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TRANSITION

Maha Samadhi at 74

Beloved Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami passes away on November 12, 2001, leaving a half-century of work that sparked a Hindu renaissance, and a global fellowship led by a monastic order from six nations to continue his vision

Most Hinduism Today readers already know that Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami attained Maha Samadhi at his ashram in Kauai, Hawaii. Once he was diagnosed with terminal cancer, this edition of Hinduism Today was postponed so we could report his passing. Here we tell the story of Gurudeva's final month. Our upcoming issue, March/April/May, 2002, will be entirely dedicated to his remarkable life and achievements.

Gurudeva's life mission began in 1949 when Yogaswami, the great sage of Sri Lanka, ordained him

with a tremendous slap upon the back, saying, "This will be heard in America! Now go around the world and roar like a lion. You will build palaces and feed thousands." For more than fifty years, the mystic whom Yogaswami named "Subramuniya" roared like a lion, built holy temples, bridged East and West and taught God Realization to all who sat before him. Suddenly, in early October, 2001, news came that Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, our Gurudeva, would soon be departing his physical body.

Hardly a month after Gurudeva dynamically toured a dozen nations in Europe with 72 of his devotees, he began to experience persistent abdominal pain and fatigue. On October 9, blood tests disclosed severe anemia, and subsequent hospital examinations revealed advanced, metastasized intestinal cancer. The hospital's specialists, as well as Gurudeva's personal physician, Dr. Tom Yarema, several radiologists and oncologists in Hawaii, Washington State and California, and his ashram's ayurvedic doctor, all offered the same conclusion—Gurudeva would survive three to six months, probably less. Intensive and invasive treatment with surgery, chemotherapy and radiation might gain him even a few months more, but the chances of remission were slim, and none recommended this course of action. "Get away from doctors for a few days," advised Dr. Tom, "and consider your options."

The multiple cancers were already so advanced that Gurudeva was unable to digest food, and his speech was being slightly impaired by two tumors in the brain. Medications given to control these problems brought unwelcome and unpleasant side effects.

In the course of his years of ministry, Gurudeva had often counseled devotees faced with their own or a loved one's pending death. He formalized his advice in his Nandinatha Sutras, stating that devotees "in their last days avoid heroic, artificial perpetuation of life and prefer not to die in a hospital but at home with loved ones, who keep prayerful vigil;" and "in cases of terminal illness, under strict community regulation, tradition does allow fasting as a means of mors voluntaria religiosa""self-willed religious death," prayopavesha in Sanskrit. On October 12, Gurudeva decided to stop taking nourishment. A few days later he declined medication as well, except to relieve pain.

So there it was the Diagnosis, cancer; the Prognosis, terminal; and his Decision, neither treatment nor nourishment. It would be 32 days until Gurudeva passed away near midnight hours before Deepavali. It was to be a month in which monastic and family disciples alike would struggle to adjust to the emotional trauma and physical reality of the passing of a great man who had been so vigorous, active and seemingly

healthy just weeks before. He requested that only his monks tend to him, and that devotees honor his privacy. He did not want their last memories of him to be of his weakened and dying state. Devotees came anyway. Nearly two hundred arrived from around the world over the next five weeks just to be near, knowing they would not be able to see him, staying as long as job and home obligations would allow, some for a few days, some for a week or two, a few for the "duration." They joined daily meetings with Gurudeva's senior acharyas to hear of his current condition, to talk of what was happening, to share personal experiences of Gurudeva and to cope inwardly with his impending departure. Several shared dreams of joyous preparations being made in the inner worlds for Gurudeva's imminent arrival.

Gurudeva's successor, Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami, who led many of these meetings, explained that everyone, close devotees and monks alike, went through a three-stage process. The first stage was intense sorrow, crying, being unable to accept that Gurudeva was actually going to die. The second stage brought a more philosophic perspective: that Gurudeva was not going anywhere, that he himself said he'd now be working with us 24 hours a day instead of just 16, just as Yogaswami had successfully guided

Gurudeva from the inner worlds for 37 years after his own Maha Samadhi. Each was eventually able to step back from the grief and say, "Yes, I do know that the soul is immortal. I do know there are higher levels of existence than this world in which the soul can dwell. And, yes, I really do know that Gurudeva is still here for me."

Then the big question, "What next?" In an inspired morning discourse, Bodhinatha explained Gurudeva's broad vision of the Sri Subramuniya Rishi Gotra, the band of Saivite devotees, monks and family members, he had brought together in such a way as to perpetuate itself far into the future, just as the rishis founded the various gotras, or lineages, of ancient India which continue to this day. One satguru would be followed by the next satguru, swamis and acharyas by more swamis and acharyas, devoted families by more devoted families, generation after generation. We were only now experiencing the first major transition of this process. All the projects that Gurudeva had started would continue—Kauai Aadheenam, Iraivan temple, his many publications (Dancing, Living and Merging with Siva and Hinduism Today) the Spiritual Park

in Mauritius, his Alaveddy Ashram in Sri Lanka, his support of the Kauai community, his protection of all Hindu priests, preservation of traditional culture and art, his campaign to end domestic violence, promote positive discipline and raise children without corporal punishment. Gurudeva never intended a single one of these efforts to cease with his passing. His goal, in fact, was to establish a self-perpetuating institutional pattern.

At Gurudeva's request, no public announcement was made of his impending Maha Samadhi, though hundreds of close devotees and associates were informed. Dozens of temples and ashrams wrote to say they would be performing special prayers until the transition. Loving messages, expressing shock, sadness and hope for the future, came from Hindus and non-Hindus alike. Sri Pramukh Swami Maharaj of the Lord Swaminarayan lineage, wrote, "Gurudeva's saintliness and spiritual values will continue to guide the whole sampradaya; this has been the tradition of Hinduism." Sita Ram Goel, one of India's most influential Hindu writers and thinkers, wrote, "Gurudeva has done great work for Hinduism, and the recent reawakening of the

Hindu mind carries his stamp." From Dharamsala, the Dalai Lama, whom had met Gurudeva during international conferences, wrote, "His Holiness will certainly remember Gurudeva in His prayers and, as is our tradition, special prayers by a congregation of monks will be performed on his behalf."

Gurudeva's 23 monks lovingly cared for him throughout this time. Teams of two were organized to be at his side in shifts around the clock. At first he remained communicative, though his speech gradually grew faint, diminished to a whisper and, in the final days, disappeared.

Gurudeva had ample time to wrap up loose ends, update his will—mostly a formality, as he had no personal assets—and to answer questions on several crucial issues. In 1995, Gurudeva had designated Bodhinatha as his successor, and Parmacharyas Palaniswami and Ceyonswami as successors in turn after Bodhinatha. The complex institutions he founded had been organized and refined by him to minute detail. All was running smoothly. From a management view, better

preparations for departure and assurance of continuity could hardly have been imagined.

Soon mundane matters faded, and Gurudeva's care became the sole focus. Hospice experts were consulted who advised the monks how to look after Gurudeva and what to expect at each stage. There were trying moments of pain from the cancer about two weeks into the fast until remedial measures took effect. There were also times of joyful company, especially at the beginning when Gurudeva still wanted to watch television with his monks in the evening as he had always done. Together they all laughed at "Tootsie" and "My Cousin Vinny" and enjoyed the music and wit of "Amadeus." Gurudeva's humor did not depart him. He woke up on October 24 and, when asked how he was, quipped, "I'm bored." A monk asked if Gurudeva needed anything, to which he replied, "A new body." That same day, he presented to Bodhinatha the golden strand of rudraksha beads worn by the spiritual head of Kauai Aadheenam.

Always the teacher, Gurudeva never stopped instructing those around him. "People say, 'I sleep eight hours a day, and that is a fact of life.' They say, 'I eat three meals a day, and that is a fact of life.' You say, 'You are the Self,' and they say, 'That is not a fact of life.' That is the ignorant, erroneous thinking that blocks you from knowing the Self. You are the Self right now. Get that strong in your mind. You have all the tools to realize the Self."

Throughout this extraordinary passing, Gurudeva remained in a powerful spiritual consciousness, easily felt by anyone nearby. He never wavered from his decision to fast, and approached death with dignity and resolve. He counseled the monks, "When you get back to your normal routines, play a lot of music and be real happy. Don't worry. I'm going to be all around this place."

On October 27, the first bound copy of Living

with Siva arrived from the printer in Malaysia. It was a great boon, for this was the last book of Gurudeva's trilogy, his final literary project, a consummate summation of Saivism in three one-thousand-page books. The monks rejoiced that he was able to hold the all-color masterpiece in his hands, turn the pages and enjoy seeing his years of work made manifest as an enduring legacy.

The monks started to see the "final gifts" that the hospice nurses described as Gurudeva lived more in the other world than in this. He would look across the room and greet people who were not physically present with "namaskara" or "Om Sivaya." On November 3, he told the attending monks that he had just seen Yogaswami, who said to him, "Everything is finished. Everything is completed." Then Gurudeva said, "Yogaswami is coming tomorrow," and insisted on sitting in a chair in the center of his room. He sat all day, facing the door

through which visitors would always come, and during this time a priest performed a paramparai puja near his room, to invoke not only Yogaswami but all the gurus of the lineage who traditionally come to personally escort a satguru to Siva. He returned to his bed the next day, but only to sit up on the side, not wanting to lie down. In fact, he sat up virtually throughout the entire 32 days, as if to insist on leaving this Earth yogically, upright, not on his back.

By November 8, he could no longer sit up at all, as he had been doing day and night, and had to lay back some. Hardly present, he would respond only to communication made on his in-breath, and not at all during the minute or so when there was no breath. An other-worldly peacefulness came over him, and the monks were comforted that he was not in pain. He grew weaker with each passing hour, and at 11:54 pm on November 12, 2001, took his last breath. The official

cause of death was cardiopulmonary failure.

As instructed by Gurudeva, all the monks gathered one hour later, at 1:00 am, November 13, in the ashram's Guru Temple, the meditation and audience room adjacent to the Nataraja Temple. There the swamis blessed and placed upon Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami the Kartar pendant. He ascended the Guru Pitham, the lineage's seat of authority, and spoke to the monks for the first time as satguru, kindly and humbly assuring us that all was well and that we would together carry forth Gurudeva's noble mission with full energy and determination.

Gurudeva had, in the tradition of our lineage, requested to be cremated, ideally within 24 hours of his death. So, by sunrise, the monks had prepared the room for devotees to come for final darshan. Family by family, they entered, to sit quietly in meditation, to cry, to

gaze in appreciation and to touch their beloved master's feet one last time. Devotees spent the morning decorating the hand-made wooden casket, and at 3:30 PM the swamis placed Gurudeva's body in it and set it on a flower-bedecked palanquin in the courtyard. Family men, in turns, carried the bier in procession from the ashram to the waiting van for the 20-mile drive to the crematorium in Koloa. Not only Hindu devotees, but neighbors and other island residents took turns as pall bearers.

The memorial at the island's crematorium was simple, informal, but powerfully Hindu. Bodhinatha addressed the group, explaining how Hindus look at death, especially the passing of a great saint. Kauai's mayor, Maryanne Kusaka, reflecting the feelings of island residents, said, "How blessed we are to have had Gurudeva in our lives. We do not fully realize his greatness." Island friends brought many bushels of flowers to offer.

Gurudeva's 13 swamis bore the palanquin to the crematorium furnace, there completing the last rites according to Hindu custom, with Bodhinatha igniting the flames. Two days later, Ekadasi Rudra Homa was performed to install Gurudeva's sandals in the sanctum sanctorum of Kadavul Hindu temple, and to place his ashes in the ashram's meditation cave. It was a powerful ceremony, led by priest Janahan, and every devotee present later reported the intense, even overwhelming feeling of Gurudeva's presence. "It was more powerful than any kumbhabhishekam," said one. And upon this high point, monks and devotees bid farewell to their satguru's earthly presence and welcomed his inner ascension to Siva's Abode where there is neither birth nor death.