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Sringeri Shankaracharya Takes Our Questions

The sage speaks about child-rearing, the guru, reconversion to Hinduism and more

Interview by Choodie Sivaram, Bengaluru

During his April, 2011, birthday celebrations, Jagadguru Sri Sri Bharati Tirtha Mahaswamiji, 61st Shankaracharya of Sringeri Math, kindly consented to an interview for the readers of Hinduism Today and responded to questions about modern Hindu living.

How can parents instill spirituality in their children?

It is the duty of parents to inform and educate their children about our culture from a tender age. For example, as children, we were regularly told stories from the Puranas, Ramayana, Mahabharata and Bhagavata. We took in these stories and their morals and ethics. The glory of God, how He saved and elevated His devotees, the way devotees sought Him--these were etched in our minds. It made us resolve to live the same way, carrying these values, as our ancestors had done before us. Thus, whenever any Western hero is highlighted, we were certain that nobody could be greater than our own Rama. And not just at home. These stories were taught to us in our textbooks when I was in school--Ramayana, etc., as well as stories of the great pilgrim centers of our land. I don't think there are any lessons in our textbooks today that highlight and showcase our culture. This is a very serious setback. If an environment to understand our culture is created at home and school, then elevating our children and making them worthwhile citizens is possible. But the situation is now the diametric opposite. Children do not learn our culture at home or school, and are being instead exposed to alien and contrary cultures through TV and cinema. Under these adverse influences, they are becoming rebellious and treating their parents with disregard.

What is your advice for Hindu parents in other countries?

Haven't these parents come from here, India? Whether they are in America or in London, our culture does not change--praying to God, keeping a tulsi plant in front of the house, touching the feet of parents--these are simple things. The parents have grown up in Hindu culture and should carry it and inculcate it in their children wherever they are.

Can the guru's grace be received by darshan, sight, alone?

That depends on the power of the guru. Some gurus speak to devotees. Some of them are in such an elevated state that the mere sight of such a guru makes our life fruitful. These great gurus can transform lives and cleanse people of all sins by just their glance. Chandrasekhara Bharathi Mahaswamiji (1982-1954), the 34th pontiff of Sringeri, is proof of this. Sixty years ago, there was a publication called *The Searchlight*, published from Patna. Its editor, M. S. M. Sharma, was an atheist who would ridicule anyone who had faith in God. In 1926, one of his friends, a devotee of Sringeri, brought him to have darshan of Guruji. Refusing to adhere to protocol of wearing a dhoti and veshti, he insisted on coming in Western attire. Upon his arrival, Chandrasekhara Bharathi had come out to give darshan to people. Sharma was standing behind him, amused at people's stupidity in bowing to a person simply because he was wearing saffron robes. Guruji turned around, and the moment his eyes fell on Sharma, some intense transformation happened in him. Sharma fell to the ground and prostrated, not knowing what was making him do so. As he wrote later of this experience, "Then the miracle happened. The very glance of the guru in a second removed all my atheism. I fell in surrender and could not get up. Guruji asked me to get up and enquired who I was. I told him I was a sinner and had sought him to elevate me. He asked me to come the next day and I went. It was only then I became a human being. Till then, I was an animal. He did not do anything, just a glance."

What is the proper way to approach a guru?

Once, when Guru Chandrasekhara Bharathi was on a tour, a Muslim police officer came to see him. He asked the Math officials who received him about the appropriate protocol. The Math officials told him, "You can meet him the same way you would meet your religious head." One approaches the guru in the same way your culture guides you when meeting a respected elder person.

How can one avoid being misled by some gurus?

There is a difference between the old days and now. In ancient times, the guru was without duplicity or deceitful motives. He would impart knowledge to the disciples with a pure heart. Thus, there was no room for any suspicion. Now, there is

a proliferation of gurus, some of whom wear the saffron robes with the very intent of cheating those who come to them as seekers. It is not wrong for people to be cautious and alert with such people posing as spiritual teachers. Adi Shankaracharya said, "One who has complete knowledge of the scriptures, one who ceaselessly yearns for the good of others, such a person is a guru."

What is your view on re-conversion to Hinduism?

"Reconversion" is a misnomer. Say, for example, that our child leaves home out of some misunderstanding or bad judgment and goes to someone else's house. If we bring him back home, we have just brought him back where he belongs. How can this be reconversion? His leaving home was wrong, but bringing him back home is not wrong.

Why are hatred and conflict increasing, despite our affluence?

Because desire is increasing, there is no contentment. As long as man does not have satisfaction, there is no peace. When our wants keep increasing, where is the room for peace? People believe the myth that money can make them great. What use is a big bank account, if there is no peace? Even if I am a millionaire, I can only eat so much. In that case, why employ wrong means to acquire wealth and harm others? If people realize this, they will not take a wrong path. Adi Shankara said, "Take not pride in your wealth, position, power or vitality. None of this is permanent. Believe only in God. Resort only to God."

What is your advice for sannyasins?

The primary reason to take sannyas is for the monk's own spiritual development. The seeker, wishing to be free from the bonds of this material world, realizes that sannyas is the only path to attain liberation. Thus, he becomes a mendicant and proceeds along this path by practicing self inquiry and meditation on God and the Self, with dispassion and repetition of the syllable Om. His first aim should be to achieve spiritual elevation. Thereafter, if he gets an opportunity to convey a good message to someone, he should. If someone comes to him with a doubt, and he has the capability to ease their troubles and relieve their doubt, then he should do so. But beyond this, he should not indulge in or get drawn into any material matters. Else, the very purpose of his taking sannyas, to end the cycle of birth and rebirth, is defeated. The renunciate must be completely detached from the material world.

What is your message to the readers of Hinduism Today?

First, give up hatred towards the other. Look at everyone with love and affection. Help others; if not, at least do not harm others. Secondly, never lose faith and belief in God. Believe in Him through whichever name you choose, but never stop believing. Worship God with dedication and devotion, and you will receive His Grace. My complete blessings to Hinduism Today. You have been able to deliver righteous thoughts to people through your magazine. With God's grace, may Hinduism Today prosper.