

# The Tale of the Yellow Path

## An Arunachala Adventure



A tale based on two ideas:

Paths Go Somewhere  
(to find out, go look)

And

One Thing Leads to Another

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## **Introduction**

The main characters in this tale are myself, Richard Clarke, my wife, Carol Johnson, and Arunachala, the holy mountain in South India.

It started in 2005, when our spiritual teacher, Nome, took a group of us to India to visit the Ashram of Ramana Maharshi, whose teachings we all followed. At the time of this visit I was facing retirement in the coming years, and was looking for a place where we could afford to retire on our limited income from Social Security. I felt this small South Indian city, Tiruvannamalai, next to the holy mountain that Ramana Maharshi loved, Arunachala, was such a place.

What led to this feeling was a series of events. First, while the group we were travelling with all were going to stay in rooms provided by Ramana Ashram, I had decided differently. I had read about complaints about the accommodations saying the mattresses were terrible and one person complained about monkeys getting into his room and tearing it up. I also read that there were these things called “Guest Houses” that had rooms to rent, and that usually, even in busy times, you can find a room. So this was my plan. The evening we arrived In Tiruvannamalai, went to Ramana Ashram and were taken to a new complex of guest rooms, all clean and well-fitted with good mattresses. All our friends stayed there, but Carol and I were then getting into a yellow auto-rickshaw headed for places unknown. At this moment we both questioned my choice. This choice, though, led us to where two years later we were moving half-way around the world to this small, dirty city.

## *The Tale of the Yellow Path*

Because of this we had a much more experience of India than did the others on this trip. We were more on our own and able to freely explore this place. And these experiences led us to find people who become important resources when we actually moved here. When we rode off in the rickshaw it took three different guest houses, but we finally found one that had a room. The man who was running this guest house was Sathya. On our own, we explored Tiruvannamalai. A rickshaw driver we used was Rajan, who later gave us much help getting started with our life in India. In the guest house, I would rise before dawn and go up on the rooftop to meditate, sitting with Arunachala and watching the sun rise over the city.



**Arunachala from guest house**

After I meditated I would watch the day begin, and I watched as a woman, each morning, decorated her doorstep with a white powder design, called a kolam. While she worked a neighbor woman would come out of her home and just watch. I felt like these Indians, who had lived in towns and cities for several thousands of years, knew how to live together in peace. As we walked around, again and again we saw children playing. These children were, by American standards, desperately poor, yet their faces were so happy and full of life and energy much more so than what I knew back home. I felt that someplace that grows children like this, bright-eyed and happy, has to be doing something that was right. After just three days of morning meditations and watching the day begin from this roof, I had the sudden sense that this would be a good place for

## *The Tale of the Yellow Path*

us to live. I came down stairs and told Carol, “We could live here!” She said, “You’re crazy!” Probably I was, but this is what I felt, deep inside.

After we returned to our home in San Jose, CA, I started planning to move there in the coming years. We were caring for Carol’s mother in our home, and basically waited for her to pass before we could move. Two years later this happened. It took us several months to get ready, but in November of 2007 we got on a plane in San Francisco, and about 24 hours later, got off in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India, to start a new life. The Tale of the Yellow Path is about what became our primary focus when we got there, the holy mountain Arunachala, and our explorations and interactions with it.

### **Arrival in India**

We arrived in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, at about 3 AM. Many international flights arrive around that time, so the airport was crowded and chaotic. It was South India, and so it was also pretty hot, still, at 3 AM. After we got our bags and cleared customs, we went out into the arrival madhouse. So many people. The airport exit area had a rail separating the arrivees from those who were waiting. The exit was at one end, and there were many people holding up signs so they could connect with arrivees. And in the middle of the crowd, we saw Sathya waiting for us. What a relief after leaving our home of 15 years and on our way to a new home in a far away and very different place, to see a face we recognized. We had met Sathya on our trip to India in 2005 as he managed the guest house we stayed in, where I got the idea of retiring to India. After I got the idea, I started trying to connect with locals who might be able to help when we moved. Sathya was the main contact I made. When he found out we were coming there to live, he said he would meet us at the airport, and

## *The Tale of the Yellow Path*

let us stay at his house in Tiruvannamalai. His help made the move so much easier than it would have been, since we had a person we knew who would meet us at the airport and who would let us stay at his home to begin with.

The other thing that made the move easy is that we already had a house near Tiruvannamalai rented for our first year. This seemed to us like the universe was helping us make the move. Just a few weeks before we were going to leave for India we got an offer from an unexpected place. A woman who also went to Satsang with Nome, had in the prior year had a whirlwind long-distance relationship with a Tamil man she met in India, while we were on the group trip to Tiruvannamalai, and had married him. And bought a property with a house that she had planned to have for their married life. She went there to live with her new husband in their new house, but hated the life. She was expected by her husband to be like an Indian wife, very subservient. He would not even give her a key so that she could leave the house when he was out. He didn't want HIS wife going out unaccompanied (and unsupervised), so she was alone in this small house outside of town, near a village. Naturally she hated this and soon returned to America. And now she had a vacant furnished house, and offered it to us. We

signed a rental agreement, sight unseen. All of these details made the transition

much easier than it could have been.



**Richard and Carol at new house**

## *The Tale of the Yellow Path*

There was a third factor that made our life in India much better than it could have been. When we moved into the house, we were pretty much stranded. There was no phone. We had no vehicle, and driving in India was enormously different than in the US. We could walk into town, to Ramana Ashram, which would become one of the centers of our life in India, but it was 1 ½ miles, each way. The way the “Westerners” (as the visitors were called locally) got around was by auto-rickshaw. We had done this some in our first trip in 2005, and I remembered a driver, Rajan, we had used before and who spoke good English. I met with Rajan at Usha’s restaurant to talk. I offered him a different kind of deal, for a fixed monthly cost, he would drive us around and help us get things done locally. He was not at all sure, but thought for a bit while we talked about what working together might look like, and finally we agreed. The cost was to be RS3000 per month, about \$65. This was the best thing we could have done. Rajan’s help was essential to us while we were getting started. We kept him on this monthly retainer for the 7+ years we lived in India.

### **Starting our life in India**

Here we were, newly retired after 45 years working in Silicon Valley, living near a small village in Tamil Nadu. We needed to discover what our life was now. We had removed all of our habitual props on which we had learned all these years, place, family, work, relationships, and the myriads of habits that made up our “everyday life.” So now what?

One thread I had from the past was contributing to a spiritual Yahoo group, run by Harsha. I had been posting our experiences in India in the newsgroup, and Harsha invited me to start posting on his blog. So we would do things like walk up to Skanda Ashram, and take photos and write a posting on his blog.

## *The Tale of the Yellow Path*

This went fine, and I posted a few articles and photos of our exploration. Then Rajan invited us to a family celebration in the village his family was from, about 60 km from Tiruvannamalai. This was a farming village, with maybe 50-60 houses. I think there were only a few families in the village, and various uncles and aunties lived in houses nearby. We were invited for a special celebration that the family held each year for the family shrine. When we went to things like this, since we did not know much about the culture, we had no idea what was going to happen.



**The sacrificial goat**

The celebration started with the leading of a goat to the small temple, the family's shrine. The goat was decorated with flowers, and treated with great respect. Then they sacrificed the goat, cutting its head off, as an offering to the family deity. Afterward there was a celebration where they skinned the goat, and used it to make a giant pot of goat biryani, enough to feed the 30 or so people who were there. I wrote this up and posted the story with photos. This was on Harsha's spiritual blog. This got such a negative reaction from some of the readers; spirituality and vegetarianism often occur together. The reaction was so negative that I felt I couldn't post freely in this blog what we were finding. So I decided to start my own blog. I called it "Living in the Embrace of Arunachala," and used a free service from Wordpress. This blog became a focus of our life for several years.

Besides the blog, or actually, as content for the blog, the other element that became a big thing for us was exploring Arunachala.



## *The Tale of the Yellow Path*

This started with Arunachala's "Inner Path." A major tradition in Tiruvannamalai was circumambulating, walking around the holy mountain Arunachala, perhaps the most important holy place in all of South India. The main route was on a road that went around the mountain. The Inner Path was an alternate route, and instead of cars and buses there was just the peaceful forest, and Arunachala. We had been introduced to the Inner Path by Nome in 2005. And now it was close to our house.

It was only a half mile from our house to a path which connected to the Inner Path. We started early morning walks, from our house, to the Inner Path, then around the mountain to Pachaianman Koil, then back to the road and to Hotel Rama Krishna, where we would have a South Indian breakfast of idlis, dosas, vadas and Indian coffee. We would call Rajan and he would come and pick us up and take us home. We did this 2 or 3 times a week for the next several years.

### **Beginning to Explore the Inner Path**

We would usually start for our walk around Arunachala, or Pradakshina, at about 6 in the morning. We would walk towards Arunachala, and pick up the trail at Kattu Siva Tank, or sometimes we would start at Ramana Ashram, and walk the Inner Path from there. We got to know the Inner Path pretty well, walking it two or three times a week. Almost always we would end our walk at the Rama Krishna Hotel for a South Indian breakfast and Indian coffee. This would be about 5 miles. Then Rajan would come and pick us up and drive us home.

After a while I started noticing smaller paths that headed from the Inner Path towards the mountain. I would say to Carol, "That path goes somewhere. To find out where, we need to go look." And so we did.

## *The Tale of the Yellow Path*

### ***Papaji's Cave***

One path looked particularly promising on the west side of Arunachala. So in February of 2008 we started exploring it. We would go up the path for a bit, then turn around, and continue on our morning

pradakshina. By then we had garden clippers and

were cutting back the ever-present thorn bushes that would grow and block the path. The next time we would go further up the path. One day in March, 2008, we planned to go a lot further, and went up past anywhere we had been before, up onto a smaller hill that rose out of the mountain here. After we climbed up a rise, we met some people going the other way. They asked, "Have you been to Papaji's cave? It is just over the next small hill" We went



**Carol climbing path to Papaji's Cave**



**Carol at Papaji's Altar**

up and did find a small altar, under the cover of an overhanging rock, hardly a cave. This was really the first thing we had found that was not on the main path, exploring on our own. Obviously others know of this place, but it was not in any book or write-up I had read.

### *The Tale of the Yellow Path*

The story of Papaji and this cave is as follows: After Papaji's Self-realization, brought on by dialog with Ramana, he went into seclusion for a while at this place. He stayed until he felt ready to be with people again. So this is seen as a special location by Papaji devotees, like the ones we met coming down the hill, a place for pilgrimage. After Papaji died, some of his ashes were scattered here.

In addition to this altar, when we explored more around this area, we saw a trail at the bottom of the big rock we were on. It was about 15 feet down, and pretty steep, with a dirt trail at the bottom, leading through some bushes. We went down and found, around a turn in the trail, a small cave, on the side of the hill. Maybe this is where Papaji slept during the time he stayed here?

We came here several more times, and sometimes brought other people.



**Inside Aum Amma's Cave**

We discovered another place, too. Down the side of the hill, there was a secluded cement structure, built around a corner in the rocks. It had two rooms with nice cement stairs to the main room, which had a big window in the cement wall where you could see out into the trees. We found out that this structure was made for a holy woman, Aum Amma, who lived here in 2001-2003. She must have

### *The Tale of the Yellow Path*

had a group of dedicated devotees to carry all the building materials and cement all the way up the hill to this place, then build her this 2-room cave. This was an enormous task and shows the reverence in which she was held. People used to visit her for darshan in this cave. While here, they called her "Cave Amma" or "Aum Amma" because she had a mark on her forehead that looked like an Aum symbol.

### ***Starting to explore under "The Elephant"***



**Carol walking towards The Elephant**

The next area of the Inner Path that started to interest me was a section on the north side of Arunachala, that was under a formation called "The Elephant," where a large rock formation near the top of the hill looks like a giant elephant head and trunk. Here there is a big area between the Inner Path and Arunachala. It was pretty flat and criss-crossed with small paths; a perfect place

## *The Tale of the Yellow Path*

for someone like me who liked exploring. This started in September, 2008.

In this area, one prominent feature was a small pond on the inner path, just at the boundary between protected mountain land and a farmer's fields. We had stopped to rest here when we walked the Inner Path with Nome in 2005. The many frogs in the pond led me to call it "the Frog Pond." This was a favorite place for us to stop and rest on our walks around the mountain. We would stop and sit in a shady spot, and maybe read a few verses from a book often read at Ramanasramam during Ramana's days, "Song of Ribhu." the Tamil version of the Ribhu Gita.

I made it a point to gradually walk every little path I could find here, just curious to see what I could find.

### ***Paths across Arunachala***

Before we thoroughly explored around the Frog Pond, we did a lot of exploring on the west side of the hill, around Kattu Siva tank. The mountainside here was really three hills. To the right was Arunachala, to the left was a small hill called Parvati Hill. Between Arunachala and Parvati Hill there was a smaller hill connecting the two, with passes over both ends, the east end and west end. There was a footpath from Kattu Siva tank that went towards the pass at the east end of the small hill. In October of 2008, we decided to try to get over this pass. By this time we had equipped ourselves with good pruning clippers, and sturdy sticks, and felt like with these we could get through anything on the hill. Today would be a big test.

We started out on the path towards the hill that went from Kattu Siva tank. There was a good foot path for a while, then we had to walk up a dry bed of a small creek. We both did much work, clearing back brush, and especially thorns. Many thorns line the way, some are nasty. By this time my shirt is soaking wet from

## *The Tale of the Yellow Path*

sweat. As we neared the crest, the thorns were thick and blocked the path entirely; we had to cut our way through. After some work we made it though. A few drops of blood dripped from my hand from all the thorns I cut. We made it to the top, though, and could look down the other side of the hill, and could see the ancient Adi Annamalai temple in the distance. There looked like there was a path down the other side through more thorns, and a creek bed to follow down. Today we were happy just to get to the top; the rest of this path would be an exploration for another day.

The next big step in our exploration came in November of 2008. We had made up to the top of one pass, now it is time to try the other, the other possible “shortcut” across the hill, rather than around it. It started with a cross-hill walk from the path we used for the first hill crossing, the east pass. As we went over a ridge, and cut our way through brush, we came out to a nice stone path running up toward the west pass. Someone had done a pretty big project to lay this path. The stones that were used were not rounded, but were flat, and laid out like paving stones; it was a first-rate job. But it went nowhere; it followed the low area between the two hills, and went in between them. It started up the hill, but just ended. And it did not connect with the Inner path either. Where it started there was an original dirt path that led to the Inner Path from this nicely paved path. It was a bit of a mystery. Why was this out here more or less in the middle of nowhere? And why did it just end without really going anywhere? We would not know any more today. We had found it, and were at the end of our day’s exploration. We could really only explore for a few hours each morning, by about 10 o’clock usually it started getting too hot to be in the sun, so this limited our exploration each day.

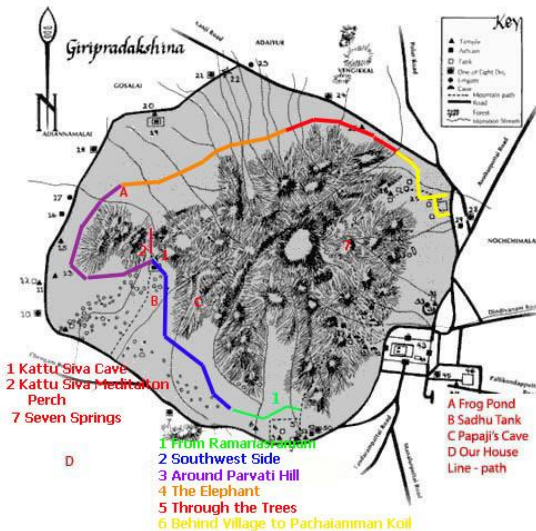
It was another two weeks before we were able to come back and finish the exploration of the path we found. The Inner Path did

## The Tale of the Yellow Path

not always follow its present route around Parvati Hill. This was created maybe 50 years ago. Before that, this was the path most used by villagers to cross the mountain, to and from the north side, from the west. I think this was the reason that some special work had been done to partially restore this old path. We struggled a bit to get to the top, but not nearly so much as we had in the other path; the thorns and brambles were not nearly so bad here. And when we got to the top, there was a pretty good path down, so we followed it and ended up coming out at the Frog Pond. So this west pass connected with one of our favorite places. This is a good alternative to walking around Parvati Hill.

## Documenting the Inner Path

In October, 2008, we started a new Inner Path project. The idea



1Inner Path Segments

### *The Tale of the Yellow Path*

was to photograph and document the Inner path, and the walk around it, from one end to the other. We documented the first section in October. I posted about 30 photos and a narrative describing the first leg of the walk, from Ramana Ashram to a gate on the south side of the mountain. I found a map of Arunachala, and used Photoshop to draw in the path segment on it. I was going to post the walk in six articles, so I felt I had to give each segment a name. The first segment I called, "From Ramanasramam." I posted 50 photos. I wanted to give readers some of the experience they might have on the actual walk. This was in the days where video was not as available as it is now, so I took a lot of photos.

The second section of the path was documented in December 2008. This section of the path went to Kattu Siva Tank. I called this section, "Southwest Side." There were about 30 photos. With photos of Sadhus at Kattu Siva Tank, this is a spot that is loved by many who walk the Inner Path, with a pleasant tank nestled in the trees, usually with a contingent of sadhus bathing and hanging out here. Kattu Siva was another holy man who lived near Arunachala at about the same time as Ramana Maharshi. He had a following that was primarily local villagers, who built for him a small ashram that featured a small underground meditation room that you had to crawl through an opening to enter. Apparently this is the place where Kattu Siva would meditate for long hours. Sadhus still come here every day to take their daily bath in the tank.

The third section was around Parvati Hill to the Frog Pond. I called this, "Parvati Hill." I posted more than 60 photos, including of a small colorful shrine we found near the Inner Path. The shrine had four painted terra cotta figures: a man - a guardian, two white horses, ready for him to mount and ride to combat evil, and a dog, sitting at attention. I was told that villagers put this shrine



## *The Tale of the Yellow Path*

here, because in this part of the forest “they could hear the footsteps of god.”



**Inner Path map using Google Earth**

In March, 2009, I published the final three sections of the Inner Path. I called them, “The Elephant,” “Trees” and, “Pachaiamman Koil.” As before these were many photos and my commentary. I used many photos since I wanted to make this blog as immersive as I could, and kind of recreate the experience of the walk. Maybe I succeeded.

As I reviewed blog statistics of readership, this blog had taken off. The first full month, August of 2008, I felt I was doing OK; there were about 20 hits a day, 20 people reading an article each day. This rose rapidly, so that one year later, there were almost 300 readers each day. And I found out more than half of the readership was from India. So here I was writing about India, and my main readership was from India. Kind of ironic. It turns out that Indians were interested in the Inner Path, and most of them had

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