

SADGURU GNANANANDA - Life



Meeting with his Guru

Sadguru Sri Gnanananda Giri Maharaj, a Himalayan Sage, *Mahayogi* and great *Gnana Siddha* lived to a phenomenally long and undetermined age. Not much is known about his early life. Many were curious to know the secret of his conquest of the aging process of the body. He would discourage their queries about his age, saying with a gentle smile "Ask me about the immortal Atman within and not about the perishable body". But, from his chance remarks, those close to him have made out an account of his life. He was born of orthodox Brahmin parents in *Mangalapuri* near *Gokarna*, a sacred pilgrimage center in *Karnataka*, most probably in the early years of the nineteenth century. While a boy of tender years, he experienced *Saktinipata* or Descent of Grace and was led by a light to the famous *Kshetra* in Maharashtra, *Pandharpur* on the banks of *Chandrabhaga* River. There he met his Guru Sri Swami Sivaratna Giri, belonging to *Jyotir Mutt*, the northern regional mutt established by Adi Sankara Bhagavatpadacharya. Whenever he referred to his Master, emotion surged in him obstructing the flow of words. Obviously, years spent by him in the tutelage of his preceptor were replete with scintillating episodes of joy and experience.

Himalayan Sage – Paramahansa Parivrajakacharya, wandering monk, par excellence

After the Mahasamadhi of his Guru, Sri Gnanananda renounced his title to the pontificate and retired to the remote heights of the Himalayas for intense penance. How long he remained there and how long he traversed the entire length and breadth of India, Nepal, Burma and Sri Lanka could only be a matter of conjecture. But he revealed familiarity with most of the places in these parts of the sub-continent at a time when modern means of transport did not exist. He was fully conversant with the writings of Tamil saints acquired most probably from his long stay in Tamil-speaking areas of Sri Lanka. His knowledge of Sanskrit was good. He could converse freely in Hindi, Malayalam and Telugu with the same facility as in Tamil and Kannada. It was clear from his casual references that he had come into touch with spiritual luminaries of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Ramalinga Swamigal, Saibaba of Shirdi, Sendamangalam Avadhoota Swamigal and his Guru known as "Judge Swamigal", Vithoba of Polur, Seshadri Swamigal, Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi, Aurobindo and several others were amongst them. During his stay in the *Narasimha Guha* of *Sampatgiri* hills near Polur, he used to visit Sri Ramana when he was in *Virupaksha* cave. Many devotees believe that "Kulla Swami" mentioned by the patriot poet Mahakavi Subramanya Bharati refers to Sri Gnanananda who was in Pondicherry at that time.

Attayampatti and Siddhalingamadam

Sri Gnanananda was a *Paramahansa Parivrajakacharya*, an itinerant Sannyasin teacher par excellence, who loved anonymity and obscurity and moved about freely avoiding permanent stay at any particular place. However, early in the twentieth century when he came to Attayampatti in Salem district he yielded to the entreaties of the poor people and allowed them to construct an Ashram for him. In the late thirties, he moved to Siddhalingamadam situated at about six miles from Tirukoilur, in South Arcot district, on the southern bank of the South Pennar River, renowned as Dakshina Pinakini - southern Ganges. From time immemorial, the place was associated with Siddhas. In 1951, he shifted to a mango grove on the northern bank of the river. An ashram called Sri Gnanananda Tapovanam grew around his presence. It is believed to be the sacred spot where sage Mrigandu, the father of the immortal Markandeya performed penance. It is situated at about 3 km from Tirukoilur on the highway to Tiruvannamalai.

Spiritual eminence of Tirukoilur

According to ancient religious tradition, this part of Tamil Nadu known as *Krishnaranya* in the hoary past, was sanctified by the presence of great saints through the centuries. Here, Lord Krishna, pleased with the penance of the sage Mrigandu gave *darshan* to him as Vamana, the Trivikrama Avatar of Vishnu. The first three Alwars (Sri Vaishnavaites) met and ecstatically sang the glory of the Lord in this ancient temple. Tirukoilur is an important center for Saivaites also. Kilaiyur shrine is one of the *Ashta Veerattana* or the eight special temples of Siva. Saivaite saints have offered hymns in praise of the Lord who had slain the demon Andhakasura. Avvayar, the Siddha poetess pleased Sri Ganesa in the same temple by offering her immortal composition "Vinayakar Agaval" replete with deep insights of yoga. Saint Gnanasambandar was steeped in ecstasy on the sight of Arunachala from the shrine of Atulyanatheswara situated on a big rock on the northern bank of the river. Nearby is the *Mula Brindavana* of Swami Raghottama Tirtha, a saint highly venerated in Madhwa tradition. He took his Eternal Abode in Samadhi more than 400 years ago.

Situated within easy reach from Tiruvannamalai, Tirukoilur partakes of the spiritual grandeur of Arunachala, as Lord Siva has decreed that its potency will help all aspirants living within the radius of 3 yojanas from the holy hill attain *Sayujya*, no separate *diksha* being necessary for cutting off the knots of bondage.

Considering the spiritual importance of this hallowed spot dating back to many centuries, it seems no accident that Sri Gnanananda has chosen it for locating his Ashram towards the close of his long spiritual ministry and for resting in it in Samadhi for eternity, keeping unbroken the tradition of the eminence of the *Kshetra*.

Adhyatma Vidyalaya

In the initial stages of its development, Sannyasins were the main inmates of Tapovanam. Later, when Sri Gnanananda settled down there permanently, shifting from Siddhalingamadam, devotees came to him from all parts of India and abroad. He called the Ashram an *Adhyatma Vidyalaya*, a school for Self-knowledge and initiated

a few disciples into *Sannyas* in the traditional manner. He encouraged the study of Vedanta and personally guided their Sadhana or spiritual practice.

His Teachings

Sadguru Gnanananda's teaching was pure Vedanta, the timeless message of the Upanishads. It is fundamentally the way of total renunciation, so that finally there is no ego left to manifest itself. He is the Vedantic Ideal living in the Spaceless Here and Eternal Now. By unintermittent *Tapas* of constant awareness of Self, he has with his Presence, sanctified the entire world. He is a true Sadguru in the line of Adi Sankara, abiding in the peaks of spiritual experience. The traditional message issues forth from him in such pristine purity that its import is always clear and the direction safe and authentic.

He was easily accessible to all. An inexhaustible fountain of Divine compassion, God's mercy flows through him equally to all, to the saint and to the sinner alike. His gentle response to those who came to him for succour used to be "Let us pray". Though he did not overtly perform miracles and in fact emphasized that they were mundane and belonged to the realm of illusory phenomena, extraordinary things happened in the presence of the great *Jeevanmukta*. He is verily a *Kalpaka Vriksha*, a wish-fulfilling celestial tree who gives the devotees what they want so that they may gradually turn Godward with a desireless love and total self-offering and develop keen aspiration for attaining Self Knowledge, which is what he really wants to bless them with. Truly, Sri Gnanananda is like an immense iceberg much of that is hidden from our vision. Established in Sahaja Samadhi, he was the greatest Bhakta among Bhaktas, a peerless Yogi among Yogis and a Gnani of unequalled stature among Knowers of Atman. Above all, he is Guru par excellence among the preceptors, who teaches the import of the *Mahavakyas* by his presence as *Jeevanmukta*. As the inner Guru, he lights up the Lamp of Wisdom in the hearts of his disciples. Speaking to them in his eloquent language of silence he transmutes their ego consciousness into constant Self-awareness. Sri Gnanananda has been introduced to the west by a French Benedictine monk, Swami Abhishiktananda (Henri Le Saux O.S.B). He has written a book 'Guru and Disciple' in which he describes his encounters with the Sage in whom he discovered his Guru.

Mahasamadhi

The great teacher who was embodiment of Absolute Truth attained Mahasamadhi in January 1974. As per his instructions he was laid to rest in the traditional manner, in a hexagon-shaped Samadhi chamber constructed by him a few years earlier. The *Jeevanmukta* has cast off the limitations of the physical body and now his presence in *Videha Kaivalya* has become all pervading. An abiding peace encompasses and permeates the Ashram premises and the very air is redolent with his powerful Presence. Indeed it is not confined to Tapovanam. As before, even now wherever devotees may be, they find his unfailing Grace and immediate support in a more potent inner Presence. They now realize the significance of his oft-repeated assurance "Swami will always be with you". For him, a *Jeevanmukta*, there is no coming or going away.

Although the eternally youthful, lustrous, sweet and smiling face of the sage, lotus-like in tinge and form, may not be visible to their gross vision, his uninterrupted Presence and constant shower of Grace have been the definite experience of all devotees who surrender to him.

Shrine of Grace

It was indicated by the sage that his Samadhi with his eternal living Presence, which is the very heart of Sri Gnanananda Tapovanam would become a place of pilgrimage and grow to be a great center of spiritual *sadhana* for keen aspirants. As per his instructions, the *Sanctum Sanctorum* of the shrine has been constructed in a hexagonal shape. Twin forms of Ganesa, Siva, Vishnu, Surya, Devi, and Subramanya are sculpted in the six pillars, as he is coming in the lineage of Adi Sankara who is *Shanmatha Sthapanacharya*. *Mahakumbhabhisheka* and final consecration of Sri Gnanananda Mahalinga were performed on 9th June 1978 with due Vedic rites, sanctifying to eternity, one of the holiest places on earth.

Subsequently, a *Prakara* (vestibule) around the *Sanctum Sanctorum* and a sixteen pillared *Mahamandapa* in front of it have been constructed with lovely paintings on the ceiling and ornamented pillars with appropriate sculpted figures of Lord Siva. *Rajagopura* of noble and imposing appearance with five terraces has been erected over the main entrance on the southern side leading to the Shrine of Grace of Sadguru. *Mahakumbhabhisheka* of the *Rajagopura* was performed on 22nd June 1989. *Kumbhabhisheka* was again performed in May 1999, after renovation of the Ashram temple and the Samadhi Shrine of Grace. Sri Gnanananda Tapovanam is now one of the well known centers of spiritual importance in South India.