Two Swamis Carve a Niche in the Western Turf
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Ancient Eastern Teachings are Made New with a Personal Touch

In the beginning when swamis in the West were few, they were unique and their followings were large. They were treated like prophets bearing on ancient wisdom which was fresh and new to devotees. Then more swamis came. As the swamis kept coming, a receptive public kept listening. Nowadays, with many swamis sharing the Western turf, the followings are smaller, more in the style of the Hinduism of India whence these swamis and their teachings came. Something else has changed, too. The craze for instant realization has waned. Spiritual groups tend to be smaller, more cohesive and infinitely more mature then the earlier crowds of sadhana-made seekers. Worship is growing stronger. Today's seekers, more familiar with Eastern teachings tend to "shop around," ever pursuing the glimmer of truth that yields results. Each new swami to the West must use his own spiritual gifts to carve a niche among his brother swamis and contend with the Western public's decreasing spiritual vulnerability. He must answer many questions: What is the true end of spiritual aspiration? Is there really a quick and easy way? Do Hindu teachings not require Hindu commitments? Yet, in the end each spiritual aspirant answers these questions himself as he approaches the swami for guidance. Now, meet Swami Prakashananda Saraswati and Swami Ganapathi Satchidananda, two relative newcomers to the West, independently preaching and opening small yoga centers. In the spectrum of Hindu dharma, the latter promotes Smarta teachings while the former is clearly Vaishnavite. Theirs is a message of love - no less true for having been heard before. Distinctive in their emphasis on personal worship of a personal God, they are trying to give more than the meaning of a word. Their followers, citing practical results, say they do.

A PROFILE

Nan Geller is one of a hundred-odd USA followers of Swami Prakashananda of the International Society of Divine Love. She sums up the results of her year and a half of study with the swami as "a holistic sense of growing completion."

"My experience has been one of a tremendous sense of intellectual fulfillment," says Geller. "My answers seem to come from a direct experience of an affinity with God. My experience of devotion is very heart-warming. I have gotten out of my head and into my heart. It's a sense of contentment that I feel is complete, and yet it seems to grow. I have never had that before."

The swami's teachings are unique in stressing devotion to a personal God, not through external ritual, but through "Divine Love Meditation." This method does not deal with the transcendent form of God but stresses simply "love of God through the remembrance of Radhakrishna." Geller says, "It's like being three years old again - God is a person and He loves you."

The swami's teaching includes lectures, satsang, video tape showings, personal interviews and three-to-five-day "intensives." Bi-weekly satsang is a routine sadhana for dedicated followers who meet at some 15 ISDL centers in the USA, Ireland, India and New Zealand. In the USA - with the exception of one ashram in Philadelphia - centers are home of devotees.

Intensives last up to 14 hours a day. A day's schedule: morning devotions, "transpersonal relaxation" through yoga asanas, breathing exercises and chanting, "opening of the heart" (dialogue with the swami on God-realization) and "introversion" (guided meditation). This day ends at 10:30 PM with devotions and instructions on inner-sleep preparation.

On philosophy, Swamiji writes: "One should know that when intellectual flight stop, true progress towards the divine can start." And, "It can be understood by common sense that a limitless divine power like God cannot be achieved by any limited effort, whatever the spiritual motivation; it can only be attained through His Grace. And to get His Grace you will have to surrender yourself with a deep and sincere feeling of love...The love of God is not a mere hearty experience, but it is the divine perception of Godhead Personality in divine form. Thus, only such saints who visualize the divine form of Godhead can guide a devotee toward the true path of the divine, and their sayings are genuine."

Born in Ayodhya, India, in 1928, Swami was drawn toward God at a young age and took the vows of sannyas at the age of 20. Geller summarizes: "After living alone in

remote regions of the Himalayans, he journeyed to the forests of the central Indian district of Braj, where he remained in isolation for over 20 years. Here his spiritual devotion bore perfect fruit in Divine Love Consciousness. He was graced and allowed entry into the divine depths of love's essence, finding his Divine Beloved in the perfect form of Radhana Krishna. Towards the end of his stay in Braj, his Master requested him to deliver the message of divine love to the world, and in 1972 the International Society of Divine Love was born."

There are no religious restrictions for anyone wanting to practice Divine Love Meditation. Swami Prakashananda says that since God has no religion, religion is not an issue.

For more information, call or write ISDL 809 Loma Prieta Drive, Aptos, CA 95003, phone 408/688-6590.

A PROFILE

Swami Ganapathi Satchidananda

In Texas, Indiana, Pennsylvania, New York and Massachusetts during a recent USA tour, Sri Ganapathi Satchidananda Swamiji joined "old friends and good souls" to share the experience of "the permanent Divine Bliss that God alone gives."

Although he personally worships Shiva, Ganesha, Shakti and other deities, the 40-year-old Swamiji from Mysore, India, stresses devotion to Satguru Mahatma Dattatreya, a deity emboding the essence of the Hindu trinity: Brahma, Vishnu and Siva. Guru Datta, he says, will "bestow boons, remove suffering and appear the moment one remembers him."

Swamiji stresses the importance of personal experience over intellectual study. "I can only help you intuit God," says Swamiji. "And this is something which cannot be expressed in words."

Long-time American devotee Padma Vakthi Devi told Hinduism Today the details of the swami's early training are unknown. Who was his Guru? Who initiated him into sannyas? Where and how did he perform his sadhana in preparation for his work as a swami?

"His mother was his first Guru," says Padma. "At some point later in life he had another guru but it is not any one who is known or that we can identify. That whole time period is somewhat mysterious. He never really talked about what occurred then." Yet, this is not unusual since it is traditional for swamis to not stress personal history.

Swamiji is said to be blessed with the spiritual power to cure devotees of cancer, leprosy and other afflictions. Although he accepts the accolades, he says such powers are secondary since only true faith and devotion can help in Self-Realization.

He is also well versed in yoga, Sanskrit, ayurvedic medicines and the Vedas. For thousands of his devotees (There are some 100 in the USA) he is a saint, seer and Guru who can "light the spark of true love in one's heart." Although he is said to have risen to "divine stature" beyond "man-made barriers" of religion, race, nationality and language, Swamiji sings bhajan, performs puja and homa and stresses worship of a personal God through ritual - distinctively Hindu - in accordance with ancient scriptures. Yet, like so many other Hindu teachers, even as he invites devotees to join him in Hinduism in West, as practiced by born Hindus, and Hindu swamis with western followings.

Padma says, "The swamiji's message is that you should worship God in the form that you can relate to. If you are a Christian, you don't have to change to Hinduism."

Swamiji says his goal is "to propagate bhakti, devotion, love and Self-realization" and that man's purpose is "to seek God and His Grace within, while performing his duties in the world without."

The swami also conducts seven-day intensives which include Kriya yoga, breathing techniques and concentration exercises to discipline the mind and senses.

For more information contact: Datta Yoga Center, PO box 792, Fredericktown PA, 15333.