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One Swami's Impact

My five life-changing days with a modern saint

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I returned home from my fourth semester in college mentally and physically tired from final exam week. As my sophomore year came to a close, I looked ahead to a relaxing summer, a time for me to regroup. I have always been what you might call a "regular Hindu" in that I pray to God and I know general Hindu concepts and practices. So, having been away from home for so long, one of the things I had been looking forward to was the opportunity to come to the temple again. Along with home life, it's a sort of reservoir where I can come and replenish myself spiritually. I had also known that His Holiness Sri Sri Sri Tridandi Sriman Narayana Ramanuja Chinna Jeeyar Swamiji was to visit our Sri Siva Vishnu Temple outside Washington, DC, once again in early June.

I was sixteen when Swami was last here in 1996. I attended all the events while Swami was here, and had become somewhat acquainted with who he was and what he did. Although I recognized him then to be an elevated soul, I was still too immature to fully absorb the whole situation and be internally

touched by it. In addition, the circumstances of this visit would be different from 1996, in that there has been an ongoing, unprecedented Koti Kumkuma Archana for Sri Lakshmi during the preceding four months, and the Swami was coming to participate in the final five days of it. My mother and sister had been consistently participating during those preceding months and found it an enriching experience.

It is difficult to articulate the profound messages I took away from those five days, but I can say that, through the Swami's words, I believe I have gained some understanding about the essence of Hinduism--where all its universality and greatness lie. At this stage in my academic career and my life in general, I have been asking questions as I seek to grasp my identity. Many of the more spiritual questions, which I felt were the most relevant ones, led me to probe my religion. I was looking for answers of what role my religion plays in my life. I sought concrete answers, and received them through our Swami. It was because of him that I was able to understand that we worship the all-pervading supporter of the universe around us, visible and invisible, Sriman Narayana. The issue of these many Deities that Hindus worship and in many cases quarrel amongst each other about was put to rest by Swami's explanation that we worship the Lord of the universe in a form we choose, a form He accepts but is not limited to. The power that sustains everything and everyone is intangible to us, invisible but all-pervading. We call it God, and we give it many forms which we worship. But I was then able to realize they are all One.

Our Swami preaches the importance of the partnership between knowledge and practice. Only when combined are the

two of these useful and beneficial. The Swami emphasizes the importance of doing things correctly, and yet he does this without making worship seem tedious or painstaking. He simply says that there is a right way and a wrong way of approaching God. Just as a specific key will fit a specific lock, so too are there specific protocols to be followed when worshipping God.

But equally or more so than protocol, the swami speaks of the devotee. After all, we worship God not for His sake, but for our own. It is for our own enlightenment that we seek the divine power. So what does the devotee need to do to get closer to God? I learned from our Swami that I should accumulate qualities that bring me closer to the Divine, such as compassion, selflessness, respect, discipline, and suppress those qualities which disrupt and hinder that progress, including anger, passion, greed and jealousy.

The positive qualities that help us reach God are automatically manifested if we accumulate bhakti, devotion, towards God. I say accumulate, because, for most people, like me, it is something that must be generated and nurtured. True bhakti in most cases is not innate, like a mother's love for a child. I saw that my bhakti must blossom through the consistent practice of worship. It is with bhakti that one should worship God, rather than fear or sense of obligation. The only way for me to generate that kind of love and bhakti towards God is constant prayer, but how does one pray to God constantly?

The Swami cited the Bhagavad Gita on several occasions when answering that question. It is through devotional service to the

Lord. I realized then that worshiping the Lord should be integrated into my lifestyle; it should become a way of life. It does not begin and end with going to the temple and praying or standing before a picture or an idol and praying. Any work we do, let it be an offering to God. My attempt to put this philosophy into practice, however incomplete an attempt, has brought me peace of mind and a sense of control and bliss.

What was further inspiring was the actual yagna, or Vedic fire ceremony, being performed on those days by the temple priests and the disciples of the Swami. The Swami and his disciples brought to our temple immense energy which diffused into and visibly changed all who were present. Our temple priests performed the yagna hand in hand with the disciples. The atmosphere during those five days was a window into Vedic times, an era when the wisdom of Hinduism was undiluted and practiced in its purest essence, where they were performed all the time, everywhere, by enlightened men and women.

One could close one's eyes and leave the parking lot outside the temple where the yagna was being done. One could forget the present, inhale the holy smoke from the sacred fires, feel the energy of the voice of Narasimhacharyalu as he perfectly recites the sacred verses and Vedic mantras, and travel back in time, escaping the trivial worries of modern life.

I look back upon those five days as a period in my life where I was able to open my eyes and become aware of a more subtle and more relevant knowledge than I had ever been previously exposed to, a knowledge that is applicable in all arenas of life.

It made me grateful and proud to be born into my culture and to have at least scratched the surface of the Vedic wisdom which always existed but was manifested from the deep meditation of the most austere, wisest sages in the beginning of time.

My experience with His Holiness has pacified the turbulent waters of life, giving me the knowledge and the strength to progress day by day, spiritually and otherwise. I have by no means done justice to my experience, what I learned, how I improved myself as a person and my life during the Swami's visit. It is beyond the scope of this chronicle and of my ability to articulate.

I write these words to express my humble gratitude, and to pay my sincere respects to the great souls of the past and present who have made available to anyone seeking it the divine knowledge which can dispose of all ignorance and lead to happiness and liberation. Jai Sriman Narayana!

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