

# Release from human bondage

*The meeting of Somerset Maugham with Ramana Maharishi possibly led to the writing of 'The Razor's Edge', perhaps the most intriguing of the books the master story teller wrote. It was published in 1944 when Maugham was seventy-one years old.*

For some of us, the generation who became teenagers in the nineteen-sixties, Somerset Maugham was a great teller of tales. He died in 1965, when I had turned sixteen. By then I had read most of his novels as well as the autobiographical 'The Summing Up'. When I read the news of his death in the morning papers, it grieved me a little. The thought crossed my mind that I should be crying, for he had contributed so much to my understanding of the world. But no tears came; it was to be a private grief as nobody else in my aunt's family, with whom I was living then after my mother's sudden demise, shared my feelings.

Maugham is best remembered for his short stories although his novel 'Cakes and Ale', which daringly narrates the love story of Edward and Rosie Driffield won him some critical acclaim. The novel that intrigued me most was "The Razors Edge". It was the story of a young man, Larry Darrell, whose quest for meaning led him to shun success and eventually visit an ashram in South India, represented in the novel as Sri Ganesha's spiritual residence, a thinly disguised description of Ramana Maharishi's ashram.. What had got Larry embarked on this journey was the death of a friend, a fellow pilot, during the first world war. The experience changed him completely and he decided to figure out what life was all about.

Throughout the novel Larry is set off against Elliot Templeton, an expatriate American snob whose only passion in life was to throw parties or be invited to them, whether that was lunch at Cannes or dinner at Monte Carlo. Elliot never missed an opportunity to be with the rich and famous at the 'brilliant season' on the Riviera or in Paris. Larry, on the other hand, lived in voluntary poverty, without ever seeing any merit in riches. He was meant to marry Elliot's niece Isabel, but Elliot disapproved of the match as Larry lacked the ambition to move around in the upper echelons of society. Isabel broke off her engagement with Larry when she realized that he would not provide her the life she wanted for herself. Larry did not see the point of spending his life in the company of 'seedy marquises and long-nosed duchesses'. At the end of the novel Larry gives up all his worldly possessions to become a taxi driver in New York. Where Elliot was the sophisticated hedonist, Larry strove to find happiness and bliss, which were more important to him than success and money. Larry believed that when a man became pure and perfect his influence spread like ripples in a pond.

Somerset Maugham visited India in 1938 and met Ramana Maharishi. We do not know if it changed his life. In the novel he wrote Ramana became Sri Ganesha. Larry Darrell's visit to India changed his entire life. A meeting with Sri Ganesha led to an enlightenment experience. In the book Larry describes the event as follows:

"I'd never known such exaltation and such a transcendent joy. I had a strange sensation, a tingling that arose in my feet and travelled up to my head, and I felt as though I were suddenly released from my body and as

pure spirit partook of a loveliness I had never conceived. I had a sense that a knowledge more than human possessed me, so that everything that had been confused was clear and everything that had perplexed me was explained. I was so happy that it was pain and I struggled to release myself from it, for I felt that if it lasted a moment longer I should die; and yet it was such rapture that I was ready to die rather than forego it..."

According to Larry the guru tried to explain to his followers the futility of selfhood and its attendant passions and showed them how liberation could be attained through tranquillity, restraint, renunciation, resignation, steadfastness of mind and an ardent desire for freedom. If a person worked without selfish interests the mind was automatically purified. Work was a way for man to dissolve his separate self and become one with the universal self. Nobody had to retire from the world; only the self had to be renounced. But for Larry, the simplicity, gentleness and saintliness of the guru were as impressive as the teaching itself.

Throughout the book Maugham clumsily wanders in and out of the story attempting to give the narration an air of veracity. In the preface to the novel Maugham writes: "I have invented nothing. To save embarrassment to people still living I have given to the persons who play a part in this story names of my own contriving, and I have in other ways taken pains to make sure that no one should recognize them." There has been considerable speculation about who Larry Darell was. Was there ever such a person? Guy Hague (who stayed at the Ramana ashram for a time) Paul Brunton and Even Christopher Isherwood have been mentioned as possible models who served to inspire Maugham. But whether Larry Darrel was real person or a composite of several persons it is clear that the theme of finding the Absolute fascinated Maugham. At least, there was an intellectual fascination.

By the time he wrote 'The Razor's Edge' he had lived long enough to see the hollowness of the likes of Elliot Templeton. Was Larry Darrell's journey one that Maugham himself would have wanted to undertake. Was the writer in him condemned to experience 'enlightenment' only through a character he had produced? Not an easy question that a writer or artist can answer. Who after all is the writer? Is he or she primarily somebody who has something to contribute, or is the writer also driven by narcissism of various intensities? Can the writer merge with the Universal Self whom Ramana experienced, or will the separate self in her or him constantly keep the creative person from experiencing the absolute oneness of everything? As I said, not an easy question to answer. And yet age catches up with the writer and she or he eventually realizes that the adulation of the readers is no substitution for a larger fulfillment.

A Hollywood script writer, Mercedes De Acosta, came all the way to India only to meet Ramana. In her book "Here Lies The Heart" she speaks of Maugham's visit to Ramanna's ashram at Tiruvanmalai in 1938:

"The Sage in Somerset Maugham's book *The Razor's Edge* is supposed to be Ramana Maharshi. It is possible that this is so as a few weeks before my visit to the Ramana Ashram, Somerset Maugham had been there. I was told that an English author had come to see Bhagavan and had fainted when first coming into his presence. I asked his name but they did not know how to pronounce it. One of the disciples retired and

came back with Somerset Maugham written on a piece of paper. A few years later I saw Mr. Maugham in New York and inquired if he had actually been to see the Maharshi. He said he had, but I did not feel I should trespass on a possible spiritual experience by asking if it was true that he had fainted."

Major Chadwick, an inmate of the ashram, mentions that he and others carried Maugham into his room after he fainted and laid him on his bed. Chadwick then went and fetched Ramana. Maugham recovered and sat opposite Ramana for more than half an hour. Not a word was exchanged. It was obviously a new experience for Maugham, for he turned to Chadwick and asked if there was a need to say anything. "No", replied Ramana. "Silence is best. Silence itself is conversation". After this Ramana left.

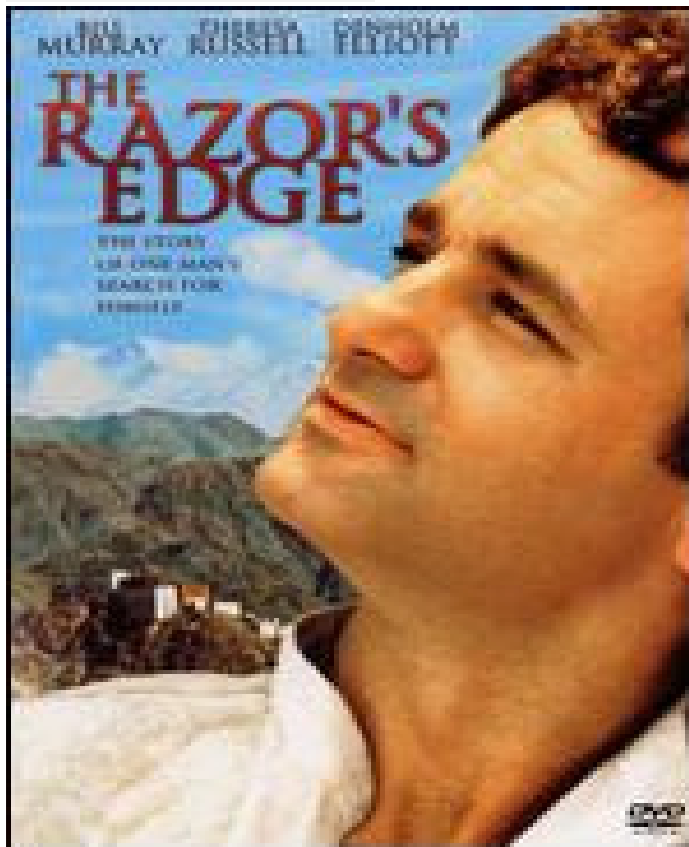
Maugham later wanted to see the public hall where Ramana lived, in full gaze of all his devotees. He writes: "I do not know whether it was the consequence of the rest or the Swami's meditation, but I certainly felt much better and in a little while I was well enough to go into the hall where he sat by day and slept at night. The Swami sat on a low dais on which was a tiger skin...The faithful inhabitants of the ashram or habitual visitors sat cross legged on the floor... The Swami entered that blissful state of meditation on the infinite which is called samadhi. A little shiver seemed to pass through those present. The silence was intense and impressive. You felt that something strange was taking place that made you inclined to hold your breath. After a while I tiptoed out of the hall."

Altogether Maugham had spent only about three hours at the ashram. In a non-fiction essay entitled "The Saint", published some twenty years later, Maugham describes the journey from Madras to Tiruvannamalai as hot, dusty and bumpy. He notes that some of the devotees of Ramana attributed spiritual reasons to his fainting. But he had passed out on other occasions as well and saw the episodes as medical in nature and little to do with his meeting with Ramana. When he returned the ashram had sent him some material on Ramana written by various people. From reading these accounts he had "formed a vivid impression of the extraordinary man he was."

The Razors Edge was twice made into films, once in 1946 with Tyrone Power in the lead role of Larry and then in 1984 with Bill Murray as the main actor. Murray apparently bargained so that he would do the film Ghostbusters on the condition that he would get the role in The Razor's Edge. The 1946 film with Tyrone had some success. Maugham had been asked to write the script, but the producers never used this. He didn't ask to be paid for his work but Darryl F. Zanuck nevertheless presented him with a painting of Matisse.

Whatever grace Ramana bestowed on people he did not claim to be a miracle worker or perform feats of magic. Ramana's greatness lay in his capacity to lead people to an experience of Oneness. In the well known case of Arthur Osborne an eye-to-eye contact with Ramana led to the experience of enlightenment. In the novel Larry is shown as possessing extraordinary powers after his visit to India. He is able to cure Isabel's husband, Gray, of his debilitating headaches. He acquires powers to get Maugham's arm to raise involuntarily from the shoulder. Fortunately Larry does not claim to have acquired this knowledge from Sri Ganesha ( Ramana). I must however relate a curious event that happened at the exact moment of Ramana's death. Many eye-witnesses have stated that a light was seen to cross the sky. I came to know that

the famous French photographer was at the ashram at the time and had also seen the light. When I lived in Paris several years ago I walked over to the apartment of Cartier Bresson, which happened to be only a few hundred feet away from my own, and asked him if he had indeed seen this light. Cartier Bresson's reply amazed me and still continues to intrigue me. He said, "Of course I did! Of course I did!" There was no reason for the great photographer to tell me an untruth.



Poster of the 1984 film with Bill Murray playing the lead role.

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