silently looks at you, beaming a quality of stillness, light and grace that is utterly remarkable. Having sat with her at length, it is apparent that she offers something incredibly profound which seems to help unwind the knots of mind and soul, thus helping people drop into deep stillness. Personally, I would go to Tiruvannamalai just for the privilege to be in her presence and receive her darshan.

Then there are other local sadhus, from Ganesha – the grand nephew of Ramana Maharshi, to other local swamis; some who speak and most who don't, but their presence, their quality of being opens and stimulates a deeper unfurling, a deeper knowing.

There is much to say about Sri Ramana Maharshi. This extraordinary being, who hardly spoke but whose Presence had profound affect on many from Carl Jung to Paramahansa Yogananda, is still touching people today – nearly 60 years after he left his body. My experience, and that of many, is that His presence is phenomenally alive still. I am not alone in 'hearing' his guidance inwardly in the caves or the ashram come alive from within. More than anything, there is a tangible sense of the deep stillness beyond mind that he radiated. I cannot logically explain how or why, but this stillness is fully held here and is such an incredible gift. Ramana's invitation was direct and simple, namely, to 'Be Still', through the method of Self Inquiry, reflecting deeply on the perennial question "Who am I?".

In the daily satsang that I offer, it is the essence of Ramana's teaching, non-dual Self Inquiry, that I am holding a space for, but in a way that embraces the relative as well as the Absolute. This means that the gatherings are very real, and every human concern is a relevant entry point into inquiry. Where so much of what is on offer in Tiruvannamalai is offered in silence, my contribution is in holding a space where we

can receive guidance and support in unwinding the obstacles to direct realization. God is not a philosophy but a living experience, and this is something that wants to be not only directly realized for oneself, but also actualized throughout all of human experience. My satsang is a space where we join together in closing the gap between our spiritual yearnings, our knowings, and our actual lived experience. I offer two satsangs a day: one that is open to the public – both as service back to this place that gives so much, and also because I see helpful medicine in such different cultures diving into Truth together, and the second is an evening satsang that is specifically designed for the retreat participants that helps ground and integrate the personal understanding and insights being generated throughout the retreat.

One of the recent participants remarked that had any single one of the above retreat elements been experienced, that would have been enough to blow her mind for the next three months. My years of experience in facilitating groups by helping them integrate a unique cornucopia of spiritual opportunities and openings, all within a carefully designed daily rhythm, can be life changing. Additional to the experiences and local offerings, I hold and guide participants spiritually in the direction of the deepest yearning of one's soul. Bob Duchmann, our co-ordinator, and himself a spiritual teacher of the Diamond Approach (the work of A. H. Almaas), takes meticulous care of all practical and organizational details – normally something that can make time in India a chaotic hassle, thus freeing up participants so that they may dive even deeper into their own heart. The diversity of retreat elements create a dynamic and powerful opportunity for deep transformation.....for direct realization and embodiment and may quite possibly change one's life.

If you are called to join me, and feel you are open, flexible, curious, and ready for such an experience, know you are very welcome.

Love and blessings ~

Miranda Macpherson
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