Meet an 82-Year-Old Hermit From the High Himalayas
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Our ashram (from which Hinduism Today is published) was blessed to have Swami Divyananda Saraswati join us for the celebration of Maha Sivaratri. This delightful 82-years-young swami has spent much of the last half century living high in the Himalayas, in a cabin above the remote pilgrimage destination of Badrinath, sacred to Lord Vishnu. Before his renunciation, Swamiji was associated with Mahatma Gandhi in India's freedom struggle and the land redistribution movement.

Hinduism Today: Swamiji, please tell us about life in the Himalayas.

Swami Divyananda: I dreamed of the Himalayas from my early years. Above Badrinath I found a valley, just three mountains on three sides with one big river flowing and some small streams. I said, "This place is meant for me. Lord Siva is there. He will take care of me."

HT: Do you get visitors?

Swamiji: Sometimes sadhus visit the cottage. It is our pleasure sometimes to prepare seventy glasses of tea in one day. But for weeks, when it is cold, nobody comes.

HT: What do you do for heat?

Swamiji: Nothing in particular. I live in a sort of refrigerator. My God, it gets very, very cold. Sometimes, I tell you, I slept at night with my knees joined to my neck.

HT: We've heard stories that there are sadhus in the Himalayas that are 100, 200 years old. Have you ever met such sadhus?

Swamiji: Yes, in my meditation I have met persons like that. Actually, they live in their astral body, not in the physical body. Under divine command they live to help other sadhakas who really deserve their help. Sometimes in my meditations I have met such sages, some very ancient sages.

HT: What do you meditate on?

Swamiji: Meditation can be on form, on name, on quality and on the Absolute Reality. So I do all the meditations according to my mood. When I do my own meditation, then I go very deep. We may call it root meditation. One hour I do pranayama, and other things.

HT: Were you ever married?

Swamiji: Yes, I was married. My wife and my husband is always with me, because I am married to God. There is no fear of divorce!

HT: Please tell us about your guru.

Swamiji: He was Sri Swami Abhinava Satchitanand Tirtha Swamiji Maharaj. the Shankaracharya of Dwarka Mutt. My guru had only two monk disciples. He was a very highly God-Realized soul. I had a vision of him in my dream before I met him. When I met him, I recognized him and he also recognized me. My guru used to run many institutions, colleges and children's schools. My Guruji wanted me to take up [the leadership of the Mutt]. He was my guru, I couldn't disobey him. I told my guru, "I will do whatever you want. I spent my whole life in society, and now I have gone to the Himalayas for solitude. You are my guru. I do not want to conceal my feelings from you. But I want to stay in solitude." He understood and gave his blessings.

HT: What is the Swami Divyananda Sharda Foundation?

Swamiji: I had some money from before my renunciation which I gave to make an institution and to give scholarships to willing, God-minded students. To receive a scholarship the student must be of a religious mind, single and have faith in our Hindu culture and religion. There are three things it does: educational service; social service, such as in calamities, floods and famine; and dispensing spiritual knowledge amongst the people.

HT: What sampradaya do you adhere to?

Swamiji: It is very difficult to answer this question. People often ask me, "Swami, to what do you belong?" I tell them, "Let me think for a while." I think that I belong to all sampradayas, because I accept the basic teachings of all. The basic teachings are not different. The aim of sampradayas is to reach God. I worship the Mother aspect of God. Now in my present level of, you can say, God consciousness, I don't see any difference anywhere. Wherever I go, I see the same deity. I go to all temples. I worship all Gods.

HT: How do you keep so young?

Swamiji: The first thing is brahmachariya, self-control. Second thing is a very pure diet, simple food. For the last 42 years I have been living on fresh fruits and

vegetables. I eat only enough for my hunger to be satisfied. One thing more is my belief in God. I believe my primary responsibility is to do my duty to God. I should not worry about what comes in the end. I believe in His justice, in His fearlessness. With that attitude mentally I am very free, very easy in mind and heart.

HT: What are your observations on the West?

Swamiji: Internally I don't see any difference. For me the Divinity there is the same Divinity here. But externally there is a difference. God is the one truth, and yet God can express Himself in many ways. The Himalayas is the austerity aspect of God and North America is the luxury aspect of God. So it is all Divine.

HT: What is your insight into the relationship between Muslims and Hindus in India?

Swamiji: Just as love begets love, fanaticism begets fanaticism. If you find any fanaticism in Hindu religion, it is not because Hindus are fanatics. It is because fanaticism begets fanaticism. So fanaticism has to go from all sides. Certain mistakes were made by the [founding] political leaders of India, initial mistakes, great blunders, I would say. Indian society has had to reap the consequences. Secularism does not mean Godlessness. You have to believe in God. You have to respect your way, and you have to show respect to others. That is the meaning of secularism. You don't discard God, religion and all truth and philosophy in the name of secularism. This was a wrong meaning of secularism that they took, and this is the cause of all the present maladies. They forgot that all ethics is contained in religion. In the name of secularism they removed all religion and the good teachings of our ancient seers and sages from the students' books and courses. That was very unfortunate. It is not easy to set things right now. Cooperation and understanding have to be developed.

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