

# Swami Shantananda Puri

Lover of God and All Mankind

SWAMI SADASIVANANDA

## **Introduction**

Paramapujya Sri Swami Shantananda Puri, born in 1928, was a disciple of Paramapujya Sri Purushottamanandaji Maharaj of Vasishtha Guha, in the Himalayas. Swamiji was a personification of *jnana* and *vairagya*. His extraordinary knowledge of all scriptures and his artless simplicity, piety and dedication, coupled with an ardent desire to guide sincere *sadhaks* as possible, drew to him many a devotees from all over India and abroad too. Some of his books have been translated into Hindi, Kannada, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Gujarati and one in French. Swamiji frequently stayed for long periods in Sri Ramanasramam, and while there, was always graciously available to all sincere seekers. He attained *mahanirvana* on 14th October 2014.

Swamiji has written more than 35 books. They are being compiled in suitable volumes. Four such volumes are already published and a

Sri Swami Sadasivananda, a writer on the teachings of saints and sages, had a close association with Swamiji. He first came to Sri Ramanasramam in 1970. Soon after he received direct instruction from Ananda Mayi Ma.

fifth volume is scheduled to be released on 6th May 2018, the 90th Birthday of Swamiji.

This volume comprises mostly commentaries on Bhagavan Ramana's works. They include: *Stories for Inspiration*, *Golden Guidelines to Who am I?*, *Sadhanas from Upadesa Saram*, *Sadhanas from Guru Vachaka Kovai*, *Sadhanas from Devi Kalottara*, *Sadhanas from Tripura Rahasyam*, *Sadhanas from Viveka Choodamani* and a few special articles written by or on Swamiji.

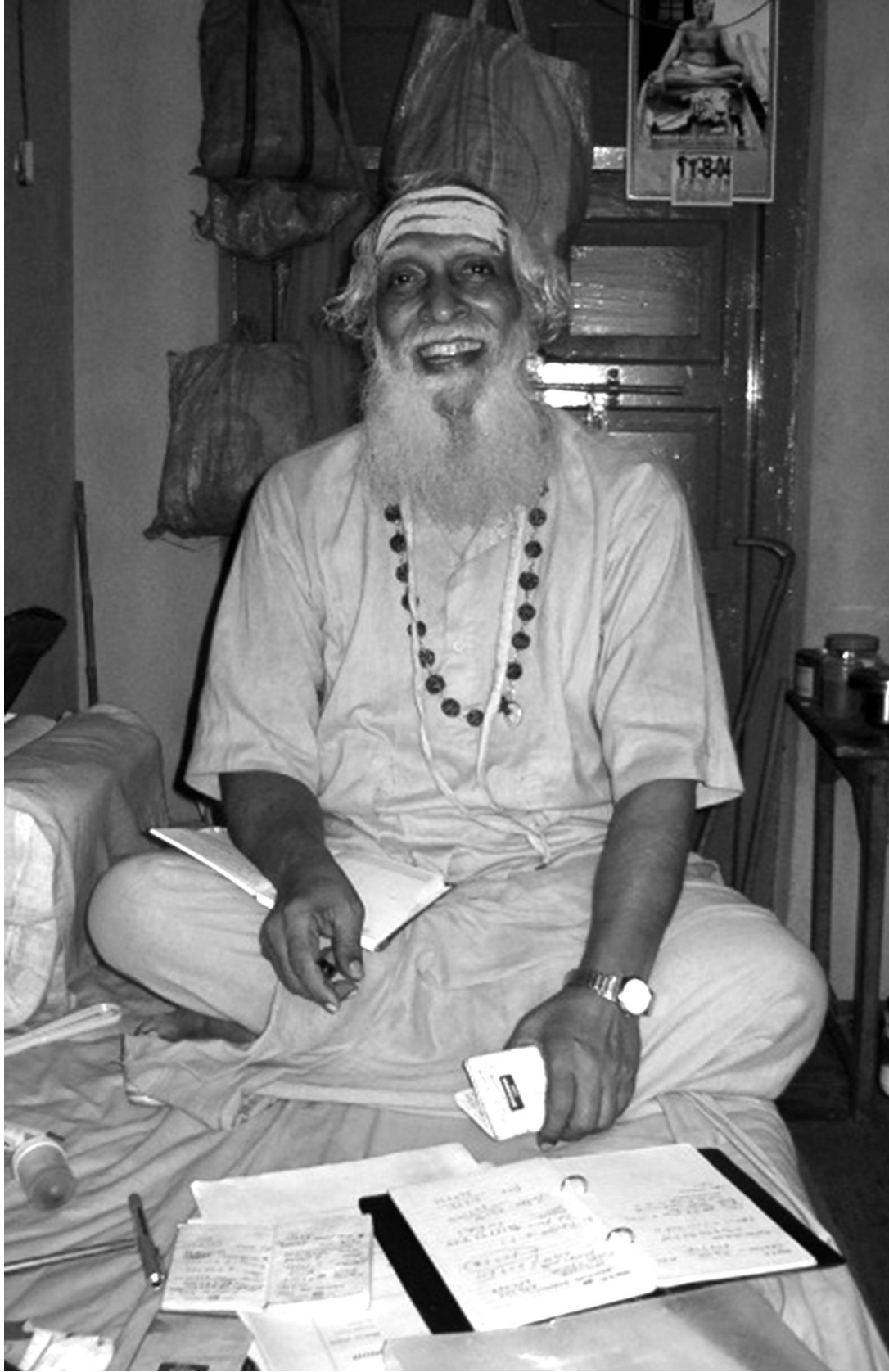
All the books and articles written by Sri Swami Shantananda Puri are available for free download at <http://swamishantanandapurimaharaj.org>

**W**hat has been said of the Saints of old, holds true for Swamiji:  
"He was and is all things to all mankind."

In an effort to demonstrate this truth, at the outset I find that words fail to express the greatness of His being – which simply was an embodiment of love for all, while at the same time showing always diminishing care for his personal well-being in favour of the spiritual benefit of others. His life among us was guided by the sovereign hand of the Divine. As once has been famously uttered by another saint of the Lord, "Where God guides, God provides."

Alas, though words fail to encompass Swamiji's being, I am tasked to try to give a glimpse into this miracle of our Divine Mother. During all the blessed years I spent with him, through many travels and being embraced by the free-flowing *amrit* (nectar) of his care and wisdom, there stands out one event that comes closest to revealing a clear vision of the essence of his being.

This event occurred during one of the prolonged stays of Swamiji at Sri Ramanasramam. As was our custom, I came to his room long before dawn every morning for meditation and instruction. For some days he was steadfast in emphasizing what so many had heard him declare over the years. This was one of his mantras: "Always seek the Giver of gifts, rather than the gift itself." Many have heard with their own ears this often repeated declaration, and today was no different, except for the fact that, from breakfast-time onwards, one group of



devotees after another were recipients of this message. Swamiji was unrelenting, he stressed to all that the goal of life was the highest attainment – God Himself!

We took a break from his shower of golden spiritual advice only for lunch. On the way back to his room, again followed by a group of his longtime devotees, he was without a waver reinforcing this Truth within the hearts of those with him. Being refreshed by Bhagavan's prasad, Swamiji was the embodiment of a Master Weaver, with every strand of his teaching he deepened within all an intense desire to seek God above all else.

However, one of his lady devotees, closely followed by her young daughter, uttered a response to Swamiji's insistence that seemed to shake the very earth we walked upon. She suddenly and boldly proclaimed, with an air of gentle though defiant insistence, that she did not see the need to seek the Manufacturer of Grace (God), when she had the wholesale distributor (that is, Swamiji) right in front of her! To this remark Swamiji simply smiled. I was stunned.

Upon entering Swamiji's room, all took their leave for a brief afternoon rest. Perhaps too brief, for when Swamiji reopened his door there would again be a hungry group seeking from him the sweetest spiritual eatables. I lingered until all had left. Still bewildered by Swamiji's smile in response to what seemed to me to be a direct rebuttal to the guidance Swamiji had spent all morning teaching us about the grace of God, I timidly sought some clarification.

So, my dear friend, what followed encapsulates the unfathomable depth of the heart and soul of this God-man. I said: "Swamiji, can you please explain why such a direct rebuttal to your insistence that God is the Goal was met by you with just a smile?"

Swamiji's response melted my heart, and must have delighted all the Gods. He sweetly responded: "I am helpless to defend myself in the face of such love!"

The Param Guru of his lineage, Sri Ramakrishna, once said: "God is infinite, and infinite are His forms, and infinite are the paths to find Him." Swamiji continued almost at the point of tears: "If a devotee sees in me her God, I become helpless to utter even a word in response, for such grace is the highest embodiment of the Divine – namely, a human heart filled with love for her Guru as God."

Although Swami Shantananda's life and guidance emphasised love of the Divine as the paramount goal, there is a mystical thread woven into every breath of his teaching. This thread leads us onwards along the path to cultivating this Love. It is so often rightly said of Swamiji's published books: "His emphasis was always on practice, practice, practice!" Is there a contradiction here with the paramount goal? How can one practise love, when it comes from the heart rather than the mind?

The answer to this is clearly revealed by Swamiji's Param Guru Sri Ramakrishna. In Chapter 17 of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, 'With Devotees at Dakshineswar (II)', the Master declares:

"The Whole thing, in a nutshell is that one must develop ecstatic love for *Satchidananda*."

The mystical thread of the 'path' is revealed in a single word: 'develop'. The Master goes on to say:

"One must practice austerity, as Bhagavati did, in order to attain Siva."

Swamiji often told me, in-between our hours of predawn meditation, that ultimately we are incapable of developing love to the required ecstatic level by our own effort, which is so often tainted by our reasoning. He would then say, "So, my dear, what to do?" and at this point I thirsted for further guidance.

By his grace, as was his compassionate custom, he answered his own question. Reaching into what seemed to me to be his total remembrance of every word of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, not to mention his unfathomable knowledge of its meaning, he quoted from the same chapter mentioned above:

"A man sees a thing in one way through reasoning and in an altogether different way when God shows it to him."

This profound declaration immediately echoed in my mind the words of Sri Ramana Maharshi:

"Practice is necessary, there is grace."<sup>1</sup>

"Grace is always there, it is only you who have to make yourself receptive to it."<sup>2</sup>

Bhagavan continued: "The obstacles that hinder realization are

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<sup>1</sup> Cohen, S.S., *Guru Ramana*, p.76.

<sup>2</sup> Osborne, Arthur, *Be Still, It Is The Wind That Sings*, p.74.

habits of the mind (*vasanas*),” and the aids to realization are “The teachings of the scriptures and of realized souls.”<sup>3</sup>

So, once again, Swamiji was guiding us to what he often so affectionately referred to as the ‘Super Bazaar’ where the Lord is freely offered for sale. But though I do emphasise ‘freely’, there is a price! It is not something we acquire through practice; it is something we *shake off* through practice.

Swamiji then concluded by completing the tapestry of the mystical thread woven within our innermost being by declaring, almost at the point of tears:

“Summing up the entire *Srimad Bhagavatam* Sri Krishna reveals the quintessence of His teaching in one statement:

‘Shake free of sloth, and merge your mind within Me’.”<sup>4</sup>

This was not the first time I had heard Swamiji utter this profound truth. While staying with him at his Guru’s Ashram, Vasishtha Guha, early one morning I was ‘trying’ to meditate while the roar of the Ganges River was all-pervasive. As this sound was extinguishing any successful concentration on my part, I opened my eyes to find Swamiji looking at me with one of his notoriously divine smiles. Then out-of-the-blue Swamiji softly reminded me to merge the mind within. This time he added a hint on how to be successful in shaking off distraction.

His advice was not only the quintessence of Sri Krishna’s teaching, it was the quintessence of Swamiji’s teaching:

“Say the prayer that I found to be the best and most truthful prayer, which cannot be ignored by the Mother of All!” whose Divine Presence, as he spoke, was thundering within the rushing Ganga.

My prayer at that moment was a silent plea that although Swamiji had spent years of spiritual struggle to finally be granted the knowledge of such a boon, he would be gracious to one as undeserving as I to reveal this prayer to me. I did not even have the time to open my mouth and plead for this when Swamiji smiled with an even brighter countenance. Beaming like the very Polestar that guides wayfarers to their harbour of safety, he said just three words:

“Shouri Yako Mama!”

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<sup>3</sup> Venkataramiah, M. (compl.), *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk§13

<sup>4</sup> *The Mahabharata, Uddhava Parva*, Book Eleven.

Then he fell silent, as did I. These three words uttered by Swamiji invoked a Divine Presence so intense and enlivening that at once I was overtaken by exactly the same feeling that I had experienced some thirty years earlier as I sat before Sri Anandamayi Ma.

Though I was rendered speechless, by the Grace of That which was now Present with us, Swamiji softly explained that if these three words were be uttered with conviction of mind, heart and soul, then the One to Whom this prayer was directed would take care of ‘all that was needful in life’. His explanation was perfectly simple:

“Shouri Yako Mama (in the Swahili language) meant:

‘Mother, this is all Your problem!’”

This was guidance par excellence, uttered by a true Guru. The definition of a Guru was once given by Sri Ramana Maharshi as ‘the Spirit of Guidance’. Though this definition was perfect in its simplicity, I must confess that although the spirit is willing, to muster the necessary *conviction* seems to be a life’s work.

Swami Shantananda was regarded by many students to have a clear-sighted understanding of this truth, as well as a deep knowledge of all of Bhagavan’s teachings. Yes, to all that had ears to hear, Swamiji would emphasize that guidance was essential.

From the most sincere disciples this response was all too often heard: “We are ready and willing to follow you, but what is to be done when your physical presence is withdrawn?” Sri Ramana Maharshi gave the answer. In addition to his famous declaration when his body was on the point of death: “You say that I am leaving, but where can I go, I am here.”

Bhagavan also said, “Kailas is on the Himalayas: it is the abode of Siva. Whereas this Hill [Arunachala] is Siva Himself.”<sup>5</sup> Arthur Osborne explained this as follows, “He saw the sacred hill as the form assumed by pure Spirit for the support and guidance of men. Now that the physical body of Bhagavan – the most precious of all supports of Grace – has been withdrawn from us, the Hill emits power and Grace for his devotees even more than before.”<sup>6</sup>

To those who follow the teachings of Bhagavan, Swami Shantananda often reminded Bhagavan’s devotees of this ever-present Form of Guidance.

<sup>5</sup> Op.cit., Venkataramiah, *Talks*, Talk§143.

<sup>6</sup> Op.cit., Osborne, pp.78-79.

Swami Shantananda possessed a special gift of guidance to those who sought his help. It was in direct concordance with the teaching of Sri Ramana Maharshi. Swamiji emphasised that our love for the Divine developed through the practice of meditation. It is true that Bhagavan Ramana, seeing the inner disposition of a devotee's heart, would sometimes direct souls to other means of attaining the goal of life – realisation of the Self and love for the Divine. Nevertheless, Bhagavan still insisted (to those who had ears to hear) that the mind must be strengthened through meditation. The task at hand has 'a lot of spade work'. Anyone who has ever had to dig their way out of any dilemma, especially of a spiritual nature, knows that it requires persistent practice coupled with a wholehearted effort.

Bhagavan's own words emphasising this truth could not be clearer:

"The means that make one qualified for enquiry are meditation, yoga, etc. One should gain proficiency in these through graded practice, and thus secure a stream of mental modes that is natural and helpful. When the mind, that has in this manner become ripe, listens to the present enquiry, it will at once realize its true nature, which is the Self, and remain in perfect peace, without deviating from that state. To a mind that has not become ripe, immediate realization and peace are hard to gain through listening to enquiry. Yet, if one practises the means for mind-control for some time, peace of mind can be obtained eventually."<sup>7</sup>

Thanks be to God, that though the digging may seem endless and the only promise we are given is that peace can be 'obtained eventually', we are never without help. Yes, now even more than before when Grace was embodied in the form of Bhagavan. It has been declared with assurance:

"Where can Bhagavan go, for he is here. And even more, the Holy Hill Arunachala emits power and Grace for his devotees."

There is another cherished memory of the importance of meditation and the Divine form of Grace in Arunachala which involved another distinctive aspect of Swami Shantananda.

During the year that I was living near the pradakshina road in Tiruvannamalai, about a mile from Arunachala, I was in a vacant compound where I lived in the servant's quarters. It was most

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<sup>7</sup> *Vichara Sangraham* [Self-Enquiry] of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi, pp.16-17.



conducive for meditation, as from this vantage point Arunachala loomed above the relatively empty countryside. The Divine radiance was overpowering, I found it was hard to get adequate sleep at night. There was a gazebo in a jasmine garden on the property directly facing the Hill. So, after a while, I slept just for a few hours at a time, and ended up sitting in *padmasana*, usually from midnight onwards, until I went to Swamiji's room at Sri Ramana Ashram around 4 am. Long, long hours of meditation can take the heart upwards, but in time it can also pull the body into a state not really depletion, but rather a special kind of disinterest in maintaining physical stamina. Swamiji would immediately notice this in me, and sternly emphasise the importance of taking care of the physical body while doing intense spiritual practice.

Every time I entered Swamiji's room in those predawn hours, when I received his look and his mischievous and heavenly smile, complete strength would return to me. It was not only nourishment, but a balancing and enlivening that seemed to cause all the spiritual power acquired from the long hours of meditation to be fully digested and absorbed. This was his divine gift to me.

Being eternally inquisitive, I asked Swamiji to explain what his presence had just evoked within me as I knew he did for so many others! In reply he again turned me towards the guidance of Bhagavan Ramana.

Swamiji tenderly said that although our effort in meditation is surely pleasing to God and thus productive, the 'digestive juices' of the Guru are at the onset needed to enable us to be fully receptive to the intended purpose – Dramatic Transformative Change! Once again I was reminded of Bhagavan's words that seemed to effortlessly and freely flow from the fathomless memory of Swami Shantananda:

“Grace is always there, it is only you who have to make yourself receptive to it.”<sup>8</sup>

“The guru is the Spirit of Guidance. Ultimately this is to be found within oneself. Whatever awakens it is acting as guru. ‘The purpose of the outer guru’, the Maharshi said, ‘is to turn you inwards to the inner guru’. And yet in this regard there is no easy formula, no guarantee against error, for just as the aspirant may be misled by false outer

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<sup>8</sup> Op.cit., Osborne, p.74.

gurus reflecting undesirable qualities in himself, so he may dignify various inner urges with the same name 'guru'. Constant vigilance and intelligent purity are necessary.”<sup>9</sup>

This fact, along with many more, caused me to understand that Swami Shantananda was far less human and far more Divine in the being that he revealed to those who sought his guidance and love.

The next time Swamiji reminded me of the sacred prayer of 'Shouri Yako Mama' to our Divine Mother to whom all the problems in life really belong, happened while we were travelling in Bangalore. This was always a special treat for me, for in addition to spending time with the sincere devotees there, we would always stay within a short walking distance of the Living Presence of that Divine Mother Sri Rajarajeshwari. One morning while we both stood before Her, Swamiji turned to me and declared with tears in his eyes: "Look at Her, She is mine – my Black Beauty!" This statement completely assured me that She was the fount of ever-sustained nourishment, the strength, wisdom and guidance that characterised Swami Shantananda Puri – eternally!

Before we left Her Presence, Swamiji took my arm and turned me to directly face Her piercing countenance and said: "If you have any complaints, tell Her now, for you and all of Her children, always have the right to complain." At such a moment, what is one to do? How could I ever asked for more than She had already done for me? For some 60 years earlier, I was born in what seemed to be a hopeless (but not helpless) life in the USA. Could I really complain, now that I was convinced that She had Her eyes on me even then? Swamiji had often told me that one of Her Divine Names was 'Ocean of Compassion without reason'. Here I stood before Her, in Her Chosen Land of Bharata, with a Saint holding my arm telling me that if I had any complaints, now would be a good time to petition Her. With the belief that I had never given Her any real reason to show mercy on me, how could I claim any legitimacy to petition Her?

I now vividly recall that moment, Feeling supremely blessed and simultaneously scared to the bone, all I could utter inwardly was "MA". Swamiji then slightly squeezed my arm, as if to prod me not to lose such a precious opportunity. From that touch a lightening flash of recollection burst in my mind.

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<sup>9</sup> Op.cit., Osborne, p.62.

That instant I recalled one morning before dawn when we had stood together in the Samadhi Shrine of Sri Ramana Maharshi. Swamiji was standing right in front of the gate of the shrine. As I looked back and forth between Bhagavan and Swamiji, I again was transfixed with blessings and fear, for Swamiji was speaking to his Mother (in the form of the Maharshi) in a hushed tone that was inaudible to me. Such moments are rare, transfixing, and at once life-changing. Nevertheless, I summoned the courage to ask Swamiji a question. He had often told me to never hesitate to question him, but at this moment I had to search for the courage in the depths of my soul to interrupt his discourse with God.

In a halting voice, trying not to stutter, I said: “Swamiji, please forgive me, but what are you saying to Bhagavan?”

I know! What audacity on my part!

Swamiji’s answer embodied the guidance that no doubt I had been yearning to receive for numerous incarnations. It was again perfect spiritual simplicity. Standing here before me, in one of the most sacred places on this earth, was a Saint of God, our Swamiji. He had already achieved the highest spiritual realisation and the true vision of the Divine. His heart belonged to the Divine Mother. She had given him the highest wisdom and blessings. His faith was solid in this knowledge. His breath moved in unison with Her Heartbeat. Although all this was true beyond Truth, he stood there with tears in his eyes and pleaded:

“O Bhagavan, My Mother, somehow make me love you!”

From this moment it was clear to me, as I pray it is also clear to all who read this account, that the very life breath of Swami Shantananda Puri yearned with one overwhelming longing. This yearning was summed up by the divine utterance of his Param Guru, Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa:

“Cry to God with a yearning heart and then you will see Him... Extreme yearning is the surest way to God-vision. Through extreme longing the mind remains fixed on the Supreme Being.

One should have faith like that of an innocent child and such longing as a child has when it wants to see its mother.”<sup>11</sup> ▲

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<sup>11</sup> *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, Chapter III, ‘Visit to Vidyasagar’.