

Travels with a Master

My social and spiritual experiences travelling in Kerala for three weeks with Swami Bodhanandaji

By Dr. Tilak Agerwala

1 INTRODUCTION

The trip to Kerala was marvelous. For three weeks, I experienced a lifestyle remarkably different from what I am used to. I developed a real appreciation for Kerala and its people who put me in touch with the Indian way of life which has endured through the millennia. Above all, it was an exciting journey of spiritual discovery for me.

Kerala is a beautiful land of lakes and rivers, sandwiched between the Arabian Sea and the mountains of the Western Ghats, with lushness reminiscent of Hawaii. The people are wonderful, warm and welcoming. The food is delicious. Of course, I ate only vegetarian food. But each meal, often served on banana leaves, and consisting of a choice of idli, dosa, appam, half a dozen vegetarian dishes (including cooked fruits like unripe jack fruit), sambar, rasam, payasam (rice pudding), and fresh papayas, was a real treat. The tradition in Kerala is that no one eats until the guests have been served and have finished eating. The hosts, one assigned to each guest, ensure that each person is fully satisfied. This was quite uncomfortable at first and took a while to get used to!

Kerala, called “God’s own country,” has a rich spiritual and religious heritage and, especially with Swamiji as a guide, was an ideal place for a journey of spiritual discovery. The state has a long history of religious diversity but is communally one of the most tolerant states in India.¹

In these 21 days filled with spirituality, Swamiji formally initiated me on my spiritual journey and taught me the Tattva Bodha and Chapter 13 of the Bhagavad Gita. I learned about Chanakya and the opportunity to introduce the Rajarshi model of leadership to the world today. I learned about applying spirituality to solve real life problems from Swamiji's talks on "Gita as a National Scripture," "Spirituality and Ethics," "Pursuit of Excellence," and "Happiness Unlimited."

¹ According to the 2001 Census of India figures, 56% of Kerala residents are Hindus, 24% are Muslims, 19% are Christians, and the remaining follow other religions including Sikhism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Judaism. Kerala is the birthplace of Sankaracharya and home of Advaita Vedanta. The Saint Thomas Christians, an ancient community of Christians trace their origins to the evangelistic activity of Saint Thomas in the 1st century thus making it one of the oldest Christian communities of the world. There had been considerable trade relations between Arabia and Kerala even before the time of Islamic prophet Muhammad. Islam might have been introduced in the region by the Arab traders in the 7th or 8th century AD. Judaism arrived in Kerala with spice traders, possibly as early as the 7th century BC. There is no consensus of opinion on the date of the arrival of the first Jews in India. The tradition of the Cochin Jews maintains that after the destruction of the Second Temple of Jerusalem in the year 72, 10,000 Jews migrated to Kerala. Taken from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_Kerala

I visited sacred places: the birth place of Shankaracharya, Guruvayoor Temple, Padmanabhaswamy Temple, the Mannarasala temple, the Chottanikkara Temple and the Ambalappuzha Sri Krishna Temple. I once again did the Pinda Puja for departed souls in a beautiful, natural setting at the Tirunalli Vishnu Temple and I saw a fine example of a simple, natural, eco-friendly lifestyle at Moozhikkulam Sala.

To top it off, I was with Swamiji on Christmas Eve, Christmas, and New Year's Day and received his blessings for our 41st wedding anniversary on January 6. I also witnessed Vineesh being inducted as Brahmachary in the Advaita tradition. He will serve as Acharya in Sambodh, Kerala.

In Sections 2-15 below I describe our journey to Trivandrum, Nagarcoil, Kollam, Ambalappuzha, Cochin, Kozhikode (Calicut), Wynad, Palakkad, and Thrissur. At the bottom of each section is a link to [selected photographs](#). I cannot possibly convey in words many aspects of my journey and I urge the reader to refer to these photographs. The section on "Swamiji's Talks" contains a summary of five talks.

I would be remiss if I didn't take this opportunity to express my deep and heartfelt gratitude to Swami Bodhananda, Swami Adhyatmananda, Brahmachary Pranav Chaitanya (Vineesh), Lakshmiji, Davisji, Lataji, Balachandranji, Sreeraj, Ananthasankaranji and Parvathiji, Padmaji, Manojji and Nishaji, Rajendranji and Jayasreeji, Raghunathji, Damodarji and Umaji, for making this a truly memorable trip.

Finally, many thanks to Rashmi Vaish, Geeta Agerwala, and Davisji for their help in editing this document.

2 TRIVANDRUM, CHRISTMAS EVE AND CHRISTMAS

I arrived in Trivandrum on Christmas Eve after a two hour delay in Delhi due to fog and was received at Thiruvananthapuram airport by Lakshmi. We went straight to a Satsang with Swamiji, at a devotee's new home, after which I went to the ashram and settled into a lovely room overlooking the Karamana River.

Christmas Day started with a one-hour walk with Swamiji at 5 a.m. I visited the [Sree Padmanabha Swamy Temple](#). My host, Mr. Balachandranji has been going to this temple for more than two decades and is active on organization committees. Because he is well known, we were able to complete the visit in an hour. Scholars state the temple is mentioned in the Puranas, some of which date back to 500 B.C. I was impressed with the age of the temple and the depiction of Lord Vishnu.²

I requested the priest to perform an archana for Geeta, Arjun, Suneel and me as the idol has great power, equal to a 1000 Mahakshetrams.³ This is the temple where priceless treasures were discovered in 2012. The temple is now very crowded with people eager to see the treasure. The crowds are driving away some devotees, because it is not possible for them to pray in peace anymore.

Before lunch, after a Pada Puja for Swamiji (where the Guru Ashtottara Sata Namavali was chanted), Swamiji gave a talk on [Pada Puja](#) and concluded with his statement on Advaita Vedanta: "The whole Universe is a manifestation of God and all of us are expressions of the ultimate - we don't know it because of impurities in our mind."

A scheduled talk was cancelled and Swamiji decided to go to the beach with a small group of devotees. It was very enjoyable. In the Trivandrum ashram, I am known as "Suneel's father."

Photos

² "The marvelous idol of Sree Padmanabhaswamy is seen reclined on the mighty five hooded serpent Anantha. The supreme God is in conscious cosmic slumber with the head positioned to the south and the feet to the north. Anantha (or the endless) spreads its hoods above the head of the Idol. The three coils represent the three characteristics of mankind Sattva, Rajas and Tamas and its five hoods indicate the Panchendriyas (five senses) or the five elements (Panchabhootas). From the navel of the Lord emerges a lotus on which Lord Brahma, the Creator, is seated. Just below the stretched right arm of the Lord is the Shiva Linga of the Destroyer. Brahma, Vishnu (Padmanabha) and Shiva represent the 'Srushti, Stithi and Samharam'." <http://sreepadmanabhaswamytemple.org/>

³ The idol "contains within it 12008 Salagramas collected from the bed of the River Gandaki in Nepal. It is believed that Salagramas represent Lord Vishnu. Twelve Salagramas when worshipped together gain the potency of a Mahakshetram (Great Temple). Thus the mighty Ananthasayana Moorthy here gains the greatness and sanctity of a thousand Mahakshetrams."

<http://sreepadmanabhaswamytemple.org/>

Yogamayi Mataji's Spiritual Center

We started the day with the customary three-mile walk at 5 a.m. I went with Swamiji to visit Mataji's Spiritual Center, nestled in a beautiful, lush, hilly area and saw some sights of Trivandrum on the way there and back. The Center is an ashram with a temple and a flowing rivulet, started by Yogamayi Mataji, who is a disciple of Swami Bodhananda. She is doing some superb work with children.

After a Pada Puja and breakfast, Swamiji spoke to the children: There are three holy places: Temple, Home and Ashram. You are very fortunate to have all three – so worship Shiva in the temple and he will protect you; worship your parents at home; and in the ashram, worship your Guru who will give you knowledge. Come to the ashram. Read important texts like the Bhagavad Gita and Ramayana in addition to your school books. Your mantra is "Cleanliness." Keep the ashram, the temple and the rivulet clean – and don't use plastic bags. Respect your parents and teachers and chant OM and the Gayatri Mantra every day. If you want to be strong citizens of India (they all wanted to be) study well, eat properly and exercise. Swami Adhyatmananda then told them a story about a swami who saw a scorpion floating in the river and tried to save it. He was bitten three times and ultimately managed to throw the scorpion onto the land. When asked why he did so the swami replied, "We all have to follow our Dharma. The scorpion's dharma is to bite and my dharma is to save it." At the end, the children recited, largely from memory, an entire chapter of the Gita. It was truly remarkable.

The Gita Jnana Yajnam

What is a jnana yajnam? A jnana yajnam is very different from the traditional yajnam we are used to, which is a karma yajnam. In jnana yajnam, the Guru creates a burning desire for knowledge in the disciple, in which the ego is ultimately destroyed and Moksha is obtained.

This afternoon, before lunch, Swamiji asked me to be the chief guest at the Gita Jnana Yajnam inauguration, from 6 to 7:30 pm today. The person who was going to inaugurate the yajnam had to go to Delhi on an emergency. It was a great honor to inaugurate Swamiji's Gita Jnana Yajnam. I spoke for about five minutes on how I was introduced to the Gita and its impact on me.

Swamiji gave an introduction to the Gita to motivate people to attend the sessions over the next four days. His basic message: The Gita says, "don't worry." Life is the unfolding of a series of decisions. You must face life's problems head on, with a calm mind and consequential thinking. As you progress, a vast source of energy, creativity, and happiness will become available to you and you will "happily" deal with all the problems and become spontaneously creative. This is the state of moksha.

[Photos](#)

4 TRIVANDRUM, DEC 27 2014

We walked at 4 am today because the Gita Jnana Yajnam started with a Kundalini meditation at 7 am. In the meditation sessions, Swamiji talked about how awakening of the Kundalini prepares the mind with the right values and then eventually leads to Self-realization. He discussed the chakras, the emotions associated with each chakra (that block the energy from flowing), the mudras associated with each chakra, the bija mantras that help activate the chakras, lotus visualization of each chakra, and the associated deities. During meditation on each chakra, Swamiji says it is important to watch the negative emotions but adds that it is very appropriate to bring out deep-rooted emotions and act out in a virtual way what one may have done in the real world. In meditation session 1 we focused on the chakras, visualized the lotuses, watched our emotions, and chanted "Om Aim Hreem Kleem Shreem Swaha." In meditation session 2 we added the mudras. In session 3 the deities were installed and we practiced pranayamas: Kapalabhati and the Brahmari pranayama. At the final session on the 30th, we had a full one hour meditation that combined what we had learned, and this closed the meditation sessions.

On our return from the meditation, there was a delightful function with children of all ages where Swamiji spoke and then recited the Gayatri Mantra 108 times, with the children repeating after him.

That afternoon, I had a 90 min roundtable with kids from middle and high school, college, and one graduate. I spoke to them about my career, the leadership model that had worked for me (passion, trust and awareness), gave them a few pointers like the importance of mentoring, and answered questions. It was a good session with specific actions that they took away. I trust they will follow up.

In the evening we had Session 1 of Gita Chapter 13. The remaining sessions will run through the 30th. I will try to summarize what I understood in the near future.

[Photos](#)

5 TRIVANDRUM/NAGARCOIL DEC 28 – 31 2014

On Jan. 28, 29 and 30, we walked, went to the meditation sessions in the morning and attended the lectures on Gita Chapter 13 in the evening.

On the 31st we went to Nagarcoil after stopping for breakfast at a devotee's house. The photographs once again show lush Kerala, sandwiched between the southern part of the Western Ghats and the Arabian Sea. Two pictures are of Maruthuva Malai. Legend has it that this is a fragment of the Sanjeevani Mountain, which was being carried by Hanuman from Mahendragiri to Lanka for healing the fatal wounds of Lakshmana – it fell in this place (Kottaram).

Swamiji had a meeting with the Nagarcoil volunteers (called Sambodhis) and so I asked Swamiji if I could go to Kanyakumari. Given that it was New Year's Eve, the consensus was that the Vivekananda Rock Memorial would be very crowded and we should instead go to [Vivekananda Kendra](#) on 100 acres of land. We walked around the grounds and Swamiji recorded his New Year's Message in front of Swami Vivekananda's statue. We then went to a place from which we had a clear view of the Vivekananda Rock Memorial, the statue of Thiruvalluvar,⁴ and the merging of three oceans: the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Bay of Bengal.

On the way to Kanyakumari, we visited a property a couple of miles from the ocean donated to Swamiji by a devotee. We returned to the Trivandrum ashram late (at around 9). I packed and went to sleep since we were leaving for Kollam early the next day.

[Photos](#)

⁴http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thiruvalluvar_Statue: "The statue has a height of 95 feet (29 m) and stands upon a 38 foot (11.5 m) pedestal that represents the 38 chapters of "virtue" in the Thirukkural. The statue standing on the pedestal represents "wealth" and "pleasures", signifying that wealth and love be earned and enjoyed on the foundation of solid virtue. The combined height of the statue and pedestal is 133 feet (40.5 m), denoting the 133 chapters in the Thirukkural. It has a total weight of 7000 tons. The statue, with its slight bend around the waist is reminiscent of a dancing pose of the ancient Indian deities like Nataraja. It was sculpted by the Indian sculptor Dr. V. Ganapati Sthapati, who also created the Iraivan Temple."

6 KOLLAM, NEW YEAR AND JAN 2 2015

Happy New Year! What a pleasure it is to ring in the New Year with Swamiji! Here's an excerpt from his [message](#): "The new year is an occasion for us to forget and forgive, unlearn and relearn, unload and reload, un-think and rethink, it is an opportunity for our tired souls to reincarnate from the old to the new. Life is an endless stream: it stops for no one. Life favors none and dis-favors none. Keep moving, wait for nobody. Everyone has their own pace and the river of life, in spite of all its twists and turns, underground and over ground meanderings, ultimately reaches the ocean. And that is the rationale of our abiding faith and unfailing hope."

I missed the walk in the morning. After breakfast at a devotee's place we left for Kollam. In the afternoon, I checked into a hotel, napped and then went to the host's house. There was a children's program that I missed since I went to the [beach](#).

On Jan. 2, Swamiji started teaching me the Tattva Bodha, a short but important text by Shankaracharya. Tattva means Truth and Bodha is knowledge. So Tattva Bodha means Knowledge of the Truth or the Nature of Truth. The Truth, to be realized through an experiential enquiry, not an objective enquiry, is that the Self is the only invariable in all experiences. Swamiji's own experience is that this experiential enquiry results in happiness immediately – here and now, not in some afterlife. A study of the Tattva Bodha is therefore an essential first step before going deeper into the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita and it contains the very essence of Jnana Yoga. The first session lasted 1 1/2 hours. I really enjoyed the first session! I will summarize what I learned at a later date.

Anil Prasadji arrived in Kollam today. It is very nice having him around.

In the evening Swamiji gave a talk on "Hindu Dharma in the 21st Century".⁵ This talk addresses the need for Hindus to go back to their roots and readopt the principles of dharma, which Swamiji lays out, if India is to gain its rightful place in the world.

[photos](#)

⁵ The basic message can be found in the monograph, "Hindu Dharma" by Swami Bodhananda, The Sambodh Society, Inc. Publisher, www.sambodh.us, 2013

7 KOLLAM TO AMBALAPPUZHA TO COCHIN, JAN 3 2015

We started the day with a visit to three temples with our hosts Ananthasankaranji and his wife Parvathiji, another pair of really warm, welcoming and wonderful people. The first temple was a Vishnu and Shiva temple on the Ocean. Shiva faced the ocean, which can absorb His great energy. Vishnu faced the other way. After the darshan, we went to a small, peaceful beach behind the temple, washed our feet and sat around for a while. Sambodh organizes youth camps at this beach. The ocean off this beach is safe to swim in. We then visited a Devi temple, and a Ganesh temple with a Navagraha.

After a Pada Puja, we left for Ambalappuzha. On the way, we visited the [Mannarasala Sri Nagaraja Temple](#), a very ancient center of pilgrimage for the devotees of the Serpent God, Nagaraja. The temple is nestled in a forest glade and has over 30,000 images of snakes along the paths and among the trees. Women seeking fertility come to worship here. I do not believe I have been at a temple like this before and it was very interesting. There is no snake deity. Swamiji pointed out some small groves of trees, which have been protected, from time immemorial, to protect the habitat of the snakes. An elderly lady with a glowing face, Valia Amma, who continuously worships Nagaraja, is the heart and soul of Mannarasala. Sri Valia Amma performed a puja for Swamiji and gave us her blessings. We also went into the inner sanctum where the prayers were originally done.

We arrived at Ambalappuzha around noon. Our host is the head priest of a famous [Sri Krishna Temple](#), which we visited before lunch. This temple is directly associated with the [Guruvayoor Sri Krishna Temple](#). During the raids of Tipu Sultan in 1789, the idol of Sri Krishna from the Guruvayoor Temple was brought to the Ambalappuzha Temple for safe-keeping. The payasam served in the Ambalappuzha Temple is famous among Hindu devotees and it is believed that Sri Krishna reaches here daily, at the time the payasam is distributed, to have it. The temple produces 350 liters of kheer a day. We bought three liters for the lunch at the head priest's place. It was delicious.

I rested in the afternoon and attended Swamiji's talk in the evening after which we left for Cochin, arriving at 10 p.m. We are staying with Swamiji at Padmaji's house. Anilji and I are sharing a very comfortable room here.

[Photos](#)

8 COCHIN, JAN 4 2015

After breakfast, we visited Swamiji's ashram in Cochin, on land one of his devotees donated. We then walked to the [Chottanikkara Temple](#), a famous temple of the Hindu Mother Goddess, Bhagawati. "Bhagawati is one of the most popular deities in the area, Chottanikkara Devi is worshipped at the temple, in three different forms: as Saraswati in the morning, draped in white; as Lakshmi at noon, draped in crimson; and as Durga in the evening, decked in blue. Lord Shiva is also worshiped at the temple. People suffering from mental illnesses commonly visit the temple as Bhagawati is thought to cure her devotees."⁶

We took a wrong turn on the way to [Shankaracharya's birthplace](#), and got to visit a very peaceful Ramakrishna Mission Ashram.

Visiting the birthplace of Shankaracharya, the father of Advaita Vedanta was a real treat. A priest who spoke English gave us a quick tour. We saw the Samadhi of Shankaracharya's mother. The temple considers this to be the holiest site in the world. Shankaracharya's home has been converted into a temple, where we did Pada Puja for Shankaracharya. We also saw the river where Vishnu took the form of a crocodile and caught Shankaracharya's leg. Shankaracharya asked his mother to let him take sanyas, which she agreed to, and the crocodile released Shankaracharya.

In the evening, Swamiji gave a talk on [The Bhagavad Gita as Our National Scripture](#).

[Photos](#)

⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chottanikkara_Temple

9 GURUVAYOOR TEMPLE, JAN 5 2015

I left for [Guruvayoor Sri Krishna Temple](#) early in the morning (5:30 a.m). It took an hour and a half to get there. Our host, Mr. Raju, who is a member of the governing board of the temple gave me the "VIP Darshan:" I was allowed to stand in front of the deities for a few minutes (this is unheard of) and the entire darshan was completed in 30 minutes.

This is a Hindu temple (non-Hindus are not allowed) and is dedicated to Lord Krishna (an avatar of Lord Vishnu). It is one of the most important places of worship for Hindus of Kerala.

The driver and I walked around the temple grounds, and when he noticed my interest in two elephants that were there, he asked me if I would like to visit the "captive elephant sanctuary," 15 minutes away. Of course, I said yes and it was a delightful experience. The 50 or so elephants owned by the temple are kept in and cared for in this sanctuary. There are four staff members for each elephant. Most of the elephants were tied to trees, being bathed and groomed. A few were walking around, managed by a staff member. It is the visitor's responsibility to stay away and we had one scary moment where an angry looking elephant started coming towards us at some speed but the staff member managed to get it off the road and behind a wall in time.

After the sanctuary we had some idlis and vadas at a restaurant and returned home after a two-and-a-half-hour drive.

In the evening, I attended a debate moderated by Swamiji on "Development Sans Environment".

10 COCHIN BEACH HOUSE, JAN 6 2015

I went for a walk at 5 a.m. and was very fortunate to see the International Space Station pass across the Cochin sky!

The main program today was a gathering of Swamiji's devotees at a beach house, Indriya Sands on Kudipilli Beach. We went north through a series of narrow islands that run parallel to the coast with the highest population density in the world.

The location of the beach house was marvelous, with the backwaters at the back and the Arabian Sea in front. The pictures are worth thousands of words and I recorded the sounds of the ocean. After a brief speech and meditation session, the focus was on the business meeting.

We left the place at 4:30 p.m., got stuck in traffic and got home after 6 p.m. I rested for a while and then went to dinner at the house of Mr. Arora, returned home at 10:30 p.m. and got Swamiji's blessings for our 41st wedding anniversary! Packed up and went to bed at 11 p.m.

11 COCHIN TO KOZHIKODE (CALICUT), JAN 7 2015

Our first stop was [Moozhikkulam Sala](#). Swamiji was trying to get ideas for similar construction on land in Bangalore. “Thousands of years ago, there existed a Moozhikkulam Sala in this village with a vision of preserving culture and tradition. It was one among the four foremost universities of ancient Kerala. The Vedic knowledge of Sama was mainly imparted here. The modern Moozhikkulam Sala venture aims at encouraging and maintaining eco-cultural friendly way of living while leading a life in the ultra-modern age.”⁷ Moozhikkulam Sala “has a premise of 2.40 acres of area which consists of 22 Nalukkettus (traditional Kerala style building) and 29 single roomed buildings. The remarkable feature of these buildings is their eco-friendliness.”⁸ Some of the cottages are permanently occupied and some are rented out. The one requirement is that owners/renters follow the Vedic values, culture and lifestyle.

We then visited the Vice-Chancellor, K. Jayakumar, of the newly formed “Malayalam University,” which will offer post-graduate degrees in Malayalam culture and heritage. Swamiji spoke with him briefly and offered Sambodh’s help. Swamiji will contribute to the university’s vision statement.

Our next stop was Swamini Jyotirmayi Mataji's Ashram, which is situated on a beautiful, peaceful tract of land on the banks of the Nila River, also called the Bharathappuza. This river is the longest and most voluminous river in Kerala. Much of Kerala's history occurred on the banks of this river. A very enjoyable function was held in honor of Swamiji. Young boys and girls chanted complex slokas beautifully with performances of Temple music (sopama sangeeta, Chenda style). This was primarily drums and percussion, which I recorded. After lunch, Swamiji spoke on the importance of three pujas: worshipping parents, gurus, and idols at homes, ashrams, and temples, respectively. Such worship leads to cultural, moral, material, and spiritual wealth. We went to Mataji's home and visited the house of a typical Kerala Namboodri Brahmin (called an "illam").

Finally, we went to the Navamukunda Temple, on the banks of the Bharathappuzha mentioned above. Legend has it that if you stand in the river devoutly, the souls of your parents will go to heaven. Swamiji and I stood in the river and later watched the sunset. We then proceeded to an "arena" where two kings, one stronger and the other weaker would do battle. The weaker king, who worshipped at the Navamukunda temple, would send thousands of soldiers on suicide missions. The superior king's forces would mow down these fighters and throw their bodies into a well, which we also visited.

⁷ www.moozhikkulamsala.org/

⁸ www.moozhikkulamsala.org/

On our way to Calicut we passed through the village Tirur, the birthplace of Ramanujam, the father of Malayalam. We reached Calicut late and after Bhiksha and dinner at a devotee's place on the outskirts of Calicut, I was dropped at my hotel, which was very comfortable.

[Photos](#)

12 CALICUT, JAN 8, 9 2015

The two days in Calicut have been restful. We had breakfast in Swamiji's ashram, a very pretty and peaceful place. I got two lessons on Tattva Bodh here. After breakfast, there was a Pada Puja following which Swamiji gave a brief talk, which very aptly summarized the three fundamental values we need to attain moksha and create a dharmic society:

Our unique goal in life is to attain moksha. This distinguishes us from animals that eat, seek shelter, sleep, and procreate. Moksha means unfolding ones potential (divinity) while interacting with the environment. Each one of us has infinite power. We are unique, sentient human beings with talents and desires. We have a complex moral, ethical, inner life. We interact with the environment to fulfill our needs (food, shelter, love, Self-realization) and express our talents. We need a system of norms, standards, values that guide all our interactions. The three fundamental values are satyam (truth), ahimsa (nonviolence), and tyaga (sharing, reducing needs). We must internalize these 3 values and practice them and we will attain moksha and also help create a dharmic society, family, community and nation.

In the evening, there was a memorial for a patron of the arts who passed away six months ago, followed by a Kuchipudi memorial dance which I recorded.

On the 9th, we went for a walk on the beach at 5:30 and saw an incredible sand Shiva face. After breakfast, we had an hour-and-a-half long discussion on the Tattva Bodh. I went shopping and bought a book, "Jinnah vs Gandhi" and a pair of sandals from Bata. Swamiji held a "Maha Satsang" (Maha because the discussion is about relations with God, community, ourselves and not on mundane topics.) Swamiji gave a version of the earlier talk on [Bhagavad Gita as Our National Scripture](#). We leave tomorrow for Wynad, away from the ocean and on to the mountains!

[Photos](#)

We left for Wynad early in the morning. I've put a map of the area in the album showing Kozhikode, Wynad and the Western Ghats. The drive was spectacular with beautiful scenery all along the way. After 12 hairpin bends and crossing the Ghats at 6,000 ft. we reached the beautiful home of devotees Manoj and Nisha, where we are staying.

We went over to the [M.S. Swaminathan](#) Research Foundation where all the Wynad events are being held. Mr. Swaminathan is credited with the Green Revolution in India and for ending famine. On the premises are a research center in agriculture and a very colorful and lush botanical garden. After Pada Puja, Swamiji spoke and we had lunch. During a discussion with Sambodhis (in Malayalam), I went out and took a bunch of photographs, too numerous to put in the album. I came home in the afternoon to rest and work on the Tattva Bodh.

In the evening, we went back to the Foundation where Swamiji gave a talk on [Happiness Unlimited](#). Swamiji gave everyone the mantra to recite and practice: "I am working in the world as a happy person but not for happiness."

After the talk, we went to a place where Swami Adhyatmananda's father has donated a beautiful property. Swamiji installed a Ganesha in the temple and made it the presiding deity for the land and the ashram to be constructed.

The next day, we went for our 5 a.m. walk, during which I asked some questions on the Tattva Bodha. (The walks are as much about exercise as they are about discussions with Swamiji.) After breakfast I spent another hour with Swamiji on the subject. I went back to the center where there was a discussion in Malayalam so I sat on a bench in the garden for two hours relaxing, organizing photographs and writing my journal. In the evening Swamiji gave a talk to parents and teachers on [Sanatana Dharma](#).

[Photos](#)

14 WYNAD TO CALICUT, JAN 12 2015

We left home at 5 a.m. to visit two temples and (for me) to do the Pinda Puja, to send the souls of our deceased parents, forefathers, other relatives and friends, and animals, past and future generations, on their way. We went to the Trishleri Shiva Temple, and worshipped a rock, "the head of Shiva." The feet supposedly are at the second temple. It was very cold in the hills at that time in the morning and I was just wearing a dhoti and a cotton anga vashtram! We saw the sunrise at 6:50 a.m. on the way to the main site of the Pinda Puja, the Thirunelli Vishnu Temple. I climbed over some slippery rocks, dipped in a pool of water, just in my dhoti, and then did the puja with approximately 20 people, standing in a small flowing stream. Imagine a large long rock, with a priest sitting on it, a stream flowing by the rock, under the priest, and people standing in the stream. The puja was done by placing straws on the rock and making offerings of rice, tulsi, and chandan paste to the straws and saying Om Narayanaya three times as the priest recited mantras. At the end we placed all the offerings in a banana leaf, washed the rock and let the leaf float away in the small stream. The hardest part of the ritual was going up and down the rocky surfaces. I was helped by Rajendranji, his wife, Jayasreeji and Swami Adhyatmananda. Without this help, I would not have made it and would surely have fallen.

When I came down from the rocks I got a big applause from Swamiji and the other people with us. Walking back, I told Swamiji that he would have to make sure I passed on properly - he laughed and said, "We'll see about that!"

Our next stop was a 30 acre coffee plantation, which was also like a botanical garden, where we sat on the porch and had papayas and freshly made pomegranate juice which was delicious. The whole area is really one big wildlife sanctuary and the owner of the plantation was telling us how tigers and elephants came on his property. Some plantations have put electric fences but this does not stop the elephants that have apparently learned to put logs over the fences and walk across. After lunch and a brief nap, we set off for Calicut, visiting a lake on the way that we walked around. We arrived late at Calicut, I wrote my journal and went to sleep in a hotel.

[Photos](#)

15 PALAKKAD, JAN 13, 14 2015

We drove from Calicut to Palakkad in the morning, without stopping anywhere. The journey was scenic and I saw rubber trees for the first time on this trip. Palakkad and the surrounding area are very pretty, though Palakkad is probably the hottest district in Kerala. At Palakkad I went to another hotel after lunch with air conditioning and running hot water (similar to all the hotels I stayed at). In the evening Swamiji gave a talk on the [Bhagavad Gita as Our National Scripture](#). I went back to the hotel after dinner. On the first day, I was driven around by a dentist, Dr. Raghunath. It turns out that his father was a Master Warrant Officer in the Air Force at the same time as my father was in Tambaram and then Nagpur. He is going to check whether his father, who is currently in Australia, knew mine. Small world. I have met many fine, genuine people on this trip who have welcomed me with open arms. This has been a great experience on hospitality.

On Jan. 14, I went to the Ashram at 5:30 a.m. for a Ganesh Havan. Vineesh, who has been taking care of me since I came to Kerala, is a disciple of Swami Adhyatmananda. He was initiated as Brahmachary in the Advaita tradition and will serve as acharya in Sambodh, Kerala!! Swamiji gave another short talk on the significance of [Pada Puja](#).

I bought another small suitcase to carry the things I acquired in Kerala: books, CDs, coffee and pure honey (from the plantation we visited). I rested in the afternoon and then attended a talk by Swamiji to professionals on [The Nature of Excellence](#).

16 THRISSUR AND CONCLUSION, JAN 15, 16 2015

We left Palakkad in the morning for the final leg of the journey: Thrissur. We went to Mattathur Panchayat, where Swamiji grew up and where his mother and siblings still live. Our first stop was to visit Swamiji's mother, a very sweet lady. Swamiji, the eldest, has three brothers and four sisters and the mother stays with the second youngest son. Next we went to Swamiji's birth place and ancestral property where Swamiji's father's ashes are buried. The original home has been demolished and a new structure built. The property was inherited by Swamiji's younger brother and we visited his home and the home of the youngest brother and then left for Thrissur. On the way Swamiji told me a little more about his experiences. This was a wonderful part of the whole journey. We reached Thrissur in time for a Pada Puja and lunch, after which I went to my hotel and rested a bit.

In the evening, I attended a talk by Swamiji on [Spirituality and Ethics](#).

After the lecture, I spent an hour with Swamiji and completed the Tattva Bodha. I now understand the teaching intellectually and have to practice it. I said my goodbyes to everyone and returned to my hotel after dinner.

I woke up at 3:30 a.m. the next day and went to Kochi airport, accompanied by Damodarji and caught the 7 a.m. flight to Delhi.

What an incredible trip!

[Photos](#)

Swamiji's Talks: Dec 24 – Jan 15 2015

1 BHAGAVAD GITA AS OUR NATIONAL SCRIPTURE

To become relevant on the world stage, India and Indians must return to their Vedantic Heritage and build a world view, a vision for India, built on the Vedic values of Dharma. Today, the world is dominated ideologically, politically, scientifically, technologically, economically, by the West.

A key principle taught in the Vedas and Upanishads is "ahimsa paramo dharma." Ahimsa is nonviolence of thought, word, and deed, respect for the individual, and freedom of expression. These values derive from a profound belief that divinity resides in all human beings. Our life is an expression of this divinity and an opportunity to continuously grow. Let's take this as one "bookend" and contrast it to another, the Western one, where the world view is based primarily on the pursuit of wealth, improving human comfort and productivity through a relentless pursuit of scientific and technological innovation. In this world view objects of happiness, including divinity, are external and little emphasis is placed on self-awareness or respect for the individual.

We may take these world views as Eastern and Western, respectively. Fundamentally the former is inclusive, cooperative, and nonviolent (tolerant) and the latter is based on a deep assumption that the Western world view is the only correct one. This attitude leads to conversion (to the single viewpoint), intolerance, and the use of violence if needed.

The Eastern approach has a focus on "soft" issues and Western on "hard" ones. True success will be realized only when the hard issues are addressed on a strong foundation of Eastern values.

With dharma as a foundation, India will have the opportunity, as a nation, to proactively lead with the principles of dharma and demonstrate, by example, how this leads to better social, political, and economic outcomes on national and global issues.

Though India may not lead in science and technology or production and manufacturing, our world view is unique. Rather than letting the West interpret our Vedas and values, India must proactively bring forward this great heritage and demonstrate its value-add.

The best single text that captures our unique wisdom tradition is the Bhagavad Gita, which, in practical terms, describes how to become deeply Self-aware by leading a dharmic life in all senses of the word dharma. It speaks of multiple levels of Knowledge: dharma vidya, adhyatma vidya, and bhuta vidya. It has been described both as a warrior's text and a

philosopher's text – certainly, it is a text of reconciliation. It accurately describes the Vedantic vision and world view held by Indians in the pre-Moghul, pre-British era. The importance of the Bhagavad Gita has been recognized by great leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Swami Vivekananda, Madan Mohan Malvia, Sri Aurobindo, Jawahar Lal Nehru, and Vinoba Bhave.

The Gita teaches us about dharma, ethics, self-awareness, diet, yoga, and a host of cultural issues based on the underlying principle that divinity resides everywhere. It is totally secular and non-political in its message and, in this sense, can become our national scripture. In the end, it may become the scripture of the world.

Similarly, "ghar vapasi" must mean going back to our traditions and rebuilding, reintegrating and reengineering India, based on the Vedic world view.

If we accept the above as a working hypothesis, we must (1) immediately start a scholarly and Intellectual debate on how the teachings of the Bhagvad Gita should be interpreted and applied today and in the future and (2) work out how this teaching can be taken to 1.2 billion Indians. Even with one teacher per 1,000 people, this is 12 lakh teachers. For this to work, the Bhagvad Gita should not be used as a political weapon to defeat an opponent and the teachers must have the highest level of integrity and lifelong commitment.

2 HAPPINESS UNLIMITED

We are hardwired to seek happiness (sukha prapti) and avoid unhappiness (dukkha nivritti). We are surrounded by consumable items, we pursue and acquire them with zeal – yet we are unhappy. This is a unique human problem. The creation of happy, flourishing human beings and society is the ultimate goal of humankind. This is being increasingly realized by psychologists, accountants and scientists.

There are two types of happiness. In one view (held by capitalists and communists), happiness is a result of consumption (bhog sukha). In Vedanta, the belief is that happiness comes from contemplation of external objects and the Self (yoga sukha). The two are diametrically opposed. Moreover, a conducive external environment is necessary but not sufficient to achieve yoga sukha – we need a conducive inner environment, a peaceful mind, as well.

Swamiji emphasized that, “If you expect happiness, if you search for happiness in people, places, things, ideologies, you will fail and be miserable.” He first referenced the Mundaka Upanishad:

Parikshya lokan karmachitan brahmanah |

Nirveda ayat Nastyakrita kritena | |

“After long wanderings in the world of objects, the seeker realizes that the infinite Truth cannot be gained by finite actions.” The “wanderer” concludes that there is no happiness in the world and by acting on and changing the external world one will not be happy. The Rishis said this and every age rediscovers this truth.

Logically, there are three possibilities: (1) there is no happiness at all, (2) happiness is in the subjective world - atma nishtham sukkham or, (3) happiness is in the objective world - vishaya nishtham sukkham. Our spirit cannot accept the first and our experience, our scriptures, and the Guru tells us that happiness is not in the objective world. Therefore, our goal should be to “attain atma nishtham sukkham” - imperishable, eternal happiness, not fleeting happiness. This declaration and the method to achieve the goal is a great contribution of Indian thought.

Lasting happiness cannot be achieved by activity or meditation alone. Activity can create objects of consumption but there is no lasting happiness here. Meditation by itself does not give you happiness because your mind is not meditation worthy and is still involved with the real world due to strong habits. Therefore, our Indian spiritual tradition combines meditation with activity:

Viveka (discrimination) leads to vairagya (detachment) and practicing them in the real world makes you a reflective person. Karma yoga is work with detachment, with the expectation of outcomes but without the expectation of happiness. Here, success or failure doesn't matter, and Swamiji says you will work without performance anxiety and will develop a balanced, non-reactive mind with which you can meditate. When you meditate with a calm mind you will gain access to the infinite energy within you. The most common form of meditation is watchfulness and this ties back to developing a reflective mind.

This is a complex journey and ultimately needs a Guru, who listens to your story until you become silent and then tells you "you are the source of happiness." Slowly, you develop the awareness.

In closing, Swamiji reminds us that unlimited happiness is within you, but you are ignorant of this. So recite the following mantra:

"I am working in the world as a happy person but not for happiness."

3 SANATANA DHARMA (TO PARENTS AND TEACHERS)

Swamiji says there are two important aspects in all systems of thought:

- (1) Revealed wisdom (shruti) that specifies permanent, unchanging values.
- (2) Current wisdom (smriti) where the revealed wisdom is interpreted based on the needs of the times and thus incorporates changing values.

There are fundamental differences in revelations among religions. Vedanta says: Truth is one but revelations can be different. This vision, that there can be many paths to the truth, is called Sanatana Dharma and it yields seven insights:

Brahman is central. Swamiji contrasts “Brahmic and Abrahmic religions” and says that “the former affirms the divinity in man and the latter calls man a sinner, that man's essence is not divine. Brahman is the universal consciousness in which all entities appear and disappear and all experiences occur. Vedanta proclaims "Aham Brahmasmi", Brahman is the same in all of us, and Brahman expresses through each and every one of us. In contrast, Muslims believe Mohammed was the last prophet and Christians believe Christ was the only Son of God. Muslims and Christians believe in one God who is separate from the world and people. Hence their God is an exclusive transcendence. Whereas Vedanta believes that the world and people are expressions of the same Brahman and therefore Hindu God/ Brahman is an all-inclusive Transcendence.”

Maya: the world undergoes change constantly. This changing world is an opportunity for us to express, share, and grow, operating from a deep understanding of the oneness.

Swadharma: your unique values that guide your interactions with the world. We are all unique individuals with a unique combination of talents and needs. Each of us has our place in the universe as a mind-body complex. We need to fulfill our needs and express our talents (vyashti dharma). Brahman is trying to express through each individual and an individual's talents should therefore not be suppressed. Swadharma is your unique mission in the world though self-expression must be modulated and controlled by commonly accepted standards (samanya dharma).

Theory of Karma: Every individual is responsible for choices and their consequences.

Yagna: A cooperative effort with the view that I do something for you, you do something for me.

Yoga: Reflection, contemplation, observation that leads to happiness.

Lila: Our life in this world can be playful provided you are a yogi.

The message for Hindu Education is:

1. Teach students about basic Vedanta and the seven insights it provides.
2. Discover each student's unique talents and then nurture and train to express the talents.
3. Teach students how to integrate into society.

4 NATURE OF EXCELLENCE (TO PROFESSIONALS)

How do you pursue excellence as a professional? Swamiji describes excellence as beauty, something that is structured, orderly, and sustainable and, these days, green. He talked about three skills needed to achieve excellence:

(1) Domain knowledge, which is obtained by long training and accredited study. The professional is a knowledge worker who operates autonomously in the field, works without supervision, learns continuously, and innovates. These skills are the "hard skills" and lead to EFFICIENCY.

(2) In this complex world of experts, the professional increasingly needs skills to deal with people, work in and lead teams, be able to come up with consensual solutions, have strong ethics, values, and be able to "connect." These are "soft skills" which lead to EFFECTIVENESS.

Swamiji goes on to add a third critical skill set, not addressed explicitly today:

(3) In today's complex, fast changing and connected world with empowered people, motivation must come from within the person, who is a combination of body, mind, and spirit. We need "spiritual skills" to inspire and motivate ourselves, to pursue our chosen profession passionately. The way to develop these skills is to move to contemplative action or reflective action. Reflective action is a meditation, which will allow the individual to tap into the infinite potential inside. Swamiji says, "Have faith and practice reflective action and eventually you will happily work and gain inspiration to become truly INNOVATIVE."

Indian wisdom tradition has a unique, differentiating approach and Swamiji gave this slogan to the group:

"Don't work expecting happiness, but happily work."

The combination of hard, soft and spiritual skills leads to a highly competent individual/leader who is efficient, effective, and innovative.

5 SPIRITUALITY AND ETHICS

The mindless pursuit of material success has resulted in a criminal neglect of spirituality and ethics. The world is built on an ideology of "consumption" - the more I consume the happier I will be as an individual and stronger as a nation. Continuing on the current course and speed, we will soon require the resources of seven planets to satisfy our greed. Furthermore, far from being happier, we are becoming more unhealthy and sick, the environment is being destroyed, and conflicts between the haves and the have-nots are increasing. This is a dangerous situation.

The mindless pursuit of material comforts is based on an ideology where humans are viewed purely as a product of matter – a very reductionist view. Based on this view, we have created a materialistic culture and civilization. A second ideology based on evolutionary theories reduces man to an evolved monkey. And finally, the psychological perspective is that man is nothing more than a bundle of conflicting thoughts and complexes. The conclusion is that human beings are being reduced to objects.

In contrast to this materialistic view, another world view is that an individual is a complex entity consisting of a spirit, mind, and body, none of which can be further reduced.

In this view there are three ways of knowing and knowledge: bhuta vidya (knowledge of the material world), dharma vidya (knowledge of the mental world), and adhyatma vidya (knowledge of the spiritual world).

Bhuta vidya is very important to become more productive and efficient and we have established a healthy relationship with the world because of many advances in science and technology. Bhuta vidya is necessary but is not sufficient.

In addition, we must realize that two individuals who are interacting create another space/reality, a mental space. It needs a different set of rules that are not reducible to material rules. Feelings and emotions are important here and we must be able to manage many different relationships to be effective. Morality, ethics, and dharma come in play here and this space is becoming increasingly important as the world today has become more complex, more interconnected, and more diverse.

Three foundations of Ethics are: (1) Satya - transparency and honesty in all relationships and (2) Ahimsa - (ahimsa parmo dharma) nonviolence in thought word and deed and respect for everyone's views and beliefs, and (3) Tyaga - sharing, reducing needs. People

must be trained in ethics and moral discipline just as they are in the material and intellectual disciplines.

Why should one go through this potentially difficult discipline and training?

This is where spirituality comes in. It gives you access to a third dimension, a source of infinite energy, where you can happily interact with the world with all its complexities. Moral discipline and emotional discipline opens the door to this third dimension. There is no "proof" of this statement, but Swamiji advises us to learn from the masters, explore this concept and experience it. The intelligence quotient, emotional quotient and spiritual quotient ultimately coalesce and result in a whole healthy human being. Such a person is called a yogi or stitha prajna and he has the complete knowledge needed to be totally free.

6 PADA PUJA

This summary is a combination of thoughts expressed by Swamiji on two occasions

Dec. 25, 2014:

The Guru is an exceptional role model and must follow the highest standards. He must be totally transparent in all activities: finance, relationships and lifestyle. Pada Puja, worship of a living person, is the highest, most fulfilling ritual, which is unique to Hinduism. There is deep philosophy behind worshipping an individual, which sets Hinduism apart from other religions. Jesus was the last Son of God and Mohammad was the last person to whom God spoke. In Hinduism, God speaks to anyone who quiets the mind – everyone is a prophet. In the Guru, we see the full expression of divinity and make the bold statement that “I and my Guru are one.” This leads inevitably to the view that God, my Guru, and I are one and the same.

Jan. 13, 2015:

When you worship your parents, you develop shraddha (faith). Worshipping deities in temples develops bhakti (devotion). Worshipping Gurus develops Atma Jnana (knowledge of the Self). Shraddha and bhakti are important to develop vairagya (detachment). Atma jnana from a Guru leads to moksha and access to boundless energy. Moksha is the ability to be happy all by yourself and happily work in society.