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Yogarishi Dr. Swami Gitananda: "The Lion of Pondicherry" Attains Mahasamadhi at Age 88

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The Lion of Pondicherry will roar no more. Yogamaharishi Dr. Swami Gitananda Giri Ji Guru Maharaj, the head of Sri Kambliswamy Madam, Pondicherry, took samadhi at the auspicious time of Arudhra darshan at 2:20am on December 29th, 1993. Arudhra darshan is one of the most important moments of the year in the Hindu calendar. It is the one time when devotees can view the normally fierce Rudra-Shiva in his most peaceful and benign aspect or mood. Swami was one of the five foremost authorities on ashtanga yoga, the ancient Hindu system of spirituality. He was placed in the samadhi shrine with the full honors due to a mahant of his status in his madam, Sri Kambliswamy Madam, Pondicherry, on December 30th. From the early morning of December 29th, as news of the Yogamaharishi's samadhi spread throughout the community thousands thronged the ancient madam site. Abhishekams (cleansing and purification ceremonies) were performed for the Yogamaharishi who was placed into a sitting position in padma asana as floral offerings were made and blessings taken of his physical form for the last time. At 11:00am Swami was placed in a grand palanquin and carried in an enormous procession around the premises of the Sri Kambliswamy Madam, so that his final blessings could be

given to all corners of the ashram. He was then placed into the samadhi which he had constructed for himself in July, 1986, at the entrance to the main ashram hall. The samadhi is four-layered and is in the geometric shape of the Ananda Mandala, literally, "shape of great joy and bliss." The final arathi to the face of the guru before the samadhi was closed was performed by Ananda Balayogi Giri, the Maharishi's son and chosen successor. Thousands of devotees present chanted mantras and sang bhajans non-stop throughout all ceremonies. A large number of government officers and political leaders, who had fought the Yogarishi fiercely during his life, paid tribute with namaskarams and floral offerings at the time of his leaving his body in mahasamadhi. The elaborate rites and rituals, lasting nearly 38 hours, were directed by the centenarian guru Srila Sri Shankaragiri Swamigal, who was assisted at every stage by Ananda Balayogi. Yogamaharishi Dr. Swami Gitananda, at the age of 88, was one of the most potent and effective forces in the field of ashtanga yoga worldwide. Trained in modern allopathic medicine, he combined the ancient traditional spiritual sciences with a modern scientific temperament. His hundreds of thousands of students around the world were attracted to his clear, rational, scientific expositions of ancient philosophical and spiritual concepts. A practical man to the core, the technology of yoga which he transmitted to his students has proven an effective method of attaining perfect health, well being, personality and intellectual development. The outspoken and frank man made many enemies along the way, especially the politicians, accustomed to obsequious and fawning behavior at every turn. He spoke out boldly for the cause of dharma, and called on his students to live by its principles. His tireless crusades to prevent governmental and political interference into the affairs of Hindu institutions and temples took him on many occasions to the Madras High

Court. His most notable victory in the court was on December 10, 1986, when Justice S. Mohan struck down the Pondicherry government's takeover of Sri Kambliswamy Madam, and the Pondicherry Hindu Religious Institution Act as well. The Yogamaharishi Dr. Swami Gitananda Giri Guru Maharaj was the purveyor of a vast, scientific, rational and systematic body of yoga knowledge. He embodied in himself the Bengali tantric tradition of his life-long guru Sri Kankananda Swamigal with the Shiva Yoga and ritualistic expertise of the line of gurus of Sri Kambliswamy Madam, as imparted to him by his predecessor Sri Shankaragiri Swamigal. The vast living and vibrant knowledge which he imparted so freely to hundreds of thousands of students included a complete and rational system of hatha yoga practices which provided a base for the higher techniques. For those who prepared themselves properly, he offered a complete system of jnana yoga techniques to purify, steady and cultivate the mind, and free it of hangups and false concepts and conditions. Those few who were able to deepen, concentrate and purify themselves sufficiently were led along an amazing path of raja yoga practices, which initiated the disciple into the psychic world of spiritual energy, colors, forms, sounds and shapes, sensitizing the seeker to the meditative qualities of mind and matter. Swami's expertise and contribution to Indian society was recognized by the Central Government when he was appointed in March, 1985, as a member of the prestigious Central Council for Research in Yoga, under the Ministry of Health, New Delhi. In 1986 the President of India, Sri Giani Zail Singh, awarded him the title of "Yogashiromani" at the World Yoga Conference in New Delhi. Swami looked every inch a rishi, with long flowing white hair and beard and a majestic stance. His magnetic personality dominated the stage wherever he went. He was a marvellous orator, capable of holding crowds of thousands in thrall with his large-hearted humor and resonant

voice. When he entered a room, all felt the effect of his presence. A disciple once described Swamiji as, "A locomotive engine which can pull innumerable cars along behind with its sheer strength and power." A strict disciplinarian, Swami did not allow his disciples to make any excuse for the deviances from the yoga path. He cut away layers of false conditioning with a single stroke with his sharp tongue, totally transforming the lives of all who came in close contact. He would often joke, "I am not here to make money or gain your votes. Therefore, I do not have to please you. My joy is to help you grow. And to grow, you have got to shed all this false conditioning which binds you back." His approach to living was entirely positive. "Iti, iti. God is This. God is that. Everything is God," he would say. He was a born teacher and taught yoga his whole life from the age of 13, even while in the midst of a busy professional and family life. He set up Ananda Ashrams wherever he travelled and lived in the United States, Canada, South America, Europe and Australia. A visitor was never turned away from Swami's door. From the lowly rickshaw walla's seeking money to finance his daughter's wedding, to the delegation of fishermen wanting a donation for a temple festival, to the wandering foreign traveller looking for God, the high government officer seeking spiritual solace, Swami was immediately available, willing to drop even his most urgent personal work to attend to his guest. He was a wonderful correspondent and answered, very often at a great length running into several pages, every single letter which crossed his desk. For most of his life, the Canadian born swami was an inveterate traveller. He made ten world tours, spreading the message of his gurus. His greatest delight was to take his students on pilgrimage, and he had paid his homage not once but many times at all the great holy sites of Hinduism. He was one of the active founders of the modern yoga sports movement, and had done preliminary work towards getting

yoga asanas accepted as a demonstration sport in the Olympic games. He was the sponsor of the First International Yoga Asana Championships in January, 1989, in Pondicherry. He had also sponsored four World Yoga Conferences in Pondicherry and was the inspiration for the two International Yoga Festivals held in 1993 and 1994 in Pondicherry by India's Department of Tourism which attracted over 500 delegates from 26 countries. Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami recently said, "Nowhere in the world have I seen hatha yoga performed as well as it is at Swami Gitananda's ashram." One of his foremost messages was, "Yoga is a way of life." He was an exemplar extraordinaire of his own words and lived life fully, consciously and skillfully. Swami was a great patron of all the Hindu spiritual arts, and had sponsored hundreds of artists throughout India in performances, travel abroad, pensions and other forms of livelihood. One of his major projects was the upliftment of village children through yoga and the carnatic cultural arts. To this end he founded the Sri Kambliswamy Yoga and Cultural Arts Program, in which more than 10,000 children studied yoga, bharata natyam and carnatic vocal music free of charge. He also supplied food, school books, uniforms and other material help for children who participated in the program. He was the author of 25 books on the science of yoga and publisher of the international yoga journal, Yoga Life. He was a popular though somewhat controversial figure in Pondicherry as his outspoken and forthright views were not always understood. His vibrant personality, however, touched everyone, and he was open to all, from the lowest of the rickshaw wallas to the leaders of the country. His roar woke many a sleeping soul to the higher values of a truly human and humane existence. The Lion of Pondicherry will roar no more. He will be sorely missed by all who understand the need for and value of the ancient life principles contained in ashtanga yoga, especially for modern man who, lost in the mad melee of

materialism, cannot see the path out of all this madness. Yogamaharishi Dr. Swami Gitananda Guru Maharaj, like the rishis of old, shouted for those with ears to hear: "Lo! A way has been found! A way has been found out of all this darkness!" And he, like the true guru that he was, led hundreds of thousands of persons along that path to light. Dr. Swami Gitananda is survived by his American-born wife, Meenakshi Devi Bhavanani (author of this article), and their son, Ananda Balayogi, 21, (Swami's designated successor). Both are citizens of India. Address: 16-A Mettu St., Chinnamudaliarchavady, Kottakuppam (Via Pondicherry) 605 104 India.