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Published by Anonymous on Apr. 01, 1995

Editorial

Waylaying Wayfarers' Waywardness

The gift of grace is not granted to the false disciple who thinks not of sundering the soul's fetters, nor of annihilating worldly desires, but takes instead a wayward course.

Tirumantiram 1688

By the Editor

Behold the ashram, literally a "place of striving," quiet, rustic havens far from the madding crowd. Forested retreats where souls can reflect, subdue the senses, think only of the Divine, engage single-mindedly in the legendary yogic disciplines. Places of peace. Sanctuaries of silence where the one and only desire is for desirelessness. Right? Wrong.

Today there are thousand-room ashrams in the Himalayas where every manner of worldliness is openly, if reluctantly, permitted, where sadhana is spoken of more than practiced and less than politics. City ashrams in every nation attract the curious more than the serious. It is a fact that not every seeker is destined to be a sadhu vowed to silence, eating sparingly and chanting all day on his beaded mala. Groups, like individuals, are not static. They grow, change, go through things. Young groups tend to be expansive, energetic, eager, over-reaching in their ambitions to save the world from itself. Mature groups are stable, provident, inward, with higher-some might say more old-fashioned-requirements for members. Still, readers will understand our dismay that ashrams, though not dwindling, are deteriorating.

While there will always be a balance between quantity and quality, when ashrams become mere unhostile hostels, we cringe. Many will naturally be common, with a broader mission, like a MacDonalds; hopefully, a few will remain inwardly extraordinary, like the remarkable Ashoka Bhavan eatery in Madurai. It is of those we speak.

When the 6th century Greek philosopher and mathematician, Pythagoras, started his ashram, he wanted only ardent students. Life was shorter in those days, and there was no time for half-hearted geometry nerds. Pythagoras accomplished this by requiring a simple precondition-to enter his gates one had to fast, on water only, for three days and nights, on the stone steps. It worked and his school flourished, with the right people inside its walls.

There are other strategies, of course. Some ashrams are built on the wind-swept crags of uninhabited mountains, where the snow drifts 40-feet deep in the winter. But even that doesn't assure quality control in this age, what with 4WD vehicles and helicopters. In the early 60s we had an ashram in the mountains of Nevada, 7,000 feet high and not easy of access. Still, yoga was the fad and droves of hippies found their way to our door. To preserve our contemplative lifestyle and ashram character, in 1970 we moved to a tiny island, the world's most remote land mass, surrounded by the world's largest ocean, the Pacific. From here you can travel 2,500 miles in any direction and not reach land. Still visitors come, sometimes several dozen a day. I know what your thinking, "You might have more seclusion if you stopped sending your paper to 250,000 readers each month." Good point, and well taken. Still, we can see that with modern travel, remoteness is no longer sufficient protection. It's just too easy to get anywhere now.

One of South India's most popular ashrams has a subtle strategy that works wonders. Though they can afford just about anything, they have intentionally kept their place ruggedly austere, with few modern amenities. Rocks serve as the ashram laundry. Showers and rooms are shared by dozens of residents. Meals are healthy but meager. Many hours of karma yoga, not the easy kind, fill the daily routine, no exceptions. And personal demands are made on all who live there. No coddling. No easy life. Lots of tapas and spiritual opportunity. So you know how long those who are looking for the easy way to enlightenment stay.

Some of the most effective ways will not be found in any managerial video or CD for CEOs. Witness the sage who swears at visitors he intuitis are on-lookers, or

stoops to grab a stone to throw their way. That's communication, and few will brave such an act even to draw near a Great One.

Perhaps the greatest guarantor that ashram residents will be diligent, dedicated souls is the character of its preceptor. If he or she is the living embodiment of the spiritual ideals that are taught, that becomes the touchstone of striving, the impetus of change for all who come. They want in their hearts to be like him or her, to be that pure, that selfless, that high-minded. Add to that the leader's ability to set rules (uncowed by the conventional western wisdom that holds rules are for children and the infirm) and then enforce them. Strong leaders end up with strong followers and effective ashrams.