

## Madurai, Journal entry #4, January 23, 2015

Another day, another darshan.

Wednesday I took a taxi to a temple complex called Alagarkoil, comprised of three temples, one of which is up a steep flight of steps on the side of a hill, and the others some distance away from the base of the hill. The temples are about 20 km outside of Madurai and are dedicated to Murugan, the second son of Shiva and a prominent god in southern India.



I wandered through all three, received the god's darshan from a priest in each temple, had sacred ash thumbed onto my forehead, and even received a rose garland in Pazhamudhircholai Murugan temple.



I had a good thing going so yesterday I took a tuk tuk to Thiripparankudram Murugan temple, in town but a 20 minute ride from my hotel. I had received darshan when I visited this temple in 2002. The day had been a special festival and the pressure and smell of the bodies, the thick incense cloud, the heat, the laughing priests, one after another, all painting my forehead, had made that occasion a memorable one. I recall exiting the chute, feeling like I had in the '60s after inhaling the herb.

This time there was a marriage ceremony at the temple and little else going on. The priests seemed bored, like ball players without a crowd. What I recall being an assembly line of priests was now broken up into a number of rooms. I ran out of small rupee notes, prompting one priest to say "not compulsory". My forehead did, however, get its share of sacred ash swipes and the power of the place is, as it was then, palpable.

My guide, Swami Naadin, had met me at the entrance, agreed that I could slip my shoes and socks into my pack, explained that photos were allowed in the outer rooms but not in the inner sanctuary (which is carved into the hillside) and began to show me around, just as if this meeting of ours had actually been arranged by an agency rather than by "chance".



Today I visited Meenakshi temple. The jewel of South Indian temples, it has a huge gopuram at each compass point forming a square enclosing an enormous building with carved columns, painted ceilings, multiple sanctuaries, numerous statues of the various gods, trinket sellers, guide-wannabees, and a frenzy of activity. An enterprising Indian with a backer could rent out cell phones with good cams for, let's say, 666 rupees an hour (just over \$10) because the only camera that gets in is that one. Cameras,

tablets, backpacks, shoes, socks - all must be left at the booth before you can enter. You can keep your hat but take it off inside out of respect to the god.

I could have taken 1000 photos inside, it's just that photogenic. Nevertheless, and although I felt naked without my usual accoutrements, it was a unique experience to actually focus with my eyes for a change.



## **Madurai, Journal entry #5, January 29, 2015**

Each time I had visited Meenakshi temple and walked on the west or north sides I had been solicited by men inviting me to see into the temple from their rooftop. They were mostly loud and insistent and their game, it seems, was to get me walking through the shop of the merchants who had hired them, so the salesmen could sell me a carpet, or a shawl, or a carpet.

On one day, I had been out for a while, and I had to use a toilet and, as I approached Meenakshi, a quieter men began a conversation which was heading to a familiar topic. I asked him if I could use their toilet, he said yes, and that did it.

I was met in the shop by Ashiq, a 30-something man from Kashmir, who led me to the roof, where we conversed while I took photos, not into Meenakshi, but across its prow, so to speak.



After I had used their toilet, I was served lemon tea in the rug room, while he rolled out three or four carpets, mostly conventional ones, except for a lovely dark blue wool carpet with white silk accents, which I liked and told him so.

Well, you know I didn't buy it - I can hardly see the floors in my rooms as it is - but we sat there convivially for a half hour while we went through the requisite pre-negotiation discussion.

On the way, next, to the jewelry room, I saw a lovely large wood Ganesh which I was attracted to. Not to bring home, though - the logistics of transport would be daunting (not to mention the price). He didn't try to sell me at all, which was sort of a surprise.





In the jewelry room he took me through several huge and unattractive rings that florid car salesmen might wear and then showed me a lovely little 22K gold "temple ring" with Ganesh on top and cabochons on the sides. I tried it on and I'm sure he figured he had me. I liked it. He saw that. It fit. It called out to me. And only 110,000 rupees (about \$1800). Such a deal.

We went through the motions. I left. I emailed him that night saying I couldn't spend more than \$900 on it, he invited me back for another cup of tea, he offered it to me for a price, he said, I couldn't refuse, \$1100. I told him it's a good price and I'd either be back or let him know by email. He tried once again to sell me the carpet. He already knew what I figured out a little later: the ring no longer called out to me.

But, on to my last full day in Madurai.

This afternoon I found myself sitting in meditation on the floor of the room where, in 1896, at the age of 16, Ramana Maharshi had his awakening.



Most spiritual seekers would know who Ramana Maharshi is and, if you had read from his works, you would have heard the story of his awakening. Few, though, and that includes me, would have known that it happened just steps from the south entrance to Meenakshi temple in Madurai, in his uncle's house, that is now called Sri Ramana Mandiram.



I stayed for two hours, until the caretakers kicked me out (very graciously) so they could rest and have lunch. I came back in the evening. I changed plans and came back the next morning, just before I left Madurai. I had intended to visit another Murugan temple and have darshan from the god. But what's darshan from the god worth when you can have darshan from absolute being itself? Would even the god hesitate?

## Ooty, Journal entry #6, January 30, 2015

I'm in Udhagamandalam now, Ooty to its friends, the black hole of connectivity. My hotel doesn't have it, even though it lauds itself by calling what it has a "wifi activation zone". Most of the restaurateurs I've probed look at me as if I'm requesting some foreign delicacy. Kabob Corner has a medium fast system which, after a load of timing outs, looks blazing. And the chicken tikka malai kabob is good.

Yesterday, after I arrived by taxi from Coimbatore, I took a walk up to the Government Botanical Garden, paid the 80 rupees entrance and camera fees, and wandered through the large park with exotic trees, fern and tropical plant houses, artful plantings, and curious denizens.



I was trying to take a photo of a sculpted hedge and include one of the teen girls who kept walking by when I was approached by one of their teachers. He introduced himself, then introduced another teacher and so on, until we were all one happy family.



The taller guy in the middle is the first one I met, the two on his left are not brothers, and the shorter one on his right took my hand when we met, rubbed it excitedly, and wouldn't let go. The girls were great, so lively and happy. There are more of them than you see here and a large group of boys, as well, scattered around the grounds, part of a group of middle school students from Kerala.

Whew, imagine being a teacher!

By the sunken pool I was run into again, this time by a fun group of boys from a private Christian school in Ooty. They used English well, were planning to be doctors, lawyers, one engineer, and one baker, and we had some lively conversations. They said they were on a school field trip. Before I knew their denomination, one asked me my last name and I

explained it was almost the same as that of a holy man from the Vedas. Not one of them had heard of the Vedas.



Today I needed a rest from people. I taxied to the highest point in the Nilgiris, looked through the mist at Ooty and other enclaves, came back and visited the Ooty Rose Garden, where only the roses paid attention to me.

