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Canadian Sannyasini Captures Audiences with Her Youthful, Down-to-Earth Message

By Rangana Lahiri, California, USA

Siddheshvari Devi was staying as a guest in an upscale, elegant home in Danville, just outside San Francisco. I had come armed with a sheaf of questions--"Who is your teacher?" "What inspired you to become a sannyasini?" etc.--but before long, I found myself asking this sagely soul questions about things that pertained more to my life than to hers.

Stately and graceful, Siddheshvari Devi is also down-to-earth, friendly and exudes a spiritual self-confidence that clearly empowers her mission of spreading age-old Vedic teachings of love and harmony. She is affectionately addressed as Didiji, "respected sister." Fittingly, her words carry the sweetness and informality as if coming from one's own caring elder sister. Though she is comfortable talking on any subject, her pivotal message is that lasting happiness is not in pursuing extravagant materialism but rather in nurturing the spiritual side of our beings.

What struck me most is that she said that to attain the divine

state it is not necessary to renounce the world and practice some lonely sadhana, or penance, alone in a forest or high on a mountain top. Instead, she said reassuringly, it is enough that we let God, or spirituality, into our lives one step at a time.

I asked her, "How?" She explained, "By imagining the Lord to be a part of your everyday life. For example, when you are cooking, imagine Him standing beside you and that you are cooking for Him. Similarly, everything else that you do should be an offering to Him. Consciously let Him flood into your life and then turn over all your emotions to Him," she said. "Let your ego go completely."

Soul-Search at Age 13 in Canada

Didiji was born in India, raised in Canada from age thirteen, went back to India to find her guru and has been teaching in the West since 1987. Though still young, she has become quite popular in Canada and other Hindu-populated countries by her straightforward, easy-to-understand approach and soulful presence.

I was particularly curious how she got inspired to follow the renunciate life, a lifestyle historically so dominated by men. She shared candidly that even from a very early age she had questioned the purpose of life--so full of seemingly meaningless chores and activities --and had also been terrified of death. It became an inner turmoil. This, coupled with her desire to know the ultimate Truth first led her to the sanctuary of temples and spiritual gatherings. At one such temple, she fell in love with Lord Krishna. Then in 1983, at a stirring lecture

by a sannyasini, she found answers to her deepest questions.

With this sannyasini's help, Didiji traveled to India to find Jagadguru Sri Kripalu Maharaj, who accepted her as his disciple. It is in his teachings that she truly found herself and her purpose in life. It is with his guidance and blessings that she now travels and preaches in Canada, West Indies, Trinidad and the US. She conducts satsangs in devotees' homes and also in public halls, etc. These usually include a short talk drawing on the teachings of her guru, the Bhagavad Gita, Ramayana, Vedas and Puranas--occasionally even the Koran or Bible. She says, "Be proud of being a Hindu, but also respect all other religions." She leads devotees in devotional song accompanied by the dholak, then distributes prasad. She then responds to people's questions.

In an age when so many talk of love and harmony, words can begin to sound hollow. But listening to Didiji was more than hearing. It was more like experiencing--you could catch the feeling from her. After my two-hour newspaper interview, I felt a renewed appreciation of spiritual life and how to practically integrate it into our hectic modern living.

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Sidebar: Didiji Interview

Hinduism Today: To attain to divinity, does diet matter?

Siddheshvari Devi: Certainly. I am a vegetarian. What we eat does have a profound effect on the state of our mind. It is

important that we eat natural and fresh foods like fruit, vegetables, milk and whole grains. Overcooking foods destroys their nutritional value. And putting in too much oil and spices to satisfy the taste buds disturbs the mind. Still, I won't insist that people adhere to any strict rules.

HT: How can people go beyond a materialistic lifestyle?

SD: This is difficult for those who have been indoctrinated into materialism from a very early age, but not impossible. For all of us, the ultimate goal in life is union with God. To achieve this takes regular practice. Set aside one hour a day, everyday--no matter what other pressing engagements or duties you might have--to be by yourself with the Lord. Open your heart to Him completely. Invite Him into your life. He will come in and fill it with love and grace. Petty desires, emptiness, ignominy, drudgery and anger will be flooded away.

HT: Is a guru necessary?

SD: In the beginning, do whatever you are most comfortable with--meditation, reading scripture, bhajan etc. But eventually, whatever you do by yourself is not enough. It is essential then to follow the path pointed out by a guru.

HT: How does a guru point out the way?

SD: A guru is a teacher and a guide. Just like it is virtually impossible to master any language or any other discipline without a teacher, so it is with the spiritual goal. The true guru has only your good at heart. His love is a microcosm of the infinite divine love. I do have to warn you though that there are many impostors who are out there posing as divine guides, preying on the emotions of unsuspecting seekers, interested only in the size of your wallet.

HT: Should we go out and look for a guru?

SD: You must actively look for your spiritual teacher. Effort really counts. Then pray to the Lord with all your heart that He may come to you in the form of a guru.

HT: It seems like whenever one tries to meditate, the mind wanders all the more. Do you have any solutions?

SD: If your mind wanders, follow along with it, only just remember to take the Lord along.