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Life of Service Earns Swamiji Our 1994 "Hindu of the Year" Award

Amma Kidd, Virginia

After taking sannyas from Swami Sivananda and serving throughout India and several other countries in South Asia, Paramahansa Sri Swami Satchidananda Saraswati Maharaj-reverently called Sri Gurudev -finally settled in Sri Lanka in 1953. There he founded his first ashram in the lush mountain city of Kandy. One day, sitting in his little kutir, he went into a trance and had a vision of himself seated in the yogi's lotus posture, floating in space. All around were large, transparent "bubbles," each containing the shrine of a different religion, out of which the faithful were coming to worship at the center where he was sitting. From that moment onward, his ashram's Guru Purnima Day became a celebration of gurus from all religions, with pictures of each placed on the altar, and then kept there permanently. This caused some eyebrows to rise, but in general, it was a joyful explosion of devotion and brotherhood. For the first time, people of different religions were coming together, worshiping in their own way with mutual respect and acceptance. "The greatest divisions among human beings, and the bloodiest of wars have taken place in the name of God," comments Sri Gurudev. "It is time that we come together in His Name instead of fighting."

From Kandy to Woodstock

Sri Gurudev came to the US in 1966, right in the midst of the hippie era. Youth, especially, gravitated to him like bees to a honey comb. Neither judging or condemning their somewhat unorthodox lifestyle, he welcomed them into his fold with unconditional love. They trusted him. Soon, the very ones who were indulging in drugs were deep into yoga practices, heading and staffing yoga retreats, drug rehabilitation and prison programs. Integral Yoga Institutes spread like wildfire all

over the country. In 1969, Swami Satchidananda opened the now legendary three-day Woodstock Music Festival, telling a sea of 400,000 youth camped in a cow pasture, "My beloved brothers and sisters, through music we can work wonders. Music is the celestial sound and it is sound that controls the whole universe." The instantly popular swami liked America as much as America liked him. He soon took citizenship and felt his mission unfolding.

Deeply committed to breaking down the fossilized barriers between different religious traditions, Sri Gurudev soon became co-founder and director of the Center for Spiritual Studies together with a Catholic monk, a Zen monk and a Jewish Rabbi. The annual event "The Swami and the Rabbi" gained enormous popularity in New York City. The famous Yoga Ecumenical Retreats which he originated, attracted thousands from all religions. Their repute spread beyond our national borders all the way to the Vatican. The Light Of Truth Universal Services-a worship of the One Light by representatives of the major religions-are performed throughout the US, Europe and India. Their format is now being used by other organizations wishing to express Unity in Diversity.

Sri Gurudev's tangible spiritual presence, unusually affectionate bearing and uncanny ability to transform the highest Vedic metaphysics into down-to-earth, everyday practical wisdom drew many to his talks and teachings. The most dedicated came to live at his ashram. In time he was giving sannyas diksha to the most well-tested ardent young men and women. So persistently and persuasively has he articulated the message of religious harmony, ahimsa, non-injury, and the Vedic truth Vasudaiva Kutumbakam, "The whole world is our family," he has won the abiding respect of many heads of state, religious leaders of other faiths, including the Pope, who are honored to meet with him.

LOTUS Vision Blooms

After establishing large residential centers both in California and Connecticut, he moved his international headquarters to a verdant, serene setting near Buckingham, Virginia in 1981, calling the center Satchidananda Ashram, Yogaville. This 750-acre wooded retreat is the home of approximately 100 people, comprising 27 sannyasins and sannyasinis, some pre-sannyas bramacharis and some families, of which most couples are ordained ministers. They staff a publications and distribution department, an audio/video section, library, guest facilities, garage and auto services, a conference center and the various daily classes programs, ongoing

seminars and retreats available to ashramites and guests. The Yogaville children's school, Vidyalayam, or Temple of Learning, is attended by an average of 20 children of the family devotees. The Yogaville Fine Arts Society holds a dance camp every summer teaching Bharata Natyam.

The jewel at Yogaville is the overwhelmingly beautiful edifice Light Of Truth Universal Shrine (LOTUS) rising from a water setting in the form of a lotus flower. An earthy reminder of the one all-pervasive universal spirit, LOTUS honors all the world's religions, with a small alcove shrine for each. It is dedicated to the one divine light out of which all beliefs, concepts and religions spring and into which they all dissolve. This has always been the Sri Gurudev's most central teaching and one he inherited from his guru and matured through years of sadhana at Palani Hills, South India, and in numerous contemplative experiences of the all-pervasive divine light and energy, Satchidananda.

Architecturally, LOTUS was a formidable feat. Constructing giant lotus petals of super strength and durability was a trying ordeal but engineering rays of light to rise and then curve down to the 12 surrounding shrines was like ascending Everest mid-winter. After countless failed attempts, they ultimately employed neon light encased in curved tubes with moving water so the light appears to "flow." The deeply spiritual symbol of the lotus has inspired the visual arts and poetry of India and the Far East for centuries and temples for all religions are not a new concept. LOTUS stands as a perfect chalice anchoring into the physical plane the outpouring of the Sanatana Dharma, the unchanging Eternal Truth. In 1991, a small, glass-walled Lord Nataraja shrine was built on a hilltop overlooking Yogaville.

Worldwide, there are two ashrams, 12 international Integral Yoga Institutes from Switzerland to Nigeria and 13 IYI centers in the USA. Thousands of IYI teachers have been, and continue to be, trained to share Sri Gurudev's jnana through classes and programs. The Integral Yoga Institute in Coimbatore, India, is one of the fastest growing centers where Hindus, Moslems and Christians joyfully come to learn, serve and worship together. The LOTUS Vision Research Trust, an eye hospital and research center, is also fully active in that city. In Chettipalayam, the house where Sri Gurudev's was born, is now a free medical dispensary and will soon include an orphanage, a long time dream of his.

Sri Gurudev's teachings are applied by people of very diverse religious, social and cultural backgrounds. Increasingly, his six- limbed holistic yoga message is

subtly influencing even mainstream US society. Take for instance Dr. Dean Ornish, nationally recognized as a present day authority on heart disease and close disciple of Sri Gurudev. His health and nutrition programs, based on the principles and practices of Integral Yoga, are now revolutionizing the life-style of thousands of Americans including President Clinton and his wife Hillary. They called him to the White House recently for counsel on preventive medicine and were so impressed they hired him to retrain their chefs to prepare a new healthier menu for the First Family and the entire White House staff.

Eight Decades

Sri Gurudev will turn 80 on December 22nd. Jayanthi celebrations are planned first at Yogaville and then at the Integral Yoga Institute Coimbatore, South India. Sri Gurudev was born not far from Coimbatore in the nearby village of Chettipalayam. His father, a landlord, was the unofficial headman of the village and his home was the hub of most of the local activities. Holy men were regular guests in his home. His mother desired to conceive a child endowed with the divine virtues like them so she undertook a 60-mile long pilgrimage to the Lord Muruga temple at Palani Hills. There she received the sacred mantra of the sun with the purpose of invoking the conception and birth of the sun, the light of God. Her desire was fulfilled in 1914 with the birth of Ramaswamy. He had a joyous childhood and recalls, "Probably I had all my disappointments in my previous lives. Otherwise, I can't think of any reason why I should have been so contented in this present one." Very clear on what he wanted, he achieved goal after goal, great or small, with dedication and excellence. This was true of studies, jobs, his own business, inventions and married life. It was after his wife's sudden, early death, that Sri Gurudev undertook a serious serious meditative regime. Leaving his two children in the loving care of his mother, he wandered throughout South India as a homeless sadhu meeting yogis, staying at temples and ashrams. His journey eventually led him to Rishikesh to the feet of Swami Sivananda. This spiritual giant initiated him into the holy order of sannyas and gave the finishing spiritual touches to the young sadhu to empower his mission to serve the world at large. Thus emerged Satchidananda, in whose vast embrace all races, cultures, creeds and all living things have a spontaneous and loving home. Satchidananda, the servant of all, whose humility, simple ways, unconditional love and inspiring example have touched and continue to touch, so many souls of searching for the doorway out of the bondages of instinct and ignorance into freedom of Universal Light.

Address: Satchidananda Ashram-Yogaville, Buckingham, Virginia, USA 23921

Close-up

Swami Satchidananda is a remarkable being, one who through great striving and sadhana has made Aham Brahmasmi, "I am That," a personal reality. During his early sadhu years, he worshiped Goddess Parvati and recounts seeing Her in vision many times. Then for years he performed tapas at Palani Hills, South India. During one of his regular morning hilltop meditations, Boghar Rishi, the ancient founder of this Lord Muruga shrine, appeared and put his hand on his head and blessed him. "My highest experience, " he recounts, "which was not connected with any particular form, was the experience of Advaita, or Oneness, or Enlightenment in 1949. It was mid-winter, when I visited Vasishta Cave. I reached a large room-like place with a seat. As I sat there and meditated, I had the experience of transcending my body and mind, realizing myself as the Omnipresent. I forgot my individuality. It is impossible to explain exactly what this is. I must have spent several hours in that state. Then I heard a humming sound, OM chanting, coming from a long distance away. Slowly, slowly, it became louder. As it neared, I became aware again of my mind and body. I went out of the cave. I couldn't see anything in the normal way. All over I saw light, light, light. The whole world appeared to be a mass of light. There was only peace and peace everywhere. After that, I had this experience very often. I had it in Badrinath, everyday when I went to Kailash, in Jerusalem and at St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican."

Sri Gurudev Awarded 1994 Hindu of the Year

For 40 years, Swami Satchidananda has been one of Hinduism's most respected international ambassadors, meeting and sharing the Advaitic vision of interfaith harmony with world statesmen and leaders of other faiths. In recognition of a lifetime of service to dharma, yoga, harmony among men and spreading the teachings of Atma Jnana, Self-Knowledge, Hinduism Today has chosen him as "1994 Hindu of the Year." He will receive a \$1,001 award and a plaque.

YOGAVILLE, USA

If an old Appalachian farmer stumbled upon LOTUS for the first time at dusk, lit up and glowing, he would go to the nearest phone and report a UFO. All who have seen this spectacular spiritual "spaceship" on the James River in Buckingham, Virginia are awed. Here Swami Satchidananda has constructed the Light Of Truth Universal Shrine dedicated to all the world's faiths. The shape is a lotus flower, India's perennial icon of spiritual enlightenment. It took five years. The dome's lotus petals are Italian glass mosaic tile. The main sanctuary has 12 shrines for the world's faiths surrounding a central altar with a three-dimensional granite Lord Muruga yantra. A 22-foot column of blue light rises from the center to a pink hub of

light at the top and then splinters into 12 rays to each of the 12 shrines. A six-foot-high South Indian shikhara, copper-plated with gold-plated embossed garlands, crowns the sanctuary. [This "sidebar" was featured on one of our color pages as a photo-essay. You'll have to subscribe to see what you're missing!]