Former SYDA Co-Guru Explains
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In the following telephone interview, conducted on December 15, 1985, Venkateshwar, former co-guru of Siddha Yoga Dham Foundation, shared his comments with Hinduism Today.

Hinduism Today: Was it difficult for you to convey the news of the change to the devotees? Venkateshwar No, it was not difficult because it took place in the spiritual sphere, not the political sphere. It was Baba's will. With Baba everything is right. Everything is good.

Q: What, essentially, was your message to the gathering.

A: I told them that my time as guru was up. That Baba had put me in that position for three years and now I had to step down, that I could no longer serve in that role.

Q: Did Baba instruct you also to change from being a Sannyasin to a householder?

A: No. He left it up to me. That was my decision. But I felt that since I was stepping down and would no longer be the guru, that I should also not be a sannyasin, but should leave that life altogether. If I remained a sannyasin, I felt people would always be confused about my role.

Q: At the time that you took your Sannyas vows, did you look forward to one day no longer being a Sannyasin?

A: No, I didn't.

Q: And at that time, you fully intended to fulfill your lifetime vows?

A: Yes, at that time I did.

Q: One effect of your turning back on sannyas may be to cause others to think that it's ok to take lifetime vows and then later on change one's mind and be released through a ceremony like you did. Would you encourage others to stick with it even if it seems difficult?

A: Yes, I would encourage them to stay with it No matter what role you play in life, there will always be many difficulties, many trials...

Q: Did Gurumayi advise you on whether or not to remain a sannyasin?

A: No. She didn't She said it was my choice.

Q: How did you think of renouncing Sannyas?

A: I had a talk with the Mahamandaleshwara. He is the one who gives all the Sannyas dikshas. And after talking with him and sharing my feelings about the matter, he shared his views. He said that even though I would no longer be guru, that I could still remain a Sannyasi and remain in the order, perhaps in a lesser seat This would be like the Mahamandaleshwaras in north India. There one will serve in the highest seat for a time and then he will step down and another will take his place. But I felt that if I was not going to be in that seat that it was better if I did not continue in that role at all.

Q: What did the older swamis think?

A: They finally said that if that was what I really wanted then that was what I should do. That the choice was up to me.

Q: Among those who have left your order, are you the first to have such a ceremony?

A: Yes, I am the first. I didn't want to do anything that was not proper. So we had a ceremony in which we conducted the funeral rites for Swami Nityananda, and two of our other Swamis conducted that...In another ceremony they conveyed power into a statue, gave life to it - one of the Swamis did that with his own prana - and that became Venkateshwara. We also did the Upanayana or sacred thread ceremony for me, just as for a young person. This was because when you take Sannyas, all that you are is consigned to the flames and you are no longer the same person.

Q: Do you feel different now?

A: Yes. That power, Baba's power, is no longer there in me as the guru. I am just a devotee now.

It was sad, because people get attached. Just like when someone dies, one is attached. So many people became attached to me as the guru. And even now I have to tell them not to look at me in that way anymore, that once I was guru, once I sat in that seat and served in that way, but I am not that anymore. It may take time, but I think everyone will accept it

Q: Would you regret it if others followed your example?

A: It is easy to blame one's own actions on another person, or to think that what happens to you is the result of someone else. I don't think my action should necessarily be a precedent for others.

Q: Did anyone besides you and Gurumayi know of Baba's instructions?

A: No. No one else knew. Others were told things by Baba at various times which later they understood in this light. But no one was told directly. For example, Baba once said that his successor would be a woman, and people thought he must have meant a woman and a man, but now they understand. Also Baba used to say to me that in the future Gurumayi would be my guru, and that I would have to worship her.

Q: Have you encountered anyone who doubts that Baba planned this all in advance?

A: There are always those who make trouble. There is one group, probably not worth mentioning, who have certain doubts,...but if everything was believed in this world then that would truly be a blessing from God. I would not call them devotees, because if they were devotees they would not be making trouble but would accept the will of the guru.

Q: Do you feel that having just one guru will be better for SYDA?

A: Oh yes. I was just thinking about that Now it is just like with Baba - one guru. When there were two it always raised questions, "Oh, Baba made two gurus. Why did he make two." Now there are no doubts, no feeling that one needs to choose between the two.

Q: Do you think the public will have any difficulty with a woman guru?

A: No I don't think so. At this time in the world, I think it will not be a problem. In fact with a woman as guru it is even better. And it is like when you are worshipping the Goddess. When you worship Durga, you don't think of her as a woman. Same with Gurumayi, she is just the guru, not a woman or a girl or a lady. And now with all this fighting for woman's rights and everything, I think it is good that a woman is guru. Baba is showing that anything is open to women, that spiritually they are the same. There is no difference.