A River of Devotion, A Flood of Spirituality
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A wise guru will require good character and a kindly nature before teaching any form of advanced yoga

Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami

K--A BIG K--IS FOR KUMBHA MELA, the largest gathering of humans on Earth--over ten million. It happens rarely, only once every twelve years in Haridwar when Jupiter is aligned with Kumbha, the sign of Aquarius. All the rishis, sadhus, swamis and pundits come out of seclusion and gather to give darshan and bless the people. Only here can you see many of these holy men and women. It took many months for the efficient Indian government to arrange for housing and feeding facilities and divert the Ganga River into another channel in order to build access bridges.

Yes, devotion is what the Kumbha Mela is all about. It is about worship of water, earth, fire and air, and most importantly God in people, and there were a lot of people at the Mela--from the highest, most evolved souls to those experiencing their first or second incarnation, all living, sharing, understanding and even bathing together. It was a wonderful, rewarding event for all who attended and for you now who will read about it and enjoy

the pictures.

To prepare for this unique issue of Hinduism Today, we sent specialists to Haridwar to film, interview and write. Each had to promise not to become so devotional as to forget the real reason for being there! Team Members traveled from Nepal, Delhi and Dehra Dun. Photographers Thomas Kelly, Dev Raj Agarwal, Phal Girota, Steven Huyler and Amit Kumar contributed in large and small measure. Prabha Prabhakar Bhardwaj visited Haridwar just prior to the Mela, while long-time Hinduism Today correspondents Rajiv Malik and M.P. Mohanty, both of Delhi, covered the Mela's culmination on April 14. We also arranged with Swami Chidanand Saraswati (Muniji) of Rishikesh, to provide a guide, translator and access to the event for Ghost Films, Inc., based in Vancouver, Canada, for their TV documentary of the event. Hundreds of slides were couriered to Hawaii, and then our biggest problem began--how to choose the dozen or so that would go in the magazine. Our goal was to take you, our readers, to this holy place, in words and pictures, so you could share the immensity of it, the joy and hardship of it, the darshan, the vision, of it all.

Why were so many rishis, sadhus, swamis, pundits there worshiping with the worshipers? It is because the beginning, the middle and the end of the path is worship. A rishi or sadhu arriving into a high state of consciousness does not give up his love for God and the Gods in whatever form he sees them either with his two eyes, or the third. His devotion does not stop, rather it becomes more intense. He does not stop eating, relating to others. These are all dual things, too. My satguru, Siva Yogaswami, said, "Love pours forth to melt the very stones."

Bhakti yoga is not an intellectual study. It is a practice. It is also not an emotional experience. It is a devotional experience. It is the foundation for enlightenment. It is a way of life. The transformation that comes from living in the permanent state of bhakti is the softening of the heart.

External worship leads to internal worship. The external is taught first because it produces a softened, mellow heart. The patient guru will wait until this has happened within the devotee. Otherwise, any accomplishment attained through intense raja yoga practices will not be sustained. The problems that arise within the devotee's subconscious mind--should he be taught raja yoga before the proper preparation has been mastered--will go back on the guru. The guru will then have to act as the psychiatrist to solve the problems arising from the forced awakening. Whereas a mature bhakta, or devotee, takes such problems, or negative karmas, which are sometimes aroused as a result of deep meditation, to the temple Deities, or to Divine Mother Ganga, to be carried away and dissolved.

Once bhakti yoga has melted the heart, then the deep yoga concepts and meditation techniques of raja yoga may be practiced and take hold. They are to be understood and experienced, not just memorized. The wise guru will never teach deep meditation techniques to angry, jealous, fearful devotees. Such devotees should first learn to serve selflessly, by performing karma yoga projects in the temple or monastery, and then perform simple bhakti yoga until all anger has melted into love. The inner knowing that "All is God's will" is one of the first benefits of bhakti yoga. Only through true bhakti can the devotee achieve and maintain the inner state of

Satchidananda. It is only the true bhakta who can sustain living with God and the Gods unreservedly and begin to internalize his devotion into deeper meditations.

Many yoga teachers in the West teach purely advaitic meditation, with no theism or religious practice. But most who have come from India were raised in devout Hindu homes. They do have within them a firm religious, cultural foundation for yoga. Many, however, do not pass the religious culture on to their devotees. In an orthodox Hindu community they would most likely teach in a more traditional way. Advaita philosophy is appealing to the Westerner. It does not require a change in lifestyle.

The nondual, advaita-based meditations do bring devotees out of the materialistic, externalized state of mind, but more often than not lead them into their confused subconscious state of mind. It is here, within the subconscious, that unresolved problems with family and one's own personal ego begin to appear. Without a proper religious-cultural background and traditional belief system of Sanatana Dharma, these problems are difficult to handle. This turmoil is certainly not the purpose of advaitic meditations, but it is a by-product. The wise guru trains his devotees in traditional Hindu culture and values and teaches the beginning yogas, as well as temple protocol, music, the arts and dance. All these should be mastered to build a proper clear, clean foundation within the subconscious mind. Karma yoga and bhakti yoga are the necessary prelude to the higher philosophies and spiritual practices.

Wise gurus will not initiate anyone into raja yoga techniques

who does not have a sweet nature and a natural outpouring of love, forgiveness and self-effacement. No one auditions for the symphony orchestra until he has mastered all that his first, second and third music teachers have taught him. Suppose a devotee who is not virtuous is taught an intense meditation and practices it ardently over a long period of time until a burst of light is seen. Then the devotee, now feeling quite above others, argues with his or her parents. Or a burst of anger occurs when talking to a friend. At that moment, all the good merit and benefits of the raja yoga awakening are erased. This is because the prana of higher consciousness has been dissipated by the angry words, which now burn deeper into the minds of others than they would have before. No, a sweet, sweet nature must precede raja yoga sadhanas.

On a deeper level, personal individual practices to advance spiritual unfoldment include prostrating before God, Gods and guru, face down, arms and hands outstretched, and in that act totally giving up, giving up, giving up, giving up. In Sanskrit it is called pranipata, "falling down in obeisance." What are these devoted ones giving up? By this act they are giving the lower energies to the higher energies. It is a merger, a blending. When one is performing this traditional devotional act, awakening true prapatti, total surrender, it is easy to see the lower energies from the base of the spine, the muladhara chakra, rising, rising, rising up the spine through all six chakras above it and out through the top of the head. It is transmuting or changing the form of the base energies which breed conflict and resistance--mine and yours, you and me, division, insecurity and separateness--into the spiritual energies.

Once the giving up of the lower is total--body and face on the

ground, hands outstretched before the image of God, Gods or guru--those energies are surrendered into the higher chakras within the devotee, and it is a blissful moment, into the consciousness of us and ours, we and oneness, and inseparable love, thus claiming their individuality not as a separate thing but as a shared oneness with all. Thereafter these devoted ones are able to uplift others, to harmonize forces around them that they work with day after day after day, year after year after year.

No one should perform intensive meditation alone until he or she can serve selflessly and accept praise and blame and criticism without complaint or resentment, but with a sweet smile.

All this and more the Maha Kumbha Mela has revealed.