

# Ramana Maharshi's 40 Verses and Commentary

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## Introduction

40 Verses is one of Ramana Maharshi's most famous works. It is one of his own chief and briefest summaries of his teachings, compiled at the request of one of his devotees. It explains the philosophy and the essence of that true knowledge which is beyond the changing things of the world, knowledge of the real Self.

## Invocation

### i

i. If Reality did not exist, could there be any knowledge of existence? Free from all thoughts, Reality abides in the Heart, the Source of all thoughts. It is, therefore, called the Heart. How then is one to contemplate it? To be as it is in the Heart, is Its contemplation.

**Commentary:** This invocation, which has two parts, starts before the forty verses themselves. Reality means that which is unchanging, whereas knowledge of existence is always in thought (or feeling, or perception, etc., which are all forms of thought). Reality is that which permits thought, that which is aware of it. Thought always implies a background which is itself not simply a thought. That which is beyond thought is beyond change, since changes are themselves in thought — in order to say something has changed, you have to think and make a

comparison. In other words, changes are always cognized. Without concepts, you cannot say that something has changed. So the knowledge of existence — which is thought — implies something which is beyond change, and which is that which is aware of thought. That awareness which is beyond change we call Reality.

This background to thought — though phrasing it this way is of course itself a thought, and that's inevitable, since any language that talks about Reality is going to have to use thought, and so be imprecise and imperfect — shines in what Ramana calls the Heart. While Reality is an abstract concept, the Heart is simply the ground of our own awareness. It is the background of thoughts that each of us can access. It does not refer to the physical heart. It refers to the background of thought that we can seek by turning our attention towards whoever it is that is witnessing all our experiences. That witness is "inside" all the other experience, which is on the "outside." That inmost point is called the Heart. When this inmost "point" is reached, it turns out not to be a point at all, and to be entirely beyond the distinctions of inside and outside.

What we call Reality, which is a grand word which seems to be "out there" and "universal," is equally in us. It is not merely in us, actually, but rather we *are* it.

It is the grand concept of Vedanta and of Ramana that the unchanging essence of the "out there" is also none other than the unchanging essence that is "in here." When stripped of the inessential & the changing, which stuff is actually just a bunch of thoughts of those things, the out there and the in here are not merely similar — they are exactly one and the same.

This Heart is what is behind thought, and it is that from which all thought comes, and to which it all returns. So it is not itself a thought. But only thought can be the object of contemplation. So how are we to turn our attention towards the Heart? We simply have to just be the Heart. Which of course we already are.

"To be as it is in the Heart" means that we are to be *just and only* as it is in the Heart, meaning to be without thought. It means we have to abandon our delusions of being in thought — of having things to do, goals, doings, experiences. To turn away from thought, to stop pretending to be anything other

than the Heart, is the way to contemplate it.

## ii

ii. Those who know intense fear of death seek refuge only at the feet of the Lord Who has neither death nor birth. Dead to themselves and their possessions, can the thought of death occur to them again? Deathless are they.

**Commentary:** All fear is rooted in the fear of death. But death can only afflict what is born, that is, what is changing: that is, what is thought. We have just seen that what is Real is unchanging, and that what is Real is us.

The Lord who has neither birth nor death is none other than this very Reality, the Heart. This Lord may go by many other names — Shiva or Vishnu or God or the Goddess, for example. But ultimately they all refer to this unchanging Reality.

In order to take refuge at the feet of this Lord, all else must be given up. This giving up is a kind of death. By dying to what is changing — to what one *thought* one was, but in fact is not — one realizes oneself to actually be the unchanging. What seems mortal has in fact never been born to begin with, and what is immortal cannot die. And the thought of death cannot occur to the immortals, which are those who have given up their stake in everything changing.

## 1

1. From our perception of the world there follows acceptance of a unique First Principle possessing various powers. Pictures of name and form, the person who sees, the screen on which one sees, and the light by which one sees: one oneself is all of these .

**Commentary:** When we see the world, logic dictates that the world itself arises from something which possesses the power to create that seeming seeing. That power itself appears to be split into the various objects of the world, the seer, the act of seeing, awareness itself, and so on. These are all nothing other than Reality, however, and that Reality is what you actually are — not any of

these divided objects.

## 2

2. All religions postulate the three fundamentals: the world, the soul, and God, but it is only the one Reality that manifests Itself as these three. One can say, 'The three are really three' only so long as the ego lasts. Therefore, to inhere in one's own Being, where the 'I', or ego, is dead, is the perfect State.

**Commentary:** Religions tend to assume three basic divisions. First there's the world of objects, then ones who see them (those are individual souls), and finally there's the God who creates, maintains, and destroys the whole system. But this is all only from the standpoint of thought — which is the standpoint of the ego. The ego is that which says "I am in here, separate from out there. I experience the world and my thoughts and feelings." The ego is that sense of distinction that arises from and is mixed with the body and mind.

It's only when the light of Reality appears to be split through the prism of ego that there seems to be this thing called the experience of changing objects, and it's only from that experience that religions then put forth the self-world-God system.

But this ego is a kind of illusion. It is the thought that says that "I am a thought." But that thought is wrong. The true I — Reality — is not a thought. The egoic I is a kind of illusion that drives and is driven by a cycle of identification with the body and mind, and the actions based on desires and fears that come from that identification. When we *feel* that "I am" — that's the ego at work. And this ego is what enables normal perception. Without the sense that "I am," we cannot have the sense "out there are the things I experience, which I am not."

If that ego is dead and we are without that sense of differentiation, of 'in here' and 'out there' — that's the perfect State. That's the contemplation of Reality.

## 3

3. 'The world is real.' 'No, it is a mere illusory appearance.' 'The world is

conscious.' 'No.' 'The world is happiness.' 'No.' What use is it to argue thus? That State is agreeable to all, wherein, having given up the objective outlook, one knows one's Self and loses all notions either of unity or duality, of oneself and the ego.

**Commentary:** The questions of philosophy about the exact relationship of the world to consciousness are impossible to answer in language. That's because language & concepts are themselves based on the idea that the ego is real, that is, that the sense that "I am separate" is true. Only when you say "I am in here and separate" can you look out at the world and say "out there is not me," and then divide the not-me into names and forms. From these names and forms we get language, and from language we get philosophical debates about the nature of the world. It all starts with that me / not-me distinction.

But the problem is that the very base assumption of the ego that "I am in here and separate" is incorrect. That is merely a thought, whereas what you actually are is beyond thought; you are the unthinkable Reality. That Reality is cannot be said to be in here, cannot be said to be separate, cannot be said to create any kind of boundary by which names and forms may be drawn.

Since the base assumption of the ego is incorrect, then "I am *not* in here and separate." So all the stuff out there is *not* the not-me, and so all the names and forms based on those assumptions are in some profound sense incorrect — or, more accurately, meaningless. This is because names and forms are based on boundaries, but the original boundary that would allow them — again, the me / not-me boundary — is invalid.

This makes language, in a very certain and deep sense, meaningless, and that then makes philosophical debate about these concepts ultimately meaningless as well. Even 'meaningless' is too meaningful a word to be used, technically. It too is a child of language.

A philosophical framework can be useful provisionally for a seeker, but ultimately it has to be realized that Reality cannot be proven in language one way or another, since what is being indicated is beyond language.

From a practical standpoint, it's wise not to get too bogged down in

philosophical debates about the exact status of the world. The key point is that if there is abundance without the ego — that is, without the “objective outlook” to which Ramana refers, since the ego enables us to experience objects by assuming it is itself the subject — that is happiness. That state is beyond concepts of either unity or duality, beyond the concepts of the self and ego. All that vanishes, or rather, more than vanishes: whether it is there or it isn’t there is itself seen to be a meaningless point.

“Ego” and “existence,” are themselves concepts, and saying that they are false is also a concept. There is something beyond concepts, which can only be pointed to by language, but not actually described.

## 4

4. If one has form oneself, the world and God also will appear to have form, but if one is formless, who is it that sees those forms, and how? Without the eye can any object be seen? The seeing Self is the Eye, and that Eye is the Eye of Infinity.

**Commentary:** A form is a boundary. If you have a form, it means that you have a boundary. Other things, like the world and God, are contrasted to that boundary. They are the not-you. It is by the creation of mental boundaries that we have experiences. Without a form, without those boundaries, there is no way to differentiate self and other. There is therefore no way to use concepts, no way to use language, no way to say “individual,” “world,” “God.”

The eye is the form of the instrument of knowing, and it differentiates things into forms with boundaries. This eye can be regarded both as physical or as metaphorical — i.e. as the egoic mind, the mind which says “I” and “not-I.”

But in reality what sees is no physical or even mental I. Rather, the Self sees, and that Self is infinite — meaning boundless, meaning formless. There is no actual space in it for I and not-I. For that Eye, the true Eye, its Seeing is no seeing. Ordinary seeing can be understood. But the Seeing of that Eye, when inquired into, leads straight into the silence of the incomprehensible. It stuns the mind into silence.

## 5

5. The body is a form composed of the five-fold sheath; therefore, all the five sheaths are implied in the term, body. Apart from the body does the world exist? Has anyone seen the world without the body?

**Commentary:** The five-fold sheath is a Vedantic idea that understands the body-mind to be a complex which includes five layers, like an onion. Each layer in some sense is the product of the layers within it, and in some sense produces the layers outside it. The outer-most layer is the physical organs. Then comes the prana, or physiological energy. Then is said to be the seat of the emotions. Then, within that is our ability to reason and to decide. And finally within that is the ego, the sense that “I am.” Note that this sense, too, is actually just a layer, just as insentient as all the other layers. It claims to be conscious, claims to be deciding and feeling and all the other layers, but it can no more do those things than a piece of paper can actually think and feel. It is only when the light of consciousness hits that insentient “I am” thought that the *reflected consciousness* appears to experience the world.

The body, however, is a kind of instrument for seeing the world, much like a novel is an instrument for experiencing a fictional universe. When readers read a book, they project an imaginary landscape peopled by imaginary people. Both the reader and the book are required for this to happen.

So the body establishes boundaries and mental concepts which are the tools by which everything else seems to be experienced. The world as we know it is always the world as perceived and cognized by the body (where the body is understood to include all the mental and emotional instruments together).

## 6

6. The world is nothing more than an embodiment of the objects perceived by the five sense-organs. Since, through these five sense-organs, a single mind perceives the world, the world is nothing but the mind. Apart from the mind can

there be a world?

**Commentary:** The world is what perceived by the senses, but the senses are themselves cognized by the mind (the deeper sheaths within that five-sheathed body / mind). The world is, as we know it, put together, organized, synthesized by the mind. The raw sense data are put together into this thing we call experience only because of the mind.

We cannot imagine a world without a body-mind there to perceive it. Everything we know about the world comes through our senses brought together through the mind. The idea of a world apart from our ideas about it, that is, apart from the organizing function of the mind, is literally inconceivable. Every possible idea of what the world could be like without the mind would have to first be filtered through the mind's categories. In other words, we have no evidence, capacity, or justification for believing in a world that is entirely independent of mind.

This is not necessarily to say that any one individual mind creates all of reality. There may be a global mind which integrates all the individual minds into a common reality. We can call that global mind God. Regardless, the point is that one way or another, the world is always mind-dependent.

## 7

7. Although the world and knowledge thereof rise and set together, it is by knowledge alone that the world is made apparent. That Perfection wherein the world and knowledge thereof rise and set, and which shines without rising and setting, is alone the Reality.

**Commentary:** So we have this twin idea of the world and the knowledge of the world. This knowledge comes through the mind. The mind is what we use to perceive the world; there is no other access to the world.

Where there is a world, there is a mind which says that is the case. And where there is a mind, there has to be a world, since what it means to be a mind is to have knowledge of something. That something is simply what we call the world.



Even someone hallucinating sees the world — it may be a distorted vision of the world from someone else's perspective, but it is the world for the hallucinator. In a dream it's a dream world.

The idea of a mind requires the experience of thought. Thought is always of things, and things have boundaries: this is an apple because it is not an orange or a giraffe or anything else. Its limits make it what it is.

Without a something 'out there' there could be no perception of a something 'in here,' and vice-versa. That something 'in here' is the ego. So the mind is rooted in egoic identification, which is the sense that "I am a thinking, doing, experiencing entity." Without that sense, you couldn't have a world. Without the world, however, you couldn't have that sense either.

Ego & world are like the two ends of a pole. When one comes, they both must come. They imply and require each other. The egoic mind is what seems to know the world.

Both the egoic mind and the world are established in something superior to them both, which does not come and go. The mind and the world are both just objects. Neither are really aware. They are, rather, in truth known by something else. They are both merely modifications of or forms of that something else. That something else in which they are both rooted, and by which they are both known, and which unlike them does not come and go, is deemed Perfection, the Self, Truth, Awareness, or Reality. It has many names.

## 8

8. Under whatever name and form one may worship the Absolute Reality, it is only a means for realizing It without name and form. That alone is true realization wherein one knows oneself in relation to that Reality, attains peace and realizes one's identity with it.

**Commentary:** Reality or Perfection can be known under many names and forms, but these are only tools for getting beyond those names and forms. We're looking for a perfection beyond limits, and names and forms are inevitably limits and boundaries. The only spiritual realization worth having is to pass beyond the

prison of name and form and recognize your identity with the formless, into which your identity dissolves like a drop of water into the ocean. Or, to be more precise, where you recognize that you never were that drop of water in the first place. This alone brings real, lasting peace.

## 9

9. The duality of subject and object and trinity of seer, sight, and seen can exist only if supported by the One. If one turns inward in search of that One Reality they fall away. Those who see this are those who see Wisdom. They are never in doubt.

**Commentary:** Experiencing the outside world, thoughts, feelings, or anything at all always happens by a division between the seer, the seen, and the actual act of seeing. This trio, which comes and goes, and which has no life of its own, can only exist if supported by something which does not come and go, and which is fundamentally aware and alive, though in a profoundly different way in which we might normally understand those terms.

The One seems to cover itself up with thought and then it becomes these three instruments. But in fact these instruments are changing, transient, and therefore impermanent. They depend on *not* noticing the One that supports them. If that One is seen, it's like a magician whose trick is seen through, or the cartoon coyote who, having walked over a cliff and gone 100 steps, suddenly looks down and falls. Instantly the suspension of disbelief is gone.

Again, this is because the seeing and the seen depend on there being a boundary between the me (the seer) and not-me. If there was no boundary, or distance, between me and something else, I could never say I saw it. But the me that this depends on is itself an 'in here,' me, small, atomic, indivisible — the ego. It assumes to itself the glory of the light of the One which it merely reflects. Like a candle next to the Sun, as soon as we see the Sun, the candle becomes invisible. Once the me cannot stand, the not-me (the seen and the act of seeing) cannot stand either. They exist only if the seer exists.

So if we turn attention inward away from the changing objects looking for the

One, the usual trio of division falls away. Those who see and understand this are the ones who are truly realized. They are never in doubt, because the mind is the instrument of doubt, and that instrument is only credited if the One is not seen.

## 10

10. Ordinary knowledge is always accompanied by ignorance, and ignorance by knowledge; the only true Knowledge is that by which one knows the Self through enquiring whose is the knowledge and ignorance.

**Commentary:** Ordinary knowledge is knowledge of things. Knowledge of anything rests on innumerable assumptions about logic, about the reliability of the instruments of perception, about the interpretation of what is perceived, about how the laws of nature work, and so on. The more you know of the world, the more questions there are, as each fresh new piece of knowledge brings questions about how it relates to the rest. And these doubts and problems multiply, so that our current state of knowledge of the world, while quite sophisticated, also admits an enormous amount of ignorance. Ordinary knowledge requires making assumptions and simplifying the world, and continuously raises doubts. This is because the instruments of that knowledge are imperfect.

The only knowledge beyond doubt, therefore, cannot be that ordinary knowledge of objects. This ordinary knowledge and the ordinary world of objects is sustained by the assumption that there is an I “in here” which observes the world “out there.” It is this I which supposedly possesses this ordinary knowledge.

But if we look into who this I is, it suddenly becomes elusive, and if this elusiveness is pursued, it turns out to be an artifact of the movement of thought. The I that we think we are, we are not. And if we chase that I with sufficient intention, attention, and concentration (this is called self-inquiry), we will eventually slow the illusion-promoting dance of desire and thought long enough to see through it. And in seeing through it, the Self we actually are will shine. That shining will destroy the illusion that there is an I “in here” as opposed to the

world “out there.” That shining, then, will be beyond boundaries, and being beyond boundaries, is beyond time, space, and change — and therefore beyond doubt.

This is not a knowledge “of” something. This is not a knowledge “that” something is the case. This is simply Knowledge per se, the pure light of knowing itself. That Knowledge alone is true, pure, absolute, and beyond doubt, because it is that medium within which the very instrument of doubt, which is the mind, operates.

## 11

11. Is it not, rather, ignorance to know all else without knowing oneself, the knower? As soon as one knows the Self, which is the substratum of knowledge and ignorance, knowledge and ignorance perish.

**Commentary:** When you look into the knower of the relative world, that is, the egoic I, which thinks it is the body and the mind, that ego shows itself to be not the knower but merely an object that is *known* — known in the light of the Self. Knowing that Self, one can no longer take seriously the claims of the ego to be separate. If those claims fall, then the knowledge of the world, and equally the ignorance of the world, also cannot be taken seriously.

All our knowledge of the world is based on taking the ego seriously. All our projects and desires, which make use of that knowledge, are based on taking the ego seriously. We live our lives thinking that we are the body and the mind when that is not the case. *That* is the harshest ignorance.

When the ego is looked into and seen to be a mere puppet, and not our actual self, then this deep ignorance disappears — indeed, reveals itself never to have existed in the first place, for to believe that we were affected by that ignorance is itself ignorance.

## 12

12. That alone is true Knowledge which is neither knowledge nor ignorance.

What is known is not true Knowledge. Since the Self shines with nothing else to know or to make known, It alone is Knowledge. It is not a void.

**Commentary:** True Knowledge is not knowledge *of* anything. Knowledge *of* anything, or knowledge *that* anything is or is not the case, is relative knowledge of objects, knowledge of things that come and go, things that have boundaries. It is about these things that ignorance is possible. It is only when one looks through the lens of the ego, that separating belief that “I am in here, as opposed to the things I experience, which are out there,” that there are objects to know or to be ignorant of.

True Knowledge is that which illuminates even the ego. It isn’t object-based knowledge. It has no opposite. It shines by itself, and is self-illuminating. In the blinding light of the sun, there cannot be said to be any visible objects. The same is true of what is seen in the blinding light of the Self. If one sees the Self, one cannot see the ego. Seeing through the ego is premised on forgetting the Self, on its being obscured — or at least its *seeming* to be obscured.

The knowledge that is the Self is not knowledge of any objects, but that does not mean it is simple nothingness. It’s not a thing, but nor is it a void. It is what it is — pure illumination. What that is like is indescribable, since to describe it, one would need to think about it, and that would require the ego. And yet, though it is indescribable, we experience it at all times.

## 13

13. The Self, which is Knowledge, is the only Reality. Knowledge of multiplicity is false knowledge. This false knowledge, which is really ignorance, cannot exist apart from the Self, which is Knowledge-Reality. The variety of gold ornaments is unreal, since none of them can exist without the gold of which they are all made.

**Commentary:** Reality is what is unchanging. Objects of experience — thoughts, feelings, exceptions, the world — have boundaries that are subject to change. They seem to be independent, but they are all merely manifestations of

the medium of which they are made, just as a golden ring is not independent of the gold of which it is made.

Even that may be going too far, since even to say that they are manifestations of a medium requires the egoic perspective. The Self alone is true Knowledge, and the knowledge of objects, which assumes the reality of the ego, is therefore false. It's false, not quite in the sense of being incorrect, but more in the sense of being meaningless. It appears to be meaningful, but it is only so if we assume the ego is true. But if the ego is investigated, it is seen to be untrue — or, to be precise, it is not what it seems to be. That means all the objects which are seen through it are also not what they seem to be. The meaning that comes from those objects is also not what it seems to be.

## 14

14. If the first person, I, exists, then the second and third persons, you and he, will also exist. By enquiring into the nature of the I, the I perishes. With it 'you' and 'he' also perish. The resultant state, which shines as Absolute Being, is one's own natural state, the Self.

**Commentary:** If I believe that I exist as an independent entity, then I can draw a boundary between I and the not-I. That not-I will include you, and will include he, she, and it. It's all founded on the idea that I am a separate, doing, experiencing person. Otherwise none of these boundaries, none of these names and forms, could be created.

But if we look into the nature of this seeming I, which is nothing other than the ego, it vanishes. When all the 'not-I' is cut away, what remains has no boundary. But the not-me was created by being contrasted by a bounded I. Other things can only exist against a background of a "me" that is solid, against which they can be contrasted. If that I with boundaries is actually something infinite, meaning non-bounded, everything else that is drawn with reference to it cannot be sustained. Without a solid, bounded I, the not-I cannot be sustained.

That creates a kind of cascading black hole. All the objects, feelings, ideas, people, memories — in short, all experience, only makes sense if they occur to an

I. If that I is not what it seems to be, then experience is not what it seems to be.

What remains beyond boundaries is the natural state, the Self. This is the natural state because every other state is merely a thought, and so comes and goes. This natural state is unchanging. It is beyond concepts, indescribable. It is natural because it cannot be the product of any process and so cannot be altered by any process.

## 15

15. Only with reference to the present can the past and the future exist. They too, while current, are the present. To try to determine the nature of the past and the future while ignoring the present is like trying to count without the unit.

**Commentary:** It's only the sense of now that gives meaning to the past and the future, and when we think of the past and future, it's always in the present that we seem to do it.

## 16

16. Apart from us, where is time and where is space? If we are bodies, we are involved in time and space, but are we? We are one and identical now, then, and forever, here, and everywhere. Therefore we, timeless, and spaceless Being, alone are.

**Commentary:** Time and space are only seem to exist through the lens of the mind. The essence of that lens is a sense of individuality that splits things into a me and a not-me. Without these boundaries, the mind could not make its distinctions, including the distinctions of time and space.

Time is a product of memory. Space is a way of organizing physical objects. Both are products of thought, which depends upon the notion of the thinker, the doer — the egoic I.

If the egoic sense is right, then we are bodies and minds, and caught up in time and space. But if the ego is examined carefully, the mind is reduced to

silence. It then becomes clear that there is no one to say that we are thinking, that we are in space, or that there is a past, a present, or a future.

This is in fact the eternal truth, that seems merely to be obscured at various times by the thoughts of individuality. We are not really bodies caught up in space and time. Those are merely categories dependent on the illusory ego. That ego penetrated — or more accurately, revealed never to have existed in the way that it seemed to exist — what remains is beyond time and space — and always has been. That we are.

## 17

17. To those who have not realized the Self, as well as to those who have, the word 'I' refers to the body, but with this difference, that for those who have not realized, the 'I' is confined to the body whereas for those who have realized the Self within the body the 'I' shines as the limitless Self.

**Commentary:** For those who have not realized the Self, the I is basically founded in the body (which includes the mind) and its attachments and linkages. For those who have, so to say, realized the Self, the I is not grounded in the body. The body is seen as merely a mirror for something which is not actually in the body — any more than the Sun reflected in a puddle is actually in the puddle. The I can refer to the body, as a convenient way of naming a limited entity. But that limited entity is seen as nothing other than a reflection of the Self, which has no limits.

## 18

18. To those who have not realized (the Self) as well as to those who have, the world is real. But to those who have not realized, Truth is adapted to the measure of the world, whereas to those that have, Truth shines as the Formless Perfection, and as the Substratum of the world. This is all the difference between them.

**Commentary:** The phenomenon called the world might be said to appear to



both the realized and the non-realized. But the realized view it as nothing other than a modification of the Self, which alone is considered the real truth. The only actual truth is known to be formless and beyond the mind. The world is real only *as* the Self, but the Self is beyond the egoic thought that says “I am, and therefore the world is.”

So the world is real only as the Self, but the Self does not think the thought that acknowledges the existence of the world.

For the realized ones, then, what appears to be thinking, feeling, perceiving and acting are nothing but the Self that does not admit any of those activities. In other words, thinking is not thinking, feeling is not feeling, perceiving is not perceiving, and acting is not acting. These are not real in themselves; they are all only the Self. They are not what they seem to be. They are semblances.

Whereas for the so-called ones who have not realized, the world is taken to be independently real, and there is thought to be actual truth in it.

“This is all the difference between them” — but what a difference!

## 19

19. Only those who have no knowledge of the Source of destiny and free-will dispute as to which of them prevails. They that know the Self as the one Source of destiny and free-will are free from both. Will they again get entangled in them?

**Commentary:** Free will and destiny are concepts based on the idea that there are real individual minds which could either be free or bound. But when the source of this assumption is investigated, it falls apart. That’s the end of viewing the ego as real. Only if the ego is real — that is, only if there really is a separate, individual, doing, experiencing self — can that self be assessed as either free or bound. Since upon investigation such a self dissolves into the Self, the questions of free will or predetermination are falsely posed. Are the actions of a character in a novel free or bound? Neither, since there is no character, really — there’s merely a set of words on a page which become a hypothetical person in the mind of the reader. Is an elephant you see in a cloud free to wander where it wants?

There is no elephant, actually. It is merely the projection of an imagination. Freedom and destiny cannot apply to creatures who are only pretended to exist.

## 20

20. He who sees God without seeing the Self sees only a mental image. They say that he who sees the Self sees God. He who, having completely lost the ego, sees the Self, has found God, because the Self does not exist apart from God.

**Commentary:** God is merely an abstraction, a thought, a belief, unless experienced directly. And God can and is experienced directly, as the Self. So one who knows the Self knows God. If the ego has been investigated and its illusion penetrated, then the Self is said to be known. In that same moment, God is also found, since the idea of God is nothing other than the Self with a few illusory attributes superimposed. From the view of the ego, God is the whole. That is, the mind is small and limited, and God is large and unlimited. But when the Self is found, this egoic way of looking at the mind and God falls apart. There is then only the Self, which is nothing other than God's real formless form. God's worldly attributes — God's miraculous powers, etc. — are as true or false as the attributes of any individual mind. There is then to be found no distinction between your true form and the true form of God.

## 21

21. What is the Truth of the scriptures which declare that if one sees the Self one sees God? How can one see one's Self? If, since one is a single being, one cannot see one's Self, how can one see God? Only by becoming a prey to Him.

**Commentary:** The Self cannot be seen as a separate object, and neither can God, whose essence is of course nothing but the Self. Both are said to be seen if the obstacles to recognizing their existence are removed. This obstacle is the belief that you are a separate, individual self. You cannot directly remove that belief; you can only offer yourself up by letting go as much as you can of your

attachments to your identity. This is done by firmly turning the mind away from all the objects of experience through self-inquiry or surrender. Then that sense of separation will be removed by divine Grace, and the Truth — the Self in God, the God in Self — will shine, as in fact it always has. The idea that it ever was obscured will be seen to be a misconception, and even that misconception has never existed.

## 22

22. The Divine gives light to the mind and shines within it. Except by turning the mind inward and fixing it in the Divine, there is no other way to know Him through the mind.

**Commentary:** God is nothing other than the source of all. By definition God exceeds the ability of the mind to grasp it. It in fact is nothing other than the light that illuminates all attempts at understanding; that light cannot *itself* be understood. The only way, then, to know that light, is to turn the mind away from the changeable, illuminated objects... there is no place left for it to go then but to the light itself.

## 23

23. The body does not say 'I'. No one will argue that even in deep sleep the 'I' ceases to exist. Once the 'I' emerges, all else emerges. With a keen mind enquire whence this 'I' emerges.

**Commentary:** The body, being insentient, cannot actually believe anything, any more than rocks can believe anything. So "I" am not rooted in the body. And even in deep sleep, we have a rudimentary sense of our existence, which is why we know, when we wake up, that we slept, and didn't just cease to exist from the moment we fell asleep at night to when we opened our eyes the next morning. So "I" exist even in deep sleep.

We should note here that the I that remains the same between deep sleep and

waking is the true I, whereas all that we have access to in the waking state is a modification of that true I, namely, the waking I, which gives a sense of division and separation. That is the I we are forced to look for, and when we do, we will find that it is merely a reflection and modification of the true I, which watches over all the states of consciousness (waking, dreaming, and deep sleep), and can either be experienced with or without a sense of duality and separation. The senses of duality or the lack thereof — which we call being conscious or unconscious, respectively — are merely thoughts.

## 24

24. This inert body does not say 'I'. Reality-Consciousness does not emerge. Between the two, and limited to the measure of the body, something emerges as 'I'. It is this that is known as Chit-jada-granthi (the knot between the Conscious and the inert), and also as bondage, soul, subtle-body, ego, samsara, mind, and so forth.

**Commentary:** The body, being insentient, cannot call itself the I any more than the words on a page can speak themselves. And the Self, being beyond thought, does not change or act, and cannot and does not call itself by any name. The light of the Self, then, is said to reflect upon the body (or the body-mind), and in the *reflection of that body in the light of the Self* — is said to be the ego which arises.

This is much like the imaginary character that is created when a reader (analogous to the Self) reads a book (analogous to the body). In the interaction *between* reader and book arises an imaginary person who is called the character. This character does not actually do, feel, or think anything, but is only imagined to do so.

This is called the knot that ties consciousness and matter, or the ego. This imaginary character is the one who seems to seek spiritual truth, and at the end of its quest, will be dissolved away by the the knowledge of its own imaginary

nature against the background of Self.

## 25

25. It comes into being equipped with a form, and as long as it retains a form it endures. Having a form, it feeds and grows big. But if you investigate it, this evil spirit, which has no form of its own, relinquishes its grip on form and takes to flight.

**Commentary:** The form or vehicle of the ego is the mind-body. This mind-body assumes an identity and relationships, and then has desires and fears based on that identity and relationships. This entangles it in more and more thought, and this thought increasingly obscures the fact that this ego is merely an imaginary thing. The movement of thought seems to create the sense that the ego is doing things, much like, as is stated in an ancient scripture, a torch being whirled around seems to create a circle of light. A more modern metaphor might be how two stereo speakers create an illusion of a three-dimensional soundstage and a band.

If this ego is investigated — namely, by slowing the thoughts down and trying to find just who is watching the whole show — it suddenly recedes, because the illusion cannot be sustained if you see its background. The illusion is based on separation, and the separation is a trick of misdirection. As long as you're consumed by desires and fears, then mind moves endlessly, and doesn't actually investigate who the "I" is who has all of these desires and fears. Start looking, and suddenly it becomes elusive who the I is. The I, which watches, and which cannot be what is watched, cannot seem to find or locate itself. That immediately starts to break up the desires and fears, since they are all premised on the idea that *I* want this and *I* fear that. But if you can't find yourself, then obviously those desires and fears then become less compelling.

But stopping there is not enough. The one who cannot find the I is itself the I that is being looked for. That I must be pursued relentlessly, and as it is pursued, concentration, peace, and the desire for liberation generally increase and attachments tend to decrease, though there may be spectacular bouts of fear and

passion as the usual identity struggles to hold on to itself.

This goes on until the Background of the Mind is finally and inevitably noticed, and the conceit that the mind-body is independent is no longer sustainable.

## 26

26. If the ego is, everything else also is. If the ego is not, nothing else is. Indeed, the ego is all. Therefore the enquiry as to what this ego is, is the only way of giving up everything.

**Commentary:** Everything is a series of things. Things are objects with boundaries. Boundaries are always set in relation to an observer, the one who feels that “I am.” Thinking “I am” means thinking “I am *not* those things.”

This “I am” thought is the ego. It is inevitably mixed with the belief that “I am the body and the mind” and various other things. In order to think “I am,” the ego has to implicitly create a sense of what it is, and what it is not. That sense is based on the idea that one is a doing, experiencing person.

Only then can you cognize other things. You perceive them in relationship to this person that you think you are. So everything is only possible if there is an ego, a sense of separation, that then creates a world of names and forms. If that sense of separation falls, the boundary-based world cannot stand. All our language and concepts depend on the egoic distinction of an out there as opposed to an in here, on a not-me as opposed to a me.

So the only way to really give up everything is to look this egoic illusion in the face. It cannot sustain itself, because the I which is observing everything is *not* actually that which it seems to be. It seems to be a solid core. It is quite clear that if one looks, though, that the observer is not a solid core. It has no boundaries. It isn’t an object.

But if it isn’t an object, then it isn’t “in here,” and if it isn’t “in here,” then the things that are out there aren’t really out there, since they are only out there *relative to* something that is in here. Names and forms fall, concepts fall, language falls. Everything then is given up, in the sense that it is was never there to begin

with.

Inquiry into the ego means to turn attention continuously towards the I, that is, towards whatever is noticing experience. The cardinal rule of self-inquiry is that you cannot be what you are aware of; that in order to be aware of something, there has to be a distance between you and it.

When one tries to do self-inquiry and find the I, one tends to land on another object of experience. This again cannot be you. Then you try to turn towards whatever is noticing that. On and on the inquiry goes this way, until it is seen that more and more of what you thought you were is actually a series of objects. This is then recognized as not you. Pursued to its end, everything is given up.

## 27

27. The State of non-emergence of 'I' is the state of being THAT. Without questing for that State of the non-emergence of 'I' and attaining It, how can one accomplish one's own extinction, from which the 'I' does not revive? Without that attainment how is it possible to abide in one's true State, where one is THAT?

**Commentary:** The non-emergence of the (false, egoic) I is the Self, which is also known as "THAT" because it cannot be described. It is the indescribable beyond. Only when there is no I is there no other, and only when there is no other is there nothing to seek or to fear. This is the state of perfection.

This state appears to be blocked because of the egoic identification with the body and mind. The identification is sustained by continuous frenzied labor towards the desires and fears that the body and mind desire.

The non-emergence of the I is possible in temporary ways: in deep sleep, by controlling the breath, or by some other means of profound concentration in an activity. But the only permanent way is to seek the source of the I through self-inquiry (a continuous chasing of the I which seems to experience and do) or surrender (ignoring all thought except the thought of surrender, and relaxing).

Then it vanishes and the one who thought themselves bound finds themselves having always been free. That is Self-abidance. This is the true state, meaning it is the state that in fact is always the case; there is only a

misconception that it isn't, and when that is inquired into, even that misconception is found not to have existed.

## 28

28. Just as a man would dive in order to get something that had fallen into the water, so one should dive into oneself, with a keen one-pointed mind, controlling speech and breath, and find the place whence the 'I' originates.

**Commentary:** "I" is a kind of illusion that depends on your not looking in its direction. You — or what seems to be you — believes yourself to be aware and independent, beliefs which cannot be sustained if you see the background from which what seems to be you arises. That background, and not you — in other words, not the "I" — is what is aware and independent. Noticing that background fully, however, destroys the very ideas of background and foreground.

The one who seeks to destroy the illusory I needs to move the attention away from all changeable objects and "inward" towards the one observing those objects. The "I" is what feels like what is noticing everything. It is the sense of being awake, alive, aware. When one turns the attention in pursuit of it with intense concentration, we can find from where that I originates — meaning, that when we look for the I, we find that it did not originate at all, that it is in fact not what we thought it was. It turns out that what seemed to be a separate I was in fact nothing but the Self, which is beyond separation.

## 29

29. The only enquiry leading to Self-realization is seeking the Source of the 'I' with in-turned mind and without uttering the word 'I'. Meditation on 'I am not this; I am That' may be an aid to the enquiry but it cannot be the enquiry.

**Commentary:** The I has to be followed to its root by consistently turning away from changeable objects. This is not the same as simply telling yourself what you



are or are not. Those are just concepts. They can be helpful if they quiet the mind — telling yourself that you are the Self, for example, can quiet the mind. But the I, which in our usual concept is a kind of illusion, must be looked for, not asserted.

The I is to be followed by looking for the observer (that would be ‘self-inquiry’ in Ramana’s terms) or by ignoring all changing objects (‘surrender’), and in fact these two are merely two descriptions of the same process.

The source of the I simply means that one looks for *where* the I — that is, where *you* seem to be. From what vantage point are you viewing anything? In your normal awareness, when you experience something, you know three things: that thing, the fact that you are aware of it, and the fact that you are not it. It’s clear where in your experience the thing is, but where are *you*?

When you look with enough intensity, you find that it is not what you thought it was — that the “I” is not in fact the doing, experiencing center that it seems to be, but that all that is a misconception, and that there is only the Self.

## 30

30. If one enquires ‘Who am I?’ within the mind, the individual ‘I’ falls down abashed as soon as one reaches the Heart and immediately Reality manifests itself spontaneously as ‘I-I’. Although it reveals itself as ‘I’, it is not the ego but the Perfect Being, the Absolute Self.

**Commentary:** The I initially appears to be a kind of center point within you. When it is deeply inquired into by searching relentlessly for it and rejecting all objects of awareness in search of what is aware of them, then that which seemed like a center point (and this seeming center is the Heart) actually reveals itself to be a kind of tunnel or hole, an absence which actually reveals the otherwise-forgotten background. When that background is recognized fully, it is no longer background, but is simply Reality.

This Self has appears to be what feels like I, but when looked at closely it is not I (or not *just* I), but the I-I, which is the I without a sense of separation,

without the thought *that it is I*, or at least without *identification* with that thought.

## 31

31. For Him who is immersed in the bliss of the Self, arising from the extinction of the ego, what remains to be accomplished? He is not aware of anything (as) other than the Self. Who can apprehend his State?

**Commentary:** When the illusion of the I is, so to say, penetrated, bliss is the result. This bliss goes beyond ordinary pleasure, because it is not contrasted with pain. In this bliss there is no cognizing anything separate. Thoughts and objects and separations and boundaries are themselves nothing but the seamless continuity of the Self. In this wholeness, in this totality, there is no room to do anything, to make any changes, or to go anywhere. Nothing therefore remains to be done. Things that are done are seen as such from the egoic point of view. But when the ego is deactivated, nothing can be said to be happening.

This is not to say that nothing is happening, exactly — that too would be an egoic concept. But language falls away. By falling away is meant the fact that even what is spoken is merely understood to be a modification of silence; language is not what it seems to be.

Language falls away because language is a child of the egoic mode of thought, the separating mode of thought.

And so the experience of the realized one can never be described, because language cannot touch it. When it seems to be described, it is in fact not described. The mind is stopped, and so there is no coherent way to talk about the experience that results. And in fact the mind is always stopped — or to be accurate it has never started.

The mind appears to be moving to outsiders, but it is not so in reality. In reality, the mind does not move even when it appears to move, and even its appearing to move is not really even an appearance.

## 32

32. Although the scriptures proclaim 'Thou art That', it is only a sign of weakness of mind to meditate 'I am That, not this', because you are eternally That. What has to be done is to investigate what one really is and remain That.

**Commentary:** We have to go beyond concepts. Mentally repeating the idea that you are Self over and over, as the scriptures tell us is Truth, keeps you on a certain static thought, and doesn't permit you to go beyond it. Truth may be put in various words, but it cannot be attained by fixating on any set of words, or on any particular idea. To find Truth, one must exit the network of ideas.

The only way to go beyond that network is to see the egoic illusion at work. This requires looking deeply into the I. That will discern away the false things that you take yourself to be (that have been 'superimposed' on the 'pure' notion of the I). When that discernment occurs, even for a moment, peace happens, and attachments to normal things of life drops. That discernment is revisited over and over until it becomes absolutely clear and there is an automatic remaining in that without a return to the egoic mode of life. Or, to put it more accurately, it is understood that there never was nor could there ever be such a mode of life.

## 33

33. It is ridiculous to say either 'I have not realized the Self' or 'I have realized the Self'; are there two selves, for one to be the object of the other's realization? It is a truth within the experience of everyone that there is only one Self.

**Commentary:** Realization is an event and thus a concept. Events and concepts happen in the land of things, that is, the land of the mind or the ego. This ego, this foundational feeling that "I am," creates the sense of separation that is the identification with the mind and the body. This is called the veil of ignorance.

It is the purpose of self-inquiry to pierce that veil. But in piercing that veil, it is found that you are not the ego, are not the mind — and never were. Therefore the idea of realization is also inapplicable — and always was. Who identified with the mind and the body? Who was ignorant of their true nature? There was no such entity — *that*, seemingly paradoxically, is realization.

The “I” that could realize anything is the separate I — precisely the I that is seen to be not what it thought itself to be. It cannot be *that* I that realizes anything, because realization is seeing how *that* I is an object. That I cannot realize or not realize anything, any more than a stone can.

And yet the infinite, inexpressible Self which we actually are also cannot realize anything, since it cannot be ignorant in the first place. Pure light cannot admit darkness. The Self does not cognize objects. The Self does not *do* anything. All doing and all things are only in the egoic perspective.

Realization is the leaving behind of the notion that “I” am an entity that could realize anything. And yet, despite all that, the seeker must reach for this realization as if they could realize it. The impossibility of realization, the eternity of realization, is itself the realization that will then be clear.

## 34

34. It is due to illusion born of ignorance that men fail to recognize That which is always and for everybody the inherent Reality dwelling in its natural Heart-centre and to abide in it, and that instead they argue that it exists or does not exist, that it has form or has not form, or is non-dual or dual.

**Commentary:** The ignorance, the forgetfulness, of the Self is the ego, which is the sense that “I am a separate someone.” This sense needs forgetfulness, because without that, the notion of being a separate entity couldn’t exist. If you kept noticing the movie screen, it would be hard to suspend disbelief and become completely absorbed in the film. You need to forget the background to take what’s playing in the foreground seriously.

Out of the egoic notion come all the incorrect desires and fears that lead the mind to chase happiness in contingent, temporary things instead of simply going quiet, and, in so doing, allowing the light of the true and permanent bliss that is the Self to shine, as it does, in the Heart. That Heart is nothing different from the Self — it’s just another name for where self-inquiry leads. If you imagine yourself in a kind of large sphere, you seem to be “in here” while experience is “out there.” The Heart is the inmost point in the sphere, separated out from all the

objects that it experiences. As soon as one gets to the point, of course, it turns out not to be a point at all, at least not a point in the way that it seemed at first. It has, as the scriptures say, suddenly the circumference of the entire universe despite being as tiny as an atom.

All the arguments about whether the Self exists or not, whether it has form or not, etc. are all simply mental debates — that is, they are based on the foundational notion that the ego is real. Conceptual arguments are always based in a sense of separation, because words and thoughts are about bounded entities. And you cannot notice the bounds of other objects unless you are the first bounded object. Only after there is an “in here” (me) and an “out there” (not-me) can the “out there” be split into pieces and named and then argued about.

What is Real is beyond concepts, beyond separation, beyond bounds. So getting embroiled in these kinds of arguments can be a kind of snakepit for the seeker, who gets confused mucking around with them instead of simply looking within and allowing the indisputable, the beyond-concepts, to shine in its wordless way.

## 35

35. To seek and abide in the Reality that is always attained is the only Attainment. All other attainments (siddhis) are such as are acquired in dreams. Can they appear real to someone who has woken up from sleep? Can they that are established in the Reality and are free from maya be deluded by them?

Seekers can also get obsessed with miraculous powers of various kinds — to see past lives, to enter other universes, powers of creation and destruction, and so on. Mythological texts talk about these. These are all irrelevant, mere temporary baubles compared to the infinite beauty that is the Self. In a dream, who cares how far you can fly or how fast you can run? In the end, it's still a dream. That's the nature of the world — it is dream-like, and so all the powers that one attains are still limited by that fact.

Realization of the Self is akin to waking up from that dream. Someone who has woken up from a dream is not going to be wowed by miraculous powers that

he had in a dream. They're not going to think they're somehow any realer than the dream itself.

## 36

36. Only if the thought 'I am the body' occurs will the meditation 'I am not this, I am That', help one to abide as That. Why should we for ever be thinking, 'I am That'? Is it necessary for man to go on thinking 'I am a man'? Are we not always That?

**Commentary:** Some texts on non-duality emphasize repeating to yourself that you are not the mind and the body and that you are the Self. This is only of temporary use.

The egoic first thought — “I am” — causes separation. It implies the “not-I” and is ultimately connected with the idea that “I am the body,” and then connects to the mind, other relationships, your personal history, etc. It is only if you first buy this “I am” that implies that you are a separate, individual self that you need to continuously remind yourself what you are and are not.

But that's tiresome. We need a way of cutting to the root of things. If we look into the egoic first thought, we see that it is not what it seems to be. When this is seen, there is then no need to keep asserting over and over what we are and are not. We'll simply stop crediting — identifying with — the idea that we are anything other than the Self. Indeed, in some profound sense, we'll stop crediting ideas at all.

## 37

37. The contention, 'Dualism during practice, non-dualism on Attainment', is also false. While one is anxiously searching, as well as when one has found one's Self, who else is one but the tenth man?

**Commentary:** The story of the tenth man is one where someone in a group knows there are ten people but keeps counting only nine. He wonders where the

last one is. It turns out he's been forgetting to count himself the whole time.

This kind of simple recognition of what is stunningly obvious is akin to the insight of Self-realization; it is the penetration of the usual forgetfulness of what is right in front of our eyes.

Yet this forgetfulness is not real. It's just a thought. It's not the case that the tenth man was somehow not the tenth man until he remembered it. He was always the tenth man.

Similarly, it's not the case that the seeker is *truly* ignorant until realization. He is the Self at all times, in fact. Duality is false not just before realization but at all times.

But duality seems true to seekers. So it seems, but the end of realization will be to see that that seeming is itself untrue, and always was. Note: what this really means is that not only the tenth man the tenth man the whole time — but that, in fact, never was it not the case that he did not know it!

## 38

38. As long as a man is the doer, he also reaps the fruit of his deeds, but, as soon as he realizes the Self through enquiry as to who is the doer, his sense of being the doer falls away and the triple karma is ended. This is the state of eternal Liberation.

**Commentary:** Identification with the body and the mind is the egoic mode of consciousness. In this mode, you feel like you are doing. You identify with the one who makes decisions and exerts efforts. In this mode, you also enjoy and suffer the consequences of those actions, since both doership and experiencership depend on identification with the body and the mind.

As soon as you look into who seems to be doing things, or, for that matter, who seems to be experiencing them, this identification can no longer stand. It becomes clear that one is not the body and the mind. So doership and experiencership drop away. Or, to be more precise, they are no longer identified with. They become, in Vedantic parlance, like a burnt rope — the form may seem to remain, but the structure has lost its bite.

Karma in this context simply means the actions that you take and their results.

Traditionally in Vedanta, there are said to be three types of karma: sanchita karma, which is supposedly all the karma you have accumulated over your many previous lives; prarabhda karma, which is the karma that is used to make your current body and is supposed to unfold over this particular lifetime; and agamya karma, which is the karma which you generate anew from your actions in this lifetime.

But all three karmas can only affect you so long as you believe that you are the body and the mind. If that is dropped, then only the Self remains, and the Self is beyond action and its results. Thus all karmas are burned to the enlightened one. Some in the past have claimed that the prarabhda karma remains and that only upon physical death is one “fully” liberated, but this is untrue — Realization is the recognition that one was never born. And what was never born can never die a physical death.

The Self alone always is and always has been, which means that the very idea of karma, in the final analysis, cannot be said to be true.

## 39

39. Only so long as one considers oneself bound, do thoughts of bondage and Liberation continue. When one enquires who is bound the Self is realized, eternally attained, and eternally free. When thought of bondage comes to an end, can thought of Liberation survive?

**Commentary:** The idea of bondage or ignorance is itself based in the egoic idea that there you are a person, a body and a mind. It is the one who believes that they are the body and mind that seeks freedom. Yet when you engage in self-inquiry, this one who believes that they are the body-mind is itself seen not to exist. What you actually are is not the body and mind, and not the one who believed they were the body and the mind, therefore you are not the one who wanted liberation. You did not really want liberation because liberation was already yours. You did not need liberation because you were never imprisoned to



begin with. Ignorance is itself, and always has been, a misconception.

The end result of realization will be to recognize that there was never any ignorance, and therefore never any solution to it. Realization itself is a mere concept that is destroyed along with the concept of bondage. They annihilate each other like matter and anti-matter. Realization is a ladder the seeker climbs and then tosses away once at the top.

Even as concepts, truly, ignorance and realization didn't exist; they were misconceptions, and even the idea that they were misconceptions is a misconception, and *that* is a misconception too, all the way down.

## 40

40. If it is said, that Liberation is of three kinds, with form or without form or with and without form, then let me tell you that the extinction of three forms of Liberation is the only true Liberation.

**Commentary:** Some say liberation occurs to the mind. Some say it occurs to one beyond the mind. Some say it is something that occurs to the body and the mind while alive, but then dissolves into something infinite at the death of the body and the mind.

These are all positions taken from a conceptual, and therefore egoic, stance. The kind of liberation that is subject to that kind of debate is an egoic liberation still. The thought of liberation is the last egoic thought. It, and therefore all the forms of it that could possibly exist, have to go — only in the beyond-concepts is there true Liberation. Even formless liberation is a concept, because it is defined as a certain kind of liberation as opposed to another kind. Anything which has an opposite is a concept.

The true Liberation is no Liberation at all, because it has no opposite. It cannot be described as this or that, because it is not actually a phenomenon, not a thing, not a process of any kind. It merely an indirect description of the Truth that always has been the case, which is that the ignorant idea that there is someone who needs to be liberated, someone who suffers, someone who is limited is and always has been only a playful fiction, and not even that.