Interview
Category : January/February/March 2009
Published by dharmalingam on May. 04, 2009

Interview

Bring Forth the Dharma

The contemporary and orthodox Swami Avdheshananda shares his wisdom

By Rajiv Malik, New Delhi

Even as a reporter, i was always impressed with the majestic and pious presence of Swami Avdheshananda Giri in the few occasions we met. Our first encounter was in 2003, during the Kumbha Mela at the city of Nashik where he delivered a speech in the company of saints and spiritual leaders. I rushed to the staircase as he walked down the stage, touched his feet and handed him a copy of Hinduism Today.

For years, I had wanted to do an extensive interview, and it all finally came together during his 2008 Guru Purnima functions in New Delhi and Ambala. Devotees from all over the world were gathering for the celebrations in large numbers at his large five-acre ashram. Swami granted me some time over a few days. The interviews would take place in his private chambers.

I was not expecting the mix of modernity and unapologetic tradition that followed. Swami's speech was articulate, contemporary and relevant, yet not a grain of Hinduism's cultural richness was lost in his translation from the ancient to today's world. In his quarters, where a couple of his sannyasin initiates are always present to help turn decisions immediately into actions, his personal secretary held fast to his laptop during the interview, using a wireless connection to send e-mails and gather information. Professionalism and efficiency seem to be the order of the day in the 21st century's Juna Akhara. I found Swamiji to be sharper and more agile than a corporate CEO. Yet, after attending all the four Kumbha Melas and meeting hundreds of swamis, I can say that Swami Avdheshananda is one of the most orthodox Hindu saints in India. This can be seen in the decorations of his ashrams or in the practices of his devotees. It is also visible in his traditional robes and his

ever-present personal kamandalu, a vessel that in the old days was a saint's only possession, used alternatively to hold water or to store offerings received.

His traditional ways are far more than just outward appearance. His speech is woven with flawless Sanskrit, and what he has to say is brimming with Hindu truths that I have seldom heard so clearly articulated in my work as a correspondent.

Here now, are excepts from that extemporaneous exchange with Hinduism Today, in which Swami Avdheshananda Giri speaks of his life, his order's work and his vision for the future.

MY JOURNEY TO INFINITY

Sannyas is an unending journey. This is a journey which takes us to the infinity of God. The goal is discovery of one's own Self. When you realize that everything around you is not the Truth and you feel that all that you see is perishable, that all is changing every moment, then you start aspiring for the Truth. When the aspiration becomes a craving to know That, that intense desire slowly becomes a state of sannyas. It dawns on you. The solitude of mountains and caves becomes attractive. All this happened to me. I moved to the Himalayan mountains and lived there for a long time. During that stay, I realized how important it is to dwell close to satpurushas (noble souls), those who are awakened and have the blessings of the Almighty on them. Those are the jivanmuktas (liberated ones). Such people are not much influenced by worldly things. I realized that until you come in close touch with such sages, you cannot really understand life. This was my experience. That was what took me to the feet of the great saint Swami Avadhoot Prakash.

TEACHING BY EXAMPLE

I am the Acharya Mahamandaleshwar of Juna Akhara. My group has a few mahamandaleshwars, and our task is to lead and organize thousands and thousands of sannyasins associated with the Juna Akhara, all over India, who are serving the people. Our work, the sum of all of our efforts, is to create samskaras, deep impressions in people's minds. This is not done in the classrooms using the blackboards. We want to shape the devotee's character. If you have to civilize, educate and discipline someone to obey the law, or if you want a person to keep his equilibrium with nature, then a certain awakening has to be catalyzed in that person.

These things can be taught only by example. We sannyasins use our conduct, character and thoughts to reshape society. Most of us may not do this in a very conscious or structured way. But that is the result of keeping full control over the senses and living according to the scriptures. By doing that, we are building the character of individuals. We develop the personality of those who come near.

Our objective is to create harmony, all throughout the world. Since it is today's wrong lifestyle which leads to the world's problems, the sannyasins are teaching people the art of living.

ON INDIA'S CHALLENGES

In India and all over the world, everyone fears terrorism. There are also many other challenges, like global warming and the caste system. But in my view, even bigger and more dangerous than all these problems in India is the problem of bhogwad (desire for things and pleasures). We are following the consumerism of the West without understanding it. This lifestyle of blindly fulfilling desires is having an adverse impact on our relationships. This lifestyle is making us focus just on ourselves. I think we have to create proper samskaras to educate people on this. We are using my kathas to do it, which is also a form of group counselling.

CONVERSION

All the forces behind the attempts to convert Hindus have in common people who are fanatics. They feel they are superior and are arrogant about it. Hinduism has no place for all this. We have been here for an eternity. I respectfully must declare that ultimately all religions are panths (sects). The only dharma is the Sanatana Dharma, and all religions are but part of it. The most dire threat to Hinduism is conversion. What could be a bigger threat? It is the same whether it comes by the sword or by persuasion. Our whole country has been divided because of it, and Pakistan and Bangladesh went away from us.

HINDUTVA AND AHIMSA

We have to understand that a movement driven by devotion, faith and improvement of the world is good and acceptable. But when the movement's aim is power, it does not become successful.

Today Hindus are recognized as important members of society in the Silicon Valley, in Los Angeles, in Tokyo, in London, in Paris and even in China. Hindus are nonviolent. Hindus believe in the family system. Hindus are not aggressive, not attackers.

Hindus will never harm anyone. There are four reasons why I say this. The first is our principle of vasudhaiva kutumbakam, which means the whole world is one family. For us, the whole world is a big family. Second, par dara matravat, meaning women of others are like our mothers. Hindus are known all over the world to maintain the purity of relationships. Third, Hindus believe in sarve bhavantu sukhina, let all be happy and blissful. We want the whole world to be harmonious and joyous; we want the welfare of all beings. The fourth principle is atmavrata sarvabhuteshu, treat others as they would treat themselves. Hindus are the believers in one God. This God is present everywhere and in every being, formless but also on Earth. Hindus are flexible and generous. They mingle freely with everyone. If there is a least harmful community on this Earth, that is the Hindu community.

Our treatment of the planet

Don't you feel that the laws of nature are being violated? Global warming, forests cut down, rivers drying up. Chemicals and fertilizers are destroying the soil. All the glaciers are melting. I have travelled to the North Pole, and I have seen the angry mood of nature.

The Vedas say that if you deprive anyone of his honor, that is a sin. We want to protect the rights of even a lion, an elephant and, for that matter, every element of nature, including a cloud. Such nature-loving is our dharma. Just imagine the kindness and open-mindedness of our heritage and culture. We are the people who offer milk to poisonous snakes. We consider trees as our devatas (village Gods). Hinduism and Hindus are the most nature- and environment-loving people in this world.

On this Earth, animals have never engaged in widespread killings as we do. Earth

has never been divided by them. We are less civilized than animals. They have not encroached on our lands; it is we who have cut down the trees and attacked their places of living. In fact, there is a big debate going on about vegetarianism in the whole world. Research has highlighted that the production of white and red meat is behind global warming. Our teeth and mouth are not designed to consume nonvegetarian food.

TO HINDUS LIVING OUTSIDE INDIA

The Juna Akhara has very few sannyasins who can speak English. We do not have any direct branches outside India today, though we constantly visit many western countries. An akhara needs a certain respectful protocol, a decorum that is difficult to create in Europe or the USA. For the past fifteen years I have been visiting America. An awakening is happening there among Hindus about their religion. Today, they show a lot of faith in the Hindu traditions and festivals.

From the very beginning I used to tell the Hindus outside India to preserve five things connected to our tradition and culture: our language, diet, dress, worship of the Ishta Devata (personal or family Deity) and festivals. Language is critically important, and children should know our language, too. The way we dress is part of our culture. Our identity as Hindus must be fully realized. Even the parents are not sure if they are Hindus. They fail to understand most rituals, traditions and practices, so their worship falters. I also insisted on home worship. If the Ishta Devata is there living in the home with the family, then there will be discipline. Then our traditions and values will be preserved. My teachings have been emphasizing these five points as central to Hindus living outside India.

What I want from our Hindus in western countries is to give back their due to their motherland. They are not truly giving back to the motherland the way they should. What are they doing for the preservation of the Indian religion, literature, art and culture ?

A MESSAGE ABOUT TODAY'S YOUTH

Today's youth have a lot of temptations before them, especially in India. There are a lot of chances of their moving in the wrong direction. One example is the tendency of trying to become rich overnight, and doing every single possible thing to achieve it. My message to the youth is that without hard labor and sadhana, success cannot be attained. A youth must be focused, have the qualities of patience

and control over his senses, and work hard on both his worldly pursuits and spiritual practices. But to have young people develop these qualities, we need to have a dialogue with them; we must motivate them. Before we guide the young, we must earn their trust and confidence.

MY ADVERSITIES AND ASPIRATIONS

In the life of every human being, times come when the circumstances are not favorable. He feels that he is lacking something. He feels he is not capable. With the blessings of my gurus, I developed confidence and experience. I can face the worst of adversities. Adversities could never defeat me. It would be incorrect to say that I am beyond faltering. I also have vasanas and things to overcome. But I have always experienced that the inner presence of my gurus gave me such strength that when challenges came, I simply stood up and faced them.

I have worked to realize my dreams of a better world with better people. Another dream I have is to convey the spirituality of India to the western world. I want to let them know that Indian spirituality has the human dharma defined for the welfare of all beings of the world. Only the spirituality of India has the power to overcome anything that mankind will face.