

**RAMALINGA
POET AND PROPHET**

**BY
PURASU BALAKRISHNAN**

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In Memoriam

And was Ramalinga here?
Did he live here
and walk the street
whereon I stand
in Madras, this Madras?

Is it true
he potted and prayed
in Kandaswami Temple
now buzzing with booths and crowds
and crammed with mats and mangoes?
Is it true
this white purity of God's Light
lived in Veerasami Pillai Street
by Seven Wells
in Madras, this Madras,
and ever and anon
walked afar
to Thiruvottriyur
to meditate?

Lo, a Buddha was here
whereon I stand
in Madras—not Kasi!
from Marudhur—not Kapilavatsu!
Son of Light
and Son of Song!

And to think it was only yesterday—
so to say—
one hundred years ago
he was here,
and like a moving flame
walked the land
and lit every spot
with effulgence that shines to-day!

Note and Acknowledgements

I owe a debt of gratitude to Uran Adigal (Sanmarga Desikan) whose great work *Ramalinga Adigal Varalaru* (Life of Saint Ramalinga) in Tamil (published by Samarasa Sanmarga Aaraaichchi Nilayam, Samayapuram and Vadalur, in 1971) I have freely drawn upon, in writing this book.

The text of Ramalinga's works which I have followed is that of the two volumes, entitled *Thiru Arut Pa*, published by Samarasa Suddha Sanmarga Sangam, 36 Sami Pillai Street, Choolai, Madras, in 1932.

The translations from Tamil are mine. The translations from Sanskrit, other than those acknowledged alongside, are also mine.

PURASU BALAKRISHNAN

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1. His Times

THE INDIA, INTO WHICH CHIDAMBARAM RAMALINGA SWAMIGAL was born, was in the throes of political awakening and cultural regeneration. At the time of his birth in 1823 in the village of Marudhur in South India, Ram Mohan Roy, at forty-nine, was active in Bengal, and was to found the *Brahmo Samaj* (Spiritual Society) five years later. Devendranath Tagore, Roy's second successor to the *Samaj*, was six years old. Dayananda Saraswati, who founded the *Arya Samaj* (Pristine Society) in Bombay in 1875 (the year after Ramalinga's passing) was born in the year following Ramalinga's birth. Mahadev Govind Ranade, the greatest spirit behind the *Prarthana Samaj* (Devotional Society) which was founded in Bombay in 1867, was born when Ramalinga was nineteen. Ramakrishna Paramahansa was born in the village of Kamarpukur in Bengal when Ramalinga was thirteen. Madame Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott, in New York, in 1875 (the year after Ramalinga's passing) founded the Theosophical Society. They moved to Bombay in 1879, and thence to Madras in 1882. It was appropriate that the head-quarters of the Theosophical Society (the founding of which Ramalinga had foretold in January 1874, on the eve of his passing) was finally established in Madras where Ramalinga had spent the first thirty-four of his fifty-one years. This is appropriate again to a second degree since Ramalinga had founded in 1865, in Vadalur, the *Samarasa Veda Sanmarga Sangam* (Society for Religious Harmony in Universal Selfhood). In 1872, in order to rid the name of all religious connotations and associations, he renamed it *Samarasa Suddha Sanmarga Satya Sangam*, meaning 'Society for Pure Truth in Universal Self-hood'. Its principles were the same as those of the Theosophical Society founded in New York ten years later.

In presenting Ramalinga, poet and prophet, I shall discuss not only his life, but while not abdicating my rationality, also the legend in which it has been encased. For in a sense, legend is truer than life, being the reaction of people to its impact on them, and thus representing the poetic truth of the man's life, which is more telling than the stark or naked truth. Legend, paradoxically, takes us nearer to the quintessential man, and does this with a power greater than life.

2. His Birth

RAMALINGA WAS BORN ON 5 OCTOBER 1823 IN MARUDUR, A village fifteen kilometers north-west of Chidambaram, the famous shrine of the Dancing Siva in Tamil Nadu, South India. His father, Ramaiah Pillai, of Saiva faith and belonging to the Vellala community, was village accountant and teacher. His mother, Chinnammai, belonged to Chinnakavanam in the vicinity of Ponneri, a village in Chengelpet District, near Madras. Ramaiah Pillai was childless after losing five wives in succession. Chinnammai was his sixth wife, and she bore him two sons, Sabapathy and Parasuraman, and two daughters, Unnamulai and Sundarambal. Ramalinga was the fifth child. Legend has it, as it has about saints and prophets in general, that his birth and mission were prophesied by a Saiva ascetic who visited Ramaiah's house. It is even said that Siva Himself came in the garb of the ascetic, disappearing after walking a few steps from the house.

When Ramalinga was six months old, his father died, and his mother moved to her village, Ponneri. It is said that when he was five months old, his father took him to Chidambaram, and that Ramalinga, as a baby, had a vision of the 'secret' of Chidambaram, where the vacant space, shown behind a screen that is drawn aside, symbolizes the formless God. It is however more likely (as the present writer surmises) that Ramalinga was at least six months old when he was taken to Chidambaram. In his poem where he refers to his early experience, Ramalinga refers only to his mother, and not to his father:

*In tender age when, with my mother,
I came to You in Chidambaram,
and the screen lifted
and bared the vacant space behind,
You admitted me to the secret,
O Lord, my Joy, You ripened me at once,
Ripeness showing before seed and forming fruit.*

3. Early Childhood

WITHIN A YEAR (1824) RAMALINGA'S MOTHER MOVED TO Madras to join her eldest son, Sabapathy, who was a scholar of repute and made a living there by giving religious discourses. They lived at 39 Veerasami Pillai Street, near Seven Wells, in the present postal zone 1 of Madras.

Of his early boyhood experiences the poet recalls, addressing his God:

*Falling from the dais whereon tossing,
I slept in the veranda, of a night,
a boy, I felt You stay my fall half-way
and lay me softly on the ground,
O Hands of Love...*

When Ramalinga was five, his brother Sabapathy started teaching him. But Ramalinga was indifferent and spent his time day-dreaming. He used to play truant, wandering in the streets and sauntering in the corridors of the Kandaswamy Temple nearby, all through the day. Unable to control him, Sabapathy Pillai put him in charge of a Tamil savant, Sabapathy Mudaliar of Kanchipuram, who had been his own teacher. The savant proved equally ineffective. Discovering that his boy-pupil was already drawing audiences in the temple with his talks and songs, he gave up the task. Losing patience, Sabapathy Pillai forbade his wife, Parvati, to feed or clothe Ramalinga. However Ramalinga used surreptitiously to come to the house through the back door, when Sabapathy was away or asleep, and Parvati used to lovingly serve him food. Counseling him graciously, she prevailed upon him at last to please his brother and to take to his studies seriously. He promised, requesting however that he might be provided with a room of his own on the second floor where he could pursue his studies on his own. The request was granted. The truant returned home, and much to the satisfaction of his brother, never left the house or even the room where he remained shut all through the day.

It was probably during these days that, dispossessed, he turned a juvenile ascetic for a while. In a poem he recounts to his God:

*Lord in the years of boyhood play-time—
You know, but let me recall—
I asked a kindred mate,
'I care not for this world, do you?'
and he assenting, we turned
our back on the world and wandered.
But You, in Your grace, called us back,
and for this, O Lord my Mother,
I thank You to-day.*

It is noteworthy that he addresses the Lord as Mother in this poem. May be he was thinking of his sister-in-law Parvati who had acted the mother to him, giving him food and persuading him to return home. This experience may also explain his pre-occupation with the problem of hunger in his later years.

4. Later Childhood

HIS BROTHER DID NOT KNOW WHAT RAMALINGA WAS DOING all day long, day after day, behind the closed door of his room. It was enough for his brother that Ramalinga remained at home. Ramalinga set a mirror against the wall, and set in front of it a naked flame—a wick burning in oil. With these as aid to concentration, he meditated. These were the same aids that he set, forty years later, in the prayer hall of the Temple of Pure Truth that he built in Vadalur. Identifying the Common Universal Soul symbolically with the flame, and the mirror as one's self wherein the flame is reflected, one strives to make one's mind pure like an untarnished mirror, in order to have the Universal Soul reflected well within oneself. And thus, says Ramalinga, is born the realization of the Universal Soul, and with it, universal love and compassion for all creatures, seeing that it is the same flame which is reflected in all beings in varying degrees according to their development.

He started composing songs even at this age, or perhaps earlier, as he himself says to his Lord:

*Little grown in body and less in mind,
little feet romping in the street,
I made songs, whom You made to sing,
You taking from formlessness...*

It is stated (and Ramalinga himself says so in a poem) that, at the age of nine, he saw a vision of Lord Muruga of Thanikai in the mirror. In this room, untaught by anybody, he apparently acquired his learning by himself. For this he offers thanks to God in several of his poems, for example in the following:

*Effulgent Flame of Grace that lit in me
Intelligence to know untaught...*

The first song that he sang was before he was nine years old, and it was about the Lord Shanmuga or Muruga of Kandaswamy Temple. It was

a series of thirty-one verses, of which the following is sung widely today in Tamil Nadu:

*Bind me
to the high souls that live in you
Save me
from those that hide behind words
Let me
rejoice, singing for ever your glory
Lead me
beyond lies and pride
Guide me,
on the quest beyond creeds
Erase in me
the longing for women,
Lord Kanda,
shrined in your temple in Madras,
the city bounteous.
Let me not forget you.
Lord benevolent, Shanmuga,
Grant me
intellect, health and grace,
and for ever
dwelling in you.*

5. From Nine to Twelve

AT THIS TIME HE WAS PRESSED INTO SERVICE BY HIS BROTHER Sabapathy. Substituting one day for the girl who used to read the religious texts from palm-leaf scripts for the discourses of Sabapathy, Ramalinga rendered them so soulfully that the audience thereafter insisted that only he should recite the hymns.

One day Sabapathy, who had a discourse scheduled in the house of a patron, named Somu Chettiar, was ill with fever. He sent Ramalinga to the patron's house to inform him accordingly. When Ramalinga went there, the audience had already gathered, and one among them suggested that Ramalinga might substitute for his brother. Ramalinga spoke. The theme was the life of the hallowed saint-singer, Thirugnana Sambandar (Sambandar of Inborn Wisdom), whom Ramalinga had made his ideal. Without notes, without palm-leaf scripts, Ramalinga spoke. A flood of inspired eloquence flowed from him. This was the first talk that he, coming out of the loneliness of his closed room, gave. He won his listeners completely. Thenceforth they wanted Ramalinga to conduct all the discourses, and not his brother. Sabapathy agreed gracefully, turning to audiences elsewhere.

Ramalinga had a visitation of Divine Grace at the age of nine (1832). He himself tells us this in one of his poems:

*Just Dispenser of men's needs and meeds,
O Self-Effulgent Light, Glowing Central Flame
of Cosmos, Guide of my life
who possessed me when I was nine,
and led me to Your Kingdom and made It mine,
In You I have lost the need
to know what I need.*

The divine fellowship however did not resolve his spiritual struggles which he dates from the age of twelve:

*The plight that has been mine
from twelve to this day,
O Lord, will suffice*

to melt a mountain.

*The plight that has been
this wretch's, O Lord,
from twice six years to this day
may melt dead steel.*

He recoiled from the need of eating, as he confides to his Lord:

*From the green years of childhood,
need I tell You,
Lord who dwells within me, I found
eating abhorrent.
For the nectar of Your Grace only
I craved.*

And further:

*Dreading to see my mother's brow fade
I ate freely some days.
Dreading to wound the loving ones
who insisted, I ate,
Otherwise to eat free I dreaded—
This, my Lord, You know.
When food that was sweet I ate sometimes
I trembled, lest having known sweet,
I might sometime know new pang.
And so, Lord my Mother, I fasted free.
When friends must needs give me food,
I resigned myself to You, my Lord,
Praying it might not nourish me
and ate what they gave.
The body that I have acquired,
Lord, I have no fondness for.
When out of hunger I ate,
it disgusted me—
Even now it disgusts me
to eat:
I have no wish
that my flesh flourish.
Let me be lean*

You know, this I ask of You.

He had no desire for money. What money was given to him for his discourses, he threw away in wells or ponds or tanks, or sometimes back at the donor. This too he relates in his poems:

*I sought only Grace—money
I cared not for, neither now
nor ever, since my childhood days:
I threw it on him who gave me
or on a ridge or anywhere, You know,
My Lord who dwells within me,
All I have need for
Is Your Grace without end.
Money I hold not dear—
Money that I earned
I threw away in well or pond or tank,
Lord my Mother, I only treasure
You gift of qualities which diminish not
which diminish not
with giving or taking—
O the wonder of Your Grace
that I have seen but may not spell*

His patrons, coming to know that he threw away the money given to him, used subsequently to give the money to his brother and not to him.

Likewise, he discarded, even at this early age, all trappings of belief and faith, and stuck to his concept of God as Luminous Pure Intelligence. In his manifesto, in his last years, for the Fellowship that he founded, he declares:

Lord, how You led me through my small years away from falsehoods of castes, rituals and observances, letting me know them to be such, and steadily, as the years passed, illumining my intelligence and so speeding me on my quest.

6. Songs and Miracles

AT THE AGE OF TWELVE, WHEN HIS SPIRITUAL STRUGGLES BEGAN, Ramalinga began to frequent the shrine of Thiruvottriyur, ten kilometers north of Madras, and to worship Lord Thyagaraja (the ascetic aspect of Siva) and the Goddess Vadivudai Ammai in the temple there. The temple was of ancient fame, celebrated in song by three of the four great prophets of Saivism, namely, Sambandar, Appar and Sundarar, who lived in the sixth and seventh centuries A.D.

For twenty-three years, all through his stay in Madras, Ramalinga used to escape from the city, and go daily to Thiruvottriyur on foot, composing poems and songs to the temple's Deity, Lord Thyagaraja. Tired out, he would often spend the night there, sleeping in the open. He used to visit also Thiruttanihai (the shrine of Muruga), Thiruvallidayam and Thirumullaivayil. It is note-worthy that he visited also Thiruvallur and Thirukannamangai which are shrines of Vishnu, and composed several songs in praise of the presiding deities of these places.

Thiruvottriyur was then a picturesque place on the seashore. There was a temple to Nandi there, now dilapidated, and a stream, now dried up. He recalls this spot in a celebrated hymn of his which is popular to this day:

*O Tree, easeful rest from the summer day,
O cool Shade, O Fruit in the Shade,
O running clear Water of the Stream,
O Sweetness of the Water, O odor of its Flowers,
O Breeze on the bank, O soft Feel of the Breeze,
O the Joy of it all, my King, Mover of the Universe,
My true Husband who married me in my flower,
Deign to accept this, the flower of my song.*

Of this exquisite song it may be remarked that it is redolent of all the five senses, addressing God in terms of one aspect of Nature after another, and climaxing in the addressing of Him as Husband with sensual over-tones. The poem reminds one of Robert Browning's 'Wild Joys of Living' in his poem 'Saul', the only vital difference being that Ramalinga's

song is a spiritualized sweetness, shorn of all the sensual tangs of Browning's poem.

It is stated that Ramalinga had some mystic experiences and communication with God during this period, and he relates them in his characteristic moving way.

One day it was late in the night when he returned from Thiruvottriyur to his brother's house. He did not want to wake his sleeping brother and sister-in-law. Although he had not eaten his night meal and was tired and hungry, he lay down to sleep on the dais of the open front veranda of the house. He was soon woken up. Beside him stood his sister-in-law with the plate of food. He ate the food and went back to sleep. A little while later he was awakened again, and this time his sister-in-law called him in to dine. In the explanations that followed, it became clear that the first time he was wakened by a vision; and this was confirmed by a second vision of Goddess Vadivudaiya Ammai, with a brass supping plate in her hand. The vision shone before them and promptly disappeared. Ramalinga has referred to this in three stanzas of verse, of which the following is one:

*That night, as I lay on the veranda, cold
and tired and hungry, You, Mother, sweet Fount of Life,
Visited me, asking me, 'Back from Ottriyur¹, are you tired?'
And, wonder of Grace, from a blessed plate
out of Your blessed hand, You blessed me
with blessed food, O Mother who reads
my aches as if they are Yours, O Dancer-King²,
Accept my stammering praise!*

¹ Ottriyur is 'Thiruvottriyur', shorn of the prefix 'Thiru' which means 'holy'.

² There need be no confusion in the reader's mind as he reads God addressed as Mother, and in the same breath, as 'Dancer-King', since the Hindu devotee habitually views God in all relationships, calling Him in the manner suitable to the occasion, or simply as it occurs to his mind.

On another occasion, Lord Thyagaraja Himself, of the Temple, is said to have served him food. One day, going without food, as he often did, Ramalinga lay sleeping in the open courtyard of the temple when the

priest woke him and served him food. The next morning it transpired that the priest had left Thiruvottriyur two days previously.

During this period, as during any period of his life, numerous miracles that he performed have been recorded, of which we give one. In Thiruvottriyur he used to worship at Pattinattar Temple and rest for a while there. One day, when he was resting, an old woman who was spending her last days in the service of the temple, requested him to reassure her in her faith by performing a miracle. Ramalinga took a handful of sand from the sea-shore and put it into her hand. He asked her to close her hand and then to open it. When she did this, she found a number of tiny *lingas* (symbols of Siva) in her hand, instead of the sand. It may be recalled that Pattinattar, the great Saivite saint who lived in the eleventh century A.D., is said to have disappeared into a *linga* in Thiruvottriyur.

Except on rare occasions when he obliged some disciple or other who approached him for the favor, Ramalinga refused to perform miracles, saying that such lesser performances took toll of one's true spiritual gains.

Such tokens of divine favor and such miracles spread his fame at once, while his transparent purity, sincerity and humility and his eloquence drew people to him, many well-known and important. One of them was Velayuda Mudaliar of Thozhuvur who became his disciple in 1849. After the passing of Ramalinga, he became Tamil Pandit in Presidency College, Madras. Later he, along with others, collected and published the poems of the Master.

7. His Marriage

RAMALINGA, LIKE BUDDHA (568-488 B.C.), RAMAKRISHNA (1836 to 1886 A.D.) and Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950 A.D.) became a *jivanmukta* (a liberated soul during earth-life). From his birth he had no desire for material possessions, wealth or women. In a poem he reports to his God:

*If You are minded to trap me again
in enfolding woman's arms, let me say at once
I have no desire for this. I give no consent.
From my suckling days I recoiled from this.
Need I say more? And so, to You,
My God who dances at the shining core
of Life, I am consecrated to You.*

His relations and friends tried to arrange his marriage. He 'gave no consent'. It is said that they tried to induce him through an ascetic who, on their request, spoke to him about one's regular duties in life, including those of a 'house-holder' (*grahasta*), discharging social obligations. Finally he agreed. His wedding is stated to have been performed in 1850 when he was twenty-seven, It was a late age for marriage in those days. But there is no authentic record of this date. The bride was the daughter of his sister Unnamulai Ammai, called Dhanammal. Her age at the time of marriage is not known.

The wedding was performed. One wonders why he gave consent at all. Does he refer to this when, in several poems, he mentions his dread of seeing the fading of his mother's brow? According to the marriage rites, he tied the symbolic, consecrated string (*thali*) round his bride's neck. With her he spent the nuptial night, reading the pages of *Thiruvachaham* (Blessed Words) of Saint Manikka Vachahar, his favorite reading. This was repeated on the following nights. In a characteristic trembling confession, he refers to his celibacy in his poem *Pillai-peruvinnappam* (A Son's Supplication):

*Was it my past deed chasing me?
Was it Your Grace that guarded me?
I knew no desire, and yet one maid*

*I touched-our hands met; she bowed;
and I touched her, but union
there was none. You know, my Father,
I shrink with quivering shame
when I recall this.*

And he pays tribute to Manikka Vachahar:

*Shining soul that merged in God,
Sweet, sweet, as merged in your song,
I sing, my senses merged, my spirit merged,
Sweet, sweet is your song like the juice of cane,
Fresh, honeyed, mixed with juice of fruit
and milk, unsurfeiting, ever-sweet.*

In another poem he says that one utterance from Manikka Vachahar's *Blessed Words* would suffice to unite him with God.

Dhanammal does not figure in his life after this critical period. Nothing is known about her subsequent life.

8. Editor, Epigraphist and Poet

RAMALINGA'S YEARS IN MADRAS WERE MARKED BY GREAT literary activity. Poems and songs flowed from him in profusion. The first twelve years up to 1835 may be described as 'the period of Kandakottam' (the last word meaning 'the temple of Kanda') when he identified himself, as a devotee, with God Kandan of that temple, and composed songs in His praise. The next twenty-two years until 1858 may be described as 'the period of Thiruvottriyur' when he identified himself, as a devotee, with Lord Thyagaraja (the ascetic aspect of Siva) of that temple, and composed songs in His adoration. Numerous disciples, religious Heads, heads of monasteries, poets and scholars in Tamil and Sanskrit, rural and provincial magnates, government officials, people of importance, and unlettered people, gathered round him, revering him as a yogic adept and spiritual master, a poet and scholar.

During this period of his life, he edited certain poems of an earlier age and wrote two works in prose.

The first of these was his edition of *Ozhivil Odukkam* (Primer of self-knowledge) of the saint Kannudaya Vallal (1380-1476 A.D.) with the commentary of Thirupporur Chidambara Swamigal and this was published by Sabapathy Mudaliar in 1851.

The next to be published, again at the request of Sabapathy Mudaliar, was *Manumurai Kanda Vachaham* (A Tale of Justice) in which Ramalinga gave an expanded version in prose of the story of King Manuchozhan dispensing justice to a cow, told in the ancient Tamil classic *Periya Puranam* of Sekkizhar. This was published by Palayam Subbaraya Chettiar in 1854 for the Society for Religious Education.

At this time there was a minor academic discussion in Madras among scholars, teachers and patrons of letters whether the correct name of a particular region, comprising the neighboring districts of Chengelpet, North Arcot and a part of South Arcot (which was a kingdom in an earlier age) was 'Thondai-mandalam' or 'Thonda-mandalam'. Some of them approached Ramalinga to have his clarification. This called forth from him an exposition and analysis of the topic of such massive strength and finality that one of the scholars, Konnur Ayyasami Mudaliar, principal

of the Tamil School of Thondamandalam Tuluva-velalar Society, requested Ramalinga to let him publish it as a book. This led to Ramalinga's edition of *Thondamandala Satakam* (A Hundred Songs on Thondamandalam) of the poet Padikkasan (who lived in the seventeenth century A.D.) with his own clarification of the name of the region in the introduction. This was published by Ayyasami Mudaliar in 1855. It is note-worthy that this publication was for free distribution. Ramalinga settled the name as 'Thondamandalam' in an exposition as logical and rigorous as any academician might desire, and in a manner worthy of an epigraphist. He concluded his thesis with the following words:

Should there be some still unconvinced, I may draw their attention to the stone inscriptions in the temples built by King Athonda where he has had his name inscribed as Athonda. They may satisfy themselves by looking into the stone inscriptions in the temples in Thiruvallayam, Thirumullaivayil and other shrines.

It is to be added that the stone inscriptions in these places bear the name of the region spelt 'Thondamandalam'.

The third book edited by Ramalinga was *Chinmaya Deepikai* (Guide to Spirituality) of the poet Mutthaiyya Swamigal of Vridhachalam. This was published by Madurai Mudaliar in 1857.

The second prose work of Ramalinga, *Jivakarunya Ozhukkam* (The Law of Compassion for Life) was published only after his passing away.

Ramalinga had no desire and took no initiative in publishing his poems. Of the devotional and metaphysical poems which flowed from him all the time, a few stray pieces got published by some disciples during these years in Madras. It was years later, after he had left to Vadalur, that a few ardent disciples, through persistent persuasion, were able to get his permission and to issue a definitive edition of his poems. This book they called *Thiru Arut Pa* (Holy Book of Grace). However a considerable number of poems were still left out.

9. Bound to Chidambaram

IN SPITE OF THE HOMAGE PAID TO HIM IN MADRAS, RAMALINGA spent the days mostly outside the city, returning home only at night. He records in a poem, written long after he left Madras:

*I feared Madras for its wealth
I feared lest it diminish me.
You know, my Father,
My weary tramps through fields
and hamlets outside the city
on roads of gravel and rubble
and baked earth. Could written words
contain my daily long exhaustion?*

In 1858, at the age of thirty-five, having lived all the years except the first year or two, in Madras, he left the city for good. Accompanied by some of his pupils, he set out on foot to Chidambaram which still glowed with warmth in his memory. From early years he, born in Marudur, resident successively in Madras, Karunguzhi, Vadalur and Mettukuppam, took Chidambaram as his eponym, calling himself 'Chidambaram Ramalingam'.

Bound to Chidambaram now, he took his time, visiting sacred shrines on the way, like Sirhazhi, the birth-place of the great Saivite saint Thirugnana-Sambandar whom he had, from early years, adopted as his spiritual Guru. He gave discourses at the temple and composed songs in praise of the Deity. Then he visited Vaithiswaran Koil, here too composing songs and hymns, and finally arrived at Karunguzhi, near his own village Marudhur. His elder brother, Parasurama Pillai, who was living there, died a few days after Ramalinga's arrival. When Ramalinga was about to leave the place for Chidambaram, the revenue officer of the village, named Venkata Reddiar, requested Ramalinga to stay in his house, and Ramalinga continued to stay there. A room was set apart for him in the house; and Venkata Reddiar and his wife Muthiyalu Ammal attended to his needs dutifully for nine years until he left Karunguzhi in 1867.

As in Madras, Ramalinga spent only the nights at home, being out all day, walking with God, worshipping in temples and composing songs. Here his daily tramp was to Chidambaram, to the shrine of the Dancing Siva. Chidambaram, called Thillai in Tamil, is so ancient a shrine that St. Manikka Vachahar, who lived in seventh century A.D., refers to it as 'ancient Thillai'. Of the five shrines in Tamil Nadu representing symbolically the five elements (as recognized in Indian lore, namely, earth, water, fire, air and ether) Chidambaram represents the ether-manifestation—the most subtle manifestation—of God Siva.

An apparent paradox (or what will appear so to non-Hindu minds) may be stated and clarified here. As early as in infancy Ramalinga, according to legend, received the grace of Lord Siva at Chidambaram. In his boyhood he is stated to have received the grace of Lord Murugan (or Kandan or Shanmugan or Subrahmanya), the deity of the Kandaswamy Temple in Madras, and he also had visions several times of Murugan of Thanihai shrine in the meditation-mirror in his room in Madras. Then he returned to the worship of Lord Siva of Chidambaram. And he composed songs in praise of all these God-heads. These, to the followers and admirers of Ramalinga, both learned and lay, have not appeared contradictory or inconsistent, or posed any problem, or caused any confusion. For it is the basic premise of Hinduism, which probably every Hindu has inherent in him without any learning or initiation, that God is one, and may be approached in any form or image, and even without form. The Tamil *siddhas* (or realized souls) declared, 'Whatever God you worship, in that form God Siva will appear to you.' We have also, in the *Bhagavad Gita*, Lord Krishna saying, 'In whatever form a devotee envisages and cherishes his God, in that form I make his faith true.' (VII, 21)

During his stay in Karunguzhi, Ramalinga visited and worshipped at other shrines like Vridhachalam, Thiruvannamalai and Thiruvadihai, composing songs in praise of their Deities. But Chidambaram, being nearest to Karunguzhi, claimed his almost daily homage.

In the presence of Lord Nataraja (Siva) in Chidambaram he recalled:

*I recalled Your grace on that distant day
when I was small, and recalling, I stood tranced,
apart, 'in tears, wondering' what good deeds*

*of mine had begot this boon, this will of Yours
in me, this promise of a call from You.
Impatient of its coming, I almost said,
'The day is come—it is to-day, make me
Yours now.' And, Lord, before I spoke, You did.*

He affirms that he had intimation of grace directly from the Lord in Chidambaram:

*Lord, my Master who spoke to me in Thillai,
as I stood before Your sanctum of secrecy,
telling me, 'Our grace is yours from now,
as We pledged that day; be assured.
Henceforth all powers are yours, born of Our grace
and equal to it. Choose as you please your body,
subtle, causal or spiritual, and live in joy.
We have passed into you, and so shall remain.'
So blessing me, great God of Bliss, You showed
Your light that I may rise thereby.*

The songs that he sang about God Nataraja and to Nataraja are so numerous and diverse that it is difficult to choose from them a representative example. We give the following for the reason that it is widely sung today:

*Divine Dancer who dances for the bliss of all,
O Joy of the learned and the unlearned,
Sight of the seer and the blind,
Support of the mighty and the weak,
O Intelligence of the seeker and the complacent,
The Middle Sense between evil and good,
Dispenser of the divine and the demoniac
Be pleased to wear the garland of my song.*

10. Society of Universal Brotherhood

THIS SPIRITUAL CULMINATION RESULTED IN RAMALINGA'S founding the *Samarasa Veda Sanmarga Sangam* or 'Society for Religious Harmony in Universal Self-hood' in 1865. Later in 1872, he deleted the word *Veda* (Religion) from the name, and further added two words, *Satya* (Truth) and *Suddha* (Pure) in their appropriate places, thus changing the name to *Samarasa Suddha Sanmarga Satya Sangam* which means 'Society for Pure Truth in Universal Self-hood', a name transcending religions. This concept is contained even in his explanation of the original name:

The words *Samarasa Veda Sanmarga Sangam* mean 'the path pointed to by all religions in common', which is the result of the basic knowledge common to them all. This common knowledge is contained in the fourth path. The four paths are *daasamargam*, *satputramargam*, *sahamargam* and *sanmargam*.

According to traditional expositions, *daasamargam* is the path of approaching God as Master, that is, by service to God; *satputramargam* is the approach to God as Father (one considering oneself as the son of God); *sahamargam* is the approach to God as Friend; *sanmargam* is the approach to God by identifying oneself with Him.

This exposition, according to Ramalinga, gives the *religious* orientation of the paths. He gives the equivalents of these, as oriented to his 'good path of equal vision', by substituting 'Life' for 'God', as follows:

Daassamargam is to consider all lives as being under one's guardianship. *Satputramargam* is to consider all lives as one's sons. *Sahamargam* is to consider all lives as one's comrades. *Sanmargam* is to consider all lives as oneself.

Thus, by one stroke, Ramalinga turned the orientation of the good path from God to the Universe—from an abstract God to the God in Life, from a God apart to the God in the Universe. Indeed the main plank of his path (one should not say 'religion' since he totally eschewed the term) is *Jivakarunyam* or compassion for life.

The intrinsic nature of the fourth path—the attitude which indeed its adoption automatically evokes in one—is defined by him as consisting in

non-killing, forbearance, equanimity, self-restraint, control of the senses, and compassion for life which is the natural quality of the soul.

It is to be noted that he has put non-killing first in the list and that he specifically characterizes compassion for life as 'the natural quality of the soul'. This is diametrically opposed to the survival of the fittest which operates in natural evolution. It may be that, in the higher reaches, different laws operate. Ramalinga's path of equal vision also establishes man's relationship with life in the universe as the obverse of his relationship with God.

In Ramalinga's conception, the four prophets of Saivism were exemplars of the four paths, as oriented to God—Appar or Thirunavukkarasar being a servant of God, Gnanasambandar son of God, Sundarar friend of God and Manickavachahar realizing God within himself as Love.

At the opening of the *Sanmarga Veda Dharma Salai* (Free Eating House for the Brotherhood) in 1867, a tract of his, *Jivakarunya Ozhukkam* (The Law of Compassion) which he had started writing before 1866, was read out by Chidambaram Venkata Subba Dikshitar. It contained the following:

People must realize that they must hasten to bring to fruition the rare chance of human birth given to them.

That fruition consists in gaining the joy of awareness of the pure Effulgent Grace that shows through all lives, all deeds, all things, all worlds, and thus in gaining the higher life that is not impeded at any time in any way by anything.

The way to attain this life and this joy is through gaining the Grace which is the natural quality of God.

There is only one way to attain this Grace, and no other. It is to make the Grace which is the natural quality of God one's own natural quality. What is Grace in God is compassion for Life in man.

This tract was published by his disciples in 1879, five years after his passing, It is entitled significantly, *Law of Compassion for Life, being*

the first step on the True Path. Ramalinga reiterates this teaching in his discourses and in his letters to his disciples. He affirms that this is beyond doctrines and dogmas, creeds and religions, and as such should be acceptable to all religions.

In one of what he calls his 'Petitions of the Supreme Effulgent Grace' he prays:

Lord of all, Supreme Effulgent Grace! Grant that henceforth our minds are not tainted with ritualistic and other aberrations of creeds and sects, cultural and other aberrations of castes and codes.

Let the awareness of the identity of the soul in all beings, which is the prime quest of the pure spiritual seeker, not forsake us at any time in any degree, in any manner, in any place. Let it ever illumine and move us.

God of Shining Light, we thank You for Your mercy, we thank You.

11. Compassion for Life

RAMALINGA'S 'COMPASSION FOR LIFE AND HIS LOGIC IN THE exposition of its place in spiritual life seem to have reached the highest point in this direction attained by man. He lived, moved and had his being in Supreme Grace which—in accordance with his own concept—seems to be an affirmation of his own inward grace. Dandapani Swamigal calls him (in Tamil) 'the Incarnation of Compassion'.

The expression of this profound compassion in his poetry reaches throbbing poignancy. The following verses, thrown together, are taken from different contexts:

*Seeing withered corn, my spirit drooped,
Watching the wretch that begged from door to door
unavailing, and hungry sank to sleep,
I brooded. At sight of long-racking disease
I shuddered. Starvelings, poor, too proud to beg,
and spirit-broken, broke me.*

*O Last Boon, Shining Lord of Ethereal Space,
When I hear of human creatures starving
or spent with hunger, a fear seizes me,
like a fire in the mind, quickly ablaze,
and my body shivers.*

*Cattle's lowing turned hoarse
Dismayed me.
Bull and beast ill-fed
Preyed on me.
Quacking fowl and duck
Unhinged me.
Lord, when I saw the murderous knife
Dangling from the butcher's hand,
I trembled in fear.*

*When people's voices rose in squabble
A shivering came on me.*

*When they knocked at the door in frenzy
It jarred on me.
O Lord, you know, when some one wailed, 'O father' or
'mother' or 'Alas',
The words tore through me
Like an uprooting storm.*

*O Essence beyond the mind of man,
Final Anchor, my Master,
I, your servant, bound to my kin,
friends, comrades, mother, brothers,
sisters, others, am sore-troubled
to see passing clouds on their faces,
You know.*

*O Father, Splendor of the Cosmic Stage,
My God, my great Goal,
Need I tell you
the distress that sears my mind
When, in this distressful world,
Mother, comrades, friends,
People near to me, people next to me,
People removed from me,
Suffer, and I see them suffer,
Pangs of hunger, pain of disease.
Scorching afflictions,
Lord, You do know.
Lord, whose dance is blessing
Seed and fruit of final being,*

*In this passing show of life
Choked by grievous want,
When people greyed and people young,
known and unknown, recount to me
their trials and tribulations,
My mind trembles and splinters,
Lord, You do know.*

He eschewed flesh-eating as something fundamentally cruel and unspiritual, and banned flesh-eaters from his Fellowship. He averred that he received this intimation directly from God:

*Lord of Grace who counseled me,
'Keep aloof from killers of life
and feeders on meat. They are aliens
to you. Hold no rapport with them
nor any tie with them, except
to save them from hunger, if need be,
true to compassion, with compassion
unfailing to all life, swear, O swear!
Lord of resounding glory, Lord of Mercy,
Dancing for the common weal, glory to You.*

He emphatically repudiated flesh-eating:

*The miracle-working adept,
Though he may change a man
into a girl, and that girl, freshly risen in beauty,
Back to a virile man in a trice,
Though he may raise men from the dead,
I swear by my Master, I swear
by God's effulgent Flame,
If he be minded, in his merciless mind,
To eat and feed on a body that was house of life,
Him I do not hold in reverence.*

He expressed his horror at the very idea of feeding on animals:

*When I see men feeding
on the coarse and vicious food of meat,
It is ever-recurring grief to me;
I tremble, I faint, my flesh shrinks,
Charred and blackened.
You do know my sore-troubled mind,
My exhausted mind, my Master
He expressed again and again his horror of killing:*

*I shuddered at the horrid killer's
swift-descending axe on the prostrate life.
When with my eyes I saw
the writhing agony of severed life,
or the fishermen's net on the sand*

*with bait, or rope with noose, or trap,
Lord, Lord, my Father, You do know,
How, how, shall I utter my agony?*

He expressed himself against animal sacrifice:

*They plant demeaning little gods
over the land, and in the names of these,
They kill sheep and swine and fowl and bulls,
Bleeding their robust lives—
I am witness to this, and weary;
My reason fails, my senses reel.
The red houses of abhorrence
of these wretched little gods
It pains me to see.*

He prays:

*Lord, grant me
to be pure compassion
Help me
to tide people over their griefs and fears
Aid me
to build a world where murder is not.
and eating by killing is not
Let me sing
Your glory without end—
Lord my Mother,
For this I pray.*

He does away with any possible hostile reaction to his ideas from people by not preaching to them but by placing his agony and his entreaties before God. The fact that vegetarianism exists on a considerable scale in Tamil Nadu today is largely owing to Ramalinga Swamigal. His disciple Velayuda Mudaliar writes (to quote Mudaliar's original in English): 'He (Ramalinga Swamigal) had a strange faculty about him, witnessed very often, of changing a carnivorous person into a vegetarian; a more glance from him seemed enough to destroy the desire for animal food.'

We would refer the reader to the previous chapter (entitled *Society of Universal Brotherhood*) for an exposition of Ramalinga's logic in assigning to compassion for life the prime place in spiritual realization, viewing man's relationship with the universe as the obverse of his relationship with God.

12. Holy Book of Grace

THE SANMARGA SANGAM (FELLOWSHIP OF UNIVERSAL Brotherhood) which Ramalinga founded in 1865 in the second phase of his life in Karunguzhi (1858-67) was the seed of his third phase in Vadalur (1867-70). At the same time, the last years in Karunguzhi saw the fruition of his first two phases in the publication of the greater part of his poems by his disciples.

The disciples who took upon themselves this labor of devotion were Velu Mudaliar of Pondicherry, Sivananda Mudaliar of Selvarayapuram, and Ratna Mudaliar of Irrukkam. It is to Ratna Mudaliar that we are most indebted for the book.

Ratna Mudaliar had entertained the idea of publishing Ramalinga's poems and songs even in his Madras days, when they were being brought out randomly, and piece-meal by certain printers. He tried to dissuade them from this by offering them compensation, but to no purpose. Then he turned his energies to collecting all the poems from different sources and to getting Ramalinga's permission to publish them. Ramalinga was indifferent. For six years, from 1860 to 1866, which is attested to by the correspondence between them, Ratna Mudaliar preserved. In 1860 he wrote to Ramalinga (the letter is lost but is inferred from Ramalinga's reply to it) that he would eat only one meal a day until he had brought out the book. Ramalinga, in his reply dated 30 December 1860, wrote he would collect his poems but that he would request his friend, 'dear like the pupils of one's eyes', to desist from the vow. Otherwise, Ramalinga wrote, he himself would take a similar vow. At last, Ratna Mudaliar succeeded in collecting the poems and publishing the book in February 1867. The collecting and arranging of the matter was done by Ramalinga's prime pupil, Thozhuvur Velayuda Mudaliar who divided the book into four sections and named it *Holy Book of Grace*. He appended to it a tribute to Ramalinga and an account of his life and of the manner of publication of the book, in a poem consisting of sixty-six verses. The book was printed by 'Asiatic Press, 292, Lingee Chetty Street, Madras', financed by Somasundara Chettiar of Mylapore.

During this long-drawn process, Ratna Mudaliar wrote to Ramalinga, in March 1866, to give him permission to print Ramalinga's name as

`Ramalinga Swamigal' (Saint Ramalinga). Ramalinga wrote in reply, 'It goes against my inclination to be paraded as Ramalinga swami. It seems to me that the epithet is pompous and, as such, to be avoided.' Still keen on paying homage to him, Velayuda Mudaliar, on his own, printed in the book the name that he had coined for his master, namely, Arut-Prakasa-Vallalar (meaning 'Repository of Luminous Grace') called Chidambaram Ramalinga Pillai. When Ramalinga saw the book, he was pained. He consoled himself by saying to his disciples, 'Shall we take the words to mean "Ramalinga who asks *Who is the One with Luminous Grace?*". (In Tamil the words lend themselves to this interpretation also).

If the event, as it evolved of the publication of the book reflected the character of Ramalinga Swamigal the event which followed it was again a comment on the man.

At the time of publication of the book, Ramalinga, leaving Karunguzhi for Vadalur, was already in the next stage of his spiritual development which unrolled itself fully in Vadalur and subsequently in Mettukkuppam. He was going beyond all rituals, all creeds, all scriptures to a vision of his own of Godhead which was that of abstract Conscious Light. This antagonized many of his erstwhile co-religionists. Chief among these was a ripe, orthodox Saivite called Arumuga Navalar. While others stood aside, because of their respect for Ramalinga, Navalar was greatly incensed. He was particularly sore with the reverential epithets showered on a religious renegade. The name *Thiru-arut-pa* (Holy Book of Grace) applied to his book, the term *Thiru-murai* (Holy Supplications) applied to the sections of the book, were terms strictly restricted to the great original poetic works *Thevaram* and *Thiruvachakam* (containing songs in praise of Siva by the *Nayanmars*, Saivite poets who lived between the 7th and 9th centuries A.D.) but could not be applied to works of saints and spiritual leaders who followed in the subsequent centuries. Navalar felt that Ramalinga's new religion of *Sanmarga* gave elbow room to other religions, particularly Christianity. He started a controversy, describing *Arut-pa* (Book of Grace) as *Marut-pa* (Book of Darkness), and brought out a tract called *Refutation of the Book of False Grace*. The controversy raised a storm at the close of the last and the beginning of the present century, which was responsible for the partial clouding of the appreciation of Ramalinga as a poet.

Finding that his dissension made no dent in the following of Ramalinga, Navalar had recourse to other means. He instituted a suit

against Ramalinga for alleged defamation in a discourse that Ramalinga had delivered in Chidambaram. Navalar alleged that Ramalinga had intimidated him with assault on his person. The case came for hearing in the court at Manjakuppam. Navalar had engaged a lawyer, Ramalinga none. When, on being called into the court, Ramalinga entered, the entire crowd that had gathered there stood up like one man, and made way for him. Everyone clasped his palms together in the traditional gesture of reverence. Navalar did likewise. The judge too moved, as if to rise, but remembering the judicial convention, kept sitting. Starting the proceedings, he asked Navalar why he stood up when the respondent entered the court. Navalar replied that everybody stood up, and he did likewise. The judge further asked why everybody in the court had stood up, and Navalar replied, 'As a mark of respect.' The judge continued, 'You also stood up.'

'Yes,' said Navalar.

'That would mean the same thing?'

'Yes.'

'You agree that he is a worthy man. By the same token, you need not have filed this suit. Or having filed it, you need not have stood up when he entered. Your spontaneous action speaks the truth. The case is closed.'

We may take the story of the book *Thiru-arut-pa* to its close, although it may take us ahead of the chronological schedule at this point. What comprised the book, as published during Ramalinga's life-time, were the first four sections of the book as it is today. The fifth section, which contains mostly the poems and songs composed by him during his Thiruvottriyur period in praise of Lord Kandan of Thiruttanihai, were published in 1880 by Thozhuvur Velayuda Mudaliar. The poems composed by Ramalinga in Vadalur and Mettukuppam, for publishing which his permission had not been obtained, were published as the sixth section in 1885 by Loganatha Chettiar of Thirichirapuram, as a result of the efforts of Padmanabha Mudaliar of Velur and Raghavalu Naicker of Bangalore. *Thiru-arut-pa* is a voluminous work, as remarkable for its quantity as for its quality.

13. Personal Characteristics

IT MAY BE APPROPRIATE HERE TO DESCRIBE SOME OF Ramalinga's personal characteristics.

Thozhuvur Velayuda Mudaliar, in his statement to the Theosophical Society, described Ramalinga in English as follows:

In personal appearance, Ramalinga was a moderately tall, spare man—so spare indeed as to virtually appear a skeleton—yet withal a strong man, erect in stature, and walking very rapidly; with a face of clear brown complexion, a straight thin nose, very large fiery eyes, and with a look of constant sorrow on his face. Towards the end he let his hair grow long; and what is rather unusual with yogis, he wore shoes. His garments consisted but of two pieces of white cloth. His habits were excessively abstemious. He was known to hardly ever take any rest. A strict vegetarian, he ate but once in two or three days, and was then satisfied with a few mouthfuls of rice. But when fasting for a period of two or three months at a time, he literally ate nothing, living merely on warm water with a little sugar dissolved in it.

Ramalinga had a magnetic personality. A fascinating face, strangely haunting, eyes beaming with compassion and grace. Uran Adigal writes (in Tamil), 'To those who have not been blessed to see Ramalinga, it will be futile to say, "Such was Ramalinga, such his color, such his presence". It is said, the blessed saint had a body which transcended photography. It could not be caught on the film by photographs. It cast no shadow.'

Ramalinga, surprisingly for a religious poet, is autobiographical; he frequently alludes to himself, his circumstances, his experiences, in unforgettable live pictures. Even his physical characteristics, habits, dress and the like are alluded to.

He refers to his spare build:

*To me, of mind easily wrought.
and weak of body, who cry to You,
If You don't respond, who will,*

*O Lord³ with the river⁴
and moon in Your locks?*

³ Siva

⁴ The Ganga

He always dressed in white. His dress consisted of two pieces of long cloth. No other dress, no other color. The four great Tamil prophets of Saivism of old were also ascetics in white. Ramalinga, in one of his discourses, said:

*Ochre robes betoken militancy—the militancy
of a man who has to fight with his own nature,
One who has subdued his nature has gained
compassion, For him white is fitting.*

He refers to his white dress in a verse, which describes certain other features also:

*Shy of swinging arms,
I walked with folded hands;
Averse to be bare,
I covered body and head with cloth of white;
I cast no glance
where smartness sauntered
lest the sight offend me.*

This walking picture of Ramalinga brings out the quintessential man.

He shunned indulgence in clothing:

*Once I suffered my friend to clothe me
in cloth gold-bordered
O Lord, the dismay that it caused me!
The dismay that went forth to them!
When, in the heat of the day,
they spread an umbrella over me,
I shrank. The kerchief in my hand
I tucked in my waist, to let free my hand
for prayerful folding.*

Furthermore:

*High-placed seats unsettle me
Sitting cross-legged seems a pose
I dare not sleep on soft bed.
Sitting on a dais, I hardly dare
to stretch down my legs.
Loud talking harrows me—
Spare me these, my mother.*

He ate very little. In the early years he ate twice a day. Subsequently it was only once. Later it was reduced to once in two or three days, and only a few mouthfuls at a time. He used to go without food for two or three months at a time when he would subsist on only sugared-water. Towards the end, his disciples say that he left off eating altogether. This also he has expressed in his poems:

*Then, when I ate twice a day,
and slept a long time—you made the sleep
and food serve me for you...
And then, when I ate but once, my father,
People around, perplex'd, would question me.*

He declared:

*In the flood-tide
of ever-repeated and ever-relished food,
all gains of restraint and penance turn to nought
like tamarind thrown in running river.*

He slept very little. He advised, in his instructions to his disciples, that one should sleep only between midnight and three o'clock in the morning. In his discourses at Mettukuppam, he advised them to sleep only one hour a day. It is stated that in his youth he slept three hours a day, subsequently two hours, and then one hour, and finally, his disciples aver that he dispensed with sleep completely. He addresses God as 'You who banished sleep for me'. He says he is apprehensive of sleeping:

*Supreme Light, that shines before and beyond Time,
Have you made me Yours? I loathe the slothful*

*sleep that comes night or day. It troubles me
that it comes. Unwilling I sleep; and when
I awake, I call on you and pray,
'Lord' when shall I be done with sleep?'*

He banishes sleep:

*Sleep, you slothful, silly Idiot, beware!
If, within half an instant of this warning,
you, with your brood, leave me not
for good, you shall be accursed.
I've transcended sorrow. I've gained
creative will, and I rejoice, I'm not for you,
Get away and be quick!--I've behind me
the Lord of the Golden and Subtle Stage.*

He was transparently sincere, transparently humble, transparently saintly and full of grace. The last infirmity of noble minds—the seeking of fame—also was not his. Living in God, he was self-sufficient:

*The world forgetting, I wished to be
to the world unknown, and I found myself
in public gaze in the street. Was it
entanglement in the world?
Enlighten me, my God, I'm sore troubled.*

The last achievement of man—the complete conquest of mind—was his. He banished mind from him:

*You monkey mind, you foolish idiot, get away!
Stop playing pranks here that you play with others!
Don't take me for one of them.
If you stay within bounds, I may let you be—
Otherwise, get gone!
No leeway shall I give you, none—
Know me for the true son
of the Lord of the true path.*

He emerged above the earthly plane to one of different dimensions where we, ordinary humans, may not follow him. In

describing Ramalinga, one cannot better what Huston Smith has said of Buddha:

Buddha's entire life was saturated with the conviction that he had a cosmic mission to perform... Encomia to the Buddha crowd the texts... After words had done their best, there remained in their master the essence of mystery—unplumbed depth which their language could not express because their thought could not fathom. What they could understand they revered and loved, but there was more than they could exhaust; to the end he remained half light, half shadow, defying complete intelligibility.

To Ramalinga's compassion we have devoted one full section already.

Huston Smith says with reference to Buddha, 'a Franciscan tenderness so strong as to have caused his message to be subtitled, "a religion of infinite compassion".' It seems to the present writer that human compassion reached its acme in Ramalinga. He made it the essential and the *single step* in soul making and God-becoming, and in such terms, tender, firm, unmistakable and logical, as had not been heard with that ring before and has not been heard since. To the verses and expositions from his discourses that we have referred to earlier, we may add a few more, in this context, from the many that abound in his pages:

*Give me that man who is filled with grace
for all lives, seeing life is one,
and I will wear him in my heart
as I do God, and will be his slave,
so may I be by him up-lifted,*

*Give me that man who sees
in every life of his own, no whit different,
and exults in that unity, and I will hold
his heart to be where my Lord
of subtle pervading essence dances
and I will be his slave for ever,
as I am slave of God.*

*Give me that man whose essence is mercy,
Who sees all life as his,
Lighted by the true path gives him,
And I will wear that great being
In my soul, and hold his words
As God's very own.*

These words give the very quintessence of his message.

14. A Miracle, A Parable and A Debate

RAMALINGA, IN KARUNGUZHI, DID NOT DWELL APART, IN A fellowless firmament. His house was by the side of the road, and he was a friend to man. People flocked to him for advice and solace in their troubles. Reference to this may be found in some of his verses quoted earlier. People from distant places left their homes to be near him. They invited him to functions and musical recitals in their houses. Such invitations to him are extant. They considered it a blessing to be of service to him. He became a cult and a legend. Spending days and nights in meditation and composing poems, he gave discourses in the house or in the Sabha after night-fall, and they flocked to listen to him.

In Venkata Reddiar's house in Karunguzhi, the mistress of the house, Muthiyalammal herself used to light the lamp in his room and keep near it a mud pot of oil, with which to replenish the lamp. One day, the mouth of the pot having broken, Muthiyalammal wanted to change it. She bought a new pot, filled it with water and let it stand beside the lamp, in order to season it before use. Then she left the house for the next village. Writing his poems through the night, as he often did, Ramalinga mechanically kept replenishing the lamp with water, from the new pot instead of oil from the old. When Muthiyalammal returned the next morning, she found Ramalinga absorbed in writing, and the lamp burning. She discovered his mistake which, without any conscious volition on his part, had resulted in this miracle. So legend has it. In keeping with his habit of recording his experiences, Ramalinga refers to this in a poem, attributing this kind of office to God, and not to his own powers. Thozhuvur Velayuda Mudaliar and Madurai Chidambara Swamigal also refer to this in their tributes to their master. One could fill pages with miracles attributed to him by legend, but it will be wearisome.

Appasami Chettiar, one of Ramalinga's admirers, used to come to Karunguzhi from Cuddalore (then called Gudalur) to see his master. Having had his brother cured of an indolent sore on the tongue by the grace of Ramalinga, he placed his hospitality at Ramalinga's service. Ramalinga stayed with him for some months in Cuddalore in 1866.

One day, in the front verandah of Chettiar's house, two learned men, who had called on the Chettiar, became involved in a heated discussion on Fate and Free Will, or according to their manner of thinking, (God's) Grace and Free Will. They argued long, one taking as his text, 'Not an atom moves but by the grace of God', and the other, '(It happens) as this soul (in the body) bids'. Arguing, they walked into the house, and asked whether Ramalinga could enlighten them. Ramalinga told them a parable. He said:

Texts from scriptures may not reach all. I shall tell you a story. There was once an ascetic who went naked in the streets. A certain man, who saw him, was struck by his indifference to the flesh, and gave him a plantain. Another, who saw him, was outraged by the sight of a man walking naked where women were, and hit him with a stone. A third, troubled by the incident, took both the men and the ascetic to a judge, and told him, 'This good man here gave the ascetic a plantain. That bad man there hit him with a stone. I have brought both to you, one as witness to the other's deed.' The judge asked the ascetic, 'Who hit you?' The ascetic replied, 'The man who gave me the plantain.' The judge questioned further, 'Who gave you the plantain?' The ascetic replied, 'The man who hit me.' 'Be clear' said the judge. 'Yes,' said the ascetic, 'The man who brought me here hit me with a stone.' The judge understood that no better clarification would be available from the ascetic. Then, on his own, he gave the proper sentence to the man who had hit the ascetic. In this manner, to one who has attained the level of the ascetic, who does not divide the deeds between himself and God, and who views everything and everybody as God, the view, 'Not an atom moves but by God', appertains. To one who views individually the man who gave the plantain, the man who hit the ascetic and the man who took him to the judge, the view, 'This deed is mine, that deed is God's' appertains.

The learned men were content, neither of them having been contradicted.

During his stay in Cuddalore, Ramalinga had a chance encounter with a leader of *Brahmo Samaj*. The debate was noted down by Nayana Reddiar of Alappakkam who stated that it was a verbatim record of the debate. He entitled his pages *Verbatim Records*. This was published

under the same title by *Sanmarga Munnetra Kazhaham* (Society for the Propagation of the True Path) in 1893.

On 16 January 1867, Ramalinga was present at a festival in Thiruppapuliyur, near Cuddalore, on the bank of the river Pannai. Sridaraswami Naicker, a leader of *Brahmo Samaj*, was also there with some of his followers. The local people had been exposed to his speeches before. Taking advantage of the situation, they approached Ramalinga, telling him that Sridaraswami Naicker had exhorted them to give up idol worship, the proper object for contemplation being the all pervading Brahman. Ramalinga briefly said, 'Those who have started knowing Brahman should continue further. Those who have started idol worship should continue likewise. Both are appropriate at their own levels.'

Some among the crowd turned to Naicker and said, 'Please let us have your view, and kindly establish it.'

Naicker was reluctant. He said he preferred that the matter be settled between him and Ramalinga by correspondence. But neither the audience nor Ramalinga would submit to the evasion.

Drawn out, Naicker declared, 'To worship an idol seems idle and childish. The proper thing for contemplation is the Supreme Brahman which is eternal, formless, stainless, matterless, beyond speech and thought. This is our teaching in the *Brahmo Samaj*.'

'If Brahman is beyond speech and thought, how can the mind grasp it? It is like saying that the sky can be measured in hand-lengths, and that the air can be caught within one's grasp. It is all right as far as it goes in theory, but it will not work,' said Ramalinga.

'What I meant was that although the mind cannot seize the Brahman in the way it can seize things limited in their nature, one may yet meditate on the Brahman.'

'If a thing can lend bits of itself to be conceived by the mind, more and more bits of it can steadily be conceived until the whole can be. One cannot say one can partially conceive of a thing. Either it is beyond speech and thought, or it is not. Also, if the mind can partially conceive it, so also may the senses—the vision, the hearing, the smell, the taste, the touch. And if they do, that will go against the nature of Brahman. Only when the

mind is done away with does the experience of Brahman appear. When the mind steps in, ever so stealthily, the knowledge—which is also the experience of Brahman goes. Mind and Brahman are of different natures: the mind is matter-stuff, not self-supporting, it is passing, earth-tainted, subject to sorrow; Brahman is consciousness, knowledge, beyond matter, it is bliss. So the mind cannot conceive of Brahman, it cannot contemplate on it. This has the sanction of the Vedas and the Great Utterances,' said Ramalinga.

Naicker was silent. Goaded by the audience to a reply, he reiterated, 'The mind can think of Brahman.'

'Then the eyes can see Brahman, and all the senses can perceive Brahman in their respective spheres,' said Ramalinga.

'Does it follow that, if the mind can conceive of a thing, the eye should be able to see it?' asked Naicker.

'Yes', replied Ramalinga.

'Is there nothing which can be perceived by the mind, that cannot be perceived by the senses?'

'You must tell me,' said Ramalinga.

'Bliss,' replied Naicker.

'In that sense, the senses can convey bliss to the mind,' said Ramalinga. 'The bliss conveyed through the eyes, through the ears and other senses have been recognized by our sages. But the senses are physical instruments for physical pleasures to be experienced by the mind. But bliss is of the soul, and is to be attained by knowledge of the soul only.'

Some learned brahmins in the crowd queried, 'So Brahman cannot be conceived by the mind?'

'No, since Brahman is beyond the phenomenal world (*maya*) and the mind is of the phenomenal world.'

'Then how do we talk of Brahman at all?' they pursued.

'Brahman can be known by soul-knowledge or soul-experience,' said Ramalinga, 'and the soul knows itself.'

Then turning to the crowd, Ramalinga continued, 'One cannot get soul-experience without preliminary idol worship which is commensurate with the mind. The word *vigraha*, applied to 'idol', means 'Special Abode'. The ordinary abodes of the soul are the bodies of men and other beings, and the special abode, where the Light of Brahman is housed, as instruments for illumination, are the figures of idols. The fact that one can experience Brahman in this way is shown by people who have worshipped idols and finally attained illumination, by people who have won super-human powers like curing diseases, raising the dead, and such others.'

So saying, Ramalinga left the place.

Indeed Ramalinga emphatically repudiated the superior mouthings of cheap wisdom that are all the time in the air of the civilized world, denigrating idol worship, arguing that form necessarily limits the infinity of God, and posing, 'What are idols but stone? What are temples but stone?' and forgetting the possibility that a sense of superiority may be born of an intrinsically limited vision. Ramalinga says that such logic is right in theory but does not work in practice. Indeed he goes a step further, and says that idol worship is a necessary preliminary phase even for those who want to do without it. Without going through this stage it was not possible to attain the ultimate realization, he felt. Indeed, the divine persons whom humanity worships, like Jesus and Buddha, may also be considered as live symbols of Brahman in contradistinction to idols which are inert symbols. In one of his discourses (p. 98, 2nd section, Vol. II of Poems) he clearly says:

Meditation cannot be on anything other than a form. It cannot be on the perfection of God-head. It has perforce to be on a form (image or symbol), not on formlessness. Later form will dissolve into formlessness. The culmination of dualism is non-dualism. The manner of it is this: If the worshipper ceases to be, it is non-dualism. If the form ceases to be, it is the arrival beyond.*

*NOTE: The present writer finds that Ramalinga's counsel, spoken from his own experience, has the authority of the *Upanishad*. The *Munduka Upanishad* (*Mundaka 3, kanda 2, verse 3*):

*(Naayamaatma bhalahenema labhyo na cha pramaadaat tapaso
vyapyalingaat
Yetairupayair yayate yastu vidvamsthasyaisha atmaa vicate
brahmadhaama)*

(This Self is not attainable by one devoid of strength (of soul which is born of pure spiritual life) or purpose, or even by penance done without a Form. The Atman of him who wisely employs all these means enters the state of Brahman.)

(Translation by the author)

The agreement between the *Upanishad* and Ramalinga's statement is pointed out because Sankara (Vide *Mundaka and Mandukya Upanishads*, p. 67, ed. Swami Sharvananda, pub. Sri Ramakrishna Math, Mylapore, Madras, 1932) explains the word '*alingaat*' in the verse to mean 'destitute of the proper sign of the *Sanyasa* Institution', whereas very simply, without recourse to circuitous unconvincing interpretations, the word means just 'without a form'. Moreover, to fit in with his circuitous interpretation, Sankara, in addition, interprets the word *tapas* (which means 'austerity' or 'penance') to mean 'knowledge', thereby giving the meaning of the whole line as 'Nor can the Atman be realized by knowledge devoid of *sanyasa*.' Others like Swami Sharvananda have avoided the issue by rendering the words as 'without the right kind of austerity' or 'by any improper austerity'. T.M.P. Mahadevan also glosses over the word '*alingaat*' by translating it as 'without an aim'. (The *Upanishads* with English translation, pub. G.A. Natesan & Co., Madras, 1950, p.114.) The Vedic text seems to the present writer to mean (in consonance with Ramalinga's statement of his personal experience) that Brahman or God is not attainable except by preliminary conditioning by idol worship, notwithstanding the intellectuals' superior but theoretical attitude.

The stand taken by Ramalinga is again enunciated in *Kena Upanishad* (*Kanda 1, verses 5,6,7*) as follows:

That which cannot be comprehended by the mind, but by which the mind is comprehended (as sages say) know That is Brahman, and not what is worshipped here.

That which cannot be seen by the eyes, but by which the eyes are seen, know That is Brahman, and not what is worshipped here.

That which cannot be heard by the ears, but by which the ears are heard, know That is Brahman, and not what is worshipped here.

15. Widening Mission

IT WOULD APPEAR THAT TOWARDS THE END OF HIS Karunguzhi years, with the founding of the *Sanmarga Sangam*, Ramalinga felt that he had sufficiently prepared himself for his mission in life. He spoke like a prophet inspired, with a sense of his mission derived from God and of his living in God:

*To help men that teem the earth,
Blotches of black within and white without,
to restore them and set them on the path
of the high quest, so may they attain
the soul's next fulfillment here and now
on the earth, the Lord sent me to this world.
For this He blessed me with His Grace.*

He gave his call in no uncertain terms:

*Your sight blinkered to the passing,
Your ears to the trivial,
Your learning shreds, your joy deception,
Your body fed on rot, your mind on the partial,
Men of the world, you have missed the truth.
Hear the tidings, turn to the common final path
of seekers offer truth, seek the Grace of Him
Who is Permeating Subtlety, so may you gain
life in body undying and rejoice,*

And again:

*I say but what the Lord tells me,
no words plus or minus
Indeed, by myself, what wisdom do I have
but what the Lord gives me?*

After founding the *Sanmarga Sangam* in 1865, he stayed in Karunguzhi for two years, visiting now and again the places in the vicinity. During one of his visits to Cuddalore, he mentioned to the fellows of the *Sangam* his intention to build a free eating house which would be open to all, irrespective of caste, creed, country and habits. (In his tract on

Compassion he has explicitly stated that these are irrelevant in the exercise of compassion.) They suggested various places for its location. Finally, Vallalar himself (as Ramalinga is respectfully referred to) chose an open plain, north of Vadalur, a village also called Parvathipuram, about thirty kilometers from Chidambaram. The open space was at the meeting of two highways, one from Madras to Kumbakonam, and the other from Manjakuppam to Vridhachalam. On getting to know this, the people owning the land (amounting to eighty *kanis* or one hundred and eight acres) at this site, made a gift, of it to him in a deed dated 2 February 1867, bearing the signatures of forty owners. A temporary building of mud, thatched with reed-grass, was erected.

The feeding of people in the temporary hutment, the construction of permanent structures, the digging of a well, pond and tank for the Hall were started on the same day with a ceremonial opening. A thousand printed invitations were issued to the public. Invitations, written by Ramalinga by hand, were sent to *sadhus* or ascetics. It is stated that one thousand and six hundred people were fed daily for the first three years. The feeding of the hungry and whoever calls there continues to-day.

At the opening of the Eating House on 23 May 1867, Chidambaram Venkatasubba Dikshitar read out extracts from Ramalinga's tract *Jivakarunya Ozhukkam* (The Law of Compassion). The foremost tenet in Ramalinga's religion was compassion for life. This, he said, leads one to God. There were two aspects to compassion, he said. They were non-killing, including rejection of animal food, and relieving hunger. His tract on compassion, expounding these, reaches noble heights of poignancy and controlled eloquence.

The Free Eating House he named *Samarasa Veda Dharma Salai* (Free House of the Good Fellowship). The word which connotes a free feeding house in Tamil is *chattiram*. Avoiding this with its demeaning associations, he chose the word *salai* which means 'house'. This name he changed later to *Samarasa Suddha Sanmarga Satya Dharma Salai*, or *Satya Dharma Salai* for short.

The same year he founded a school, *Sanmarga Bhodini* (School for the Fellowship). The unique features of the school were that it was open to all, irrespective of age, boys as well as old people, and that three languages were taught Tamil, Sanskrit and English, specified in that order. Thozhuvur Velayuda Mudaliar, a reputed scholar in Tamil as well as

Sanskrit, and proficient in English, was in charge. The school however did not run for long.

During this time Ramalinga also planned to bring out a monthly magazine called *Sanmarga Viveka Vridi* (Orientation to the Path). A prospectus was issued, signed by forty-nine people, including one Muslim, by name Kadar Sahib, who undertook to contribute monthly towards bringing out a journal. But the journal was never published.

16. In Vadalur

AFTER THE OPENING OF THE FREE EATING HOUSE IN 1867, Ramalinga shifted from Karunguzhi to Vadalur. The Eating House became his home and the hub of his activities. It became the centre for the work and worship of the *Sangam* (Brotherhood). Here in the evenings, he gave discourses to people who flocked from all over the land to see him, listen to him, to have his benediction and his counsel in their troubles and afflictions.

The Eating House was run by one Mr. Appaswamy Chettiar and some of his other pupils. Sometimes when provisions ran short, they would report to him, and he would tell them, 'By morning your requirements will be met,' and sure enough, the next morning, carts with rice and vegetables would arrive.

We get a moving picture of him, in some of his poems which describe the vision of God that he had during these days:

*I recall that night,
removing the cloth that wrapped me
and spreading it on the floor
by the Open House, I stretched myself
and slept a troubled sleep
when You came and took me in Your arms
saying, 'Fear not, son,' and You carried me
somewhere, smiling, Sovereign Lord,
and gave me gift of divine powers-
Father; accept my song.*

In other poems he repeatedly affirms that God came to him at the Eating House, and in one vision gave him all the grace and powers which would require several lives of seeking.

The crowds swelled in the Open House, and more and more people crowded around him. He now wanted to be free of these, and to strengthen himself further in solitude and contemplation, but at the same time continue to carry his message and ministry to the people. Three kilometers south of Vadalur was the little hamlet of Mettukuppam which

he had visited a few times. The people there had requested him to live amongst them; so he went there and accepted their hospitality.

In May 1870, after four years in Vadalur, Ramalinga shifted to Mettukuppam. He was accommodated in a house which had been a rest-house for visiting religious heads of the *Vaishnava* cult and fallen into disuse for years. It was a small building consisting of a single room. He called it *Siddhi Valakam* (House of Salvation) and moved there.

Living in Mettukuppam, schooling himself in yoga and mystic meditation, he was still alive to his mission in the world. He would go daily to Vadalur to inspect and bring to fruition the work that he had commenced there.

He selected an open space of about fifty acres by the Eating House. He gave it the name *Uttara Gnana Chidambaram* (New Chidambaram North). He drew a rough diagram of a temple as he had conceived it, octagonal in shape, and gave it to his disciples, with instructions to erect the temple. The construction was started in June 1871. He continued to stay in Mettukuppam, visiting Vadalur, supervising the work of the Eating House, and the construction of the temple, and giving his guidance when necessary about these projects and also about spiritual matters and codes of conduct to the Brotherhood.

He demanded perfection not only in the construction of the temple but even in the name that he gave it. He did not call it Koil or temple. He called it *Sabhai* meaning 'Hall' or Assembly, the full name being *Samarasa Suddha Saamarga Satya Gnana Sabhai*, or in shortened form, *Satya Gnana Sabhai* (Hall of True Knowledge). He wanted to eschew anything with a religious connotation. The whole temple was a splendor of symbolism. The Hall of Truth was octagonal in shape. Within it was a twelve-pillared hall, and within it again, a four-pillared hall which housed the symbol of the Supreme Light of Grace on the pedestal of Knowledge: A consecrated mirror, about four feet in length, was placed to reflect the Light of Supreme Grace, as a model for soul-making. Seven screens of different colors hung, one behind another, representing seven levels of the illusion of the phenomenal world, which bide the light within man, and which have to be pierced through by knowledge and grace. Every hall, every gate, every window, every pillar, every arch, every step, north, south, east, west, peripheral, central, every wooden plank and chain, had a symbolic significance.

The temple was opened on 25 January 1872 Ramalinga, was not present at the opening. He seemed to be lost in a quest of his own, and yet keen that people should taste of the surpassing joy that he himself had known. In a proclamation issued on the occasion of the opening of the *Sabhai*, he gave a call, ringing with the truth of his personal realization, the opening of which we give below.

*Friends who have had the rare chance of being born as humans:
I am conscious that this moment marks the attainment of what, for all my strivings, I have, not known till now-knowledge of which I had no idea, qualities of which I had no conception, powers which are beyond the pale of humans, experiences which are beyond experiencing, and I rejoice. I desire that this great joy should equally be yours. In the awareness of the universal identity of the soul, which is the goal of the pure good path (sudha saamarsa), and the promptings with which this surging joy fills me, I let you know of my joy so that you also may attain it, as I have.*

The mode of worship in the *Sabhai* was unique. It was open to all castes, cults, creeds and religions. The only restriction was that meat-eaters should not enter the main *Sabhai*. They might worship from outside. None was allowed to enter the inner *Sabhai* for worship. Only for specific functions, like sweeping, cleaning and dusting, lighting the lamp, replenishing the oil, might one among the allotted few enter it. Such were chosen as did not feed their flesh with flesh, would not kill, and had got over their lusts and passions; their caste and creed were of no moment. There were no accessories for worship like flower, fruit, rice, coconut or other offerings, light, incense or music, and no symbol of benediction like the handling of consecrated water, sacred ash and the like.

In one of what he calls 'Humble Supplications towards the true path' (*Suddha Sanmarga Satya Chiru Vinnappam*) he prays:

Lord of all, Supreme Effulgent Grace! Grant that henceforth our minds are not tainted with ritualistic and other aberrations of creeds and sects, cultural and other aberrations of castes and codes.

*Let the awareness of the Identity of the soul
in all beings, which is the prime quest of the
spiritual seeker, not forsake us at anytime
in any degree in any manner in any place. Let
it ever illuminate and move us.*

*God of Shining Light, we thank You for Your
mercy, we again thank You.*

This Sabhai, Hall of Knowledge in Truth, was renovated and reconsecrated by a re-dedicated people, headed by the venerable Kripananda Variaar on 24 April 1950.

17. In Mettukuppam—The Last Phase

FOR TWO YEARS AFTER HE MOVED TO METTUKUPPAM, Ramalinga was involved in the building of the Hall of Truth in Vadalur until it was opened on 25 January 1872. Thereafter he steadily curtailed his activities, and started withdrawing into himself. He used to practice yoga, including what is called *brahma-dandika-yogam*, sitting between two ovens. In a song he thanks God for helping him to attain the state of yoga in a *nazhikai* (Tamil unit of time, equivalent to 24 minutes):

*Within a nazhikai one evening
You led me to the yogic state.
By the next morning You gave me
its full fruits.*

In common with the *siddhi's* (adepts) of the Tamil Land, he held that *siddhi*, or attainment of divinity *with all its connotations*, was the purpose of life, not *mukti*, or liberation or release from the cycles of life and death. While he endorsed the traditional or scriptural conception of *mukti*, he held that this was not the final goal, being only the penultimate step to *siddhi*, which is Existing in Divinity or Godhead. According to him, *mukti* and *siddhi* are two sides of the same medal, *mukti* representing the state ripened for Being, and *siddhi* the Being itself. In his hymn to the Supreme Light of Grace, he declares:

*Supreme Light of Grace who revealed
Liberation as the means to God-Being,
Mukti the penultimate stage and step
to final Siddhi, the goal, the Experiencing State.*

It is recorded that one day in October 1870, he became invisible, and remained so for some days. To put his disciples and followers at ease, he fore-warned them in one of his regular 'instructions' to them:

Glory to God. Believe that one may be the instrument for good for many. Be assured that you will reap benefit through me. In a few days I shall, by the grace of God, have my body hidden

from you. Hold your patience for a while. Be not afraid. Run the Eating House confidently. Glory to God.

Having sent this notice to Vadalur, he locked himself in his room in Mettukuppam. It is said that for several days the room remained locked, and nothing was seen or heard or known of him until he reemerged. It is to be noted that he refers, in his poems and discourses, in contra-distinction to the physical or gross body, to three types of 'pure' body, namely, *suddha*, *pranava* and *gnana*, which may be rendered respectively as psychic or astral (subtle body), *devachanic* or *manas* (causal body) and *sushuptic* or *buddhi* or *arivu* in Tamil (spiritual body). Of the three pure bodies, according to his exposition, the first is free from the limitations of the flesh like disease, old age, physiological functions, and it casts no shadow; the second is visible but not graspable; the third is intermittently visible and is beyond time.

His followers affirm that he was averse to be photographed, and that when he was photographed without his knowledge, on eight occasions, no picture resulted, only dim shadows of his clothing being visible. Finally, a sculptor from Pannrutti made an image of him in clay and showed it to him. It is stated that Ramalinga remarked, 'So the golden body has become clay.' (The term 'golden body' is used in Tamil for the subtle or astral body). It is said also that the photographs of Ramalinga that we have now are of this sculpture. In numerous poems and songs Ramalinga refers to his prayers and endeavors to attain the deathless body, and his final success in attaining it along with other super-human powers:

*I saw my Father and I gained
deathlessness⁵ for sure;
Divine powers became mine,
and I became
an adept of the soul.*

⁵ This refers deathlessness of the body, not immortality as usually understood.

And again:

*No death⁶ ever for me!
The Lord has flowed into me
and I into Him, past distinction—
we are one! I wonder
how this came about
Men of the world, partake with me
of this bliss and be rid of grief!*

⁶ *op. cit.*

In numerous poems he declares that God has made him His own, His Son:

*'Behold the men, caught in creed and doctrine,
sport the vain play of religion that snares
the world, like unknowing children.
caught and dying fruitless. Let no more lives
go waste. Light the truth within them.
guide them to the path of pure knowledge,
and so to true bliss. To you, my son,
I commend them,' so You spoke, my Master,
Effulgent Flame, Bright Light of the Flame,
Dispeller of Darkness, pervading all,
from formlessness to harmony of sound!*

Again:

*Wonderful is Your grace, my Mother—
the bliss You made mine, the name You gave me,
calling me Your son, and planting me
on the path of pure knowledge and truth!*

We may compare this confident ecstasy with the following from *Taittiriya Upanishad*:

Having attained to Brahman, a sage declared:

'I am life. My glory is like the mountain peak. I am established in the purity of Brahman. I have attained the freedom of the Self. I am Brahman, self-luminous, the

brightest treasure. I am endowed with wisdom.
I am immortal, imperishable!

Tr. : Swami Prabhavananda and
Frederick Manchester

Of the poems and songs that Ramalinga composed during this period (which were published in 1880, six years after his passing, as the sixth section of *Holy Book of Grace*) Thiru Uran Adigal says that, if we consider the Holy Book as a Body of Knowledge, the sixth section will be the face, the hymn to the Supreme Light the eyes, and the symbolic word (or mantra), *Arut Perum jyoti* (Supreme Light of Grace) the pupils. This hymn, composed in *ahaval* meter, consists of 1596 lines, a dimension not reached in that meter elsewhere in Tamil poetry. We have the date of its composition: 18 April 1872.

During this period Ramalinga wrote also what he calls *Petitions to the Supreme Light* in prose. The circulars which he now and again issued to the Fellowship enunciate the tenets of the Path. The *Instructions to the House*, dated 30 March 1871, carries the following:

Should one's body break under the pressure of one's deeds and the impact of time, the body should not be burnt. It should be buried. One must be confident in one's faith and in the full belief that the dead will rise. One should not give way to grief and lamentation. Should a woman lose her husband, let still the necklace (*thali*) of his plighted troth be on her neck. Should a man lose his wife, let him not think of marrying another. Should one's sons die, let one not grieve. No ceremonies, no rituals for the dead need be done. Let the people who have suffered the loss gather together on a day and give free gift of food to whom they can.

We have a masterly exposition of the philosophical aspects of his teaching in his own words in various discourses of his in *Mettukkuppam*, put together by his disciples in a small tract entitled *Spoken Words of Grace*, in the course of which we have the following:

Many are the religions of the world, each with its own gods and paths and practices and modes of realization... We have heard it said that they are but variations of the essential truth which is the goal of our path of Pure Truth. Therefore it behoves you to accord

your belief to their holy words, realizing for yourselves the truth in those words, to make yours the core of truth in them, rejecting all their rituals and dogmas.

His most celebrated discourse, his last sermon called *The Great Sermon*, was delivered by him on 22 October 1873, three months before his passing away, at the hoisting of the flag of the Brotherhood of the Path on *Siddhi Valakam*, his house in Mettukkuppam. The flag was symbolic of the channel of mystic power supposed to exist in man, running from the navel to the mid-point between the eyebrows, according to the experience of adepts in yoga. The sermon is revealing in many ways, showing the final development of Ramalinga. He exhorted them:

Don't continue wasting your time as you have been doing all along ...
Devote yourself to spiritual enquiry.

The enquiry is this: what is our human situation, what is the nature of the powers that lie beyond us and move us?

...Don't set any store by what we have been traditionally exposed to—the *Vedas*, the *Agamas* and the *Puranas*... These have but projected the character of the microcosm on the macrocosm.

It is possible to attain super-human powers, to work miracles. But do not aim at these. The smaller gains are not worth-while: they rob you of the bigger, true gains. Therefore, undistracted by these, let your minds dwell wholly on God...

Likewise do not pin your faith in religions. They do not give you the spiritual experience born of true knowledge... The faith I had in Saiva religion it is hardly possible to exaggerate. My poems and prayers in my book are standing testimony to this. The reason why I had such deep faith then was my lack of true knowledge.

Now God has raised me to a pinnacle. This is because I gave it all up. You may likewise gain divine life if you likewise give up all.

... But what was it that actually raised me?

... It was compassion which one may call grace.

... One attains that compassion by a sense of universal unity. Only that sense can lead one to compassion. Now my knowledge has gone beyond the wheeling universes.

You will not know the taste of a thing unless you have experienced it. You will not be drawn to a thing whose taste you do not know. Likewise, unless you experience the bliss of Godhead, you will not be drawn to God. So you must first develop in you the high desire and aim to know God...

... If you persist in this enquiry, God will come to you and reveal to you what is fitting. When you develop further, He will let you know more. For a while, after me, none will be forthcoming to counsel you. For that reason do not continue on the path of indifference. This is my last word to you...

One notes here, as in many of his poems, the single driving purpose of his life—the regeneration and divination of man. One discerns also a faint note of discontent with his followers. This is more discernible in some of his circulars to the *Salai* or Eating House, containing gentle, but explicit and firm remonstrance on their behavior. It is in the context of these that Ramalinga spoke sometimes to some of his disciples of the coming of people who would care, and with them, the Theosophical Society.

18. The Passing of Ramalinga

THE CLIMAX OF RAMALINGA'S DISSATISFACTION WITH THE running of the *Sabhai* or Temple was reached in his deciding to close it down in 1873. Within six months of its opening he had issued, on 18 July 1872, written instructions on the manner of running it. He laid down that worshippers should worship only at the entrance, that people entering the Hall for cleaning it and lighting the lamp should be under twelve or over seventy-two years of age. He did not find his followers apt. Closing the *Sabhai*, he kept the key with him in *Siddhi Valakam*. The temple remained closed until four years after his passing away when the fellows of the Brotherhood opened it again and recommenced worshipping there in 1878.

After the closing of the *Sabhai* came the great sermon at *Siddhi Valakam* on 22 October 1873. This marked the end of his outward activities. As if in token of this, in the next month, November 1873, he removed the lighted lamp from his room, and placed it outside. He told his followers (as has been recorded): 'Without hindrance you may worship here. I shall be closing the door of my room. For some time the Lord will shine in this flame. Avail, yourself of this, without wasting time. The song "Thinking, and again thinking of Him", will be suitable for prayer.'

It would appear, from the statement that 'for some time the Lord will be in this flame', that Ramalinga expected the coming of the Lord and his own end. This is clear from the song of his that he refers to, which was composed by him at this time:

*Men of the world, we who call on Him,
Nectar of Grace, our pledged Lord and King,
Store-House of Good, Dancer poised in Truth,
We that for ever and for ever sing of Him,
and adore Him, thinking and again thinking of Him,
Feeling ever His Presence, limp with love,
Wet with tears, we say, to you, 'Listen!—
The hour is ripe for His coming,
for deathless divine life for us;
The time is come when we shall step on God's stage—
We speak the truth, there is no deception here.*

Truth was there, at least as far as Ramalinga himself was concerned, metaphorically, if not literally. In song after song he affirms this:

*The time is come for His coming
and proving the truth...*

The burning lamp which he placed outside his room in 1873 is still burning to-day. Thousands are being drawn to that lamp as well as to the other lamp in Vadalur.

After placing the lamp outside, Ramalinga shut himself in his room. Thereafter he used to remain shut in his room for days at a stretch, coming out for a few days, and on those days talking to people and giving discourses. This went on for three months. He gave an indication of his passing away to the people. He told them (in words that have been recorded): 'I opened my shop. There was no buyer. It will be closed. Now I am in this body. Soon all bodies shall be mine.'

Then came Friday of the eighth lunar asterism, 30 January 1874. As night set in, he called his followers together and said (in words recorded):

I shall remain shut in the room for ten to fifteen days. Don't look into the room and get mystified. If you do, nothing will show. The Lord will see to it that it is so. He will not reveal me.

At midnight Ramalinga gave his farewell blessings to the people gathered there, exhorting them to follow the path of true knowledge and to seek the grace of the Lord of Supreme Light. Then he turned into the room and shut himself in. Nothing further was seen of him. It is held by his followers that he 'merged into the Supreme Light', that he 'became one with God'. It is held by them, on the strength of his own anticipatory utterances in a poem, that he attained the God state in two-and-a-half *nazhichais* (which make one hour):

*To-day He comes, to-day He will sit where I sit,
My God, my great Lord, Husband of my life,
and within two nazhichais and a half
will mix with me, and seat Himself
in my consciousness to be there for ever.*

*This I declare, this I affirm, this I know
from penance profound. Know this for a truth—
The truth of this will be out
in two nazhihais and a half, no whit more.*

The last declaration is reiterated ten times in the ten verses of the poem.

The passing away of Ramalinga produced a stir and gave rise to diverse rumors until the Government decided to look into the matter. In May 1874, three months after his passing away, Mr. J.H. Garstin, I.C.S., Collector of South Arcot, and Mr. George Banbury, I.C.S., Member of the Board of Revenue, visited *Siddhi Valakam*. In their presence the room was opened. It was vacant. They walked round the room. Finding nothing incriminating, they donated twenty rupees for the feeding of the poor which was being carried on there, and left.

In *Madras District Gazetteers—South Arcot District* (1906 pages 316-317) appeared a brief account of Ramalinga's life, from which the following extracts are given:

Parvathipuram: A village of 1,189 inhabitants, lying twenty-three miles south-west of Cuddalore on the Vridhachalam Road. The place is connected with one Ramalinga Paradesi, a somewhat curious example of a latter-day saint who has been almost deified by his followers.

.... ..

Ramalinga Paradesi seems to have persuaded his disciples that they would rise again from the dead, and he consequently urged that burial was preferable to cremation. Even brahmins are said to have been buried in this belief, and people who died in other villages were in several cases brought to Vadalur and interred there. In 1874 he locked himself in a room (still in existence) in Mettukuppam (hamlet of Karunguzhi) which he used for *samadhi* or mystic meditation, and instructed his disciples not to open it for some time. He has never been seen since, and his room is still locked. It is held by those who still believe in him that he was miraculously made one with his God and that in the fullness of time he will reappear to the faithful.

One of his disciples, Dandapani Swamigal has recorded in a poem, reiterating the statement in each of its eleven stanzas, that he had been told by Ramalinga that he would come again to the world. A great many shared this belief.

A further curious statement is made by Dandapani Swamigal that Ramalinga is the reincarnation of Thayumanavar, a great saint and poet who lived in the later part of the sixteenth century. As usual in legends about saints, there are many reports of Ramalinga's followers having seen him in their dreams as well as in reality, and of receiving intimations of his living presence.

Ramalinga has summed up his life as a voyage of spiritual discovery in a song which he wrote in Mettukuppam towards the end of his life:

*I crossed the deep. I reached the shore,
I attained
Past the temple door that opened where
the vision glowed.
I gained the grace that ends all pain
I won the Light that lights Intelligence
I gained undying body, powers o'er-mastering
Ills and limits of the flesh, bliss of soul,
Tokens of grace of the great Dancing Lord.*

The poem reminds one strongly of Tennyson's *Crossing the Bar*:

*Sunset and evening star.
And one clear call for me!
And may there be no moaning of the bar
when I put out to sea.
.....
For tho' from out our borne of Time and Place
the flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my Pilot face to face
When I have crossed the bar.*

While the similarity between the two is striking, the difference is equally striking—between the poet's hope of meeting the Pilot, and the saint's vision of having met the Pilot, face to face.

19. Ramalinga and the Theosophical Society

THE LAST YEARS IN METTUKUPPAM SAW A RAMALINGA WHO had turned away from formal religion and become the prophet of universal brotherhood, based on the identity of the soul in all life (not only in mankind), and his conception of God as the Light or Consciousness in all, the Supreme Light whose nature is grace, and which man can attain only by developing and being turned into such grace himself at his own level. Ramalinga did away with all religious doctrines, dogmas, rituals and observances. He declared that his approach was one of true knowledge, the final knowledge and perception of the same quintessential soul in all life as well as in the insentient universe, in varying degrees, a knowledge free of the accretions of religions. This gospel of universal brotherhood and the essential identity of all religions is identical with that of the Theosophical Society, although the vision of Theosophy did not perhaps extend as far as Ramalinga's to embrace the insentient universe, and did not perhaps emphasize the revelatory, soul-making and God-making power of compassion for life, as Ramalinga did. In 1865, in Vadalur, he founded the *Samarasa Veda Sanmarga Sangam* (Society for Religious Harmony in Universal Self-hood), based on these principles. In 1872, in order to eschew all religious connotations and associations, he changed the name to *Samarasa Sudda Sanmarga Satya Sangam* (Society for Pure Truth and Universal Self-hood), and he changed similarly the name of the Eating House and the schools that he had founded. It is however only fair to say that his God of Supreme Light is but a variation of Siva, conceived in the abstract, as evidenced frequently by his hymns, in which he addresses the Supreme Light by the specific appellations of Siva, like the Dancer of the Cosmic Dance, Lord of the Cosmic Stage, Lord Nataraja, etc. Indeed, even in traditional Hinduism, Siva is considered to be Pure Effulgent Light.

The teachings of Theosophy are the same as those of Ramalinga. Indeed the *Samarasa Veda Sanmarga Sangam*, founded by him, may be considered to be the Indian counterpart of the Theosophical Society, founded ten years later in 1875 in New York. Theosophy derives its basic concept from the *Atma Vidya* (Soul Knowledge) of the *Upanishads*, which considers the entire universe to be the manifestation of an indwelling Universal Soul, and from the conceptions of Karma, re-incarnation and

spiritual evolution from Hinduism in general. Theosophy holds, as Hinduism does, that by absolute purity and high striving man can unite himself with the all pervading Soul. It recognizes the existence of such realized men on earth, called *Mahatmas*, or adepts or initiates, with divine wisdom born of special insight or intuition. It declares the unity of all religions, the core of which it holds to be revelation of such divine wisdom. This was what Ramalinga, himself a *Mahatma* or adept, taught. He said that all religions, stripped to the core of truth, are the same. He isolated this core, by the name *Satya Sanmargam*, meaning true knowledge or true universal spirit, from the super-structure which each religion builds on this, constituting the religion's total form and nature. He considers these as accretions and 'falsehood', and dismisses them. He even removed the word *veda* (meaning religion) from the original name of his Society which he finally called *Satya Sanmarga Sangam*. He defined the *sanmargam*, or 'good path' as the approach to God by self-identification with God and with life and the universe. The first and only step for receiving the grace of God, he held, was compassion for all life, compassion even for the insentient universe.

The Theosophical Society was founded on 7 September 1875 in New York by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-91) who claimed repeatedly that she had been called by initiates or masters or adepts in Tibet to make the teaching public. Col. Henry S. Olcott was the first President of the Society, and Madame Blavatsky the first Secretary.

Thozhuvur Velayuda Mudaliar, the first and best-known disciple of Ramalinga, met Madame Blavatsky and Col. Olcott when they were in Madras. At that time Velayuda Mudaliar was a Tamil Pundit in Presidency College, Madras. He gave a statement to the Society, in English, ratified by Sri G. Muthuswamy Chetty, Judge of the Small Cause Court, Madras and Vice-President of the Madras Theosophical Society. This statement was published in the book *Hints on Esoteric Theosophy* and the journal *The Theosophist*, issue of July 1882, and re-published in the same journal, issue of September 1969. Extracts from this statement are given below:

To the Author of 'Hints on Esoteric Theosophy'

Sir,

I beg to inform you that I was a *chela* of the late 'Arulprakasa Vallaalare', otherwise known as Chidambaram Ramalinga Pillay Avargal, the celebrated Yogi of Southern India. Having come to know that the English community,

as well as some Hindus, entertained doubts as to the existence of the *Mahatmas* (adepts), and as to the fact of the Theosophical Society having been formed under their special orders; and having heard, moreover, of your recent work, in which much pains are taken to present the evidence about these *Mahatmas pro* and *con*—I wish to make public certain facts in connection with my late revered Guru. My belief is that they ought effectively to remove all such doubts, and prove that Theosophy is no empty delusion, nor the Society in question founded on an insecure basis.

Then, after giving a brief sketch of the life, personality and teachings of Ramalinga, Velayuda Mudaliar continues:

In the year 1867, he founded a Society, under the name of *Sanmarga Veda Sanmarga Sangam* which means a society based on the principle of Universal Brotherhood, and for the propagation of the true Vedic doctrine. I need hardly remark that these principles are identically those of the Theosophical Society. Our Society was in existence but for five or six years during which time a very large number of poor and infirm persons were fed at the expense of its members.

.....

During the first half of 1873 he preached most forcibly his views upon Universal Brotherhood. But during the last quarter of the year, he gave up lecturing entirely and maintained an almost unbroken silence. He resumed speech in the last days of January 1874 and reiterated his prophecies - hereinafter narrated. On the 30th of that month, at Mettukuppam, we saw our master for the last time... He left with a promise to reappear some day, but would give us no intimation as to the time, place, or circumstances. Until then, however, he said that would be working not in India alone, but also in Europe and America and other countries...

During the latter part of his visible earthly career, he repeatedly exclaimed,... 'The real members of the Brotherhood are living far away, towards the North of India... The time is not far off when persons from Russia, America and other foreign lands will come and preach to you this same doctrine of Universal Brotherhood...'

This prophecy has, in my opinion, just been literally fulfilled. The fact that *Mahatmas* in the North exist is no new idea to us, Hindus; and the strange fact that the advent of Madame Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott from Russia and America was foretold several years before they came to India is an incontrovertible proof that my

Guru was in communication with those *Mahatmas* under whose direction the Theosophical Society was subsequently founded.

It must be added that the veracity of Velayada Mudaliar's statement has been questioned by some scholars, particularly his mention of countries by name:

The Theosophist, issue of July 1882, in which the above appeared, carried the following editorial comment:

When, in answer to a direct challenge, the author of *The Occult World* wrote to the *Bombay Gazette* (April 4, 1882), he began his letter with the following profession of faith: 'I was already sure, when I wrote *The Occult World*, that the Theosophical Society was connected, through Madame Blavatsky, with the great Brotherhood of Adepts I described. I know this to be the case, with much greater amplitude of knowledge.' Little did our loyal friend fancy, when he was penning these lines, that his assertion would one day be capable of corroboration by the testimony of thousands. But such is now the state of the case. Sceptics and prejudiced or interested witnesses in general may scoff as they like, the fact cannot be gainsaid. Our friends—and we have some who regard us neither as lunatics nor imposters—will at least be glad to read the statement which follows; ... We are no more at liberty to repeat here all the questions put to us by the interviewers than we are to divulge certain other facts which would still more strongly corroborate our repeated assertions that (1) Our Society was founded at the direct suggestion of Indian and Tibetan Adepts; and (2) that in coming to this country we but obeyed their wishes.

Following the statement of Velayada Mudaliar is a comment by Madame Blavatsky, also reproduced in *The Theosophist*, issue of July 1882:

This is one of those cases of previous fore-telling of a coming event, which is least of all open to suspicions of bad faith. The honorable character of this witness, the wide publicity of his Guru's announcements, and the impossibility that he could have got from public rumor, or the journals of the day, any intimation that the Theosophical Society would be formed and would operate in India—all these conspire to support the inference that Ramalinga

Yogi was verily in the counsels of those who ordered us to found the Society.

In March 1873, we were directed to proceed from Russia to Paris. In June we were told to proceed to the United States where we arrived on July 6th. This was the very time when Ramalinga was most forcibly prefiguring the events which should happen. In October 1874, we received an intimation to go to Chittenden, Vermont where, at the famous homestead of the Eddy family, Colonel Olcott was engaged in making his investigations—now so celebrated in the annals of Spiritualism—of the so-called 'materialization of spirits'. In November 1875 the Theosophical Society was founded and it was not until 1878 that the correspondence began with friends in India, which resulted in the transfer of the Society's Headquarters to Bombay in February, 1879.⁷

⁷ From Bombay, the headquarters of the Society was shifted to Madras in 1882.—Author.

20. Ramalinga's 'True Knowledge'

THIS CHAPTER MIGHT HAVE BEEN ENTITLED 'Ramalinga's Religion' but for the fact that the word 'religion', in his later years, was his expressly stated anathema, and he banished all religions from his teachings, retaining only their core, which he called 'true knowledge' and which he realized as Supreme Light. Likewise, the *Upanishads* declare that soul-realization is born of the knowledge of the soul (*atma-vidya*).

Ramalinga's conception of the Supreme Light can be traced to the *Gayatri* of *Rig Veda*. The *Gayatri Mantra* (*Gayatri* spiritual formula or watch-word), in its span of twenty-four syllables is generally recognized as the quintessence of Vedic teaching. Within twenty-four syllables it embodies a lofty spiritual quest which will suffice for the spiritual development of any intellectual man through his life-time.

In 1867 Ramalinga met Sabapathy Sivacharya, a young man of nineteen, at Chidambaram. The young man was drawn to the master. He came to Vadalur in 1869 and remained there to become an excellent disciple of Ramalinga, and finally the priest of the *Satya Gnana Sabhai*, Ramalinga's 'Hall of Truth'. In one of his early meetings with Ramalinga in Vadalur, Sivacharya requested Ramalinga to explain to him the *Gayatri*, which Ramalinga did.

The *mantra* from *Rig Veda*, called *Gayatri* or *Surya Gayatri*, has two levels of meaning, the first serving to clarify the second, which is the real purport of the *mantra*:

1. Let us meditate on the effulgence of the sun who wakens all to life.
2. Let us meditate on the Supreme Light that lights the intelligence (or consciousness) of all life.

The aspirant is to meditate regularly on the internal sun or internal light of consciousness which persists through the three states of being, namely, wakefulness, dreaming sleep and deep sleep, and whose replica the external sun is in the external world. This internal consciousness is the common quintessential core of all life.

The following texts from *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (7th *brahmana* or section of the third *Adhyaya* or chapter) notable for their sublimity, will help one to grasp the meaning of the *Gayatri*:

He who dwells in the sun (*aditya*), and within the sun, whom the sun does not know, whose body the sun is, and who rules the sun within, he is your Self, the Ruler within (*antaryamin*), the immortal.

He who dwells in the moon and stars (*chandratarakam*), and within the moon and stars, whom the moon and stars do not know, whose body the moon and stars are, and who rules the moon and stars within, he is your Self, the Ruler within, the immortal.

He who dwells in the darkness (*tamas*), and within the darkness, whom the darkness does not know, whose body the darkness is and who rules the darkness within, He is your Self, the Ruler within, the immortal.

He who dwells to the light (*tejas*), and within the light, whom the light does not know, whose body the light is, and who rules the light within, he is your Self, the Ruler within, the immortal.

He who dwells in all beings, and within all beings whom the beings do not know, whose body all beings are, who rules all beings within, he is your Self, the Ruler within, the immortal.

He who dwells in the mind, and within the mind, whom the mind does not know, whose body the mind is, and who rules the mind within, he is Your Self, the ruler within, the immortal.

He who dwells in the intellect (*vijnana*) and, within the intellect, whom the intellect does not know, whose body the intellect is, and who rules the intellect within, he is your Self, the Ruler within, the immortal.

(Tr: Max Muller)

The same thought is expressed pithily in *Taittiriya Upanishad* (III, 10-14):

He who dwells In man, and He who dwells in the sun are one.

The *Gayatri Mantra* takes further significance from the following verse from *Isavasyopanishad* (verse 16):

*O nouri her, only seer, control of all,
O illumining Sun, fountain of life for all.*

creatures, withhold thy light, gather together thy rays. May I behold, through thy grace, thy most blessed form. The Being that dwells therein—even that Being am I.

(Tr: Swami Prabhavananda
and Frederick Manchester)

The parallelism between the two meanings of *Gayatri*—between the sun as the stimulator and support of physical life, and the Self as the Consciousness-Core of life *as well as of the sun* is rendered pithily by the following text from *Taittiriya Upanishad*:

Brahman is to be meditated upon as the source of all thought and life and action. He is the splendor in wealth, he is the light in the stars. He is all things.

(Tr: Swami Prabhavananda
and Frederick Manchester)

Gayatri is the *mantra* (pregnant word or formula) *par excellence* for meditation on the Brahman. As a man thinks, so he becomes. One is enjoined to meditate on the *Gayatri* and on the Self as the Light within and the Light without, in order to purify and elevate one's thoughts.

To develop the power to behold God, and so to say, to contain God, Ramalinga, in his early years, used the device of a mirror reflecting a flame to meditate upon. Later he installed such mirrors in the Vadalur Hall as well as in the *Siddhi Valakam* House.

The *Katha Upanishad* says that in the embodied self Brahman can be perceived distinctly as an image in a mirror. This does not mean that the man's self is just an unreal reflection. This refers to the clarity that is needed by the Self-housing body in order to reflect the Self within itself. The clarity depends on the appropriateness of the body to house the Self, man, for example, being more suitable than a dog. And further,

As in a mirror, so (Brahman may be seen clearly) here in this body; as in a dream, in the world of the fathers; as in the water, he is seen in the world of Gandharvas; as in light and shade (i.e. as distinctly as light is seen from darkness) in the world of Brahma.

Katha Upanishad, Valli 6, Verse 5
(Tr : Author)

For a proper understanding of the body-lamp concept one may go back to the *Upanishads*:

As a mirror, lustrous by nature but stained by dust, shines when it is cleaned, so the embodied one, on seeing clearly the nature of the Self, becomes one with his purpose achieved, and freed from sorrow. When one, having attained to yoga, sees clearly the real nature of Brahman through the real nature of the self which can be compared to a lamp, then knowing God, the unborn, steadfast, free from every nature, one is released from all fetters.

Svetasvatara Upanishad, 11, 14 & 15
(Tr: T.M.P. Mahadevan)

The nearest expression of the nature of Brahman, the sole universal Reality, the pure, transcendental, metaphysical essence which is beyond all attributes, all changes, all personal masks, which is self-effulgent and free, is given in the words *sat-chit-ananda* and *Tejas* or *Jyoti*. The first word comprises three, of which *sat* may be translated as Pure Being, Sheer Existence or Self-Existence, *chit* as Pure Consciousness or Pure Intelligence or Pure Knowledge, and *ananda* as Pure Bliss. The second word *Tejas* or *Jyoti* is a descriptive one, meaning Light or Effulgence, not attempting to connote the content. Max Muller expounds, 'The nearest approach which metaphysical language can make to Brahman is to call it Light, as it were *Conscious* Light. The word *chit*, which Max Muller here translates as *Conscious* Light, may also be translated as 'Light of Intelligence' or of Knowledge. The *Mundaka Upanishad* (II, 9 and 10) says:

In the supreme effulgent sheath rests the stainless, transcendental Brahman. That is pure, that is the light of all lights. It is That which the knowers of Atman know.

There the sun does not shine, nor the moon nor the stars, nor these lightning, and much less, this fire. When Brahman shines, everything shines after him; by His light are all these lighted.

(Tr: Max Muller)

The teaching of the *Gayathri* has been summed up neatly by the philosopher-poet, Barthrihari:

Prostration to that pure light, whose form is *Chit*, absolute, unconditioned by time and space, whose perception is solely by direct experience.

(*Niti Sataka*, verse 1)

Ramalinga described Intelligence as 'the light within light within light' (*Jyotiyutjyotiyutjyoti*), the outermost being the light of the individual soul, the next being the Light of Grace, and the innermost the Supreme Light. This means that the individual soul is lighted by the Supreme Light through the light of Grace.

21. Ramalinga's Poetry

SRI RAMAKRISHNA SAID, 'THE BEE BUZZES ROUND THE FLOWER only as long as it has not tasted the honey. Once it starts tasting the honey, it is silent.'

This is the case with mystics and religious prophets who surrender themselves to the silent ecstasy of communion with the Divine. When they are lured to utterance, before or after, the result is not always poetry, or poetry of the highest order. But the poet, in contra-distinction to the mystic, is lured by the demon of utterance into the expression of the inexpressible. Mystics, when sometimes similarly lured to poetry, often lose themselves in holy verbiage or they take to the easier path of communication by parables. In these parables, the ideas often come out in a telling way, but these are not poetry. On the other hand, great poets, in the expression of their visions, do shape from their vision things of beauty that are a joy for ever. The sayings of prophets do strike a note of poetry to a varying extent. We recognize clearly the poetry of Jesus and the poetry of Buddha. But nobody has thought of mixing them with Shakespeare or Milton or Valmiki or Kalidasa.

Ramalinga is a unique exception. He is not only with the Sons of Light, like Buddha and Ramakrishna, he is also with the Sons of Song, like Keats or Shelley or Blake or Tennyson at their very best—poets whose utterances are the purest melody—and with pioneer poets who have extended the frontiers and potentialities of language. There are many saints, in India itself, who have produced miniatures of perfection or random poetry in their voluminous output. But these are not anything like the profusion of the unpremeditated but perfect art of Ramalinga. Within the limits of my knowledge, I do not know of any saint or prophet who is as great a poet as Ramalinga.

The testimony to the presence of the 'unbodied joy' of poetry in his hymns and songs is that even people who may not care for the utterances of saints, and are not in sympathy with the endeavors or quests of saints, who are antipathetic to the direction and pattern of the thoughts, ideas and images of saints, can enjoy Ramalinga's poems as poetry. Such is the magic of his words, the enchantment of his utterance. Effortless and spontaneous, with soaring lyrical power and trembling

sensitivity, an intensity in which are fused humanity and spirituality, exploring the flux of thought and feeling passing through him, with never a wavering line or word, his poems can be read in their purely human context. What Louis Untermayer said of Tennyson may well and truly be said of Ramalinga, that few poets have had a finer ear for the delicate nuances of sound, and still fewer have surpassed his undulating ease, his limpid lyricism and sometimes matchless music.'

Ramalinga was a pioneer in modern Tamil poetry, antedating Subramanya Bharati (1882-1921), the celebrated patriot-poet, who clearly is the legatee of Ramalinga. The saint is altogether of a different and more spacious mould. And in his luminous poetry we see the light at which Bharati lit his. Ramalinga, master of a new simple, lucid and racy Tamil, father of new rhythms, metres, measures and harmonies that Bharati availed himself of, is the poetical father of Bharati and the Tamil renaissance. R.S. Desikan, Tamil scholar and critic, writes (in Tamil, translated here by the present writer): 'The Tamil world can never forget the great Ramalinga who fashioned new metres and new music in Tamil. That Subramanya Bharati, the first poet of the present era, follows faithfully the pioneer track of Ramalinga will be clear to any student who studies them in depth.'

In brief, Ramalinga was the harbinger of the modern Tamil Renaissance, of which the neoteric voice was Subramanya Bharati. A parallel may be drawn between the Ramalinga—Bharati pair and the Gandhi—Nehru or the Ramakrishna—Vivekananda. This will give the relative measure of the two that make the pair.

The quality of Ramalinga's poetry is well described in the tribute that his foremost pupil, Thozhuvur Velayuda Mudaliar, paid him (in Tamil):

*How spell my Master's utterance of grace,
the nectar of Ramalinga's speech?
Shall I call it the gathered essence of the sky,
the ripeness of the fruit, the sweetness of honey,
sugar without surfeit, the juice of the cane
or busting vine—inspired intensity
suffusing the body, the senses and the soul,
Bliss of Knowledge out-soaring the cage?*

22. Chronology of Events in the Life of Ramalinga

1823	October 5	Born in Marudhur, near Chidambaram, in South Arcot District.
1824	March	Taken by his parents to the presence of Lord Nataraja in Chidambaram Temple which remains imprinted in his mind.
	April	His father, Ramaiah Pillai, dies.
	June	His mother, Chinnammai, moves to her village, Ponneri, in Chengelpet District, near Madras. Soon she shifts from there to Madras to be with her eldest son, Sabapathy Pillai.
1828		Denied food by his brother for truancy, Ramalinga turns a juvenile ascetic for a while when his brother's wife, Parvati, extends her care to him secretly. Soon she secures acceptance of Ramalinga by his brother.
1832		Ramalinga has vision of Lord Muruga of Thanihai Temple in a mirror. Thereafter he is ever conscious of divine visitations. He starts composing songs. His first song is on Lord Kanda (or Muruga) of Kandaswami Temple, Madras.
1835		Ramalinga's spiritual struggles begin. He composes songs in praise of Lord Thyagaraja (ascetic aspect of Siva) of Thiruvottriyur Temple, ten kilometers north of Madras.

- 1849 Velayuda Mudaliar of Thozhuvur, later Tamil Pundit, Presidency College, Madras, becomes Ramalinga's disciple.
- 1850 Marriage of Ramalinga to Dhanammal, daughter of his sister, Unnamulai Ammal.
- 1851 Ramalinga's edition of *Ozhivil Odukkam* (Primer of self-knowledge) of Saint Kannudaya Vallal is published by Sabapathy Mudaliar.
- 1854 Ramalinga's prose work *Manumurai Kanda Vachaham* (A Tale of Justice) is published by Palayam Subbaraya Chettiar for the Society for Religious Education.
- 1855 Ramalinga's edition of *Thondamandala Satakam* (A Hundred Songs on Thondamandalam) of Poet Padikkasaan is published by Konnur Ayyasami Mudaliar.
- 1857 Ramalinga's edition of *Chinmaya Dipikai* (Guide to Spirituality) of Mutthaiya Swamigal is published by Sabapathy Mudaliar and Madurai Mudaliar.
- 1858 Ramalinga moves from Madras to Karunguzhi, near Marudhur, visiting shrines like Sirhazhi and Vaithiswaran Koil on the way.
His elder brother, Parasurama Pillai, resident of Karunguzhi, dies. Ramalinga takes up his residence, as guest, in the house of Venkata Reddiar (in Karunguzhi). He visits Chidambaram frequently, and also other shrines.
- 1865 Ramalinga founds the *Samarasa Veda Sanmarga Sangam* (Society for Religious Harmony in Universal Selfhood).

- 1867 January 16 Debate with Sridharaswami Naicker, leader of *Brahmo Samaj*, in Tiruppapuliyur on the bank of the Pannai.
- February 2 Forty land-owners in Vadalur (about thirty kilometres from Chidambaram) gift one hundred and eight acres to Ramalinga for building an Eating House for the poor.
- February The first four books of his collected poems entitled *Thiru Arut Pa* (Holy Book of Grace) are brought out by Thozhuvur Velayuda Mudaliar, financed by Somasundara Chettiar of Mylapore, as a result of the persistent efforts, particularly of Ratna Mudaliar of Irukkam and also of Velu Mudaliar of Pondicherry and Sivananda Mudaliar of Selvarayapuram.
- May 23 *Samarasa Veda Dharma Salai* (Free Eating House of the Brotherhood of Religions) is opened. At the opening Ramalinga's tract *Jivakarunya Ozhukkam* (The Law of Compassion) is read out by Venkatasubba Dikshitar.
Ramalinga plans starting a *school Sanmarga Bhodini* (School for the Common Path of Religions) and a monthly *Sanmarga Viveka Vriddhi* (Orientation to the Common Final Path). Both ventures fail. Ramalinga shifts his residence from Karunguzhi to Vadalur.
- 1869 Sabapathy Sivacharya (later to become the first priest of Ramalinga's *Satya GnanaSabhai* (Hall of Pure Truth) and also publisher of Ramalinga's *Arut Perum Jyoti Ahaval* (Hymn to the Supreme Effulgent Grace) joins Ramalinga in Vadalur.

- 1870 Ramalinga moves from Vadalur to the near-by hamlet, Mettukkuppam, where he takes up his residence in a single room construction which he calls *Siddhi Valakam* (House of Salvation).
- 1871 June The construction of *Samarasa Suddha Sanmarga Satya Gnana Sabhai*, or *Satya Gnana Sabhai* (Hall of Pure Truth) for short, at Vadalur begins. From his base in Mettukkuppam Ramalinga supervises its construction, as also the running of the Eating House. Gradually withdrawing into himself, he embarks on severe forms of *yoga*.
- 1872 January 11 Ramalinga plans starting a school *Sanmarga Veda Patasalai* (School for the Common Path of Religions). This however does not come into being. Writes four *Sanmarga Vinnappangal* (Petitions to the Grace of Pure Truth) in prose.
- January 25 The opening of *Satya Gnana Sabhai* (Hall of Pure Truth). Ramalinga releases a tract on its object and aims. Ramalinga gives a discourse which has been called *Thiruvarul Meim-mozhi* (Words on the Path to Grace).
- March 9 Ramalinga issues a mild remonstrance to his followers in the Eating House on their behavior.
- April 18 Completion of *Arut Perum Jyoti Agaval* (Hymn to the Supreme Light of Grace).
- July 18 Ramalinga issues full and detailed instructions on the running of *Satya Gnana*

Sabhai. He changes the name of the institutions founded by him as follows, in order that they may be in consonance with his conception of Pure Truth, eschewing all religious terms

1. *Samarasaveda Sanmarga Sangam* to *Samarasa Suddha Sanmarga Satya Sangam*
2. *Samarasaveda Dharma Salai* to *Samarasa Suddha Sanmarga Satya Dharma Salai*

	November 25	Issues a remonstrance on the behavior of his followers in <i>Siddhi Valakam</i> and the Free Eating House.
1873	October 22	Delivers 'the Great Sermon' (<i>Purupadesam</i>) at the hoisting of the flag (symbolizing the spiritual maturation of man) at <i>Siddhi Valakam</i> . Closes the <i>Satya Gnana Sabhai</i> .
	November	Removes the symbolic lamp from his room to the outside. Exhorts people to meditate, using it as an aid, on the Supreme Light of Grace, and shuts himself in his room.
1874	January 30	The passing of Ramalinga.

Appendix

Four Poems of Ramalinga*

*Titles to the originals given by the translator.

The Hour of Grace

The hour is come
the hour for Your grace is come.

Hearken, holy One,
I speak the truth,
Dispenser of the general weal,
I've shed all pretence,
I humbly wait
for Your hour of grace.

I've gone
past disputes,
past polemics.
The heat in my blood is quenched.
Violence and deceit
I've eschewed—
My hour is come.

Rites and rituals
I've forsworn,
the jabbering monkey-mind
I've subdued,
my deeds to ashes
I've burnt,
The jugglery of phenomena
I've discerned—
the hour for Your grace
is come.

Anger and lust
I've banished,
the ego to dust
I've demolished;

desires from me
have dropt away;
Idle dialectics
I've discarded—
the hour for Your grace
is come.

Lo, the rock that was my mind
has melted,
and I long to be
lost in You.
My heart has come to its haven
brimful of true love—
Lord, my hour is come
Lord, Your hour of grace is come.

A Lover's Quarrel with God

Behold He is come
with whom I've scores to settle.

He, honored of men,
He decked me with the marital garland,
He, the Dancer on the Cosmic Stage,
He is come.

He gave me word
He would come back to me;
He has tarried too long—
I wonder
whose wiles help Him back.
Now He is come
and He stands there
shamelessly,
sporting the conch
that I gave Him.
Go, bolt the door!
I shall not let Him go.

I've endured scandal and infamy,
trusting Him.
Now He stands before me
shamelessly.
I didn't know His wiles,
and I've paid dearly—
Go, bolt fast the door!
He shall not go.

In my guileless years
He took me with a smile,
and then He left me.
Now He is back—
I do thank Him that He is back—
(He has none His equal)—
He shall not leave me again
Go, bolt fast the door!

This quarrel with Him
seems to have no end
Dear me, do befriend me,
My friend, I do need you.

Pleading with God

No pity yet?—O Lord,
How hard of You!

Cosmic Dancer, Dispenser of the general weal,
O King—my King—my King,
Hearken to my cry!

In my salad years You took me,
Great God—my God—my God,
Hearken to my cry!

You forgave me then—Your forgiveness now
I crave—I crave—I crave,
Hearken to my cry!

I knew not myself, and You made me suffer,
Is it fair—is it fair—is it fair,
Hearken to my cry!

You deigned to make me Yours then
Lord eternal—eternal—eternal,
Hearken to my cry!

A word that's given brooks no denial,
O Master—my Master—my Master,
Hearken to my cry!

Love-sick for God

Come to me and hold me,
Embrace me, sweet Lord of Dance!

Spirit of the Universe, embrace me
Omnipotent, embrace me
Wisdom of the Universe, embrace me
Refuge of all, embrace me
Lord of all, embrace me
My husband, embrace me.

You who desired me, come to me,
You who have attained, come to me
In this surging moment come to me
You who know me, come to me
You who read aright, come to me
Lord who wiped my tear, come to me
My husband, come to me.

I long to be with you, enfold me
You grace knows it all, embrace me
I am orphaned without you, embrace me
I declare I'm pure, embrace me
With all my mind I call you, embrace me
Lord seated in my self, embrace me
My husband, embrace me.

Ramalinga Swami, poet and prophet, was the spiritual forerunner of Mahatma Gandhi, Aurobindo and Ramana Maharshi. Compassion for life, to him, was the single step in realization of the soul. He perceived Brahman as Supreme Conscious Light (*Arut Perum Jyoti*)—a Light of Grace. He founded the *Samarasa Veda Sanmarga Sangam* (Society for Religious Harmony in Universal Selfhood), forerunner and the Indian counterpart of the Theosophical Society. He founded many other institutions, including *Satya Gnana Sabhai* (Hall of Pure Truth) and *Satya Dharma Salai* (Free Eating House).

He was the harbinger of the modern Tamil Renaissance, of which the neoteric voice was Subrahmanya Bharati who drew freely upon Ramalinga's new prose and poetry.

Professor S. Balakrishnan, author of this inspiring and perceptive biography, was educated at Presidency College and Medical College, Madras, and trained as pediatric specialist at the University Hospital for Children, Chicago, U.S.A., and the Hospital for Sick Children, Toronto, Canada. He has been known to the literary world as Purasu for over forty five years for his novels, plays, short stories and poems in English and in Tamil. His publications include Pon Valayal (1942), Kadal Kaditham (1947), Tamizhum Angilamum (1947), Anton Chekhov (1947), Krishna Kumari (1964), Iru Neruppuhal (1979), Kaverik-karaiyilc (1981), Sivanesanin Sabadam (1983), Mallihaiyum Sampangium (1984), in Tamil; and The Gold Bangle (1966) and Glimpses of Kalidasa (1970) in English.