

Dec. 12, 1995

### **"A MESSAGE FROM THE EARTH – SHIVA, RAMANA, PAPAJI"**

For many years, it had been my custom to seek guidance from the Earth. I would lie down in the forest and cover myself in leaves and say, Mother, I surrender to you, and deliberately allow all my energies to sink into the Earth. In 1992, the instructions I received in response to my prayers and meditations changed, and from that point onward, all that I got went like this: John, finish what you've started. Don't start anything new. Leave space for me, Gaia. I felt that Gaia was telling me to take time to seek deeper answers to my questions about how the perennial spiritual thirst of humanity could be aligned with the need to address the ecological crisis. It was time to purify myself. Time to visit some of the projects that I had helped initiate and support but had never seen with my own eyes. It was time to visit my beloved India and weave once again the spiritual warp and ecological woof of my life.

With all the projects that were underway, it took me about three years to hand over the last pieces of my work and return to India, my spiritual home, in search of nourishment and vision. Meanwhile, all the psychological aches and pains, which had mysteriously vanished when my Earth service was all-consuming, now returned. I finally, had time on my hands again. So I returned to India in 1995 searching for some resolution to the spiritual crisis that had begun for me a few years earlier. In Lucknow I spent a month attending sat sang with the 86-year-old Advaita teacher Poonjaji. Fifty years ago he had been a pupil of the late Ramana Maharshi, perhaps the greatest Hindu sage of this century, who had lived most of his life on and around the sacred mountain Arunachala in southern India.

Poonjaji, or Papaji, had many Western devotees who believed that he also was a fully enlightened master. Some 200 of us from all over the world crowded the hall Satsang Bhavan four mornings a week, handing him letters (his hearing was failing) with our spiritual questions which he would read and answer. Behind him on the wall were portraits and photos of Ramana.

While with Papaji I was interested in exploring the relationship between the human spiritual quest and the ailing Earth upon which it is carried out. For as long as people look on the Earth as Maya, illusion, and as an obstacle to realization, how could we find the intense spiritual will necessary to make the tremendous changes in our

values, lifestyles, and institutions in our very consciousness that would prevent the continued destruction of the Earth?

Lucknow seemed an unlikely place to search for enlightenment. The capital of Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, is noisy, highly polluted, and hardly conducive to a spiritual quest. Still, some of my closest friends had reported that a great opportunity existed there while this great sage was.

On the roof of Satsang Bhavan was a restaurant run by and for the sangha, and I would hang out there, listening to stories from people from around the world. I rented a bicycle and, dodging the ubiquitous pigs and water buffalo, visited new friends, playing music with them under the stars. Once I visited the sad remnants of a forest nearby and prayed for direction, for renewal, for Gaia to call me once again, but I felt frustrated and full of doubt.

I found myself fascinated by Shiva the Hindu god of creation and destruction, and tried to find out as much about him as possible. For Shivaratri, the anniversary of Shiva's wedding, I caught the train to Varanasi where that wedding had taken place. Millions of pilgrims crowded the festive city, and I watched the naga babas naked, ash-covered, dreadlocked sadhus carry their tridents down to the Ganges to purify themselves.

While there I came across an interview with Vandana Shiva, the Indian feminist ecologist and writer, who spoke about the river goddess Ganga and Shiva. She said that the power of the goddess was so strong that if she landed on Earth she would just destroy. It's symbolic of the way we get our monsoon rain. It comes so strong, that if we don't have forest cover, we get landslides and floods. So the god Shiva had to help in getting the Ganges down to Earth. And Shiva laid out his hair, which was very matted, to break the force of the descent of the Ganga. Shiva's hair, Vandana concluded, is seen by a lot of us in India as a metaphor for the vegetation and forests of the Himalayas.

#### A BLESSING FROM PAPAJI

When I returned to Lucknow three days later, I wrote to Papaji twice about these concerns. The first time his answer was mostly mysterious to me and left me unsatisfied. So I plucked up my courage and wrote again a couple of weeks later:

Dear Papaji, Lakshmana Swami once said that, since God had chosen to manifest as the world and everything in it, one could worship God by having respect for the world and all the life forms it contains.

For many, many years, Papaji, it has been my privilege and joy to worship God in this manner, to feel the living Earth play my life like a musical instrument. A couple of weeks ago, when I first wrote to you at sat sang, you said this: To the man speaking of Mother Earth I say: To help Mother Earth means you stand and shout at the top of your lungs.

I have shouted long and hard, Papa. I shouted in front of bulldozers and was thrown in jail. I made films and a book, which was translated into 10 languages, and conducted workshops around the world, donating the proceeds to the work, raising hundreds of thousands of dollars for the protection of Nature from the Amazon to New Guinea.

For the last 15 years Papa, the Earth worked through me and I was tireless and full of joy, but eventually the impurities of ego and the conditioned mind began to rise again until, a couple of years ago, the Earth asked me to hand over what I had been doing to others and purify myself for the next task that she has for me. And here I am.

This time Papaji looked directly at me. When you take care of your mother, he said in his deep voice, then you will get some prize. When you are helping the Earth, then you are helping everybody who's living on the Earth - plants, animals, and men. And now you have a reward: that the work will carry on. You may now sit quiet, and she will give you something in the way of peace.

So, my dear friend, he continued, your work is very good. I bless you for this task that is in hand, and let me tell you, both sides can happen simultaneously: Work for the good of the Earth and the people. And for your own good do something else. They needn't interfere with each other. Stay for some time before sleep and in the morning and sit quietly for five or 10 minutes. The rest of the time you may give for the world, help those who need your help.

What a blessing it was to feel Papa rekindle the flame inside me which had been wavering and doubtful. I could not yet know how, but I knew that from this turning point it would begin to flare forth once more.

SHIVA'S MOUNTAIN

My retreat was drawing to a close, but there was still one place I had to visit: the great mountain Arunachala, in Tiruvanamalai, 18 hours south by train.

Nearly 10 years before, in 1987, I had received a letter from Apeetha Aruna Giri, an Australian nun residing in the Sri Ramana Ashram at the foot of Arunachala. She wrote that when Ramana had arrived there, the holy mountain was clothed in lush forest and one might even meet a tiger walking on its flanks. Now little grew there but thorns and goats. Terrible erosion trenched Shivas sides, and torrents of mud attended each monsoon. She had heard about our work for the forests. Could we please help her to reclothe the sacred mountain?

I had composed a reply to Apeetha, encouraging her in her efforts but pleading that we had no competence in reforestation or the rehabilitation of degraded landscapes - our mission was the protection of intact ecosystems. But it was no use, I couldn't send the letter. Ramana's smiling face which I had first seen smiling from the back of his book, *Who Am I?*, in London in 1970 kept popping up before me. So we raised some money and sent it to Apeetha. Through her efforts a local NGO was born the Annamalai Reforestation Society. The following summer solstice I was facilitating a Council of All Beings workshop at John Buttons shack at Sundari community in northern New South Wales. John was a permaculture designer and tree-planter who was heading for the deserts of central Australia to become involved in a tree-planting project. For some reason I asked him if he wouldn't like to try this in the deserts of Tamil Nadu instead. He asked for details, and when I mentioned Ramana, his face turned pale and he told me that he was a longtime devotee of Ramanas.

Since that time, John and his partner, Heather Bache, have worked as volunteers organizing the rehabilitation of Arunachala. The space between the inner and outer walls of the vast 23-acre temple complex has been transformed from a wasteland into the largest tree nursery in the south of India. Hundreds of people have received environmental education, and a 12-acre patch of semi-desert was donated to the project and transformed into a lush demonstration of permaculture and the miraculous recuperative powers of the Earth.

Hundreds of Tamil people have been trained in reforestation skills - tree identification, seed collection, nursery techniques, watershed management, erosion control, sustainable energy systems. Shivas robes are slowly being rewoven. Furthermore, hundreds more have

been trained in the techniques of permaculture, inspired by the Annamalai Reforestation Society's model farm.

The train finally rolled into Tiruvanamalai, and I was able to visit Arunachala myself and see the tremendous work that had been done to revegetate the sacred mountain. Upon my arrival I discovered that many people here believe that to walk around the base of Arunachala is the fastest way to enlightenment, and each full moon, tens or hundreds of thousands of devotees and pilgrims do so. It upset me to see the indifference with which most of these folks regarded our work. Most were oblivious, but some even complained that the newly planted trees interfered with their view of the sunset. A great deal had been accomplished by the Annamalai Reforestation Society, but how much more could be achieved if only the pilgrims realized the unity of the spirit and the Earth!

What if their worship of Shiva included devotion to his physical body, Arunachala? Imagine if they lent a hand to the planting and maintenance of the trees as part of their devotion? The greening of the mountain would be accelerated. I was giving talks and lectures in the town and I began to challenge the ecological indifference I found and to propose to the pilgrims that surely the act of worship and respect of watering the young saplings that were weaving themselves into robes to cover his nakedness was an even faster route to liberation than circumambulating the mountain.

A week later I was stricken with remorse how could I be so presumptuous as to make such claims without having even asked Shiva? So one morning I climbed the mountain and found a quiet place among the trees to meditate and pray and apologize. After some time I opened my eyes to a noise. Some monkeys had appeared from the young forest. Slowly they filed past and stood guard while scores of their tribe came into view, and then they began to relax.

They groomed each other, they made love, mothers breast-fed their babies, children played and cavorted, utterly unselfconsciously living their everyday lives in my astonished and grateful presence. I saw a newborn infant cautiously explore the ground, leaving the safety of her mothers body for what seemed to me the first time, and leaping back and climbing her fur at the slightest noise or disturbance. I had never felt more accepted by the nonhuman world. I knew that Shiva had answered my prayer, had acknowledged my efforts, and was giving me his sign of approval.

It doesn't really matter what symbols we use Shiva, Gaia, Buddha, God. What we need now is for the followers of all faiths to turn their allegiance to the Earth. What matters is that we refuse to be drawn to one or the other of the great polarities: spirit and Earth. We must neither reduce everything to spirit, from where it appears that the material world is some kind of illusion, nor reduce everything to the material, so it looks as if spiritual seekers are abdicating responsibility to care for the creation.

## RESOURCES

Donations to help the reforestation of Arunachala or for other Rainforest Information Centre projects are tax-deductible in Australia and the US.

Here's how to donate in Australia,

In the US, please Mail checks with a memo stating  
"**Rainforest Information Centre Projects**" to:

**EarthWays Foundation**

20178 Rockport Way

Malibu, CA 90265

Phone (310)456-8300

To donate via wire/electronically:

Swift Code:BOFAUS3N

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Reweaving Shiva's Robes