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Sri Ganapati Sachidananda answers some tough questions for American Hindu youth

Mysore-based Sri Ganapati Sachchidananda Swami, a devotee of Lord Dattatreya, visited several US cities from June 27 through July 24, 2000. Swamiji is well known for his healing music. He believes that all music affects the human body's 72,000 minor nerves and 14 central nerves, or nadis. According to his devotees, his therapeutic music has healed millions of people. For this interview, Hinduism Today correspondent Archana Dongre asked Swami a series of questions submitted by young teens in the US.

Why are there superstitions?

Superstitions are determined by context. If you kill an animal for a Goddess like Maha Kali, it is considered a superstition. But if you say a sattvic prayer for the same Goddess, that is not a superstition. Fasting many days for internal purification before performing a fire ceremony is not a superstition. But without the proper spiritual attitude, if you just keep on pouring gallons of ghee into the sacred fire, that is superstition. At our ashram in Mysore, when we do abhisheka, ritual bathing for Siva, we collect the milk used and distribute it to the poor. Rituals, when performed in a spiritual, proper attitude, do not constitute superstition.

Why is the ultimate goal of Sanatana Dharma, moksha, or liberation, not emphasized in our activities as Hindus?

The general tendency of common people is to ask God to bestow on them material things, like a bungalow, car, money, etc. They will ask the priest to perform a ritual for that. It is not the priest's fault that they seek material things. If the priest says, come, I will help you attain moksha, or liberation, many will not come. Out of the four purusharthas, the four aims for a householder, which are dharma (righteousness), artha (wealth), kama (pleasure) and moksha (liberation), a majority of the people seek the first three. But a good guru will lead you toward dharma and moksha.

Why did God create?

God had an intention to create, and gave life to multitudes of souls to show them mercy. He also gave them karmas. By performing good karmas, they would have an opportunity for attaining liberation from the cycle of birth and death. God created gurus to guide souls toward salvation from this world bound by illusion. Creating this world was not a mere play for God.

How should we respond to kids who taunt us, saying that we worship too many Gods, not the one true God?

There are 330 million Gods in the Hindu religion. Everyone's method of worship differs. Some worship a Deity with a form (Saguna Upasana), others prefer contemplating on God without form (Nirguna). Approaches differ, but all worship ultimately goes to the One Supreme Being, just like all rivers finally reach the ocean. To give another analogy, you need one

boat to cross a river, you do not need hundreds of boats to cross the river. So choose your one God.

Are there really demons?

There are three gunas, or qualities: sattva, raja and tamas. The people whose actions are prompted with tamas, the lowly, negative qualities, have demonic, or rakshas tendencies. Righteous conduct, like respecting your parents and teachers, reading good books and studying with a sincere attitude, will enhance the tendencies toward sattva guna, the soul-like qualities, and keep the demonic tendencies away. Rituals introduce you to dharma. Keeping company with people of bad and negative actions will increase tamas guna. Bhakti, or devotion, leads you to sattva guna, and keeps demonic tendencies away.

What is your view of corporal punishment for children and students?

It is wrong. You do not have to inflict physical punishment on children. When teachers and parents inflict bodily punishment on children to discipline them, that means those adults themselves do not possess patience--they lose their temper. In our school in Mysore, the teachers are instructed not to punish the children physically. Discipline is encouraged through moral support, and by relating pertinent stories to them. In extreme cases, the erring students are either asked to stand outside the classroom, or made to fast, go without food for one meal.

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