Searching for Answers
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YOUTH

Searching for Answers

My interview with Swami Tejomayananda helped me be more inspired about Hinduism and renewed my spiritual life

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I was sure that this vacation was going to be like any other. For weeks after my parents had told me that we were going to Florida, I expected nothing more. I had every intention of stepping on and off a plane with no other purpose than to enjoy myself as any normal 16-year-old would. My agenda was clearly different from that of my parents, who eagerly awaited Swami Tejomayananda's lectures on a specific aspect of the Ramayana. To be perfectly open and honest, I wasn't particularly enthusiastic about attending Swamiji's lectures in Tampa.

I didn't see the necessity in going to the Swamiji's talks, because of my somewhat closed-minded skepticism. Consequently, I had to be pushed, pulled and cajoled to attend the first of the four lectures.

I was pretty unreceptive to most of Swamiji's first discourse. I

later attributed this relative disinterest to the many unanswered questions that I had had for a long time. At my mother's suggestion and further urging, I decided to ask Swami Tejomayananda those questions. I hoped that his answers would dispel some of the skepticism I felt concerning certain ideology and concepts of both the Chinmaya Mission and Hinduism itself. In doing this, I also hoped to share his answers with other youth who may have the same sentiments and doubts. This article is meant mainly to serve this purpose.

I hesitated to talk to Swami Tejomayananda. I wasn't sure how he would handle my questions or perceive my skepticism. This made me nervous. I was understandably (but pleasantly) surprised, then, when he readily agreed to give me 45 minutes of his limited time. I quickly readied my tape recorder as he expertly attached the small microphone to his shirt.

"Let me have a look at these questions," he said. Without any further ado, Swamiji began to set me on the path of a different understanding. When I asked him what the goals of Chinmaya Mission are, he told me that it endeavors to provide practical means for spiritual growth, enabling people to become positive contributors to society. Mission leaders hope to spread a certain ideology, "look at the world or your life as a whole, and live a whole life," in order to trigger an inner transformation and bring happiness to people. This one simple sentence struck me as deeply meaningful, yet easy to comprehend. It was also the first sentence that made me begin to be receptive to his words.

I asked him why teenagers need to be concerned with such spiritual growth and ideology. To this he answered, "So many things, people and situations come into your life for a short time, then go away. But you are the permanent aspect of your life. You need to know so much about these impermanent things. How much more do you think you need to know about yourself?" He told me that knowledge of the Vedanta and the ensuing spiritual growth allows a person to understand and know about him or herself. It is therefore relevant to people of all ages, including youth. Swamiji continued: "We think that spirituality is only for older people, but spirituality is not a kind of activity. Doing something special is not spirituality, but doing everything in a special way is. Spirituality is being your own selfÃ□what you are." This last sentence really captured my attention: "In order to know yourself, you have to be yourself."

To put it in another way, spirituality is understanding who and what we are and then living our life based on that understanding. This applies to all individuals, including youth. Swamiji went on to tell me that everyone lives and acts according to their vision of life. Spiritual enlightenment offers such a vision to live by.

I understood what he had said so far, and why spiritual growth applied to people of all ages. But I still didn't

fully understand why it is so important. To this question, Swamiji patiently answered that obtaining a spiritual education is like preparing for an exam. Just as doing well in an exam requires preparation of one kind, so too does living successfully and well require preparation of another kind: spiritual growth. This education serves us when all else fails, when nothing else will help us face certain problems and challenges in life.

I asked him two other (and perhaps rather impertinent) questions. I wanted to know if there is an "easy" way in which one could grow spiritually. To this Swamiji said with a laugh, "So, does this mean that you are not willing to work hard and pay the price in order to receive such an education? But you are willing to do so for other things?" As I smiled rather sheepishly, he patiently said, "Discipline is the first step. As Swami Chinmayananda said, 'Let your mind be where your hands are.' " In other words, stay extremely focused on the task at hand. He also told me that obedience goes hand in hand with the development of proper discipline: "Even science has made progress by obeying and following the laws of nature, not going against them."

I also wanted to know whether gurus are really necessary for spiritual growth education. Once again, Swamiji laughed. "The very fact that you are asking this question shows that you need a guru!" I was definitely

humbled by his answer. "We recognize that teachers are necessary for school and coaches are necessary for sports. Why is spirituality any different? We do need gurus, just as we need teachers."

My final doubt concerned dietary habits. Being an occasional nonvegetarian myself, I wondered why Hinduism extols vegetarianism. After all, don't plants have life just as animals do? "The answer depends on your vision of life, which I mentioned before," Swamji replied, "There is life in everything, plants and animals. Life is sustained by life, yesÃ□but we need discrimination. Plants and other creatures can live without us, but we cannot live without them. Therefore, we need to live in harmony with them." The conclusion: take only what you need from nature that is necessary to live decently, and nothing more.

Though he told me he didn't like interviews, Swamiji was perfectly willing to help meÃ□a young, doubting HinduÃ□to learn how to doubt a little less. I really think the answers he gave me did help me to be more receptive to all kinds of knowledge. I was able to listen to the remaining three lectures in a more open-minded fashion, taking many things that Swamiji said to heart. My skepticism isn't totally gone, of course, because a few answers and talks can't make it disappear completely. However, now that I have been started on

the path of my own inner growth, I am confident that, with some more effort on my part and help from those as knowledgeable as Swami Tejomayananda, I can overcome all of my qualms. I want to urge those young Hindus who as questioning and doubting as I to do the same.

About the author: Aparna Balakrishnan, 16, is a senior at Roland Park Country School in Baltimore, Maryland. She enjoys writing and is an aspiring journalist. Her article is based on her interview with Swami on June 25, 2001.

Transforming Lives

As part of the 50th anniversary celebrations of the Chinmaya Mission, a full-color, coffee-table volume was published, Chinmaya Mission, Transforming Lives (320 pages, 10" x 13", Chinmaya

Publications, us$75). This elegant book is a tribute to Swami Chinmayananda and his life work. It is an extensive collection of photographs of Swami, his followers and his life work all over the world. Brief explanations and inspirational quotes accompany striking photographs. The last section is on Swami's successor, Swami Tejomayananda, and his work of perpetuating the ideals and mission of Swami Chinmayananda. A treasurable book for devotees and friends of Swami Chinmayananda.

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