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Paper : **Indian Religion and Philosophy**  
Module : **Śrī Ramaṇa Maharshi**

  
INDIAN CULTURE

  
ज्ञान-विज्ञान विमुक्तये

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**Component-I (B) – Description of module:**

Subject Name	Indian Culture
Paper Name	Indian Religion and Philosophy
Module Name/Title	Sri rama a maharshi
Module Id	IC / IRP / 36
Pre requisites	Knowledge of spiritual philosophers of India
Objectives	To study philosophical and spiritual aspects of r Rama a teachings
Keywords	Self Enquiry, Reality, Liberation

**E-Text (Quadrant-I):****1. Introduction**

In the Indian context philosophy is taken to mean *darśana* which means in Sāṅskrit 'seeing' vision or experience. In the philosophic sense, 'to see' means 'to release' or to have a 'direct vision.' This direct experience is the source from which all Indian thought flows and it is the accepted basis of philosophy in India. From this point, we can say that Indian philosophy is not merely a metaphysical speculation, but has its foundation in immediate perception. In Indian thought, concepts like God, soul etc are definitely experienced truths. This insistence upon direct experience is that which distinguishes Indian philosophy from western thought which insists mostly on reasoning. During rare occasions, spiritually inspired people have appeared throughout the history of India, to reveal the Highest Truth. Saints and gurus through their spiritual message have been the guiding spirit of Indian culture. Śrī Ramaṇa Maharshi was one such person. He was not definitely a systematic thinker or philosopher in the accepted sense of the term as he did not present a logically thought-out system of principles. He emphasized that thought must be eliminated as he believed that it is through the elimination of thought that one discover the deeper awareness that is behind and beyond thought. He said "preoccupation with theory, doctrine and philosophy can actually be harmful in so far as it distracts a man from the really important work of spiritual effort, by offering an easier alternative which is merely mental, and which therefore cannot change his nature.' It should be noted that the significance of Śrī Ramaṇa Maharshi lies in the fact that he arrived at Advaita experience without prior scriptural studies and practical disciplines.

Śrī Ramaṇa Maharshi preferred to communicate through the power of silence and it was so deep and vibrant as it successfully claimed the minds of many who were seekers after Truth. He said "Silence is never-ending speech. Vocal speech obstructs the other speech of silence. In silence one is in intimate contact with the surroundings. Silence is true exposition; it is the perfect teaching (*Upadeśa*).” He was of opinion that a teacher employing words necessarily implies the dualities of the teacher, teachings and the taught, while Śrī Ramaṇa’s truth, his silence, embodied the pure non-dual essence. He did not propound any new theory. What he taught was the ultimate doctrine of on-duality or Advaita in which all other doctrines are finally absorbed. Śrī Ramaṇa’s teachings expounded the Vedic path of self knowledge. He taught it mainly through the tremendous power of spiritual silence. ‘The Guru is the bestower of silence who reveals the light of self-knowledge which shines as the residual Reality.’

## 2. The Life of Śrī Ramaṇa Maharshi

Śrī Ramaṇa Maharshi was born in 1879 in a village of Tirhchuzhi near Madurai in Tamil Nadu as the son of Sundaram Iyer and Alagammal. His name was Venkataram and he had an elder brother, younger brother and younger sister. In 1892 when his father died, the family moved to Madurai to the house of their paternal uncle. In 1895, he came to know of Arunachala or Tiruvannamalai from one of his relatives and hearing upon the name, a thrill went through his veins. At the age of seventeen in 1896 suddenly he had a strange and wonderful experience. He was sitting alone in his room when a sudden and inexplicable fear of death took hold of him. He became actively aware that he was going to die, although he was in good health. He became obsessed with this notion and immediately began to prepare for the coming event. He stretched his body upon the floor, fixed his limbs with the rigidity of a corpse, closed his eyes and mouth and finally held his breath. He realized then that even when the body dies, the spirit transcends it and spirit cannot be touched by death. He realized himself as deathless spirit then. He realized that the ‘I’ is not the inert body but the deathless spirit. After this incident he became indifferent to his surroundings. He lost interest in everything surrounding him. But his family members resented this sudden change in him. So leaving a note behind in the house, he left Madurai and reached Tiruvannamalai after an epic journey on 1<sup>st</sup> of September 1896.

On reaching Thiruvannamalai, Śrī Ramaṇa Maharshi went straight to the temple. When he stood there in front of the deity, he experienced great ecstasy. For some days he stayed in the thousands pillared hall of the temple in deep contemplation. Later to avoid crowds, Śrī Ramaṇa moved to a nearby mango-grove. Here his devotee, Palaniswamy would bring books like Kaivalya Navanitam and Vasistam. From mango orchard the young sage moved

in quick succession, first to a small temple close to the large temple for a week, then to a garden and finally, in late 1898 he made his first move onto the mountain, Arunachala, at a spur called Pavazhakkunru. His mother came here and begged him to come back home. But the sage wrote in Tamil that everything happened in accordance with one's karma and the mother had to go back. The young would now spend the next twenty-three years living in caves up the Arunachala hill. Later he moved to the Virupaksha cave in 1899 and lived there for the next seventeen years. Life in the caves continued as before and most of the time he could be found sitting in deep inner absorption. However, it was from this time that his life became more public. Slowly, a select band of dedicated earnest seekers formed around him, and it was they who would put questions regarding spiritual matters. Sometimes the sage would remain quiet, at other times; he would answer verbally or would write out his answers to their questions.

In 1903, there came to Tiruvannamalai, a great Sanskrit scholar, T. Ganapati Sastri, who became famous as Ganapathi Muni because of the severe austerities he had been observing. He visited the sage in 1907 and was elated with his teachings. He declared to his disciples that the sage should be known as Maharshi (great sage) since his teachings were original. The first European to meet Śrī Ramaṇa was F.H. Humphreys. He went to the cave with Ganapathi Muni. Other foreigners who met the great sage were Paul Brunton, Somerset Maugham, Zimmer and Jung. It was Paul Brunton who introduced the sage to the West through his book 'A Search in Secret India'

In 1916, Śrī Ramaṇa Maharshi moved to Skandāśrama. His mother also joined the sage the same year to spend her last days with her son. Śrī Ramaṇa accepted her as a member of the small asrama family. She began to cook for the inmates and in 1922 she passed away and she was buried near Pali Thirtham. In December 1922, he shifted permanently to the proximity of his mother's shrine. This became the starting point of Śrī Ramaṇaśramam, which grew around Śrī Ramaṇa and the mother's Samādhi.

In 1947, Ramaṇa's health began to fail and towards the end of 1948, a small mole appeared below the elbow of his left arm and it was diagnosed as Sarcoma. But sage Ramaṇa was unconcerned about it. On 14<sup>th</sup> April 1950, his breathing stopped while the devotees were singing the hymns to Arunachala. At the very moment, a shooting star moved slowly across the sky, reached the summit of the holy hill, Arunachala and disappeared behind it. In his life, Ramaṇa thus experienced, demonstrated and expounded the astonishing idea that the inner self and the not the external universe was all there was.

### 3. Śrī Ramaṇa Maharshi as a Philosopher

Śrī Ramaṇa Maharshi did not found any new school of philosophy. He taught the ageless truth of Advaita. More than an expounder of Advaita, he was a living embodiment of it. He demonstrated in his life the truth of Advaita and showed us through his life how it is possible for a sage to be in the world but not for it. He was one with everything, free from all dualistic thoughts, so he has been after described as 'an incarnation of Advaita.' Literally Advaita means Non-duality. The essence of Advaita succinctly put, it contained in the following verse "The Absolute is Real; the world is non-real; the individual human being and the Absolute are not different." Śrī Ramaṇa Maharshi was a master of non-duality. He did not expound a closed system. He pointed out the total and absolute experiences of non-duality where there is no split between subjects and objects, where are there no distinctions at all. When asked if his teachings were the same as Śaṅkara's, he replied, "My teachings are only an expression of my own experiences and realization. Others find that it tallies with Śaṅkara's." Śrī Ramaṇa remarked that he had never read scriptures before his 'Great experience' in 1896, never heard of Brahman, samsāra etc. Later at Tiruvannamalai, when he listened to sacred books he found that these books were analyzing and naming what he had felt intuitively without analyze or name. In his opinion, the real purpose of philosophy is to serve as a bridge to help the sincere seeker to cross from belief in the superficial falsity of the world appearance to its underlying truth. But most philosophies have tended to degenerated into dogma or doctrine. In Śrī Ramaṇa's view, preoccupation with doctrine and philosophical was actually detrimental to the seeker of truth for two reasons. Firstly, the reality or truth of the universe is such that it cannot be comprehended by the human mind. It can only be known through direct intuitive experience. Secondly, if a person is preoccupied with doctrines and philosophical arguments he will be distracted from seeking the truth through direct experience. So Ramaṇa Maharshi presents the seeker with a simple, undiluted and authoritative exposition of his direct mystical insight into the nature of ultimate reality.

### 4. Śrī Ramaṇa Maharshi's Technique of Self Enquiry

The essence of Ramaṇa's teaching is that it is the human mind alone that is the main obstacle in our realizing the truth or reality. It must therefore be transcended if one has to arrive at the truth. He said, 'Realization is perfection. It cannot be comprehended by the mind. One must transcend the mind to be the self, which is absolute knowledge. The present knowledge-of the mind- is only of limitation. The absolute knowledge (of the self) is unlimited.' According to him, it is the mind that has 'stolen' or deprived us of the awareness of our true nature and that of the world. Ramaṇa's expositions of his mystic insight into reality are closely linked to a simple practical spiritual discipline that he called 'self enquiry.'

The aim of self-enquiry is to discover by direct experience, that the mind is really non-existent. Self-enquiry is the direct method and all other methods are practiced while retaining the ego, consequently many doubts arise. Self-enquiry, on the other hand leads directly to self-realization by removing all the obstacles that make one think that self is not realized already. If practiced with single-minded resolve it leads one to secure, for oneself, the same mystic insight into the essential nature of the truth or absolute reality underlying the universe. We can say that Śrī Ramaṇa Maharshi's technique of self-enquiry is easy and practical. In this there is no struggling with the mind and there is no suppression of thoughts. All it requires is for the seeker to keep an awareness of the source from which all thought springs. This can be practiced anytime and anywhere, while driving the car, while eating, while at work etc. His philosophy provides us with a rational basis for freedom from fear, desires and passions. Acceptance of the principle of non-duality enables us to view all objects and events in the worldly life with equanimity. This doctrine of non-duality that all beings are, in essence, the one self, provides a rational basis for love and compassion towards all other beings because it points to the fact that there is only the one eternal and infinite self that is imminent in all. Acceptance of Ramaṇa's mystic vision demolishes our sense of individuality because it considers the universe and all beings therein as manifestations of an organic, indivisible and harmonious whole.

Ramaṇa's technique of self-enquiry is something different from meditation. Meditation required an object to meditate on, whereas in self enquiry there is only the subject and no object. Meditation makes the mind one-pointed, strengthens and increases the power of endurance facilitating the attainment of perfection in the enquiry into the self. He explains that meditation is more or less mental, but the quest for the self is a direct method and is superior to it. He said, 'for the moment you get into the quest for the self and begin to go deeper, the real self is waiting there is to receive you and then whatever is to be done is done by something else and you individual have no hand in it.' While Śrī Ramaṇa Maharshi authorized many different methods for spiritual practices, the one he considered as most effective and the one he himself advocated was self-enquiry. He said 'From the substance of the mind there is no other means more effective than self-enquiry. Even though the mind subsides by other means, that is only apparently so, it will rise again.' This practice was the corner stone of his practical teachings and his restoration of this ancient technique was his greatest contribution to Indian philosophy. The path of self-enquiry of Ramaṇa is a new integrated one which embraces *karma-mārga* (path of action) and *jñāna-mārga* (path of knowledge). His method of self-enquiry is different from Advaitin's, though not in all details but certainly in its emphasis and understanding.

The self is self-effulgent which transcends darkness and light. One should not think of it with the mind. The self is the pure Reality. The ego springs from ignorance. It confuses and misleads a man to think of self in the form of body, mind etc. Ramaṇa suggested *bhakti*, *jñāna*, *yoga* or *dhyāna* to root out the *māyā* or illusion. Devotion in his philosophy meant aspiring towards the complete surrender of one's sense of individuality-not mere adoration of, and service to, the God of one's faith in a permanent subject-object relationship. He explains that mind and ego are one and the same. The individual is nothing else than the ego which, again, is only the mind. Waking, dream and sleep are mere phases of the mind, not the self. The self is the witness of these three states. The self must first realized in the waking state for it is our true nature underlying all the three states. Effort must be made in the waking state and the self is realized here and now. It will then be understood to be the continuous self uninterrupted by the alternatives of waking, dream and deep sleep. In the fourth state, the ego merges in consciousness. Śrī Ramaṇa Maharshi explains the 'spiritual heart' as the true seat of consciousness which is pure awareness or sense of being. He had found it from his own experience to be the center of spiritual awareness and then found his experience confirmed in some ancient text.

In order to end the miseries of the world, Śrī Ramaṇa Maharshi suggested turning inwards and seeking the self. He says that the world and its sufferings are unreal. As long as one thinks that the body or the objective world is real, there exists suffering. But once he realizes the self, there is no more pain as the self is the Reality or Absolute and is beyond all the sufferings. The method of enquiry into oneself that he taught goes beyond philosophy and beyond psychology, for it is not the qualities of the ego that are sought but the self-standing resplendent without qualities. What the mind has to do is not to suggest reply, but to remain quiet so that the true reply can arise. 'To the Śrī Ramaṇa intellectual comprehension of his philosophy the verbal expression of his insight into the nature of reality-was necessary only to extent of convincing oneself that it pointed towards the absolute truth. Thereafter, all effort was to be directed towards gaining the mystic experience of truth for oneself.' The spiritual discipline prescribed by him can be practiced by any one, provided his or her present set of beliefs about the world are held merely as a tentative view rather than a rigid dogma.

Ramaṇa's philosophy states that our true nature is immortal, infinite and perfect. Our sense of mortality, finiteness and imperfection is a delusion born of identification with the ego or the sense of individuality. This delusion can be overcome by transcending it's cause-i.e., the illusory ego. He shows us the way whereby, we can regain and abide in our true nature as existence-consciousness-bliss. Such a philosophy has a greater appeal and offers greater hope and purpose to mankind than any world view that regards our real nature as mortal, finite and imperfect. It provides us with a rational basis for regarding the transcending of the

ego as one's highest aim in life. Hence we can say that 'Maharshi's philosophy is of value to us at two levels. At the higher, it offers those with a more strongly developed spiritual nature and a sincere yearning for the truth, a spiritual philosophy and a path that lead them to direct intuitive experience of the Truth or Reality. At the lower, it provides guiding principles and values of those who merely wish to lead a happier, more harmonious and serene life at the mundane level of material existence.' But Ramaṇa Maharshi was of the opinion that when one has realized the Absolute Truth, there is no sense in talking about degrees of truth or reality.

#### 5. His Concept of Reality

The Reality, according to Śrī Ramaṇa Maharshi is not 'He,' a personal being nor is it an 'It,' an impersonal concept. The Reality, Brahman, is a name for the experience of the timeless fullness of being. He said, "Brahman is pure spirit-formless, unlimited, eternal and without any differentiation. It is a unity. It never rises nor disappears. So it is permanent and therefore real- not transient and illusory." Brahman is said to be identical with world in the sense that the world is not apart from Brahman. The material cause (Brahman) brings about an effect (the world appearance) that is not different from the cause. Brahman and the world are a unity and co-exist as reality and appearance. The world is not the essential truth but merely the phenomenal truth of Brahman. Śrī Ramaṇa Maharshi says, "Reality must always be real. It is not with forms and names, but it is That which underlies them. It underlies limitations, being itself limitless. It underlies unrealities, being itself unreal." Thus Ramaṇa regarded the Absolute as that which is foundational to all experience though it is in no sense a substance.

Having defined Brahman as the cause of the world, Śrī Ramaṇa Maharshi defines the Absolute as Pure Existence, Pure Consciousness and Pure Bliss. We can see that he defines Reality by stating its essential nature or *Svarūpa-lakṣaṇa* and by stating its accidental attributes or *taṣastha-lakṣaṇa*. But he preferred *swarupa lakshana* definition. He quite often spoke of the Reality as Existence. He regarded existence or 'Sat' as the essential nature of the Reality. The Reality is existence and existence is Reality. According to him Reality is neither 'existent' nor 'non-existent' in the ordinary sense of those terms. He said "Reality must always be real. It is not with forms and names. Reality is that which is. It is as it is. It transcends speech and is beyond the expressions 'existence', non-existence, and so on." Śrī Ramaṇa Maharshi made use of an analogy from the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* to make this clear. Clay may take different forms in potters hands and thus become known as pots, cups, plates etc. Really speaking, all these objects are but clay, though they are individually called by various names. Each is a particular form in which the same clay appears. So also,

the Reality appears in different forms and is called by various names. That which underlies all names and forms is Reality. So Śrī Ramaṇa Maharshi held that the entire manifold universe is nothing but Brahman. Though he himself moved about and dealt with people and things never was he separated from the one Supreme Reality.

According to Śrī Ramaṇa Maharshi, the Reality that is Pure Existence is also pure consciousness or pure awareness. From the perspective of an ordinary person, there are three states of consciousness. Like Advaita Vedānta, Śrī Ramaṇa Maharshi also believes a fourth state or *turīya* which is pure consciousness that underlies and permeates these three. He said, “there is only one state, that of consciousness or Awareness or Existence. The three states of waking, dream and sleep cannot be real. They simply come and go. The Real will always exist ..... Existence or consciousness is the only reality.” According to him the self is beyond all these state. It is the sakshi or witness. He likened consciousness to a movie screen where pictures appears and disappears. But nothing sticks to the screen and it remains as a screen. In the same way the things that happens during the waking dreaming and deep sleep states do not affect the self.

While the self reveals everything, it itself is not revealed by anything. The self is never an object to anything. The self is called the knowing subject when it functions through mind. Fundamentally and primarily the self is pure consciousness. The indivisible non-dual pure consciousness appears divided, dualistic in relational knowledge. *Vṛitti jñāna* is a blend of the modification of mind and the reflection of consciousness there in. It is an expression of pure consciousness through a mental mode corresponding to an object. One does not attain consciousness. It has as been there all along persisting throughout all states of experience. All that is required is to give up one’s false notion of what the Reality is.

Self is also the Bliss. Śrī Ramaṇa Maharshi was of opinion that “Perfect Bliss is Brahman. Perfect peace is of the self. That alone exists and is consciousness. That which is called happiness is only the nature of the self.” According to him the self is such incomparable Bliss cannot be talked about, it can only be experienced. He used to point out that the self is Bliss and thus Bliss is natural, unvarying and constant. Thus self is described by Śrī Ramaṇa Maharshi as Existence, Consciousness and Bliss. In one of his hymns to Arunachala, Ramaṇa interpreted the three syllables in the name A-ru-na to stand for Existence, Consciousness and Bliss.

## 6. Liberation

Śrī Ramaṇa Maharshi advocated two paths of self realization: primarily self-enquiry and then also the path of surrender. He remarked, ‘there are only two ways to conquer destiny or to be independent. One is to enquire who undergoes this destiny and discover that only the

ego is bound by it and not the self, and that the ego is non-existent. The other way is to kill the ego by completely surrendering to the Lord ..... True surrender is love of God for the sake of love and for nothing else, not even for the sake of salvation. In other words, complete effacement of the ego is necessary to conquer destiny, whether you achieve this effacement through self enquiry or through *bhakti mārga*.' Śrī Ramaṇa Maharshi was not concerned about the meaning and nature of self realization. Rather he wanted to make people aware of the need to attain self-realization. He held that upon realization, all karmas are destroyed. The liberated individual need not wait until his *prārabdha-karma* is exhausted before freedom occurs. Whether the physical body persists or not is of no consequence to the liberated individual. Ramaṇa states that the self and liberation (*mukti*) have same meaning. He said, '*Mukti* is synonymous with the self. *Jīvan mukti* and *Videha mukti* are all for the ignorant. The *jñāni* is not conscious of *mukti* of *bandha*. Bondage, liberation and orders of *mukti* are all said for *ajñāni* in order that ignorance might be shaken off. There is only *mukti* and nothing else.' According to Śrī Ramaṇa Maharshi bondage and liberation do not pertain to the self.

Due to ignorance the sense of self or the 'I' notion is superimposed on the not-self and the three bodies- physical, subtle and causal. This is bondage. To know this fact from the guru is *śravaṇa*. *Manana* is the process of subtle enquiry, rejecting the three bodies and discovering the true self through self-enquiry. To fix the mind firmly in the Heart to experience the self is *nidhidhyāsana* or *ātmanusandhāna*. This, according to Ramaṇa, is *bhakti*, yoga and *dhyāna*. This helps in the attainment of self realization. As stated by T.M.P. Mahadevan, 'the quintessence of Ramaṇa's philosophy can be explained in four statements *deham* (the body), *na-ham* (not 'I') *ko'ham* (who am-I), *so'ham* (He-I am), the common factor *aham* of 'I' is the final truth.' Hence we can conclude that the tradition of Advaita has been renewed from time to time by sages and philosophers. Śrī Ramaṇa Maharshi also revealed the light of Advaita once again.

## 7. Summary

Śrī Ramaṇa Maharshi was an advaitin. Regarding theory, his statements are very much similar with those made by *ajāti vāda* Advaitins. But there is a fundamental difference philosophically with regard to the traditional Advaita's doctrine and with regard to practice. Advaitins prescribe a system of meditation that mentally affirms that the self is the sole reality. The *Mahāvākyas* are used as mantras of meditation. But Ramaṇa advocated self enquiry which according to him is only infallible and direct means to realize the unconditioned, absolute Being that which we really are. He said that his silent teachings were more direct and powerful. His aim was to discover the ultimate unity that runs

throughout the universe of multiplicity and he called this unity which the foundation of all as Brahman.

