

Pre-World Conferences, USA

Report

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Divinity Incarnate, the Avatar, Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba/Who Am I?/Faith

We took as our tasks:

- (1) To further distill the devotees findings.
- (2) To come up with items for the agenda of the world conference
- (3) To think about how the Sai Organization could improve with regard to the above topics.

(1) DISTILLATION

(a) Who is Sai Baba?

The devotees had come up with a number of ideas on what Swami is, like God, our Teacher, a friend, our father, our conscience, our direction, love walking on earth, everything.

After considering these, we decided to use a "definition" that comes from Swami Himself. In His 43rd Birthday Discourse, November 23 1968, Swami declared that He was the Avathaar, that He bore the name: Avathaar of Sai Baba.

One question that comes up is: What does Swami mean to us? The devotees came up with many answers, but all are subsumed in the following statement from Swami in this discourse:

I have come to counsel, to help, command, condemn, and stand by as a friend and well-wisher to all, so that they may give up evil propensities and, recognizing the straight mark, tread it and reach the goal.

In this, we see Swami as spiritual teacher, father, mother, friend, counselor, and God Incarnate.

While we are at it, let's repeat what Swami says His mission is:

For the protection of the virtuous, for the destruction of evil-doers, and for establishing righteousness on a firm footing, I incarnate from age to age. Whenever disharmony overwhelms the world, the Lord will incarnate in human form to establish the modes of earning peace...

I have come to give you the key to the treasure of Annaandha, to teach you how to tap that spring...

Let me assure you that this divine body has not come in vain; it will succeed in averting the crisis that has come upon humanity.

This discourse of 23 November 1968 is one of the most powerful discourses that Swami has given. Every devotee would do well to read it from time to time, to

ponder its meanings, to taste the power that is in it and reap the joy that it promises to give us.

(b) Who am I?

This question was also answered in various ways by the devotees -God, one with the mother, seeker, servant of God, a spark of divinity, for example.

However, if we were to distill this to one good meaning, we would choose the one that was given by Swami Himself. He starts every discourse by addressing us as:

Premaswaruupalara!
Embodiments of Love!

We are indeed just embodiments of divine love, just as Swami is. However, He experiences it (or IS REALLY it); we know it intellectually but have trouble experiencing it. The nice point here is the word LOVE. We are LOVE, and we should strive to remember it and to treat everyone as LOVE.

(c) What is the Goal of my life?

Our goal becomes evident once we realize that we are Embodiments of divine love: our goal is to experience, to realize, that we are divine love. And in fact Swami says that in the above-mentioned discourse:

Very few of you desire to get from Me the thing that I have come to give you, namely, liberation itself.

(d) How do we reach the goal?

Devotees came up with many answers to this question, e.g. by living life to the fullest, learning from positive and negative experiences, service, trusting in Swami, emulate Swami as our role model, associate with like-minded people.

We prefer to answer this question by referring to a quote from Swami:

You are what you think.

Thus, if we want to be divine love, or God, we simply have to think about God, continuously, all the time.

Now, it would be impractical if everyone sat around, doing nothing all day long, while thinking of God. This thinking of God continuously has to be done while we are active in the world. Swami has also said that selfless service is the way to God. If we put these two together, we get:

We reach the goal by fixing our mind on God, on the Oneness of it all, as we serve continuously with love.

That, in a nutshell, is an extraordinarily good way to reach the goal. How fast we get there will depend on the intensity with which we carry out this task.

Swami has expressed this spiritual discipline in two remarkable ways, which mean essentially the same thing:

Head in the forest, hands in society.
Love all, serve all.

(e) What is faith?

Faith, as many devotees defined it, is unquestioning belief, complete trust, confidence, full reliance.

If we think about worldly matters, we do have extreme faith in many things. When we get on a bus, train, or plane, we have faith in the driver, for example. We drink water all the time; we have faith in the system that ensures that the water is clean. We go to sleep with the trust that we will wake up.

If we have faith in Swami --God, then we will trust Him to do what is right for us, we will surrender everything to Him, knowing that what happens is right for us. This does not mean that we don't plan ahead --failing to plan is tantamount to planning to fail. But we plan and then leave it to Swami.

Some devotees have the feeling that the Sai Organization is there to help them develop faith. This is not totally true. No one can help a person have faith; that task is entirely up to the person. The Sai Organization can only provide an atmosphere and an environment that is conducive to the individual deepening their own faith.

Through the company of like-minded people, says Swami, progress along the spiritual path can be made. But ultimately, the progress comes through the thought, word, and deed of the individual only.

(f) An agenda item for the World Conference

The last item, providing an atmosphere that is conducive to the individual deepening their faith, is important. The Sai Organization is struggling to do this. And part of this struggle is to provide an atmosphere that conforms to the culture of the country. This is difficult in many countries because of the number of easterners present in that country, as well as westerners, who prefer eastern traditions --devotional songs, rituals, and the like.

We therefore think that it would be wise to include the following on the agenda of the World Conference

Orienting Sai Centers to Swami's recommendation that devotion and education programs conform to the culture of the country.

Such an item could be handled in several ways. One could prepare ahead of time quotes from Swami on the subject. One could have panels, where the topic is debated. Another alternative, a good one, we believe, would be to have short examples of devotion programs from Sai Centers in different cultures, with someone explaining what is happening, what rituals, if any, are followed, and how they differ from the standard Indian one. A country/culture could probably have a fifteen-minute program that included all the essentials. For example, only 2 devotional songs (bhajans) might be sung. Imagine how enlightening it would be to see Japanese, Taiwanese, Russian, Indonesian, Mauritia, African, etc., etc., etc. devotional programs, perhaps with a handout that explained what was happening. Perhaps each culture could give their program two or three times, so that more people would be able to partake of it.

Watching (and taking part in) devotional programs of different cultures could be far more powerful than simply explaining or debating the issue!

(g) How can we improve the US Sai Centers?

The issue concerning Sai Centers that was brought up most (in the material that was given to us) had to do with just this issue of making Sai Centers in the US more culturally relevant. Many people wanted more English devotional songs and fewer Sanskrit bhajans. They wanted less ritual (e.g. arathi, Sanskrit prayers, prostration). And yet, many western devotees thrive on the eastern way of doing things and would rather not switch styles.

This issue comes up year after year. The issue cannot be solved by mandate from the Sai Organization, or President of a region, or President of a Sai Center. It can be solved only by a ground-swell by the devotees themselves.

The Sai Organization can make the issue more prominent. For example, some discussion of it could be placed in the American Guidelines for Sai Centers. And the Regional and Center Presidents could bring up the issue, and perhaps have study circles on Swami's words concerning the issue.

It might also be good to set up some structure to help make devotees aware:

(1) Appoint a Center welcoming group, whose responsibility would be to welcome newcomers (and others) at meetings, help them understand what various aspects of the devotional meeting are about, and to make themselves available to talk about and answer questions on Swami --on the phone, at home, in a coffee shop, etc.

(2) At EVERY meeting, have a question-and-answering session, perhaps preceded by a five-minute talk on Swami. This should be held before or after the regular devotional meeting, in a separate room where talking is encouraged.

(3) As more people come to the Sai Center, have one of the devotional meetings each month be planned as a purely western-culture meeting. Anyone could come, indeed would be encouraged to come. There would be time for a question-answer period during the meeting.

Finally, it has been experienced that Young Adults make an excellent impression on newcomers. Their enthusiasm, their devotion, shows through much more than in older people. And anyone is inclined to be impressed at young adults who exhibit such faith. So, let's use the Young Adults as much as possible in welcoming newcomers and in making our Sai Centers more tuned to the needs and desires of our culture.

UNIVERSAL HUMAN VALUES

Recommendations

- I. Establish a means to become aware of and internalize the significance of Swami s Ten Guiding Principles.

(Here we need to use every word Swami said about this in His Discourse of 11-21-85. This version can be found in the Sai Spiritual Teacher s Manual, p. xi. It is also, in part, in the Guidelines, pages 2,3,

and 5. We felt it was necessary to include everything Swami said about these 10 principles, not just the shortened version put out by the organization. Example: He said in number 7, .. *seek ways to solve difficulties such as hatred, envy, and jealousy.* Then He continues to tell us exactly how to do this: *To curb this sense of envy and jealousy, we must develop a broader outlook. Do not differentiate on the basis of race, caste, creed, or country. Follow your cultural and religious customs in your own home, but do not attempt to impose them on society. Rather than this, love each person as your own brother, not seeing him as belonging to another creed, religion, or country.*

Also include the information He gave after giving us the 10 Principles: *Firmly implant these ten points as your guiding principles. I am helping and blessing you, so you shall succeed. Not only the public, but even the government should take note that you are really doing things that need to be done. These principles outline our primary duties. Following them will help bring about unity within both our society and the organizations. Once we live by these injunctions, the organizations will run by themselves, and we won't have to do anything else. The first and foremost thing is Love. There may be shortcomings and faults in others, but never look at them. Rather, ignore them and overcome them through the expression of love.*

- II. Support and facilitate a means to deepen the understanding and practice of the Human Values for adults.

Agenda Items

1. What leadership styles or traits best reflect the Human Values? Based on this, what recommendations do you have for the Sai Organization and its leaders?

2. How can we take what we know about the human values (forbearance, honesty, compassion, cooperation, etc.) to improve communication in this Organization?

Let's see what Swami says about forbearance, for instance:

Let us have forbearance towards each other. Let us rejoice together. Let us all strive together. Let us live and move in harmony. Let us grow together. Let us cherish the wisdom that we have acquired together. Let us live in complete harmony without any misunderstanding. Forbearance is Truth, Righteousness, Right living, Love, Nonviolence, all virtues rolled into one.

In other words, how can we take these values and what Swami has said about them, using them to practice the art of communicating righteously in the organization?

3. How can we take what we know about the Human Values (integrity, unity, sacrifice, respect, etc,) to increase commitment with follow through in the Sai Organization? *Man can realize his mission on the earth only when he knows himself as Divine and when he reveres all others as Divine. And man has to worship God in the form of Man. God appears before him as a blind beggar, an idiot, leper, child, a decrepit old man, a criminal, or a madman. You must look behind those veils for the Divine Embodiment of Love, Power, and Wisdom, the Sai, and worship Him through service.*
4. How can we support and facilitate a means to deepen the understanding of Human Values for adults? (Is it as simple as taking a value in a Study Group and practicing for a week? How can the level of awareness be raised in the Centers through the studying and practicing of these Human Values?)

UNITY IN DIVERSITY

Agenda

I. How can the Sai Organization promote Unity in Diversity?

A. Education

- Separating spirituality from religion, culture and nationality — making distinctions among spirituality, religious doctrine embodied in the major world religions, cultural norms and national mores
- Explaining the spiritual significance of Sai Programs in newcomer orientation workshops (example: explaining the spiritual

significance of vibhuti, to eliminate the possible appearance of religious practice of a particular religion or possible appearance of cultism)

- Providing literature demonstrating the unity of all religions — i.e., emphasizing the oneness of the essential truths of the world's major religions
- Providing Study Circle material oriented to appreciation of unity in diversity (with emphasis on Swami's Teachings in the context of day-to-day living, such as 3HV and Unity of Thought, Word and Deed)
- Conducting Adult Workshops to promote appreciation of unity in diversity (including at Conferences and Retreats)

B. Devotion

- Applying diversity in language and culture to meet the spiritual needs of devotees (example: emphasize the joy of singing of God in many languages — not just English or Hindi, without regard for the national, ethnic or cultural background of Center members)
- Emphasizing respect for the different religious traditions within our communities.
- Inviting Sai devotees of different faiths, cultures, religions and races to speak at Center and Regional events.

B. Service Activities

- Demonstrating unity through working together
- Sharing successful service projects with other Centers and Regions
- Promoting Regional, National and International service projects

OUR SPIRITUAL HEALTH

Discussion Topics:

- § **What is Spiritual Health?**
- § **What is the Quality of our Conscious Awareness? What is the Quantity of our Spiritual Awareness?**

(These Discussion Topics were the main focus of our talks. At the beginning of our discussion we looked at the devotees responses during the pre-World Conferences, and we consulted those pages from time to time. But the main influence on our discussions was the outline and questions that had been posed by Michael in the

Agenda. We kept going back to those questions as we worked at delving deeper into the subject.)

Spiritual Health:

- § Involves the total being: physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional aspects.
- § Must be **integrated**, not separate aspects of the self.
- § Implies unity in thought, word, and action — someone may be thinking spiritually, but not acting in a spiritual manner.
- § When someone says, How are you? It is a general question about our total state of well-being. What does this mean when we are speaking about our spiritual health?
- § A person should exhibit one personality, not multiple personalities.
- § There is a consistency in every aspect of life, in every environment.
- § **Constant Integrated Awareness**

What is the difference between Question (I) How do we approach each day from moment of awakening until the moment of sleep? and Question (iv) How do we approach and live each day in a spiritually healthy way?

- § Sometimes we look at others too harshly — we re too close to them.
- § This causes problems in the Centers when we have to work very closely with others — we begin to see their faults.
- § There is not enough love.
- § It s more than just love because sometimes all the involved people are very loving.
- § There tends to be a feeling of Why are they picking on me?
- § **Unconditional Love**

(At this point, the two-point definition was complete, but we weren t aware of this. We continued to discuss the topic of Spiritual Health.)

The notion of *Awareness and Recognition of an Inner Ideal of Conscious Awareness* was introduced. We realized that this idea was relevant to the topic of Spiritual Health so it was added to the page of definitions.

As the discussion continued, it shifted to talking about:

Striving to Achieve this Inner Ideal of Conscious Awareness:

- § Analogy to physical health
- § Going to the Gym = Going to the Center
- § At home, there s no support system. A person works out alone. There s not a wide variety of workout equipment.
- § At the Center, there are the other members to support you. There s a variety of tools to develop spiritual health — service projects, devotional activities, education (Study Circle, SSE classes).
- § Awareness: Study Circle helps to bring about an increasing awareness of the Inner Ideal. It also helps to develop the individual s perspective.
- § There are different ways of expressing physical health, e.g. big biceps, diet, etc. There are different ways of expressing spiritual health, e.g. service orientation, singing bhajans, etc.
- § There are different ways of evaluating physical health. What are the ways of evaluating spiritual health?
- § When we look at our physical health, we look at the general, overall functioning.
- § When someone says, How are you? we usually answer, Fine. We respond to the general question with an answer that corresponds to our overall functioning without mentioning minor conditions such as allergies, etc. that exist.
- § *We focus on the positive*, i.e. there are no major problems at this time so I m feeling fine. This is similar to Swami s focus on the positive: Be good, Do good, See good.

(At this point, the discussion shifted back to the aspects of Spiritual Health.)

Spiritual Health involves:

- § **Faith** — a person has to have faith that spiritual health can be reached.
- § This goes back to Swami s injunction that we *must* have Self-Confidence.
- § *Self-Confidence > Self-Satisfaction > Self-Sacrifice > Self-Realization.*
- § The Inner Self is a result of our thoughts. Spiritual Health begins with our thoughts.
- § We have to look at the totality — the whole being.
- § Evaluations must look at the inner self and the outer self. This could involve looking at the personal life and the Center life.

- § We have to be flexible because there will be ups and downs. We must have a Resiliency to bounce back after setbacks.
- § There is an Inner Motivator.
- § We have to have **Faith** — Faith to Follow the Master.
- § From Diana Baskin's book, When your **faith** meets My Love, there is a cure.
- § The word FAITH keeps coming up over and over again. Do we want to add it to our list?
- § What does FAITH mean? It means different things to different people.
- § Faith involves Confidence — having Confidence that I can reach the goal.
- § How about saying **Self-Confidence in Attaining the Ideal** instead of Faith because we are defining a specific aspect of Faith?
- § **Self-Confidence in Attaining the Ideal**

(The discussion continues along several lines concurrently as we focus on different aspects of Spiritual Health that have already been identified, e.g. Faith, the various pathways to Spiritual Health, the analogy to physical health, ways to evaluate Spiritual Health, etc.)

Further Discussion:

- § Reading a book, e.g. the life of a saint, paints an ideal of Spiritual Health — and we're stimulated to try it, too.
- § There are different ways of starting to develop our Spiritual Health, e.g. Devotion, Service, and Wisdom. But all paths eventually converge as they approach the Center.
- § How do we see Spiritual Health among our Center members? Evaluation should not involve a public confessional because this has its own dangers.
- § Spiritual Health is a private matter between the individual and God.
- § When we are faced with life's challenges, this is similar to taking an endurance stress test on the treadmill.
- § Swami says that we should welcome the tests because they lead to a higher state of well-being.
- § Our overall attitude is very important because there will be ups & downs.
- § There are different tools for each one of us. Which approach we choose depends on our individual psyche.
- § The Center offers a wide array of tools.

- § Service is like the steroid of Spirituality because it is a simple way to develop our Spirituality quickly and easy. Like every tool, we must be careful not to misuse it.
- § Developing our Spiritual Health is an on-going process.
- § We have to believe that we will progress in our Spiritual development.
- § Improvement comes through the practice of Swami s teachings.
- § This practice must be a steady, on-going process.
- § *Improvement by sincere and steady practice.*

(Two new concepts have now entered the discussion — the ideas of improvement and practice.)

- § When there is conflict in the Centers, how should we deal with these situations? How can we remove these distractions?
- § Swami has provided us with the tools to develop our Spiritual Health, but we have to work on preventing the distractions.
- § The problems usually involve a difference between Enthusiasm vs. Discrimination. People are willing and eager to progress, but they do not always have the ability to select the proper vehicle.
- § There is a need to have a Right Inner Ideal.
- § We re constantly refining our ideas about this Inner Ideal.
- § The more we learn, the more we find out how little we know.
- § At each higher level, we have a purer concept of the Inner Ideal.
- § **Constant Increase in the Purity of the Ideal**

(Again we have come back to the topic of Faith.)

- § Besides having faith that we will attain the Ideal, we have to have confidence that we will make steady progress.
- § This comes back to Self-Confidence again.
- § Do we want to modify our item on Self-Confidence?
- § We decide to add the phrase: **Confidence in Improvement by Steady Practice.**

(Here we began to look at our charge to identify ways to improve the Sai Organization, and agenda items for the World Conference.)

Ways to Develop our Spiritual Health:

- § Short talks of 5-10 minutes, given by experienced devotees who share some aspect of their spiritual development, e.g. a useful technique, an experience in performing service, etc.
- § Asking people to speak in this manner is a double-edged sword because it can encourage hero-worship (Swami is our only Role Model.). Also, it becomes too easy for our egos to get out of control.
- § This is the reason for the time limitation. Only experienced devotees are asked to do this. There is a relatively large number asked to speak at a single occasion to diffuse the attention paid to any single person.
- § Listening to the experiences of others can be a valuable tool. It inspires us to try new things.
- § In the Sai Organization, there is the program that Swami has given us for our Spiritual development.
- § Over time, the use of inspirational speakers has been the only addition to this.
- § There is a wide gap between the Inspirational Speakers and the ordinary devotees. We need to have some intermediary steps.
- § Is it possible to improve on the plan that Swami has given us?
- § Maybe we need to use techniques like the ten-minute talks, but use them with caution.
- § At the Manhattan Center, there had been a practice of five-minute book reviews. Devotees were asked to use five minutes to share their feelings, responses, etc. to a book that was by or about Swami. The short time was a deliberate attempt to circumvent people's shyness about speaking in front of a group.

Ways to Evaluate our Spiritual Health:

- § How can we measure our Spiritual Health?
- § How do we know if we re progressing in the right direction?
- § At one Center, the last few minutes of the weekly Study Circle are devoted to a review of the Code of Conduct. Each person does a self-assessment on the nine Points.
- § Weekly self-reviews may be too much.
- § When we look at our physical health, we usually have annual check-ups — except t in cases where there is a specific problem that needs closer monitoring, e.g diabetics measure their blood sugar levels.
- § Swami is our Doctor. He is the only One qualified to assess our Spiritual Health.

- § Again, it comes back to the idea that Spiritual Health is an individual matter — a private concern between the person and God.
- § But we still need to look at our Spiritual Health from time to time. We need to be sure that we are not moving off the path.

Agenda Items:

- § The Analogy to Physical Health can be a teaching tool for the Centers. It can be used in discussing our Spiritual Health.
- § The Analogy is a way of describing an abstract process in concrete terms that are a familiar part of our everyday life. It is a way of helping the ordinary devotees to start looking at their Spiritual Health.



The Sathya Sai Baba Organization - A Spiritual Movement/Sai Organization Experience

(1) In the light of Swami’s teachings, how can our organization better foster and improve leadership skills with regards to:

- (i) Good communication -- listening, understanding, adjusting, responding, sharing information
- (ii) Approaches to building unity in diversity
- (iii) Skill in conflict resolution
- (iv) Utilizing past office bearers and experienced leaders to mentor developing leaders
- (v) Understanding dynamics of communication in large groups and

- the importance of preplanning
- (a) learning to run a good meeting
 - (b) developing an agenda
 - (c) consensus building
 - (d) developing and following up on action items
 - (e) delegating responsibility
 - (f) being proactive, motivating people, willing to sacrifice
 - (g) utilizing workshops and small groups to better hear
and understand people
 - (h) empowering people to do their best
 - (i) utilizing e-mail and an official web page to facilitate
communication

(2) Interfacing with community/nation/world with regards to:

- (i) Center activities reflective of culture -- devotional singing, EHV programs, discussion on diversity
- (ii) Welcoming newcomers -- printed material and programs for newcomers
- (iii) Open/public meetings
- (iv) Press releases and interviews with media
- (v) Are we ready for a visit to our country from Swami?

(3) How to improve commitment/planning/follow-through/assessment:

- (i) Deeper understanding of how Center participation leads to inner transformation
- (ii) Record keeping and follow-through
- (iii) Periodic assessment of personal/Center/Organization status
- (iv) Developing short and long range vision and goals
- (v) Assessing needs of community
- (vi) Assessing our level of participation
- (vii) Assessing how best to develop ourselves to service needs of Center/Organization

(4) Broadening our education programs for adults:

- (i) Assessing current status of content and process of our Study Circles
- (ii) Development of workshops and conferences on topics such as:
 - (a) Love
 - (b) Unity in diversity
 - (c) Leadership
 - (d) Communication
 - (e) Other timely topics
- (iii) More uniform and systematic training during regional officers meetings
- (iv) National conferences
- (v) Interaction of SSE and Young Adult programs with adult programs