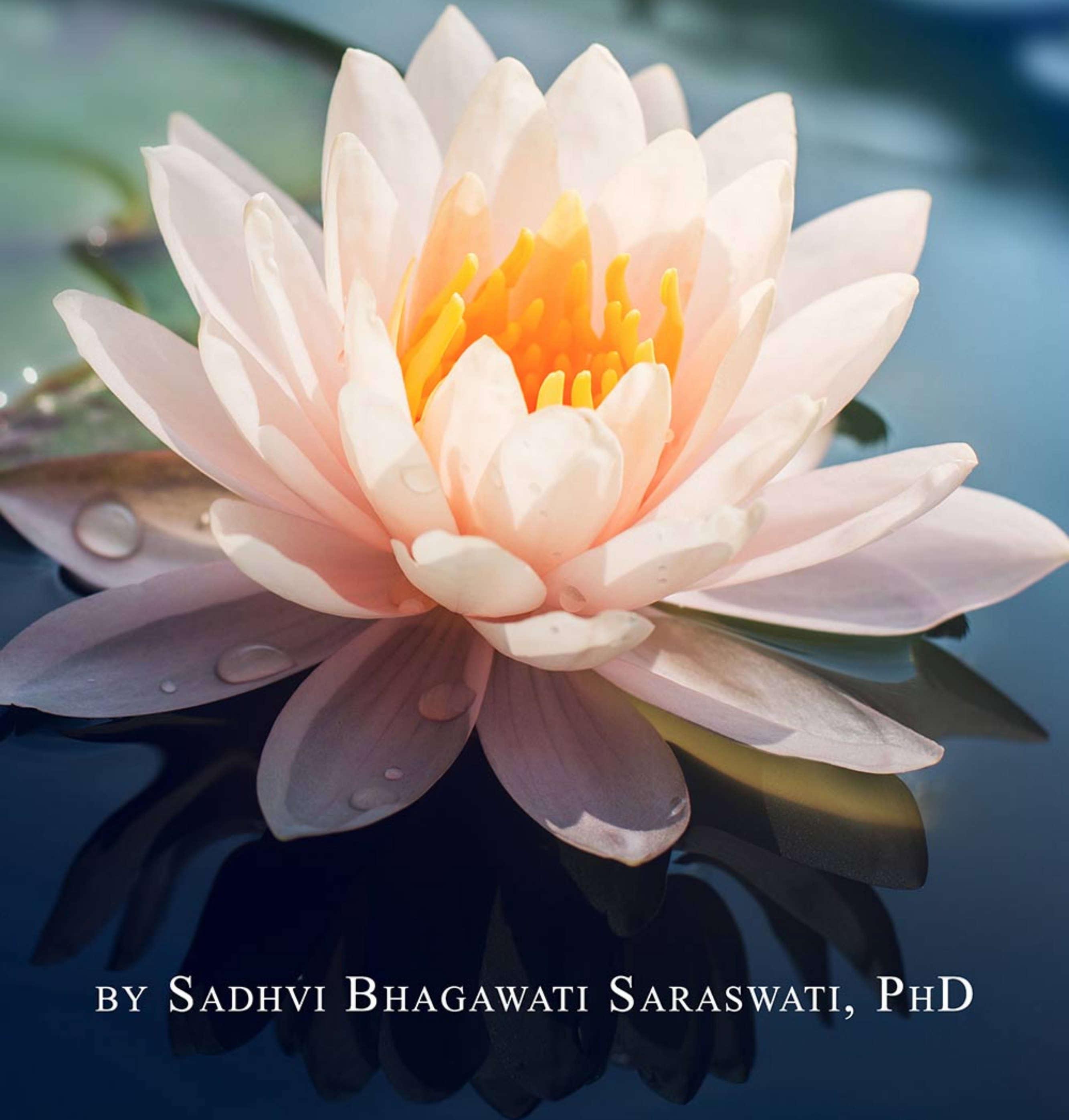


SATSANG

In the Presence of Truth



BY SADHVI BHAGAWATI SARASWATI, PHD

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Sadhvi Bhagawati Saraswati, 2018

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SATSANG: IN THE PRESENCE OF TRUTH

Editor's Note: These articles were taken from hundreds of satsangs and discourses with Sadhviji. As a collection, there may be repetition throughout the book due to the nature of the source of this material, but we hope that each article will inspire you and bring you divine drops of Truth.





BLESSINGS FROM H.H. PUJYA SWAMI CHIDANAND SARASWATIJI MAHARAJ

Dear Divine Souls,

During the over twenty years that Sadhviji has been at Parmarth, I have seen that Sadhviji is a very special soul, very divine and very sublime. Her whole life has been a journey from Hollywood to the Holy Woods. Her devotion, dedication, and commitment to humanity is a true example for all.

She reminds us to give our hearts to *seva* (service), to *smaran* (remembrance), and to *samarpan* (surrender). Let our life become a *sangam* (confluence) of these three divine qualities.

Sadhviji's life and the light and joy with which she lives and brings to others show us that the secret to life is not having more, but being more! It is not in filling our shelf, but in filling our Self!

In these dialogues, from her many satsangs over the past few years, you will hear and feel the divine clarity with which she addresses the questions that are in so many of our hearts. She has become a true vessel for the word of the Divine. Her spiritual awakening on the banks of Mother Ganga flows through these pages to you. I know you will all be touched, taught and transformed.

With love and blessings,
In the service of God and humanity,



Swami Chidanand Saraswati

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From Hollywood to Holy Woods

How did you end up in India, taking sannyas? What has living in India taught you?

Most people go to India seeking enlightenment, or at least advanced yoga studies. I went because I liked the food. Twenty years ago, I had graduated from Stanford and was doing my PhD in psychology, with only my dissertation left. It was time for a travel break. I agreed to go to India, a place I knew nothing about, only because I was a staunch vegetarian, or “vege-terrorist” as my friends used to say. In India at least, I knew I wouldn’t have to grill waiters in languages I didn’t speak about whether there was chicken broth in their vegetable soup or in the water they used to boil rice.

I was not religious. I was not even one of those people who say, “Well, I’m not religious, but I’m spiritual.” I had a *bat mitzvah* to make my grandparents happy. It was just what you did. I was an academic and a hippie. If anyone ever said you couldn’t dance all night on Saturday at a Grateful Dead show and still ace a psycho-neurology exam on Monday morning, I would have proven them wrong. I was not consciously seeking or searching or yearning for God’s grace, and yet thirty-six months after being one of the only students to ever get an A+ in Dr. Phil Zimbardo’s psychology of mind control class, I was sitting on the edge of the sacred Ganga river in Rishikesh, India with tears of ecstasy streaming down my face.

The transformation happened suddenly. “I’m going to put my feet in the river,” I had said, after we dropped our bags at the hotel. I was not expecting spiritual awakening, but it happened, before my toes even touched the water. They were not sad tears I was crying of course, but they

weren't happy tears either. They were tears of the Truth. Tears of coming home.

That which was given to me standing on the banks of Ganga was more real than anything I had experienced in 25 years. It wasn't even a decision to be made. I was someone who was always deeply committed to truth, and so for me there was no way to go back. If I weren't, I could envision trying to lock up the part of me that had just had that experience and pretending it hadn't happened and going back. But, because I was so deeply committed to truth, there was no way I was going to let myself do that. Even though it wasn't the package that I had ever anticipated happiness would come in, or life would come in, there it was in front of me, and there was no way to deny that was what I had just seen and what I had just been given.

It was an experience that was visual, but it wasn't only visual. It was full, it was all of my senses, it was an experience of being in the presence of the Divine.

I spent the next several days in Rishikesh in meditative bliss. I thought, "OK, this is where I belong," but where? How? Doing what?

My connection with Parmarth Niketan, the ashram where I now live began simply as the pathway for me to go from the hotel to the river. I was walking through the ashram one day, and I heard a voice say, "You must stay here." I looked around to see who had spoken. If there was a voice, clearly someone had spoken. There was no one. Now, in my entire sphere of reference and experience, the only people who heard voices were schizophrenic, and of course Joan of Arc. But since I definitely was not Joan of Arc and I really hoped I was not schizophrenic, I did what any self-respecting scientist would do: I ignored the voice. If no one had spoken, I didn't hear anything.

About 30 seconds later, I heard it again: "You must stay here." I looked up and I saw a sign that said "Office." I went in and told them I wanted to stay. At that time, Spiritual India was not very open to foreign women. They were perfectly polite, but they said I was going to have to get special permission from the President of the ashram, and unfortunately, He was out of town. "OK, so when is he due back?" I asked. "Maybe tomorrow," they said. Being American, I understood "maybe tomorrow" to mean "maybe tomorrow." Every day, I go and ask if he was back, and every day they'd say "maybe tomorrow," which I only later learned is Indian English

for “I have no idea.” Finally, He did come back, and He turned out to be not only the administrative head of the ashram, but Swami Chidanand Saraswatiji, one of the most revered spiritual leaders of India. “You are welcome to stay,” Swamiji said.

That was what you could call the beginning. I’ve spent the last twenty-two years in Rishikesh, engaged in study of the Self and in service to others.

So, what has living in India taught me? First, stay open. The universe has a plan for you. Yes, of course, we have to choose a path and walk it, but we only do that until we get a signal that says, “Turn right now.” Look at the caterpillar. The caterpillar spends most of its life crawling on the ground, and then one day it hears a voice or it gets a signal that says, “Climb the tree.” Now, it’s never seen anyone go up that tree and come back. Mom’s gone up, dad’s gone up, but no one has come back. That tree is the Bermuda Triangle of caterpillars. But, when the signal comes that says to climb, it does. Then the signal says, “Now go out on the branch, weave yourself into a cocoon, and some time later, burst forth, jump, and fly away.” It has no idea how to fly! It’s never flown, but when that signal comes that says “jump,” it does. You never hear of a caterpillar that missed the chance to become a butterfly because it was too scared to climb the tree, or because it didn’t know how to weave a cocoon, or because it jumped out of the cocoon too soon and plummeted on the ground, or of a butterfly that climbed back down the tree instead of flying because it didn’t believe it really could fly. There is an intelligence in the Universe that pervades all of creation, including us. But, we have to trust it, and we have to be quiet and still enough to hear it. If the caterpillar spent its entire life bemoaning the fact that the millipede got a thousand legs and he only got twelve, he might miss the call that said to climb the tree.

The second lesson is that your Self is much more important than your shelf. Most of us spend a lot of time and energy focused on filling our shelves with possessions, and we spend very little time thinking about the fullness of our Self, but it is in that fullness that real abundance lies. In this culture, no matter how much we have, most of us want more. We think, “If I could just have that, or achieve this, then I’d be happy.” But if our happiness is contingent upon something to fill our shelves, then happiness and abundance will always be an arm’s length away.

In India, even the poorest of the poor are so eager to share, and they beg you, “Please, please, come home for a meal, come for a cup of tea, come for

a cold drink.” These are people who cannot even afford to properly feed their families who ask and ask until you agree. Abundance is not building mansions while others live in shacks, or eating caviar while others starve. Abundance is connecting deeply with the fullness of our Self, recognizing that our cup runneth over and eagerly sharing with others.

Lastly and most importantly, in service to others, I have discovered the fullness of myself. Not service from the perspective of one who has to those who don’t, or a humanitarian serving the masses, but service of Self to Self.

If you trip and injure your right leg, your left leg will pick up the extra weight. We call that limping. No one had to say, “Oh great humanitarian left leg, would you mind picking up a little bit of extra weight?” The left leg is not waiting for an award or a gold star. It does it because it understands that the right leg is self. That is the goal of service, to serve myself in you.

In serving the children, I found myself. We build schools and orphanages, women’s empowerment programs, medical care programs, and now we build toilets and hand-washing stations and water filters. How many of you have ever considered the possibility that you might have to go to the bathroom and there wouldn’t be a toilet around? This is how 600 million people in India, about half of the population, and two and a half billion people in the world, go to the bathroom. They don’t have access to a toilet.

Now, if you were a boy or a man in the culture, you would have been raised to believe it was perfectly fine to drop your pants and urinate or defecate in public. But, if you were a girl or a woman in that culture, you would have been raised to protect your body from public view. You would not raise your sari in public, which means you would not go to the bathroom in daylight.

Across India, girls and women wait for darkness to heed the call of nature. They don’t drink water or eat food during the day, because if they drink, they will have to urinate, and if they eat, they will have to defecate. The dehydration and malnutrition wreak havoc on their bodies, and of course on their unborn babies as well. Across the world, more than 4,000 children die every day from diarrhea, simply due to a lack of clean water, lack of sanitation, and lack of hygiene. About fifty of them have died just since you began reading this.

As Pujya Swamiji always says, we need to shift our focus from temples to toilets. So, we started building toilets and hand-washing stations,

and teaching proper sanitation. We formed the Global Interfaith WASH Alliance, with leaders of many different religions coming together to say it is time to expand our definition of peace. It is no longer enough to simply say, "Thou shalt not kill." Children across the world are suffering and dying. They are our responsibility.

Spiritual awakening does not take us further from the world, it brings us closer. Spiritual awakening does not separate us, it connects us. Spiritual awakening is not about my bliss in the midst of your misery. Spiritual awakening is awakening from the illusion that who we are is based on what we earn, acquire, or achieve. It is an awakening into the reality that each of us is an embodiment of the Divine. It is awakening out of the illusion of our separateness into the reality of our oneness, a reality in which there is no place that I end and you begin. It is awakening from a life that is in pieces into a life of peace.

THE PURPOSE OF LIFE



Connecting to the Divine

What is God, and what is our relationship to that God?

No metaphor for it is perfect, because when it is God you're speaking about, obviously the words, which are finite, are not able to describe that which is infinite. The words are two-dimensional and are not able to describe that which defies dimension. We sort of run circles around the Truth, getting a little bit closer and closer to it. But one way of thinking about this is: you have the Sun, and the reason it's not a perfect analogy is because the Sun of course is not infinite. Nonetheless, the Sun is very big and very powerful, and as many different containers as I put on the ground, I'm going to have that many different types of reflections of the Sun. A container that is like a bowl, that's blue and ceramic, is going to give me a very different type of reflection of the Sun than a container that is glass and vertical and translucent. It's the same Sun, but different reflections only because the containers are different. So, God is one, there really is nothing but God, and that God is being manifest, seen, and perceived in an infinite number of different containers.

There is a line in the Upanishads that says "*Isavasyamidam sarvam yatkinca jagatyam jagat.*" It means that everything in the Universe is pervaded by the Divine. There is nothing and no one that is not pervaded by the Divine. These are not just teachings that we read and we say "oh wow" and then go have dinner, fight with our family, watch TV, and go to sleep. These are teachings for how we should live.

If there is nothing but God, that doesn't say mean that God is everything but your boss, everything is God except your mother-in-law. There is no scripture that says that. If everything is God, then everything is God.

In our lives, what we tend to do is identify with the container, like seeing the blue ceramic bowl instead of the reflection of the Sun. When people ask, "Who are you?" I say, "I'm female, I'm white, I'm 47, I'm American, I'm a *sannyasi*, I'm a PhD, these are my parents, this is my life, this is how much I weigh, this is how tall I am, this is what I'm allergic to, this is what I like and don't like." But, just like the bowl is just a vessel for the Sun, this is all just vessel. You can't see the Sun's reflection in the air, you need a vessel. The Sun is there, but until and unless I have a vessel, I cannot see the reflection on Earth.

With our two eyes, we are only able to see God in form. This is why we emphasize opening of our third eye. So many people ask, "Why do we put this *tilak* here in between the eyes? What does that mean?" Well, one of the aspects of it is it reminds us, "Oh God, when I use these two physical eyes, I'm able to only see form. I can see hair color, skin, weight, height, gender, beauty, and clothes, but that is illusion." The third eye *chakra* is actually the energy center of the power of discrimination, and it's the power to discriminate Truth from untruth. The Truth, that capital-T Eternal Truth, is that we're Divine, so when we put the *tilak* on or we do meditations for the third eye, the point is: "Oh God, let me see from this eye rather than using these two physical eyes which keep seeing falsehood after falsehood, separation after separation, form after form, instead of essence. Oh God, I want to see content not form, I want to see essence not form. I want to see the Truth."

The third eye sees that there is no separation between you and me. If we're looking only from our two physical eyes and only seeing false separation then I see you as an object. I may love you, I may hate you, I may want to bring you into my life, I may want to push you out of my life, but either way you are a separate object. When I am able to use my third eye, when I'm really living with the awareness that there's nothing but God, then there is no separation and there's no place I end and you begin. It's all God.

There's a great story of what happens to so many of us when we embark on the spiritual path and we start to get bits of this knowledge. A Guru was teaching his disciples this exact same teaching that everything is Brahma and there is nothing but Brahma. Two of his disciples go into the city one day, and in the city, there is a big shout that there's an elephant coming. The man who takes care of the elephant shouts, "Get out of the way!" but the disciple thinks, "Well, my Guru says everything is God, so I'm just going to stay here because this elephant is just an illusion. It's really Brahma, it's

God, and I'm really Brahma, I'm not just this weak guy, so why do I have to get out of the way?" The elephant handler is screaming at this point, "Get out of the way, get out of the way!" but the disciple says, "No, no, it's all good, it's all God, no problem!" The elephant of course comes and picks him up with his trunk and tosses him hundreds of yards, and he falls and breaks every bone in his body. Finally, his fellow disciples catch up to him and find him broken and bleeding. He cries to them, "I hate our Guru! He gave us this false piece of information, that was a horrible elephant, that was not God, I'm never going back to the ashram!" The disciples go back and tell the Guru, and then go back out and find the man again with they're lanterns in the night, and the Guru goes to him. The Guru asks the man what happened, and the man, in a fit of ego, replies, "I was just trying to implement your teaching, you are the one who said everything is God. Look what the elephant did to me." And the Guru replies, "Ah, but you really didn't implement the teaching." The man questions what he means, as he says he was seeing the elephant as Brahma, and the Guru says, "But what about the elephant man who told you to get out of the way? What about all of the people that tried to grab you and pull you out of the way? I told you everything is Brahma, but in your ego, you decided it was just going to be you and the elephant. You left out the elephant man, all the people, and all your fellow disciples who tried to help you."

This is what happens sadly to us. We tend to develop these very narrow views about what being spiritual means: "I am God, therefore you should do the dishes tonight. Therefore, you should take care of me." Well, if I am god, then so are you, because God doesn't play favorites, there is no God that says, "I will be one with you but not with you." When there is nothing but God, there is nothing but God.

How can we implement, practically, the idea that there is nothing but God and still live our lives?

As we implement these teachings in our lives, it is very important to remember that, and of course it is not easy. It is not easy to move through the world remembering there is nothing but God. We have to remember that yes, that is the ultimate highest truth, and yet there is also the creation. There is the Creator and then there is the creation, and that's us. Yes, at our core, we're God. There is nothing but God. But as the creation in this *leela*, this beautiful divine drama that God has created, we have hearts that love, we have minds that think, and we have the ability to have compassion and the ability to reach out a hand. One of the real, tragic pitfalls of a

superficial understanding in our lives of these truths is, we tend to just use them to our benefit: “Well, everything is God, so why do I have to do my homework? Everything is God, so why give charity, why pay my taxes, why do anything? If it’s all perfect, if there’s nothing but God, why do I have to wake up in the morning and meditate and pray? I mean, I’m already God.”

It really lends itself to very challenging games of the ego. So, what I have found, personally, is that it’s beautiful to hold that Truth, to remember it, to know that it is the highest level of Truth, but when I can’t live in that Trust every moment of every day, I can at least live in my humanity, rather than push my humanity away. That’s a pitfall we don’t want to fall into.

One way to think about existence is like the old TVs which had dials that would turn the TV from one channel to another. On the highest channel is the all-encompassing Truth in which it’s all God. But then, on another channel, we’re here in this human form, and this human form has the ability to smile at each other, hug each other, help each other, make *laddoos* and feed each other, and use our talents and abilities to serve each other.

We don’t want to dismiss that, because if God had wanted us to just disconnect entirely from the world and to just let people suffer and die, I do not believe we would’ve been born with the ability to experience empathy, to experience compassion, and to cry at the plight of another. I do not believe our instinct would be to immediately reach out and help someone who falls down in front of us. If someone falls down in front of us, we don’t take a moment to process in our brains, “Well, is it God? Is it not God?” No. We just reach out and help. If we’re trying to push away our humanity, then we’re throwing away a gift that God has given us, which is our humanity. God is perfect, and God gave us a human birth on purpose. We could have been a leaf or an earthworm. Why did God make us human, give us consciousness, love, and intuition?

So, we use those as gifts from God, with an awareness that the perfect, all-knowing God gave them to us. We hold in our awareness that the highest, deepest, truest Truth is that it’s all perfect, and yet we still reach down and help the person who tripped in front of us, because that channel also exists as long as we are human.

How do we connect with our Divine Self, and then stay connected?

First, I’m going to change the phrase to “True Self,” because if we say

“Divine Self”, it implies that there is a “non-divine self,” as in this part of me is my divine self, and this part of me is my non-divine self. What we have is a True Self and a non-true self. The non-true self is the stuff that most of us actually identify as: our name, our ages, where we’re from, the color of our skin, our bank accounts, our careers, our titles, all of that stuff that we identify as self but actually isn’t. The reason that we know it isn’t truly Self is because it keeps changing.

The example that I always give about this is: if you’re driving down the freeway and someone calls you on the phone and says, “Who are you?” and you say, “I’m Exit 30,” they will say, “No, I didn’t say where are you, I said who are you?” So then you say, “I told you, I’m Exit 30, but actually now I’m almost Exit 31.” They would think that either you couldn’t hear them or that you had gone absolutely crazy. We understand intuitively that Exit 30 or 31 is simply the intersection of time and space that our vehicle is at. It’s true, it’s not a lie that that’s where we are, but it’s not who we are.

If I say to you that I am 47, female, white, American, and a *sanyasi*, well that’s all true, none of it is a lie, and yet, it’s what we’ll call the lowercase-t truth. It’s true at this exact intersection of time and space. It’s not the capital-T Truth; it’s just telling you the story of my vehicle and where it happens to be right at this intersection of time and space. But our True Self is the Divine, the True Self is the essence. This body is just the container. So, when we connect with our True Self, what we have to do is sink beneath the container. If we’re stuck on the container, we’re not going to get to essence.

If I pick a glass of water up and I spend all my time at marveling how beautiful or ugly or solid or soft it is, it’s not going to quench my thirst. In order to do that, I actually have to drink what’s inside. The same is true about our vehicles. There’s nothing wrong with admiring the beauty of the glass, it just doesn’t do anything for my thirst. Similarly, there’s nothing wrong with paying attention to our body vehicles – we’ve only got one, and it’s a temple. If who we are is the Divine and the Divine lives in this body vehicle, it means the vehicle is a temple. We have to care for it, we have to worship it, we have to take as much care of it as we take care of our temples, our churches, our synagogues, our mosques, and wherever the Divine resides. And yet, we don’t confuse form for content, we don’t confuse packaging for essence.

Our True Self is the essence, is the spirit. There are so many ways to connect with it. One simple and easy way is through a meditation practice called "*neti, neti,*" which means, "not this, not this." We begin literally by saying, "I am not my orange *saree*, I am not my skin, I am not my bones..." Should anyone doubt that, the reason that we know that is true is because my skin keeps sloughing off, I get new skin every day, but "I" is still there. My bones break, but I'm still there. So, I'm not my blood – I could get a blood transfusion, donate blood, but I'm still there. I'm not my organs – I could get a transplant of one of those, but I'm still here. We then go deeper and deeper, recognizing that all of the parts of our body actually slough off and regenerate over a period of years. After every eight or nine years, you are brand new! If there is any grudge that you are holding onto from something that happened eight or nine years ago, it did not happen to you!

So, we go through that and then we get a little bit deeper, and we say, "Well, I'm also not my emotions. I'm not my anger." The reason I know that is I'm not *always* angry. I may be angry way too frequently but I'm not *always* angry. When I'm not angry, I don't cease to exist. If I AM my anger then I would cease to exist when I'm not angry. I'm not even my thoughts because there's a very small space in between my thoughts, and in that space, I don't evaporate. If I did, if I were my thoughts and I ceased to exist even momentarily in between my thoughts, who would think the next thought?

Then, maybe something else will come to you: "I'm the child of an alcoholic." Well, no, because that child is not who I am anymore, my body has literally completely regenerated its cells since I was that child, and if you believe in past lives, it wasn't true in my last birth.

So, we go slowly as deep as we can until there's really nothing else to remove. If you do that in a very meditative place and you allow yourself to just sit there after peeling layer after layer, what you find is that there's this beautiful stillness, this beautiful experience.

So, we can remove everything that we identify with until we get into what the Buddhists speak about as nothingness and the Hindus speak of as everything-ness, but it's the same experience of infinity. Imagine, if I've got a glass jar of air and my jar breaks, what do I have? On the one hand, you could say I have nothing as I no longer have my jar of air, because it broke, so I have nothing now. On the other hand, you could say well, all I did was lose that dividing line between *my* cup of air and *all* of

the air, so now actually I have *all* of the air instead of just a jar of the air. Neither is right, neither is wrong, they are just two ways of looking at it, but you'll recognize that they actually take us to exactly the same place. We all agree that we're left with just air. And that's the truth of who you are. When the border and boundary dissolves, when the walls of the container shatter, you realize you have always been the infinite, have always been consciousness, have always been Divine.

The last piece of how we can stay connected to that Divine is just in remembrance. There's no magic unfortunately. It would be really nice if you could get a Nicotine Patch-like patch, that every time you forgot, the patch would remind you, and you would somehow just get this infusion of remembrance and awakening. But we don't have one. What we have is just practice, in the same way that when our mind wanders in meditation we just bring it back. When you start meditating, you find that your mind wanders more than it's still and your meditation feels like you do nothing but keep bringing your mind back, but then slowly the spaces in between having to bring the mind back lengthen and it stays. You're able to catch it faster and bring it back faster, and slowly you're able to accumulate lots of consecutive moments of being there. This is what it's like living within our True Self. It's just about remembrance, coming back. A mantra is a great life raft to bring us back. Our breath is a great life raft to bring us back. They're techniques to bring us out of where we've gone and back into who we are. And slowly, you keep living as that.

The last piece of this is to remember not to berate yourself, because in this consciousness and acceptance of the invitation to live with love and connection, it's very important not to leave ourselves out of the equation. Many of us are very comfortable with connection, compassion, love, forgiveness, and seeing the Divine in all as a practice, as long as it relates to everyone other than ourselves. It becomes very difficult when we have to turn it back inward. Then ironically we further berate ourselves for that: "Oh my God, you are so stupid, look at that, you forgot to be compassionate again." So, where's my compassion for myself? Here I am berating myself for not being compassionate to another, and that irony kills a lot of us. We have to remember that as we work on staying connected, it's not just connected to God outside of us and in those around us, but connected to God within us. When we lose it, when we find ourselves disconnected, we have to have that same compassion, love, understanding, and presence for our lowercase-s self that wandered off that we have for those of us around us and for the world around us.

Knowing & Finding the Purpose of Human Life

What is the purpose of human life?

The purpose of human birth, the reason that we're here is to attain the experience of our own Divinity, Self-realization, Self-awareness. The purpose of our life is to wake up, realize who we are and accept wholeheartedly the incredible invitation the universe has given us to fully embrace spirit in ourselves and the world around us, With this mind, with this brain, we actually have the power and the ability to have that consciousness.

That is why human birth is seen as the pinnacle of existence, for its ability to see itself, to be conscious of the self and witness the self. The animal kingdom, and the plant kingdom, certainly act a lot better than we do. On the level of our actions, we cannot say humans are the pinnacle of evolution. If you look at animals, they harm another animal only for two reasons: either they are hungry carnivores, or because they feel immediately threatened. If you are hiking and inadvertently come upon a mother bear with her cubs, if she feels your presence as a threat to them, she will attack. Those are the only two reasons. Humans are the only species that harms others for reasons other than for food or physical protection. So, we are not at the highest of evolution in that way for sure.

But what we have is the ability to witness ourselves, to be conscious of our own consciousness and that is a crucial component of attaining enlightenment. If I'm not able to step out of my identification of myself as this body and this personality, I'm not going to experience enlightenment. I have to be able to connect with the One within me who's watching me act, who's watching the drama, the One who says, "Oh yes, now there's anger coming." If I only identify as, "I'm angry!", I'll never get there.

So to make the best use of your human birth, learn to step out of the role of the actor and be the One watching the drama. Then, slowly, with enough depth of practice, you can even be the One watching the one who is watching the drama. That's why we're here. That's why we get a human birth, to have that awareness.

So if we are not the bodies or our dramas or identities then how are we supposed to live? What are we supposed to do?

Once we know who we are, then what we do comes very naturally. Our problem is we don't know who we are, so we don't know what to do. We look around, we look at the people around us, our friends circle, the people we see on TV, the people we see on Facebook, and we judge and identify ourselves accordingly. "Oh, I want to do what this one's doing, I want to do what this one's doing, oh that looks really good, my brother did this, my neighbor did that." We judge ourselves based on what other people do. "Oh, I should also do this, oh I'm also that." So, we flop around from thing to thing, like fish out of water, doing what others are doing, doing what we see on commercials and television programs because we have no idea who we are.

The minute we know who we are, living comes very naturally. You never see a bird standing on top of a building debating whether to fly or not. But take a dog or cat up there and try to get them to jump, it's not going to be so easy. They understand they're not a bird. Even if they watch the bird jump, they're not going to jump. Intuitively they know, that's not who they are. Yet, we don't even know that.

Through our meditation, through our spiritual practice, through our sadhana and purification of the self that I identify as, we start to see the Truth of who we are, like cleaning the dirt off our windows so that we can see the light that's always shining. Then what you find is it's not about what you do, it's about who you are and how you do it. Everything in life becomes an opportunity to fulfill your dharma.

For most of us, we figure, "OK, I'm just waiting and biding my time until I figure out what my dharma is and then I can fulfill it." But all of the scriptures, all of the teachings, teach us the exact opposite - that our dharma is about every minute and every moment of how we live. It's not about that one amazing thing, that high thing, this remarkable, unprecedented, extraordinary thing. It's about in every minute and every moment, finding

that integrity, that sincerity, that connection.

I was just in Calcutta last week for an event, and on the morning we were leaving, we found that we had some extra time so we went to the Dakshineswar Temple, which is the temple dedicated to Maha Kali where Paramhansa Ramakrishna lived. The priest in the temple said to us, “You know, it’s amazing. He was just like one of us, he was a priest in the temple, doing what we’re doing, but in doing it, he was so in love with the Mother, so in love with the Goddess, that the rest of the magic happened. Magic that now 100 years later is still drawing people.” And you can feel it, the magic is still there. That’s what it’s about. It’s about how you are in doing what you’re doing. Paramhansa Ramakrishna was so there, so present, so connected, that in feeding Her, She ate from his hands. That’s where the magic happens. It’s not about, first you become the Chairman of the board of this association and then the magic will happen. Your dharma is right here in every minute and every moment. How can you, in whatever you’re doing, live as and manifest that Divinity, so that it all becomes sacred and it all becomes a means to your own unfolding, to your own awakening? That’s what it’s about.

How do we gain direction in life when we feel lost? How do we tune into our intuition and know that the voices we hear are pointing us in the right direction?

Our intuition really is a sense. Science tells us we have five senses. Science tells us that the only way that we can really know the world is through that which we see, that which we hear, that which we smell, that which we touch, and that which we taste. But, we actually have another sense, and that’s our intuition. It really is there, it’s not something that some people have and some don’t. Everyone has the intuition. But, most of us don’t connect with it, and sadly we don’t learn how to use it.

For example, if you take a very young child and you make them touch a table, and you ask them what it is, the child won’t necessarily know. They’re not going to know because they haven’t had that type of experience to know this is a table, this is wood, etc. They can feel it, but they don’t know what to make of it.

In the same way, our intuition is there, but if we haven’t developed it, then we don’t know what to make of it. We don’t know what the voice means, what the calling means, what the signal means. This is where it’s

so important to really cultivate the power of intuition through listening and trusting.

When it's hot out and you go stand outside, you can hold your hand out and feel the sun's rays burning your hand. You never doubt, "Oh, maybe it's just my mind telling me it's hot." You can feel it. If you stand in Ganga, you're wet, you can feel it, you're never going to doubt it. If you hear music, you know you're hearing music. So, we trust those five senses, because they're what we've become habituated to. We don't yet trust our intuition, because we haven't become habituated to it, and this is where we have to develop a relationship with it, the same way that we have a relationship with our eyes and our ears and our tongue and our nose and our hands, so that we can learn to trust it.

We have to use it, and we have to listen to it. Then, slowly, we're able to really understand the difference between just the random voices in our head – the voices of judgment, the voices of criticism, the voices of fear, the voices of ego – and the voice of intuition.

Intuition, of course, isn't always a voice. Many times it's actually a feeling about something. There are places we go that feel really right, places we go that don't feel right, people we're around who feel really right, people we're around who don't feel really right, things we embark on that feel expansive to us, things we embark on that feel contracting to us – that's all intuition. We just have to develop it the same way that we develop our sight, smell, hearing, and touch.

But I hear so many voices in my head. How to know which is intuition?

Yes! This is definitely the problem. Our fears ,our desires the voice of society, the voice of our parents, and maybe even other voices shout very loudly inside of use, threatening to overpower the voice of intuition. So, I may have an intuition, a pull, to be a musician or to be an artist or to live in an ashram, but the voice of society says, "Oh, no, no, no, that's wrong, you know you've got too good of an education, you shouldn't waste it, you've got to make something of yourself," as though you were half-baked unless you become an engineer or doctor or professional. Or the voice of fear says, "How will I feed myself? Artists and musicians don't make any money. I have to do something sensible." We may end up with a good job but having suppressed our intuition we likely won't feel deeply content or satisfied."

Pujya Swamiji always says, when you enter an address into your GPS device, after you enter the address there's always one more step – there's a button that says "Accept" or "Start." You've got to push that button that says, "OK, now guide me." Most of us just haven't actually pushed that button in our life. We've entered in an address, we want to go there or be this or experience that, but we haven't actually accepted the voice of our own intuition of how to get there.

How do we make a right decision?

The key to making decisions is not so much about what to do, but about who I am.

We have gotten brainwashed into believing that the purpose of our life has to do with the role we play and how much money or acclaim we can get from it. So, if I'm a mother, the purpose of my life becomes taking care of my children. If I'm a doctor, the purpose of my life is to treat. The purpose of my life, if I'm a gardener, is to tend to the plants. The purpose of my life, if I'm a cook, is to cook. But these are just the roles we play, and they have nothing to do with the purpose of our life.

We get so caught up in thinking that the biggest decision in our lives is to figure out the purpose of our life. We think that once we can figure out what to do, we'll know who we are. If I choose to cook, it means I AM a cook. If I choose to practice law, I AM a lawyer, if I choose medicine I AM a doctor. So then naturally this becomes a major decision because it's not just what to do, but it's who I will be.

The fear of making the wrong career decision becomes a life-death situation about my entire life.

The truth is, the only wrong decision you can make is to not awaken, to not look within, to not shift focus from the outer world to the inner world, to not live from the heart. When I say from the heart, of course I don't mean your impulses and your desires and your instincts, but I mean to not live really from love. That's the purpose of our life.

In any career, you've got at most a few decades for it. Even if you're one of those people who goes through school knowing exactly what they want to do and gets the job in their twenties, at most you'll do the job for thirty or forty years. It's barely half your life. We have all this life prior to our career, all this life post- retirement. If who I am, if the purpose of my life is

that career, what about the other half of my life? What about the hours I'm not at my job? Who am I then, once I retire. Do I go through the rest of my life then with the identity of "Retired doctor?"

This is a very tricky and sticky way to try to think about your purpose, and it's what gives us the sense of desperation in making our decisions, because it's not just about this city or that city or this job or that job, it's about my life and purpose.

The minute that you can actually recognize that the purpose of life is to know who you are, not in the role you play but who you are as soul, who you are as spirit, who you are as essence, who you are as love, who you are as Divine, then decisions become much easier. Then we realize that the role is just what we are doing for a certain number of hours a day for a certain number of years, and hopefully it's something that benefits society, that creates a positive impact, but it's not WHO I am. So the incredible pressure is off.

I'm not trying to make light of our careers or jobs. Anything that you're going to do for many decades is something that certainly deserves thought and attention. But we need to understand that these are decisions we're making about roles that we want to play, and not the purpose of our life. We get to choose what role to play, but none of it has anything to do with our purpose. Our purpose is waking up and living deeply as who we are, as divinity, as consciousness, as love.

Of course, some of us are going to be better at playing certain roles than others. In a school play, the one who can sing gets the singing role, the one who can dance gets the dancing role, the one who had an early growth spurt gets to play the villain because he is the biggest. But they're just roles, based on aspects of what we have. But we all understand, he's not really a villain. We understand, she gets to play that role because she can sing, he gets to play that role because he can dance, he gets to play that role because he's tall.

I remember we did a play when I was very young, probably kindergarten or early elementary school. My hair used to be even much curlier than it is now and I was given the role of Medusa in the play, who of course had hair that's made out of live snakes. In order to play the role, I had to bend my head over and my drama teacher brushed out all my hair from the bottom of my scalp, so that when I flipped my head up, my hair literally

went straight out three feet in every direction! But, it wasn't that I WAS Medusa any more than I was any other character. It was simply that the director planning the show had looked at me realized this girl has got the hair to be Medusa. You couldn't say that was the purpose of my life! It had nothing to do with purpose of my life! We have to realize that the roles we play in life are just roles in the Divine Drama and they are no more the purpose of our lives than the role we play in a school performance. The only difference is that the roles we play in life are ones with which we can, hopefully, make a positive impact on society and help others. We can use our roles as adults to help others, not just to entertain them. But we still must realize we are not these roles.

Since we don't know who we are we start identifying based on these roles we play. Most of the roles weren't even decided by us, they were given to us in our early family and school life: "The smart one," "the stupid one," "the pretty one," "the ugly one," "the good one," "the bad one" – Then, tragically, we internalize and we live according to them. But this is just as ridiculous as if I had lived my life as Medusa just because I had the role in a drama.

So, don't worry. The more and more you can connect to that Truth of the Self, the more your life decisions are going to come easily.

So how do I focus and make decisions in my life then?

Let finding who you are be your focus. Then what to do will come very easily and very naturally. And when it doesn't, you'll make a decision, and either way will be right. Wisdom very frequently comes not so much in the decision itself, but in how we live with the decisions that have been made. Many times, wisdom comes after we've made the decision. We don't get to have all the experiences before we choose. In many cases, we have to make a choice.

When you walk into an ice-cream parlor for the very first time, if you have no idea what strawberry tastes like, you have no idea what vanilla is like, you have no idea what chocolate is like, but you've got to make a choice regardless. In life, we have to make decisions very frequently without having tasted all the options, without knowing what they're all like. So, we do our best to make a decision, but the wisdom in many cases comes afterwards. So, the challenge then becomes how to utilize our decisions. How can I utilize this path I'm now on to awaken, to grow, to get more in

touch with myself? That's the place where the wisdom comes, in how to make this into the right decision, whether it was or not. How can I make the decision I made into the right decision?

Success & Spiritual Development

Can success and spiritual development go together?

For most of us, we tend to see the business and spiritual development as separate things: success over here, and spiritual development over there. But let's look for a moment at what success really means – what sort of success do we want, and why do we want success?

If you ask most people, "What's your definition of success?" they'll tell you, "To be the president or CEO of this company," or something like that. But if you take it deeper and say, "OK, fine, you're the president, you're the CEO, you're the head, then what?" they'll then say, "Well, then I would have all of the financial abundance and therefore financial freedom." So then you say, "OK, then what?" and they'll say, "Then I wouldn't have to worry and stress so much about making money." OK, then what? "Then I would have time for my family, I'd have time for my spiritual pursuits, then I would be happy."

Even people whose definition of success is something very material and very financial, nonetheless they're aware that they want success ultimately to give them time for their spiritual practice, time to be with their family, time to take a walk in the park, time to watch the sunset, and mostly because it will make them happy. If we recognize that our core desire is happiness and peace, we actually can go straight there. It cuts decades of stress off of our lives.

There's a great parable of the investment banker who goes on vacation to this beautiful seaside village. One day, he's sitting under a tree near the ocean and he sees a fishing boat come in, dock, and the fisherman gets off the boat. This investment banker says to the fisherman, "So, what do you

do?" And the man says, "I'm a fisherman." And the banker says, "Oh, but you've only got two or three fish."

The fisherman says, "Well, yes, that's enough, that's all my family needs." So the banker says, "But there's so many hours left of the day, it's still early. You could've stayed out, you could've kept catching more and more fish."

The fisherman asks him, "Well, why would I have done that, since this is all my family needs?" So, the businessman replies, "Then you could sell the extra, you could get a bigger boat, make more money, then you don't even have to go out. You could start a company of fishermen, hire the people, they'll go out."

And the fisherman says, "And then? As of now, I sleep late in the morning. The reason I only go out for a few hours is I sleep late, I get up, I take a beautiful walk, and I spend time with my family. I spend time with my friends, I go to our local church, I do all of these things."

The banker exclaims, "No, no, no, see, you've got to spend the time in the ocean, catch the fish, then you make a company, then you own the company, you hire other people, they'll keep fishing, bringing in the money. Then of course, you'll have to move away from this little village, you'll move to the city, but you'll be the one in charge of the biggest fishing company that the country has ever seen."

So the fisherman asks, "And then what?" and the banker says, "Well, then that's the great part, then you'll have so much money that in just a couple of years you'll be able to retire, you can move to the beach, sleep in the morning, spend time with your family, take a walk, only be out in your boat as much as you like, and enjoy your life!"

We laugh because we see the ridiculousness of it, and yet that's actually the trajectory that most of our lives take, as though first we have to go all the way over there in order to get to be over here, instead of actually just turning and walking in the direction we want to go. That's why when we talk about success and spiritual goals, we realize that they're actually the same. The ultimate goal of both is true joy, peace and freedom.

The straightest path to success is to ask yourself, "Well, what matters to me?" There isn't a cookie cutter answer, I'm not going to tell you what should matter to you, but for most people, what we're looking for – through

the money, through the careers, through the high levels of achievement, through the fancy houses, through the name and fame – is happiness in life. What we're looking for is to have time to take a walk and watch the sunset, to have time to spend with our families, to have time to meditate, time to go to our temples or churches or mosques or gurdwaras or synagogues or whatever our places of worship are. That's success, and that goes hand-in-hand with our spiritual goals.

There's a beautiful teaching that was given by the very revered saint Pujya Swami Dayanand Saraswatiji Maharaj who said that the only definition of success that matters is how you respond to the inevitable times when the Universe does not act the way you think it should. That's our spiritual goal, that's our spiritual practice. The only way for us to respond with peace, calmness, love, and understanding when the Universe and the people in it don't act the way we think they should is when we are deeply connected inside, when we are not looking in that Universe or in those people for our happiness.

If my happiness depends upon whether you give me a raise, vote for me, or buy my product, then every time the stock market goes up and down, every time my company's ratings go up and down, every time my bank balance or my weight or my relationships go up and down, I'm going to lose my sense of connection. I'm going to respond in an out-of-control way.

Real success is that connection, that grounding, which only comes from our spiritual path. So, success and spiritual development go hand-in-hand. Spiritual life is actually the highest level of success. We can't eat money, we can't sit across the dining room table from it and have a nice romantic dinner, we can't come home to it and cry to it about the trials and tribulations of our day, we can't put our arm around it in bed, we can't use it to wipe our tears, or get a hug when we're feeling down, it doesn't laugh at our jokes. So, all of the real joy and real connection that we're looking for in life doesn't come from money. It's only that we believe that through money, through a very circuitous route, we will find joy and connection. We think, "If I have the money, then people will respect me. If they respect me, then they will love me, then they'll pay attention to me. If they love me and pay attention to me, then I'll feel worthy, I'll feel like I matter,." So, all of what we do under the title of "success," whatever success means to us, is done with that goal in mind.

So why not go straight there? There is nothing wrong, of course, with

being the President or the CEO or having money and big houses, as long as we're not looking to these things to give us that inner experience of peace, joy, and happiness.

There is a great story of a woman who is on her hands and knees in the road in the night, searching for something under a bright street light. A wise man walks by and asks her, "Mother, what are you looking for?" She says, "I've lost my key." The man feels badly for her so he also gets down on his hands and knees to search. After some time of looking without finding the key, he asks her, "Mother, where exactly did you lose your key?" "Oh," she replies. "I lost it in the house." Baffled, he says, "So then why in the world are you looking in the road for it?" "Well," she answers matter-of-factly, "It is dark in my house. I have no light to see. Here there is this bright street light. So I figured I would look where it is light rather than in the dark where I cannot see."

"Go back in your house, Mother," he tells her gently. "An army could not find your key here. It may take some time but you will find it in the house."

I love this story because we live like this. We search outside for that which we've lost inside. For her maybe it was the key to a cupboard and for us it's the key to happiness and peace in our life. We also look outside, where it's light, rather than inside where the key actually is. It is very bright in shopping centers, in stores, in the world around us, and of course all the marketing shouts at us, "Buy this and you'll be happy." But, no matter how hard we look, no matter how much we buy or achieve or attain financially or professionally, we will never find that key because it just doesn't exist there.

Now, it's important to mention, of course, that happiness, peace and professional success or wealth are not mutually exclusive. It's not that having expensive things or a successful job or big house steals our peace and happiness. The problem comes only when I am looking IN those things for my peace and happiness. If the woman had replied "Oh, I'm just taking a walk and enjoying the moonlight," there wouldn't even be a story. She would have been enjoying the outdoors for what they can give – fresh air, moonlight, a nice walk. It is only a story because she was searching for what was not there. Similarly, the problem for us comes when we think that by attaining something or achieving something or buying something we will get happiness. It just isn't there. We can buy comfort. We can buy convenience. We can buy luxury and entertainment. But we cannot buy

happiness.

I did a personal study on this once. After I'd been in India maybe a year or so, and I had been so touched by what I saw in Indian culture of the real success, the real inner connection, the real emphasis on spirituality, on God, on Divine connection, on service, and on love. When I was back in America, I conducted this study, and the study was that I asked about ten different people whom I knew, each of whom was at a personal level of great success in a different field. There was a CEO of a major billion-dollar company, a tenured professor at Stanford, a well-known Hollywood actress, a singer with songs in the Top 10 charts, a person who played basketball for the LA Lakers, all of the different fields – business, finance, Hollywood, academia, sports. I called some of them up on the phone, some I met with, and in the midst of our conversation just chatting, I discreetly asked them all one question: "Are you happy?" That was the real point of my study.

What I heard from every one of them was either, "I will be happy when _____," and they all had different fill-in-the-blanks ranging from "the kids finally going off to college" to "I finally get this raise or this promotion" to "I finally lose the weight," That was about half the responses. The other half replied with "I would be happy if _____" Again what they filled in that blank with varied from person to person, including "the kids would only clean up their room," "my husband would work less," "there weren't so much traffic.". Every single one of them was someone who had reached the absolute pinnacle of what the rest of the world is killing themselves to get to, yet they were still one thing away from happiness.

This is what happens to us. When we go this external route to get to the goal of happiness, there's always something between us and the goal. Then of course, when we do get that missing piece, we just discover a new, different missing piece. I have to get this degree, then I have to get that job, then this promotion, then I have to reach here, this much acclaim, this much renown, I have to reach that level, ...then I'll be happy. But, when we keep going at it that way, there's always one thing between us and real happiness, which is the real success. That's the whole tragic irony.

Try to see whether you can shift your definition of success in your own mind to: "what's the shortest route to actually get where I want to go?"

The last point I want to clarify is that there's a very big difference between

the happiness I'm talking about and the decadence or hedonism or numbness of "eat, drink, and be merry." The shortest distance for some people to happiness may be a couple of shots of alcohol, or some drugs, or a one-night stand. There are really short distances for some people to what they identify as "happiness." But that's not the happiness we're talking about, because it doesn't last very long. You have to keep doing it. It's a happiness that actually takes you out of yourself, not into yourself. It's a "happiness" in which for six hours, I didn't have to think about the hell that my life has become, or for one night I didn't remember the pain that I'm living. That's not happiness. That's escapism, that's denial, that's numbness. Do it too frequently, and it becomes addiction.

When we're really talking about happiness, what we're talking about is the state in which we are actually able to experience joy. We don't need a funny movie, we don't need a drink, we don't need to get approval and then promotions. It's just, where we are, in that moment, we're actually able to experience joy and gratitude. The happiness our spiritual path brings is a sustained level of happiness, happiness that doesn't go up and down based on traffic patterns or weather patterns or stock market patterns. It doesn't mean that we're indifferent to the world, but our core level of inner peace is consistent.

The shortest route to that is our spiritual practice. When that becomes our focus, and our job becomes what we do to put food on the table or to make a positive impact in the world, that's when we really attain success.

The Path of Spirituality

What is the purpose of spirituality? Why do I have to be spiritual? When there's so much to do in the world, so much to achieve, why should I be spiritual? Why bother?

Let's say for a moment that you wake up one morning and you take your temperature, and your thermometer shows 101° F. What does that mean? You have a fever. It means something is off, something is not right. You have an infection of some sort, a bacteria, a virus. Now, imagine that you ask everyone around you what their temperature is, and everyone says 98.6° F. That's how you know that 101° F is a fever, that's how you know something is wrong. But now imagine that you ask everyone around what their temperature is, and they say 101° F. Do you still have a fever? Yes, of course you do. But, in the first case we know that something is off, and we're going to look for a cause, we're going to look for a solution, we're going to go to a doctor. But, when everyone's fever is 101° F, what happens? I think that it's normal. I still have a fever, but I no longer go to the doctor because everyone has this temperature, it must be normal. The fever is still ravaging my body, but because everyone else has it, I don't look for a cause and I don't look for a solution.

In our lives, most of us live in a state of pretty regular stress. We feel stress, worry, anxiety, depression. But when you look around and you talk to your friends, what do you find? They're also stressed, worried, anxious, and depressed. So, this has become the new normal.

We're stressed about so many things. Spirituality helps bring that temperature back to normal. It's what helps us get grounded, centered, and be able to stay afloat in the waves of life.

What is there on the surface of the ocean? Waves. And what do waves do? They vacillate, they go up and down, up and down. Now, if I live on the surface of the ocean, I'm going to go up and down with the waves. If my life, my happiness, my peace, my centering, my joy, my emotional state is based upon something that someone else does – how they talk to me, how they treat me, how they act – whether it's a friend, a boss, a colleague, or a loved one, I'm going to go up and down. If my happiness, joy, peace, and meaning in life is based on interest rates or the stock market or my weight or how popular I am, I'm going to go up and down, because these things all go up and down in life. When they're up in the right direction, we feel really good. But what does physics tell us? Everything that goes up has to come down. This is the nature of nature. So, if I'm attached to the surface waves, if my life, my joy is hooked into something over which I have no control, and is hooked into something that is on the superficial surface level, I may love the ups, but you can be very sure there will be downs and those downs will cause stress and depression.

This is what happens in our lives and this is what causes stress. When I'm going up, I'm always worried: what happens if it comes down? When it's going down, I'm always stressed, always depressed. So, the answer to that is the spiritual life. Spiritual life doesn't say, "Get out of the ocean." It doesn't say, "Don't live, don't enjoy, don't get wet." Spirituality say: "Anchor yourself in the depths of the ocean." In the depths of the ocean, there are no waves. The depths of the ocean are always very still, very calm. There is no high tide or low tide in the depths of the ocean and no stormy seas.

Also, there's even more life in the depths. When you look at the ocean on the surface, it looks just like plain water. Then, when you put on a snorkel mask and get your face in the ocean, and you start to see all the beautiful colors, you see the coral, you see the fish. But people who have been scuba diving say snorkeling's nothing, you've got to go scuba diving!

The same thing is true in life. We stay on the surface because we think that's all there is, but we must dive deep. , The deeper you go, the more stillness, calmness, and grounding. The deeper you go, the more beauty, the more life, the more colors. That's where the real excitement is. It's on the inside, not going up and down in the waves. It's in that connection with the depths of your Self.

We're planning to devote some time of our lives every day to move on our

spiritual path, but how do we know that this path actually leads anywhere, how do we know that there is actually a Self beyond the physical body? If I'm going to dedicate some of my time to something, I want to make sure that there's going to be some returns. How do we know?

Here's the dilemma you face: our mode of knowing, our tool of knowing, is the mind. That's how I know things, it's how I process my information, it's where my brain is. But the mind cannot know about something beyond the mind. And so a question like this puts us in this very interesting position of saying, "You need to convince a part of me which -- by its nature -- cannot understand that which I want you to convince me."

When I'm sitting here, I know that there are people sitting in front of me. How do I know that? My eyes can see them. Now, if I were blind or had a mask over my eyes and I couldn't see them, they would still be there. So then maybe one of them would speak, and with my ears I would know they're there. The sound of their voice would create soundwaves which would vibrate against my ear drum and it would give a message to my brain that they're there. But, if I were deaf or had earplugs in, I wouldn't be able to hear them. So then maybe I'd reach out and touch someone. Sometimes people who are blind recognize people by touch.

I require one of my physical senses in order to know they exists. If I had no use of any of my five senses, they'd still be there but I would have no way of knowing that.

This brings us to our dilemma because you cannot see or hear or smell or taste or feel with your fingertips God-realization, or God for that matter. For most of us, since the mind is our tool for knowing, this is where so many people say they don't believe in God. They demand proof of, God. But when we say "prove it to me," what we're saying is prove it to me through the methods that I have deemed acceptable. Prove it through my five senses. Prove it with the tools of science. So we find ourselves tragically disbelieving simply because God is not provable in the same way as a tangible object or mathematical calculation.

Interestingly, neither is love. Try convincing a young child who comes home from school and says, "I'll never fall in love, I'll never get married. Girls have cooties." Try to convince him that love exists. How are you going to convince this young boy that at eight years old he may think girls have cooties, but that there's really going to come a time in his life where

he doesn't think girls have cooties at all, there's going to come a time in his life where he does fall in love, that he's not going to think girls have cooties forever. You cannot convince him at that age of this thing called love. . All you can do is pray that his life should be blessed in such a way that he also experiences love.

Once you've experienced love, the fact that you can't see it or hear it or smell it is irrelevant. Nobody can convince you that love doesn't exist if you've ever been in love, because we just know. And this is where, when we look at our spiritual practice and our spiritual path, we have to use a means of knowing other than the five senses. As long as we relegate our knowing to those five senses, we limit our entire lives to only those things that we can know through those senses.

This is where the practice of meditation becomes so important. Meditation gets us in touch with what you can call a sixth sense, another way of knowing. Anybody who has experienced God or the Divine or the Universe or light or spirit – whatever word we use, it doesn't matter – has that understanding, just like anybody who's been in love has that understanding. But it is not something you can convince someone of using only the tools of the mind.

Looking for Something versus Running Away

What is the difference between looking for something and running away from something?

I always emphasize that our decisions in life should be made, as much as possible, by moving *toward* rather than moving *away from*. When you come onto a spiritual path, or when you go anywhere, there are two ways of getting there. One way is actually moving toward where you want to go, and the other is getting there because you are moving away from something that's in the other direction.

For example, in order to get to Rishikesh from Delhi, there are two ways I can do it. One way is to head to Rishikesh and I find some vehicle to get me there. My vision is on Rishikesh. But, another way to do it is if I hate Delhi, if I've got to get away from Delhi, and I push against Delhi.. If I happen to be pushing against Delhi in the northern direction and I do it enough, I'll end up in Rishikesh. So, the end result is the same, but they are two very distinct paths.

This is what we're looking at when we talk about the difference between being pulled toward something versus running from something else. Some people come on to a spiritual path because they want to experience the Divine. Life may be great but they want something more, they want to expand their consciousness and connect with who they really are.

Another way to come to the spiritual path, though, is if we're really hurt in life, we move to an ashram, start meditating, take up yoga, embrace a spiritual path.

If I come on to a spiritual path only because I'm running away from

something, it's not going to go very deep. It'll last only as long as my pain is there. . So, maybe someone broke my heart, maybe I lost a loved one, I was fired from my job. It stings, and in order to get away from that sting, I start meditating, I move to an ashram, I join a spiritual community. Now, if my agenda is only being free of the pain which broke my heart, then the minute time heals that pain, which inevitably it will, I discover, "Oh, I don't actually really like living in an ashram," or, "Oh, I'm actually way too busy to keep up my meditation practice." So, what you find is that the spiritual life becomes simply an escape. True, it is better than alcohol or drugs or binge-watching TV serials, but this way of using it doesn't really take you into the depths of what spirituality can offer.

There is also another possibility here: you could come on to the spiritual path in response to something that's happened, perhaps pushing things away, but if once you are on the spiritual path, you actually allow it to touch and expand your heart, then it doesn't matter why you got in.

A spiritual life is a life focused on spirit, while material life is a life focused on matter. In spiritual life, we focus on essence rather than form. We focus on the soul, the spirit, the Truth of who you are, rather than the vehicle that you've come in. If you allow yourself to really open to that, it's going to transform you, regardless of how or why you got into it.

Sometimes spirituality is also used just as a band-aid for our brokenness: "I don't want to think about something that's hurting me, so I will just do my mantra instead." Well, in some ways, that's a great practice. One of the great benefits of having a mantra is that when you find your mind going off in dysfunctional, non-helpful, pain-inducing directions, you can chant a mantra instead. But if there's something really important in your life you need to look at, the answer is not, "How can I ignore it and just chant my mantra instead?"

So, whether you've come to it running toward or whether you've come to it running away, either way, don't worry. The question now is: once you're here, on this spiritual path, how do you open yourself fully to the power, the possibility of where you are and enable your life to be fuller, richer and deeper through your spiritual practice?

How come sometimes a spiritual life is painful? Isn't it supposed to only be joy?

There are no mistakes in the Universe. This doesn't mean, however,

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that everything feels good. We were never promised a life without pain. There's no scripture I know of in which God says, "Come to Me and I'll make sure you never get fired from your job," or "Come to Me and I'll make sure everyone always does exactly what you want, when you want it," or "Come to Me and I promise you'll never get sick or lose a loved one." We were never promised anything like this. A spiritual life is not an inoculation against poverty, failure or loss.

What a spiritual life promises us is the opportunity and ability to discover who we are. Yes, along the way there are going to be moments of pain as our way of knowing and understanding gets rearranged.

I remember saying to Pujya Swamiji in the beginning, through streams of tears, "Nobody ever told me that when you annihilate my ego, you take my heart with it!" We talk so frequently about the annihilation of the ego on the spiritual path, and that sounds really good; we're all aware on some level that it gets us into trouble in all sorts of ways. But we don't realize how the arms of the ego, like an octopus, have wrapped themselves around so much of how we identify, including our emotions and our hearts. So, it doesn't always feel good, in the same way that having a tumor removed does not feel good. But no one with cancer would ever say, "Forget it Doctor, the surgery is going to be too painful, I don't like being in a hospital." We know that removing the tumor is critical to our survival.

When we're on the path and it doesn't feel good, when in meditation we find ourselves face-to-face with our own darkness, face-to-face with our own shadow, it feels a lot better to run from that. We need to understand, though, that we're here for a reason and allow ourselves to really open up. Underneath it all, it's beautiful, it is nothing but grace.

THE MIND



Calming & Understanding the Wandering Mind

Where is the mind? Why doesn't my mind let me sit still, and why is it negative? Why, whenever I try to meditate, does it wander so much?

Where is the mind? The mind is nowhere, there's not a place that you can say this is where the mind is, in the same way that we can say this is where the brain is. But what we do know is that the brain is the medium for the mind. The brain is that through which we experience the mind.

The way that we know that is things that happen to our brain affect our mind. If I drink alcohol, a very physical substance that has a very physical reaction on my blood, therefore a physical reaction on the connections in my brain, my experience of my mind changes. Maybe I was feeling really stressed, I have a drink and now I'm not so stressed. Maybe I was feeling shy, I drink and now I'm ready to dance with the world. So that which we do that's very physical we know impacts the mind, ranging from alcohol and drugs to brain injuries and degenerative illnesses. We know that the brain is the seat of our experience of the mind.

Recently someone very close to us passed away from Alzheimer's. I know from my personal neurological background where in the brain it is that Alzheimer's happens. It was tragic and also scientifically fascinating because as we watched her disintegrate, her brain disintegrate, we watched a woman who used to be so loving, kind and generous now suddenly become angry, violent, hitting people around her, not recognizing her own family members. It really, really made me think. I thought, "God, love feels so deep, it is deep in my heart and soul." Yet, let me challenge that a little bit now: with a little bit of degeneration of the dendrites and glial cells in your brain, where does that which you identify as the deepest love go? How does that love disintegrate with mere connections between brain

cells? Isn't our love deeper than that? Love lives in the heart, not in the dendrites! Are we that shallow?

This really made me start to think, as she was the first person I knew so closely to have this sort of illness, and with a background in neurology, I was fascinated with what was happening. What I realized is that it of course love doesn't live in our dendrites or glial cells. Of course it is much deeper than that. Yet, the brain is the medium for the experience of that, the same way that the eyes are the medium for the experience of sight. Sight does not exist in my eyes, but if you pull out my eyes, I no longer can see. Similarly, I can have perfect eyes, but if you damage the occipital lobe of my brain, I would no longer see. Now, sight is still there, the people I was seeing are still there, the world is still there even though it's become dark to me, so where did that exist? So, the brain is the medium through which we experience the mind.

Now, why doesn't it let me sit still? Why is it negative? Well, first of all, it's not always negative. The positive stuff is actually just as distracting as the negative. It's more enjoyably distracting. Daydreaming is fun! But unfortunately, it is the opposite of meditation. While we may enjoy it, it's just as detrimental to being in the present as negativity.

The mind tends to be negative sadly because we have gotten habituated to negativity. Children's minds are not negative. Children tend to be positive. They're happy, they're smiley. What makes them negative? Only when they're hungry, they're tired, they've got a full diaper – it's really basic stuff. Feed them, clean them, and you've got a happy kid. Hold them, love them, and you've got an extra happy kid. For us, what ends up happening is the mind starts to steal our happiness. This is where it becomes negative.

As we grow, we develop this ego. The ego decides that there's some problem in the world, or that there's a problem with us. Depending on how we've been raised, we end up with one of two pathologies: either "I'm the worst, I don't deserve anything," or "I deserve everything but the world isn't giving it to me." In either case, it's negativity. Frequently they run right into each other as: "I'm bitter, I'm angry, things aren't fair," morphing into "I'm the worst, I can't believe I'm thinking like this, I'll never be spiritual, even God doesn't like me."

The other thing that the mind does is it judges. Again, this comes from our culture, it's how we are raised: "This is pretty, this is ugly, this is nice,

this is bad. This is what good girls do, this is what bad girls do.” We’re constantly labeling, constantly judging. “Mommy’s pretty little girl.” “Mommy’s bad girl.” Everything is judgment, everything is labels. So, we develop this habit, this *sanskara*, of labeling things, and we carry it into our world. “I’m beautiful, I’m ugly. I’m successful, I’m a failure. I’m worthy, I’m not worthy.”

This is the stuff that occupies the mind and there is no end. With seven billion people on the planet, there is no end to the number of those with whom you can compare yourself. There is no end to the judgments you can pass. With all of these games of the mind, I am everywhere except here in the present moment. Because the truth is, right here in this breath, in this moment, I’m OK. I’m enough. It’s enough. This breath is enough. This presence is enough.

That actually scares the ego. When you start meditating, sadly the ego amps up what it does, because that experience of enough-ness is the greatest enemy to the ego. The ego needs scarcity, competition, negativity, and judgment to live. Love, surrender, acceptance, and enough-ness are the enemies of the ego. Those of us who have been on the spiritual path for a while know that the minute you begin, the ego screams “AAAHHH!!!” Then you go another step, and the ego again screams “AAHHH!!!”

Suddenly out of the blue just when you begin to touch another, deeper layer of the Self, suddenly there appears the ego in a new form. It’s always a new form because the ego is very clever. It takes you a moment to even recognize it, and you think, “I thought we finished this thing before!” It comes up every time we start to get deeper and deeper on our spiritual paths, every time we start to surrender more, experience our own enough-ness more, because that’s the stuff that shrivels the ego. Remember, the ego was created for you to know your place, for separation. So, connection, one-ness – this is what shrivels the ego.

You may not notice your wandering mind so much until you sit to meditate.

It’s not the mind that’s the enemy, and it’s not even the ego that is the enemy by any means, but they both need to understand that they are not in charge. If you want to solve a math problem, you need your mind. It’s what the mind does. If you need to sort something out, we need our mind. We need our minds to figure things out, to be effective, to be efficient. My intuitive heart has no idea how to make a spreadsheet; my mind knows

how to do that. So, we need it, but it's not supposed to be running the show. It's supposed to be a tool in our hands. This is where meditation becomes so important. It enables us to get out of the clutches of the mind, the clutches of the ego, and to re-experience, "Ah, I'm here," in a moment, a moment of not being run by my mind. And eventually we're able to string those moments together more and more and more.

Helpful Tools for Our Spiritual Journey

Why do some people respond so differently to various situations in life? Why does it seem like sometimes, some people are not even capable of love or compassion?

We move through the world with our own toolbox, and that toolbox is how we respond to the world.

Let's say that you get yourself into a situation where compassion is required, or resilience is required, or patience, or understanding. Well, if in your personal toolbox, you don't have patience, you don't have understanding, you don't have compassion, then you're not going to be able to respond to that situation with it. Usually what happens in our world is people hurt us unintentionally because they are not able to respond to situations skillfully.

Let's say that I'm walking and I see a nail sticking out of the wall. Well, what am I going to do? I'm going to pull a hammer out and hammer it. But if I open up my toolbox and there is no hammer, and all I've got in my toolbox is a paintbrush or a fork, I'm not going to be able to do proper justice to that nail. I'm going to whack it with a paintbrush, I'm going to whack it with a fork. Now if the nail were a living being, if the nail were one of us, it would feel like, "Who the hell are you? What are you doing? Don't you understand that I'm a nail? That what I need is a hammer? Why are you whacking me?" without understanding that yes, we'd love to hammer the nail back in, but we just don't have a hammer.

This is a metaphor that I use as the foundation for the question of why people hurt us in life. There are so many times when what we need from someone is understanding, we need patience, or we need compassion, but people respond with impatience, or with anger, or without understanding.

And then we get hurt. But we blame them for that, without understanding that they didn't wake up in the morning planning to hurt us. They didn't wake up in the morning planning to make a mess of that situation. They're just moving through the world with a certain toolbox, and when the situation required love or generosity or openness or understanding, they opened up their toolbox and they didn't have any. What they had was fear, anger, loneliness, and grudges, and so that's how they respond to the world.

Our toolbox gets created throughout our lives. It begins in our childhood. Our parents give us the first tools. If we are raised with patience, understanding, and generosity, we develop tools for patience, understanding and generosity. But if we're raised with impatience, if we're raised in the "every man for himself" model of life, if we're raised with abuse, then we don't end up with tools of love and generosity in our toolbox, and we don't have them with which to respond to others.

What have been the most beneficial tools on your spiritual journey?

On a personal level for me, I think the tool that was most beneficial for me and has been for most of my life has been the knowledge, the deep, deep awareness, that I deserve and am entitled to a happy life, a good life, and good things in life and that the world, by nature, is good. It's the way my parents raised me. They taught me, "You can do anything, be anyone, have anything, achieve anything."

When I was very young, my mother used to take me to this place near our house that had this huge, enormous slide, but she was too scared to go down it with me. So, she would grab any random guy going up the stairs and would say, "Would you take my daughter down the slide?" I was maybe four or five years old. Now, today, people would look at you like you're crazy to just hand off your toddler girl to some unknown male stranger! But my mom had this very deep belief in the goodness of people, so it never occurred to her that anything would happen to me. She used to teach me, "Strangers are just friends we haven't met yet." That was the motto that I was raised with. So with that all combined – a faith in the goodness of people, and faith in the universe, and awareness that I was entitled to good things, that there would always be enough. I was not raised with fear. I was raised with a sense of plenty.

What that did for me in my life was enabled me on my spiritual journey.

If I didn't have faith in the universe, if I didn't have faith in the goodness of the universe, the rightness of the universe, I think it would have been very difficult at the age of 25 to leave the world that I came from, to leave a path that I knew was going to take me into financial and career success, for a spiritual life. To walk out of a world in which everything is set for you, on a physical, tangible level, and walk into a place where you don't speak the language, you don't know anybody, you don't know anything about the culture, you have no idea what tomorrow is going to bring, you have no idea how long they are going to let you stay here is quite a risk. When I first moved to the ashram, Parmarth had a 15-day maximum policy and you needed special permission!

If I had been raised with fear - what's going to happen to me? where's my next meal going to come from? who's going to put the roof over my head? what's going to happen? - it would have been very difficult to take that step of faith with what I had experienced.

The other most beneficial tool in my life is a deep commitment to truth. In my home growing up, telling a lie was the absolute worst sin you could commit. You could've done something horrible, but if you admitted it, the punishment would be almost nothing. On the flip side, you could've done almost nothing, but if you lied about it, there was hell to pay in my house! You didn't lie, and you didn't lie even about little things! There was no such thing as a "white lie" in my house. And so I was really raised with this "truth at all costs" belief.

That's the second and very powerful tool that I had, because then when I was given this experience on the banks of Ganga, when I knew that this was where I was meant to be, there was no way I could not live it. People say to me, "God, it's amazing that you decided to stay, it's amazing that you left that world, it's amazing that you came here." But for me, there actually was no option. I could not deny the truth that I had seen. I could not deny what I had experienced. It didn't come in the package that I thought my life's happiness was going to come in. I was on a path, I was getting a PhD in psychology, I was going to live a normal life – house, a white picket fence, kids, a career, vacations at resorts, all the things that you think a good life is made of. I was not expecting that the package of the happiness of my life was going to come through renunciation, in celibacy, in spirituality, in an ashram in India. But when it happened, when I had that awareness, when I had that opening, because truth was the biggest tool in my toolbox – it was the only thing every time I opened my toolbox

that stared me in the face – there was no way I could deny that I had had that experience. There was no way that I could turn my back on it and say, “I didn’t see that.” And so that commitment to truth led me here.

How do we deal with people who have grudges and anger and are responding with a tool that is not right for the situation?

The first aspect is to really recognize this so we realize they are not trying to hurt us. Our pain stems not so much from exactly what people do, but from the fact that we feel like a victim of it. We ask ourselves all the time, “why me?” When we understand it’s not about us, but it’s about their insufficiently stocked toolbox, it takes that sting out of whatever they’ve done or said.

Imagine that you are walking through a park, and you get bit by a mad dog. What are you going to do? You’re going to go to the doctor, you’re going to get the wound bandaged, you’ll probably get a rabies shot. But is anyone going to chase the dog down the street to bite it back? Is anybody going to need therapy to get over what a victim you feel like due to the fact you were bit by the dog? Of course not! We all understand the dog didn’t wake up in the morning planning to bite me, the dog didn’t watch my movements for a week and understand where I take my morning walk and then lie there waiting to ambush me. I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. We intuitively understand that. Even though we have a real wound which needs to be bandaged, it doesn’t create a psychological problem that breaks my heart.

The way we understand the dog is actually the same way that we need to understand people in the world. The dog bites because it is sick. When we say “mad dog,” that means it has rabies. When the dog has a disease called rabies, it becomes mad, it bites.

The same is true with people who hurt us. They’re not doing it to us, they’re not plotting and planning how to make us miserable. They are dis-eased. They may not have an illness that’s curable with an injection or a pill, but they are living in a state of dis-ease. They’re upset. Their toolbox doesn’t have love, patience, and compassion. So in that state of dis-ease, what they’ve got in their toolbox is control, grudges, pain, violence and fear, and so that’s how they respond to the world.

When we really deeply understand that, then it doesn’t harm us psychologically because we understand that they are in a state of dis-ease.

This doesn't mean, of course, that we keep walking on that path, knowing that there is a mad dog sitting there. It doesn't mean that we allow ourselves to become victims. Understanding others does not mean I become a doormat on which they can stomp their boots or that I let myself be bit, literally or metaphorically, every day. It simply means that I don't react, when they hurt me because I realize they are in a state of dis-ease, like the mad dog. I don't feel psychologically damaged based on it. Then, with clarity, I'm able to respond effectively.

We have to have that understanding first. Does yelling back at them ever work? Never. Does criticizing them back ever work? Of course not. So, when we know what doesn't work, we have to start looking at what might work.

If someone is mean to us, what we have to understand is that they are miserable. People who are happy spread happiness. This is why we like to be around happy people. People who are in love, even if they are not in love with you, they're still really nice people to be around! When a friend of yours falls in love, you can feel it, even though you are not the one they are in love with. The love – it flows, it overflows. People in peace exude it. Pujya Swamiji always says when you are in peace you exude peace, you spread peace, you manifest peace. When you are in pieces, that's what you spread - you spread pieces, you share pieces.

So if somebody flings hurt and pain at us, it means that's what they have inside. Air conditioners give cold air because that's what they have. Heaters blow hot air because that's what they have. Whether it's effective for that moment or not effective, that's all they have. The AC is effective in summer, yet it will make us sick in the winter time. But the AC can't help it, because that's all it has. So if what someone has is pain and anger, that's all they're going to give you. It doesn't matter how much you yell at it. You could scream all day at that AC, "I'm getting pneumonia!" but it won't matter! It's going to keep blowing its cold air. You can start coughing and sneezing, you could get a fever, you could drop dead in front of it...it's going to keep blowing its cold air, because that's all it has.

The minute that you recognize that, it doesn't make it easier but it gives us distance from an immediate reaction to the person, as though they were doing it to us on purpose. If someone in your office is really sick and coughing all over the place, you don't want to stand near them. You know you'll catch whatever they've got. But you know also that they are

not doing it to you, they didn't manufacture a virus to come in and give it to you. It's festering inside them. Get too close and you're going to get coughed on. This is how people in our lives are sometimes. They have festering illnesses of pain, anger, grudges and ignorance. We don't want to get too close but we also need to realize that it is not about us.

The first thing we do is we understand. The second step is we try to share as much love and peace as we possibly can, and we never give up. Because if we give up, then we've let go of our own *dharma*, which is to share love and peace. That's who we are. If we recognize that we are the Divine, that we are the Soul, that we are consciousness, then exuding that consciousness, that Divinity, IS our *dharma*. So when we give up, when we react, we're letting go of our *dharma*.

There's a story I love about a saint who is bathing in a river, and there's a scorpion flopping around, drowning in the river. The saint goes to pick it up to save it, and tries to put it on the shore. When he does that, the scorpion stings him. As the scorpion stings him, the saint instinctively flings his hand in pain, dropping the scorpion back into the water. Then the saint goes to pick it up again, yet the scorpion stings him again before he can get it to the shore. Again he flings his hand, and again the scorpion falls in the water. This drama goes on several times, with the saint continuing to try to lift the scorpion out of the water and put him on the river bank. The scorpion keeps stinging him, he keeps flinging his hand. Finally a man sitting on the edge of the river cries out, "*Baba, chordo usko!* Let it go! It's a scorpion, he's going to keep stinging you! Forget it!" But the saint replies, "It is his *dharma* to sting, but it is my *dharma* to save, so if he's not leaving his *dharma*, why should I leave mine?"

So we don't give up, we don't react, we don't justify that "Well, he started it." But, we also don't keep sticking out leg into the bush where we know the mad dog is. We have to figure out ways, even living within four walls, to protect ourselves, not by reacting, not by biting back, but simply by effectively taking care of ourselves, whether it's creating physical distance, whether it's creating emotional distance. We don't do it out of anger, we don't lose our *dharma*, but we recognize that we must protect our own physical and psychological space.

Should that person try to come towards us with love, looking to change, we must allow it to happen. We should never turn around and say, "Forget it! You're too late. Who the hell are you now to come to me? I've been

putting up with this for thirty years!" We must recognize that sometimes it takes thirty years for somebody to change, for them to recognize it.

We literally have to become energetic transmitters of love and peace. We're not just energetic receivers, we are energetic transmitters. Where I've been energetically receiving this person's anger and grudges and pain, now I need to be an energetic transmitter of love and peace. But again, it doesn't mean that I walk into that person's psychic aura of anger. I don't metaphorically stick my leg into the bush where the dog is. But, I stay present in my own *dharma*, in my own peace, in my own love, such that – you never know? – if you become enough of a magnet, enough of a transmitter, it can change anything.

Breaking Out of Negative Patterns

Why do I think so negatively? How can I break out of negative patterns?

Negative thinking is a tragic pattern that many of us fall prey to. We do it because we've been programmed to do it, very sadly but very insidiously.

One piece is our basic culture of education and discipline, which is a system based on punishments rather than rewards. The kids who do well and behave are ignored, and the kids who are the problems are the ones who get all of the attention. So, we hear constantly "You're stupid, you're bad, you're this, you're that," and we internalize it.

The other piece of it is the rest of the culture – the media, the politics, etc. – that is rooted upon and founded upon convincing us that we are lacking something in our lives that they are going to fulfill. This is just called marketing. If you are already set, how am I going to sell you something? If you're already satisfied, you're not a very good customer, especially if what I'm selling is not something you need. I need you to feel that there is something lacking in you which my product is going to solve. So, either you are too dark or too fair, your hair is too straight or too curly, you're too fat or too thin, you're wearing last year's model of jeans. This is how advertising works.

Think about this: What does soap do? It cleans us. We all need it, it's a great product. An honest advertisement would say things like: "This brand of soap cleans so many more parts per million of bacteria than that brand. Lathering up with this brand of soap for five seconds is the equivalent of lathering up with that brand of soap for 30 seconds." But commercials never do that. What do soap commercials look like? There are beautiful people, singing in the shower as they lather up in the morning,

the bathroom is all cozy and steamy, and their husband or wife is also in the bathroom singing. They go out and their child has miraculously gotten himself up and had his breakfast and done his homework. Then the family walks out the door hand-in-hand and all you see is just a little logo that says the brand name. Nobody said anything about cleanliness, nobody said anything about bacteria. We're not selling cleanliness. We're selling happiness.

Look at car commercials. They're selling freedom, driving off into the horizon. Well, how many among us feel stuck in their jobs? How many among us feel stuck in a situation? We see the commercial and we think, "God, freedom looks so good, if I just had a Camry, I too could drive off into the sunset. Leave behind everything." We're not selling airbags and brakes and seat comfort, we're selling freedom, we're selling romance. Want to sell a sports car? The guy with the car has the right lady. You want to sell an SUV? Kids in the backseat are singing together. Well, when your kids try to strangle each other in the back seat, the subliminal message is that you have wrong model of car. If you just buy this SUV, your kids too will sing in the backseat.

I share this because it's funny, but it's epidemic. Wherever you look, we are being told in every magazine, TV show, movie, commercial, and ad on a website that we need something to be full. They are selling scarcity. "24 hours left of this sale," "2 left at this price," "Get them now or they'll be gone tomorrow!" "You're growing old, better get the right car, have the right family, take the right vacation, drive your Camry off into the sunset while you still can." It's all about scarcity.

So, what happens is we have been indoctrinated and brainwashed to believe that: a) we're not enough and there's something wrong with us, something lacking, b) these people have it and c) you're running out of time. Now that sounds very superficial, and even if we don't internalize the message about the car or the soap, we do internalize the message that we are not enough. We do internalize the message that there is something wrong with us. And we take that out into our lives.

Therefore, the way to deal with the negative thoughts is, first of all, make a commitment in your life to compassion, and make sure that commitment includes you. Make a commitment to loving kindness, and make sure that you are included in that.

The second part is: identify the voices. As the negative voice comes into your mind, ask yourself, "who are you? Are you a commercial, are you my fifth-grade teacher, are you my mother always asked me, "Why can't you be like your sister?" Most parents mean well, they don't mean to mess up their children. It's not their fault. Look at any 25 or 26 year old. They're kids. They look like babies. That's how old our parents were when they gave us these messages that we've been carrying for decades. They were doing the best they could, but they were 23, 24, 25 years old, they were babies figuring it out as they went along. They didn't mean how it came out, but we internalized it.

We also internalized the message that our worth is based on what we achieve. People who are successful, who are rich, who are the top, these are the ones that society glorifies. The message is that your value and your worth is inextricably linked with how much money you make, how high you have climbed on the career ladder, whether you're the president or CEO versus the mail clerk. It's not just your salary that's dependent on your position, but your entire self-worth.

So, we internalize that, and even if we don't go a traditional path, even if we're not climbing a ladder to be a corporate VP or CEO, we still internalize the message that we are only as worthy as what we achieve. Today, sadly, living a normal life has become sort of sub-standard. Today, it's all about what you're going to do that has never been done before, what you're going to do that sets you apart. It's a disease. It's a very serious disease, afflicting pretty much everyone between the ages of 10 and 50, but primarily the younger. It's a recent disease. Look at your parents, look at your grandparents. Did anybody's grandmother do that something that nobody has ever done before? No. She wanted to raise a family and cook a beautiful casserole that would feed her family and maybe have a garden. This was enough. Do some charity. Invite the neighbors over for dinner. This was what life was about. We can actually learn a lot from the older generations. Today, you've got to do it ALL. You've got to have a career, you've got to have a family, take care of your health, squeeze your own organic juice, get to the gym, meditate, do yoga, and stay peaceful and loving and happy while you do it all. The standards have become just insane for what counts as a legitimate life, so no wonder we're all telling ourselves over and over again "you're not good enough." We've created a standard that none of us can possibly achieve.

But, the good news is that when you look at it closely, it tends to dissipate.

If we can look at it and say, “Oh my God, I can’t believe I’ve gotten sucked into that model, I can’t believe I’ve been brainwashed.” We can just look in and recognize we are enough. It’s not about what you do, it’s about how you are. Let that be your gauge – not what you do, but who and how you are. If who you are is compassionate and loving and kind, it’s a fantastic achievement. Just remember to extend it to yourself also.

What are some other ways to break the cycle of negative thinking?

This is where the practice of mindfulness comes in. Mindfulness gives us full conscious control over our mind.

A very simple practice of mindfulness is simply being aware as you are doing things. Literally, as you are going about doing things, you say in your mind, “Now I’m doing this, now I’m doing that,” bringing the awareness back. “Here’s what I’m noticing now, here’s my breath now.” The breath is probably the easiest and the best way to stay present in the moment. It’s nearly impossible to be back lamenting something that happened twenty or thirty years ago when you are deeply connected to your breath. There’s something about the breath that brings us right into the present moment.

Then, in terms of dealing with that subconscious mind and that subconscious programming, the good news is that the brain keeps changing. There’s an expression in neurology that says “Neurons that fire together, wire together.” For example, say there was a young girl who shared a room with her brother, and he beat her every time their parents turned off the lights at night. This young girl is going to associate darkness with pain, fear, and anxiety. Now, thirty years later, she’s still afraid of the dark, but doesn’t have conscious connection of why that is. A great deal of energy is spent in her life now with her husband or other roommates saying to her, “Why in the world do you need a night light? You are an adult, the night light disturbs me. Can’t we turn off the light?” It creates great conflict. Those neurons in her brain, which fired together so many nights in a row, have now wired together “darkness” with “pain.” They became linked neurologically.

But, the good news is that we can actually rewire our brains. If we fill our brains with positive associations, those will become the new pattern. Then, automatically, the negative thoughts will go away. It’s not a matter of us doing battle with the thoughts so much as changing the entire landscape of our minds, so that there’s no place for the negative thoughts.

The Mind & Conditioning

Can you explain how we are conditioned and what that means?

Conditioning happens in many ways in many places. It begins in our families when we pick up what is important to our parents. If every time our mother looked in the mirror she said, “Oh my God, I can’t believe I’m so fat, I’m so ugly,” and every conversation we heard was her saying to our dad, “This dress makes me look fat,” that’s what in Indian culture we call a *sanskara*. It’s conditioning, a neural pathway.

If every time we drive home from some social event our father yells at our mother, “I can’t believe how you interrupted me in front of the others! Don’t you realize that’s what makes people not respect me? Didn’t you notice that Bill’s wife let him finish his sentence, why can’t you be more like bill’s wife?” what do we learn? It’s just our parents having an argument, but what do we learn? Well, if we’re female, what we learn is “be quiet.” If we’re male, what we learn is that if you are interrupted, if something seemingly unimportant happens in an important conversation, your entire self-worth is in jeopardy. Your self-worth is rooted in how your wife talks to you in public. So, we get conditioned, we get a *sanskara*.

It also happens in school: “Be quiet, speak only when spoken to, write neatly.” This is the stuff we value. What gets valued is basically how well you conform to rules. In order for society to operate, there have to be some rules. But, there are very few places in which really what’s valued is looking within and knowing who you are and having the courage to share that and to be that. So, we move through our world judging ourselves based on how well we’ve been able to adapt to the conditioning. Different cultures are different, families are different, jobs are different, so the conditioning ends up being different, but this is what ends up really in many ways

suffocating us, because there's no room for self.

I'll give you a personal example of this: India has a lot of rules. There's a lot of spoken and unspoken cultural rules in India, particularly regarding women. They're not rules that are laid down in any law book, but they're cultural standards of how women should be, particularly women in a spiritual world – how you should be, how you should sit, speak, look like, what you should think about, what your values should be, what your priorities should be. For me, coming from the West, particularly the progressive California West, it was really difficult.

When I first came, I had been here only a few months and we had gone on this trip to a place in Gujarat right on the ocean called Dwarka, a very sacred place. It was evening time, it had been a day full of temples and programs, and I was so excited to be back on the beach. So, I said to the religious leader I was with "I'm going to go take a walk on the beach." And he said, "Oh wonderful!" and then tells two guys to go with me.

So I said, "Oh no, no, I don't want people to come with me, I'm going to be quiet on the beach." And he said, "Yes, they'll come with you." I repeated that I didn't need them, and he repeated that they'd go with me. Now, I was 25, I was a backpacker, trekker, I had spent countless hours walking on trails and mountains, on the beach, by myself. For me, that's how it was always supposed to be done, that's sort of the point – just you and nature, you and the ocean. But here in India, you don't do that. In India, women should be taken care of and protected, and it would look bad from his perspective to not send at least two people to accompany me to the beach.

It's a real dance to figure out internally which aspects of our conditioning are issues to be addressed and changed and which aspects are just simple innocuous socialization. It's important to keep checking within and asking ourselves, "Is this really how I feel, or is this how I've been conditioned to believe I should feel?" That's a dance that we all have to do individually.

The answer to conditioning is not anarchy, is not being a renegade in every area, because then that becomes your identity. Then that's just a different type of conditioning. Then instead of not using a fork and knife, you're "not using a fork and knife." The identity goes both ways. You're still just as stuck with the fork-and-knife-ness. Under the guise of being free, if what I've decided is I'm going to rebel against conditioning, then that just becomes my new identity, I'm still just as stuck.

In many cases, the highest freedom is to realize that I can still be myself and use a fork and knife. I can still connect with my soul on the beach even with two guys trailing me ten feet behind. Even though that wasn't my first choice and wasn't how I would've wanted to do it, freedom is not found in saying, "No, for God's sake, don't send them, I need to be free!" Rather, it's about finding my freedom within those roles, because freedom is internal.

Every time you hear yourself saying something like, "You're so stupid, you're worthless, you're too old," etc., you should ask yourself, "Where did I learn that?" That is not the voice of the Self; it is a conditioned voice. When we're able to step out of the conditioned automatic beliefs and say, "Yes, I remember, this is the voice of my mother or my teacher or a commercial," then we see the voice for what it is, not the Truth, not our Inner Voice but simply an internalized pattern from the way we were conditioned in our youth. We then have the opportunity to say, "No. I don't actually believe that. I know my teacher was going through a rough divorce when she told me I was stupid and worthless. It's not really true." Then we have found freedom. My highest freedom is in knowing that who I am is full and complete, and we must refuse any conditioning which encroaches upon that.

Withdrawing the Senses

If God made us perfectly, why do we practice pratyahara, or the withdrawal of the senses? God gave us eyes to see, ears to hear, noses to smell, hands to touch, tongues to taste. So why should we withdraw the senses?

I frequently emphasize that God doesn't make mistakes. God gives us what we have for a purpose.. So why would we withdraw our senses if God has given them to us?

Just because God has given us a gift doesn't mean that He/She/It/ (however we envision the Divine) meant for us to use that gift recklessly. Yes we have tongues that taste, but that doesn't mean we should eat everything all day. We have fingers that touch, but it doesn't mean that we should touch everything. Anybody who's ever touched a hot burner, a leaf of poison ivy, or a snake knows clearly this is not what God intended when we were given the ability to touch. It was not for us to get hurt.

Just because God has given us something doesn't mean we are supposed to use it with reckless abandon however we want.

Everything we've been given is for a purpose, and the sense organs have been given to us so that we can know the outer world. Say you are sitting in front of me. I'm aware of that, that's part of my knowledge. But how did it become part of my knowledge? Because my organs of sight have seen you. You spoke and I heard you. You have a scent and I smelled you. I may have reached out and touched you. We need at least one functional organ of sensation to know the outer world. If I don't have sight, hearing, smell, or touch, you would still be here, but I would have no way of knowing that. Our only way to know the outer world is these organs of sensation.

I need my organ of touch so that when I put my hand on a hot stove, I'm able to remove it immediately. If I didn't have sensory neurons that worked immediately in my spinal cord connecting to the motor neurons that are going to bring my hand off the stove, I would leave it there, I would burn myself, and after a few seconds I would give myself such a burn that it would become infected, it could get septic, and I could die. Say I'm driving my car and I hear a very loud horn. My sense of hearing puts me on alert and helps me notice the car that ran the red light so that I react in time and don't get hit. The organs of sensation are very important to help us interact safely and effectively with the world around us. These senses are of great importance, they keep us alive and healthy and able to navigate the world. Everything we do in the outer world is rooted in these.

But, as we are reminded over and over again, the real world is the inner world. This is where *pratyahara* comes in. If we want to achieve *Samadhi* – enlightenment, Divine yogic union, bliss, ecstasy – well, before *samadhi* comes *dhyān*, meditation. But before I can meditate, I have to take this crazy mind that is in a thousand places and put it in one place – a mantra, a candle flame, an image, my breath. But before I can even do *that*, I have to stop my organs of sensation and perception from being rooted in the outer world.

That's why it's very difficult to meditate when you're in the middle of a basketball game! In the middle of a basketball court or a soccer field, or a supermarket, or driving your car, you've got to keep your eyes open! Anything you're doing that requires you to be focused outward is a very difficult situation to meditate, because in that moment, your perception is rooted in the sensory organs that face outward. This is why when we go to meditate, what's the first thing we do? We close our eyes, we try to choose a place that's quiet, because I have to be able to draw my senses inward in order for me to put them onto the one thing I'm going to focus on, whether it's my mantra, a candle, an image, or my breath. And from that single-pointed focus, I'm able to merge into a state of meditation, and from that I'm able, with grace, to experience *Samadhi*. But the *pratyahara* is the crucial first step.

For the outer world, we need our sensory organs. We tell God thank you for the fact that we are able to hear, able to feel, able to see, able to taste and touch. But also now, thank you for this inner world where I can see You and hear You. So, we need both.

Sleep & Samadhi

What is the difference between sleep and samadhi?

There is a huge difference between sleep and *samadhi*. It's almost the difference between night and day. They may seem similar simply because they both are peaceful. Our daily lives feel very stressful and hectic, whether with school, work, or family life. Our minds feel like they go a million miles an hour, we have lists and more lists, things in our mind and more things in our mind. But when we fall asleep, all of that goes. So yes, in sleep there's much rest and quiet, but is it *samadhi*? Is *this* the end goal of bliss?

In sleep, all that has happened is this world we live in is "off," and a whole other world is "on." We are away from this world's activities, problems, relationships, challenges, and lists, but all we've done is gone from one world into a different world when we're dreaming.

In the stage of non-dream deep sleep, that is as close as we can experience on a daily basis to what you could call *samadhi*, but there is one major difference. Non-dream deep sleep doesn't happen through an active awareness and experience, but rather through the *absence* of experience. In deep sleep, my brain has shut off and I'm no longer aware of the world around me. But the problem is, I'm also not aware of my deep sleep! When we wake up in the morning, we might remember our dreams, we might have some sense that we feel refreshed, but we have no memory of the experience of our deep sleep. We have not benefitted in any way by the experience that we've had – we haven't learned anything, and we haven't changed.

If I spend my life lying and cheating or being violent, that's what I'll be

when I sleep too. Rapists, murderers, burglars – everybody sleeps! Every night they're entering this experience of deep sleep, and every morning they wake up and keep raping and keep killing. That experience that they're having in deep sleep is not an experience that's permeating, affecting, impacting, or changing the nature of who they are.

In *samadhi*, yes, we are away from and free of the stress, free of our attachments, free of our expectations in this world, and yet it's *conscious*, it's *aware*, it's *mindful*, and it's *positive*. That *samadhi* which we experience, even if we just experience a moment of it, maybe a few moments strung together – it changes us. Even if we can't hold on to it 24 hours a day, even if we seem to lose it as soon as we're back at our workplace or around our family, nonetheless it actually has changed us. Something very, very deep within us has transformed. Because of this, the next time we sit, we get there a little quicker, it lasts a little bit longer, the space between the experiences gets a little shorter, and from that experience, how we live changes.

Anyone who has ever had a real experience of *samadhi* knows that their lives change, because suddenly they know that they're not actually separate from everyone else. We're not actually separate from our world. Suddenly we know, "Oh, I'm not this body." Even if we're not able to hold onto the *samadhi* yet for an extended amount of time, that awareness was conscious and was in my conscious mind, which means that it touches everything I do and changes my perception of who I am. *Samadhi* becomes the relaxation, the rejuvenation, the stillness, the quiet. It's all of the good stuff of deep sleep, but it's deep sleep *while awake*. You get all of those benefits in a way that actually changes you, in a way that when you're awake, you're still with the *samadhi*, you're still with that experience.

Where does samadhi end and sleep begin? How do you know?

Sometimes we sit down to meditate, we close our eyes, and sometime later we open our eyes and realize: how much of that was I actually meditating? Did I drift off somewhere?

Sleep is wonderful. The body needs it, the brain needs it, every cell of our being needs it. But, it is very different from meditation. They are nowhere near the same thing. Sleep is a withdrawal *from* the self, but meditation is a withdrawal *into* the Self. This is subtle, but it's a very important distinction. In sleep, I withdraw away from who I am. My life is very stressful – this

happens, that happens, I have this desire, this fear, this complex – and when I go to sleep, blessedly I'm free of it all. It's not because I've actually looked at it and changed it, but simply because I've been given a little vacation from it. That's all sleep is – a slight vacation from what I'm going through.

In meditation, I have withdrawn into my Self, so I'm also away from the things of this world, but I've gone deeply into my True Self, which means that the source of both my suffering and my joy should become apparent to me. Very little becomes apparent in sleep. Sometimes things become apparent in the form of a very special dream that maybe we remember the next morning that has a message to it, but in deep sleep, nothing becomes apparent. Deep sleep is darkness. A nice darkness, but darkness nonetheless.

Samadhi is light. *Samadhi* shows us the Self.

You can know whether you were in sleep or *samadhi* by checking in when you open your eyes: if I've meditated for an hour, am I any different than I was an hour ago, or do I just feel slightly physically refreshed? Did I just get a little cat nap, or have I actually been lightened up in some way? Has something been lit inside of me? Can I see a little more clearly? Am I a little more aware? You'll know, you'll absolutely know, because *samadhi* touches us.

OUR EMOTIONS



Using Anger as A Positive Tool for Action

How can we feel emotions like anger and still be present?

We get angry when we're not present. When we are present, deeply present, we don't lose ourselves into emotions.

Anger always comes out of unconsciousness. You cannot be consciously angry. So if I say to you, "OK, on the count of three, you've got 30 seconds to become furious. One, two, three, go!" Can you do it? Just try it. Try to become furious. You can't. This is actually really interesting, because how many of us lose our tempers? Everyone! It's sort of a part of the human condition. How many of us lose our tempers more frequently than we'd like to? And yet, we can't do it on command. The reason for that is that our anger comes when we are not conscious in that moment. That's why being present is such a good antidote to it.

When I say that we can't be angry and present at the same time, I'm not saying that we approve of everything that's happening in the world. Most of us disapprove of the violence and terrorism in the world, we disapprove of the injustice of our sisters and brothers starving or dying of thirst. . But, that's not the stuff we lose our temper over. That's not the anger we're looking to overcome. That anger doesn't usually lead us to behave in ways where we have to patch up what we've done or said. The anger that ruins our life stems from unconsciousness. This is why being present is the greatest antidote.

There's another way to address anger as well. Typically, when anger comes, when that wave of fury comes a tape starts playing and replaying in our mind of the person, situation, acts, and words that made us angry. As we keep thinking about that, we help the wave to grow and grow.

That habit of letting our cognitive mind hook into the emotional wave of anger harms us in two ways. First, it keeps us out of the present moment, because we are back ten minutes ago, an hour ago, ten years ago, etc. to the time of the assault or betrayal that has made us angry. So we are not here. That's always a dangerous place to be – not here. Also, it puts our brain on autopilot. It is simply a tape repeating and repeating and repeating the story. For all of that which plagues us – whether it's anger, depression, addictions, general angst, all of the stuff that afflicts us – the bottom line solution is to get out of the story.

Every bit of the pain rooted in a story of what has happened to me. It's all about me. I'm a victim of this. These people, that situation, that God, these stars – whoever and whatever we blame – are worse to me than to everyone else in the Universe. Whether we get angry about it or depressed, or become an alcoholic or drug addict, it's all based on my drama, my story.

So, as the wave of anger comes, we need to pull ourselves out of the story. The story says he did this, she did that; we replay it over and over. Instead of that, when you see the wave of anger coming in your life – you feel it, your pulse starts to race, your heart beats fast, your palms get kind of sweaty– the minute that starts to happen, the minute your attention gets very narrow on that person or that situation, shift it and focus your attention onto the anger itself. This is very subtle but it's very important. Don't focus on the situation that made you angry, the words or the person that made you angry. Focus on the anger itself. Stare at the emotion itself. What that does is actually makes it dissipate.

First, it brings us in to the present moment, and in the present moment there's no story, there's only the wave of emotion. If I can face that wave, here in the present moment, then it's just about me and my emotions. It's not about you, not about the other guy, the other girl, my parents, my teacher. It's not about some story. It's just looking at the wave of emotion. What you'll find is that as you stare down that wave, it dissipates. It just starts to fall apart right before your eyes.

Most of these emotions are secondary emotions. Anger comes because we are in pain. If you sit with anger and are true to it, you will find that beneath the wave of anger, beneath the “how dare you,” is fear and pain. So, we sit with that and we look at the wave of fear, we look at the wave of pain. Those too start to dissipate. This practice brings us into awareness. ,

Anyone who has ever has swum in the ocean knows that you can't outrun a wave. It's just going to crash on you. With anger, it crashes on those around us as well. So rather than trying to outrun it, just look at it. Watch it, and as it comes, dive deeply into that awareness, that presence of the emotion without acting on it and without getting caught up in the drama. The wave will peak and then dissipate and you will emerge safely on the other side.

The last piece is to connect with the breath. The breath is our greatest ally. The breath brings you into the present and immediately pulls you out of whatever emotion has hijacked your mindfulness, your presence, and your peace. Let the awareness of the breath be low in the abdomen, below the belly-button. Let it be slow, let it be mindful. The minute we bring our awareness there, it automatically grounds us.

But what if the people around us are doing things that are inconsiderate? For example, I have been affected with sleep deprivation because my neighbors create so much noise, and a whole assortment of unpleasant circumstances that were thrust upon me. How to free ourselves from the natural reaction to that?

The first piece is simply to have the awareness that there's a difference between pain and suffering.

Well, sleep deprivation is an objective state like wintertime or summertime or rain or sun or heat or cold. It's a state. There's no subjective quality to it as a good thing or a bad thing. If it was Maha Shivaratri, and you had made the decision to stay up all night chanting mantras, you'd be exuberant at 4am! It's not the sleep deprivation itself. If you had a 2am flight to go visit your beloved across the world, you wouldn't be furious at the stewardess or the gate agent that the flight took off at 2:30am instead of 2am, you'd be thrilled to get on your plane and go see the beloved! It's not the actual state of sleep deprivation that has created the anger. It's the lack of control. I didn't choose this, it's not the way I wanted it to be.

The fastest way out of that is to realize that nothing is how we want it to be. Nothing is what we choose. The problem with the Western world and the modern world is it's given us ATMs, drive-thrus, and order online, and it's made us have this idea that somehow everything is at our fingertips. It's a world where you get exactly what you want, "order today, refund tomorrow," you barely have to wait 30 seconds for your meal. It's given

us this impression that somehow the world functions according to what buttons we push on a keyboard or on a vending machine or shout into a loudspeaker system or microphone system in a drive-thru.

That's not how the world works. We are happy when we are in alignment with what the world has offered. So, the fastest way out of that anger is to broaden our perspective, to say, "Wow, what a greatness!" because the truth of the matter is, nothing is in our hands. These people were being loud at 4am, it's not what you wanted. Well, OK, some of us like the summer and we don't like the winter, but that doesn't stop the winter from coming. Nobody wants to grow old, but that doesn't stop it from happening. Nobody wants their kids to grow up, but that doesn't stop it from happening. Nothing is in our control. The sooner we realize that, the sooner we are free not only of the anger in this particular situation, but in every situation. The only thing in the entire universe you have control over is your response to the universe. That's it. So, the faster that you can take a deep breath and realize, "All right, I guess I'm going to be sleep-deprived," and get up to meditate and watch the sun rise, the quicker the suffering in your mind will end.

People may make you irate, but you have to realize that no amount of you being irate is going to make those people stop! Our only choice is to be miserable or not to be miserable, that's all that's in our hands, that's the truth in our life. Today it's this noise, tomorrow it's something else, the next day something else. We must realize the only objectiveness of good and bad is my response. Ask yourself, "Can I, just for a moment, simply, non-judgmentally call it sleep- deprivation without it having that emotional catch to it?"

In Chapter 3 of the Bhagavad Gita, Shri Krishna says that anger and hatred are the greatest enemies of man. How do we control anger in a situation where there is a question of justice? For example, when Draupadi was humiliated in front of the Pandavas in the Mahabharata, how would we control anger toward the sin and the sinner in situations like this?

So this is an example of a situation where there is an evil act, an unjust act, an act predicated upon nothing other than malice and meanness. Draupadi, the wife of the Pandavas, simply due to Duryodhana's anger, rage, and ego was nearly disrobed in the court in front of everyone. How do we deal with anger and hatred toward the sin and towards the sinner?

Anger is not an evil. Anger can be a great catalyst. Many people have this vision of spirituality that it somehow dulls you, and spiritual people should just be really mellow and slow and float with their feet a few meters above the earth, unimpacted by the world. That's not the highest experience or manifestation of spirituality. This is repression, this is pushing life away.

What most of us do is react. You say something, it makes me angry, I react, I slap you. Or, should I be a different sort of person, you make me angry, and I punch my hand through a wall, injuring myself instead of you. Or, I go home and I beat my kid because you're my boss so I couldn't talk back to you. Instead I go home and take it out on my wife or my kid or my employee. It's all a reaction. The purpose of life is to act, not to react.

These days, our social media and digital world make us busier and busier, and our lives have become mostly only reaction. From when we wake up to when we go to sleep, how many of us make lists of things that we're going to do that day? Then, when the day's over, we've been super busy non-stop but nothing on our list got done. And we sit there and scratch our heads and think, "But I haven't stopped! I haven't been wasting my time in a jacuzzi, or in bed painting my toenails. I haven't been idle, what's happened? Why did nothing get done on my list?"

The reason is because all of these other things that life gives us – an email, a phone call, a SMS, a this, a that – we react to it. So, we're reacting instead of acting. That's where the problem comes; that's where we've lost our freedom. I had made a decision today that I'm going to do x, y, and z, but the day ran away from me because this email, this phone call, this message came. So I've spent the day just reacting to the various beeps, buzzes and rings.

Anger can be a catalyst towards either reaction or action. If I am reactive, I react immediately unconsciously. But, anger can also catalyze pro-action. Injustice makes me angry. Violence makes me angry. Not in a reactive way, not in a way that makes me slap you or beat my kid or punch my fist through a wall, but in a way that there's an energy in me, there's an energy that's moving, that's saying "do something," serve, respond.

If your arm itches, you're going to scratch it. If you cut your arm and your arm starts bleeding, your hand is going to go immediately to the arm to stop the bleeding. It's self. If our response to injustice is a catalyst for action, that's great. There is nothing wrong with emotions, with passion,

with desires, as long as we are able to experience them in freedom rather than being slaves to them.

In anger, when I don't have a choice, I'm the first victim of that anger. Then that anger, instead of being an energy that ignites positive action, is a fire that burns me. There's a beautiful saying, "Getting angry when somebody hurts me is like saying they've made a mistake and so I'm going to punish myself for it." Duryodhana did something evil, so now I am going to punish myself by burning with anger inside. That doesn't solve the situation, doesn't impact Duryodhana, doesn't protect Draupadi, doesn't make sure that situation never happens again. All it does is burn me. It's useless. But anger that's a catalyst to positive action is a very powerful force.

There are a lot of things going on in the world today that we really should be angry about. Yet, our losing control and burning with anger doesn't serve anyone. It doesn't help our world, it doesn't help us. Instead, we need to learn to sit with the anger and acknowledge it's there because something is not in alignment with truth. Then we recognize that through our actions we can be a vehicle for change. The energy in the universe that wants to set it right is powerful and motivating.

This is what Lord Krishna tells us. He tells us, "Whenever there is darkness in the world, I incarnate to bring back the light. Whenever there is *adharma*, I incarnate to bring back the *dharma*."

Maybe God is trying to incarnate through every single one of us, maybe the situation is such today that every one of us gets to be a vehicle, gets to be that being through whom the energy flows.

If I can acknowledge that that experience of anger is there and not push it away, not eat it or drink it or gamble or shop it away, but experience it, and then see what it wants me to do,, then I'm able to be a vehicle and that energy can bring about movement towards righteousness through me.

The last piece is the part about hatred. Hatred comes when we identify the sin with the sinner, the act with the being. That really does burn us. It burns us in a much more lasting way than anger. Anger tends to come and go, whereas hatred tends to sizzle and fester.

The antidote to hatred is to understand that just as you are not your fears, your confusion, your upbringing, your desires, and your ego, so that

person is not. Even though this horrible act flowed through that person, it's because that's all they've got. Based on their upbringing, experience, and karmic package, what they've got is fear, anger, grabbing, jealousy, competition. So that's what they give.

People don't wake up in the morning deciding that they're going to commit heinous sins to bring about great suffering. Even those who are doing things that we look at as terrorism, as heinous sins, if you bring them in and ask them why they are doing it, they're going to have very righteous explanations for what they are doing – to restore justice, to restore this, to restore that. Read the interviews with Charles Manson – he had a whole rationale for why he was doing what he did. People who we label as evil, horrible, crazy people all think they're doing the right thing. It's all they've got.

Whatever people have done that has made us hate them, they did it because that's all they've got. It doesn't condone the act, doesn't mean what they did is OK, but it means that I don't allow hatred to ruin my life, or convince myself that hating is somehow the right thing to do. Because that just kills me, and it doesn't change the other person.

How to Deal with Disappointment in Our Lives

How do we deal with being disappointed or let down by someone we loved, trusted and respected? We must have some expectations with people, otherwise how do we learn and develop ourselves?

We have to have some expectations in order to move through the world. Pujya Swamiji always says, “Expectation is the Mother of frustration.” But the second part of what He says is, “Acceptance is the Mother of peace and joy.” The reason it’s important to remember both of those is that the opposite of the frustration we get from expectation is the peace and joy we get from acceptance. The answer is not to never expect; it’s to always accept what happens even if it wasn’t what you expected.

So for example, in order for us to move through the world, we have to expect that our house won’t burn down while we’re asleep overnight. Otherwise, you could never sleep at night. If you weren’t pretty sure that your house would still be standing when you woke up in the morning, that your loved ones would still be next to you in bed or in the room next to you, you wouldn’t be able to go to sleep. When we cross the street, we have to expect that a car is not going to accelerate when they see us and run us over. Otherwise, we’d never be able to cross the street. As we sit in a room, we have to expect that the roof is not going to fall on us, that whoever built this room built it with the commitment to excellence and the knowledge and expertise that one should have, otherwise we’d all rush out immediately. So in order for us to live, there have to be some expectations.

Similarly, in our relationships, in order for me to give myself fully to you, I have to expect that you’re not going to hurt me. If I’m going to give you my heart and love you with all that I am and all that I have, I have to expect that you’re not going to take a knife and stab it in my heart. I have to expect

that you're going to take my love as the precious gift that it is, and that you're not going to throw it on the ground and stomp on it.

These are the expectations we have to move through the world with; otherwise we'd be paralyzed. Or, we would have to be an emotionless robot. Can you imagine what it would take in your own heart to go to sleep every night with no expectation that the world would be there in the morning? To live with no expectation that the cars would stop when you crossed the street? That your airplane wouldn't fall out of the sky? You'd have to either be paralyzed or numb.

So we have expectations. Those are not the problem. Expecting that people are not going to hurt me is not the problem. Expecting that the airplane is not going to fall out of the sky is not the problem. The problem is what happens when that which we didn't expect happens. You didn't think your new love would hurt you, but he did. You didn't think that the plane your parents were on was going to crash, but it did. You didn't think that a fire was going to burn down your house overnight, but it did. You thought your love one was going to be there when you woke up in the morning, but she wasn't. Maybe her body was, but her soul had left the body. This is where our spiritual practice brings acceptance.

Acceptance is simply awareness that we have no control. The anger that so many of us feel is when an expectation is not be met over which we thought we had some control. For example, say I plan a picnic for my birthday. I plan it with the expectation that it's going to be sunny day. I certainly know it could rain, and sure enough it does rain. Most of us would be slightly disappointed, but we wouldn't be absolutely furious. Why? Because we didn't have an assumption of control. We expected that in the summertime it was going to be sunny, but we didn't really assume that the weather would abide by our wishes. We took a gamble. Ninety-nine percent of the summer days are dry, but we always knew there was a 1% chance it could rain and we took the risk. We would be disappointed at the rain, but not furious.

With other things that happen though, the reason we become so hurt and so furious is that in addition to the expectation of how it was going to be, we also assumed an element of control. We assumed that somehow my wanting it, my expecting it, it being right, meant that that's what would happen. We assumed that being a good person should somehow mean that bad things don't happen. We assume that me loving you should mean

you treat me well. So it's not just that we expect, but we actually have another layer of assumption of control because it's right or because it's what I want. This is what creates the problem. This is what leads to not just disappointment, not just sadness, but the inability to accept, the absolute fury, the "how dare you" feeling. Very few of us would look up at the clouds and say "how dare you" if it rained on our picnic. We understand the weather has got its own pattern. But with people in our lives, we have built-in expectations that they will behave the way we want.

The important thing to remember is that we have no more control over the people around us than we do over the weather. Everyone is living out their own karmic packages. It doesn't mean they weren't trying; it doesn't mean they're not good people, it doesn't mean they didn't intend to love us and treat us well. It's just that everyone is going through their own karmic package.

Everyone also has their own toolbox. If I've got a toolbox in my hands and I come upon a nail, well, what the situation requires is a hammer. In order to effectively deal with the nail, I should be able to pull a hammer out of my toolbox and hammer it back in. But if I don't have a hammer in my toolbox and all I've got is a paintbrush, I'm not going to be able to deal with that nail in an effective way. I'll try, I'll pull my paintbrush out and I'll smack the nail, but chances are I'm going to hurt my wrist, I might injure the wall, I might get paint everywhere if there's paint on my brush, and I might hurt my paintbrush.

So when you're on the receiving end, when you're the nail in the paintbrush situation, you wonder angrily, "What in the world is this person doing? It's so obvious that in the moment I need a hammer!" We feel that we need love, we need understanding, patience, care, loyalty, but when those around us are not able to give it to us, we get angry. However, if we can look at it directly and see that they don't have those tools in their toolbox and that they're responding with what they do have, we can recognize that the problem is not us. It's not that they can't recognize the nail, it's just that they don't have the ability to deal with it effectively or skillfully. So that's the way to deal with these situations. Certainly, if I'm a nail, I expect that hammers are going to know what to do with me. But on the occasion where there is no hammer and there is only a paintbrush, well, I'm going to get hacked around, I'm going to get paint splattered on me, I'm not going to get hammered properly, but we cannot allow ourselves to get furious at it.

So, acceptance doesn't mean it's OK. It just means I don't have any control over anything except my reaction, and I really want to live in peace, I really want to experience joy in life. Until and unless I can create space in my heart, in my life, and in my mind for the fact that this happened, I'm not going to be able to experience peace or joy.

What are some of the best ways to deal with disappointment and frustration?

Acceptance and gratitude. We love our loved ones, and we expect that they're not going to fall sick and leave us tomorrow or get hit by a car tomorrow, but on some level, we all have to know that we don't actually have any control over these things. That doesn't stop us from loving or from moving through our life. The awareness of our lack of control is almost an inoculation.

If we're able to hold on to the awareness that it's not in our hands, that every day of health is just grace, every day that my house is still standing is just a blessing. The more we're aware of this, the more gratitude we have. Gratitude brings us constantly into the awareness that it is all only God's grace.

If you owe me \$10 and finally you pay it to me, I'm not going to say to you, "Oh, thank you so much, you're so generous!" You owed me. I was entitled to it. It was my money. Gratitude, however, stems from the awareness that that which I've been given is not something that I was entitled to but that I have received due only to the generosity of the Universe, a generosity of grace, a generosity of blessings. . The more we can cultivate gratitude, the fewer expectations we will be burdened by, because inherent in gratitude is: "It's all in Your hands."

Each of us is fulfilling our own destiny, and my frustration and disappointment comes when I somehow have an attachment to a hope that's against nature, that's against the flow, that's against the will of the Divine Universe. I may say, "It was supposed to be sunny today!" but no, when there's air pressure the way it is in the atmosphere, moisture the way it is in the atmosphere, and clouds soaking up that much moisture, it's going to rain – it's the law of nature. The same is true in our relationships, the same is true in the stock market, the same is true in traffic patterns.

By bringing gratitude into our lives, we remember "There but for the grace of God go I." By the Divine's grace, I woke up today. By the Divine's

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grace that which I shove in my mouth manages to get digested. By the Divine's grace my house has not yet burned down. By the Divine's grace an earthquake has not yet swallowed us up. But even more, by the Divine's grace day by day I'm realizing that my own peace, joy, meaning in life, and fulfillment are actually not rooted in those things. My peace is actually not dependent on whether my house is still standing or not standing. My joy is actually not dependent on whether it rained or it was sunny, whether my picnic could happen or not. It's all dependent on my connection with God, which gratitude strengthens.

The more grateful I am, the less disappointed I am, the less frustrated I am, the fewer expectations I have. It also works on a much deeper, systemic, preventive level. The more gratitude I have, the more connected with the Divine I am, and the more connected with the Divine I am, the less dependent I am on what the things or the people in the world around me are saying or doing, the less power they have to make me depressed or frustrated or happy or elated, because I'm grounded in something much deeper. So, it works on both levels.

Overcoming Fear & Anxiety

How to overcome fears when it comes to connecting with others and yourself, facing your past versus dwelling in the past?

Well you can't overcome anything until you actually look at what it is. You can't overcome your fear until you know what is it I'm afraid of, and why am I afraid?

What most of us are afraid of, on the deepest core level, is extinction. This is just Darwinism; this is just basic survivalism. Our core instinct is to survive. This is true whether we are a mosquito, an earthworm, or a person. The deepest fear we have is that we will die. If you take most of the things we are afraid of and imagine that it happens, then what? Then after that, what happens next? In almost every case, you can actually walk yourself into the final "then what?" which is "I will die."

Now, it's not always death of the physical body. Sometimes it is. We may be afraid of airplanes because if they crash we die. But we're also afraid of things like humiliation. Why should we be so afraid of humiliation? If you take people through that and ask them why they are so afraid of being embarrassed and humiliated, we learn that being deeply humiliated actually feels like we cease to exist. Not on a physical level, of course, but on a deep emotional level.

The reason for this is we have developed identities based on what other people say and think about us. It begins when we're in our mother's arms – babies look at their mothers, the mothers look back, they make eye contact, they smile, they love, and these babies grow up feeling good about themselves. But, when children look in our mother's eyes and she's upset, she's stressed, and see she's not making eye contact, these kids grow

up feeling less than worthy.

On a psychological, spiritual level, we literally live judging ourselves based on how people respond. If I tell a joke and nobody laughs, something inside me is going to plummet. That's because as we look at each other, we are constantly re-adjusting how we feel about ourselves. If we see a man and he greets us with joy, our experience of ourself changes: "Wow, I must be someone wonderful, look how excited that person is to see me."

Alternatively, if you go to see or speak with someone and she turns her head away or gives a weird look, we fall inside. Now intellectually, we may not even know that person, or we may understand why he or she is upset or in a bad mood, but it doesn't matter. We are constantly re-adjusting our sense of self based on how people look at us. Think of the last time you went to a party. You dress up and go, but no one looks at you, no one notices, no one comments on your clothes or your hairstyle, no one says you look great. You come back feeling like something must have been wrong, and you keep checking yourself in the mirror to find out what the problem is. Why did no one look at me? There's something very deep within us that is constantly getting cues of who we are from other people.

So, our fear, our deepest fear is that we will cease to exist – physically, and also energetically, and what this leads to is a lifetime of being afraid to do things because of the thought, "Oh my God, what if I fail?" But if you actually imagine that failure in your mind, and ask what happens next, you'll most likely say something like, "Then people will know I'm a failure." OK, so people know you are a failure, then what? "Then they won't love me." OK, so then they won't love you, then what? Slowly, slowly, what you realize is, again, the final answer of what we are afraid of, through fear of failure or fear of humiliation is: "I will dissolve." On a very deep level we have the belief that somehow if people don't love us and acknowledge us, we don't exist.

Think about this new selfie obsession. Psychologically, it is fascinating. We don't just take the pictures and keep them. The selfie craze is not simply massive numbers of pictures on everyone's individual mobile phones. No. We take them and then we post them on social media.

Until selfie-sticks came out, because your arm isn't that long, in the frame typically your own face takes up most of the shot. You only get a small view of the Eiffel Tower or the Grand Canyon or wherever you are! So, it's

not really a picture of the Grand Canyon or the Eiffel Tower, it's a picture of my face and some sort of rocks or steel behind me.

Then we post it, and then what happens? We keep checking it -- how many people have liked it, how many people have commented on it? We think, "Oh my God, nobody commented, nobody liked it, what happened? What's going on?" It's really psychologically fascinating. We post pictures of ourselves in indistinguishable random places and then wait to see "What do you think? What do you think?" My enjoyment of my holiday has become significantly impacted by the responses, or lack of response, I get to the selfies I've taken of myself on my holiday.

If nobody likes or comments on our picture, we feel on some very deep level that we don't exist. We keep posting to remind people, "Hey, I exist." The urge to post like this is the urge to remember and to remind others that I exist. The more responses I get, the more I exist; the fewer I get, the less I exist.

This is the root of a lot of what ails us. When we talk about overcoming fear, we have to first break this myth. Making a fool of yourself, does not obliterate your existence!.

We then develop courage to take risks because our awareness of our existence is no longer dependent on how people look at us or respond to us. If my well-being is contingent upon you, I'm going to live a life of fear, playing it safe, saying exactly what I think you want me to say. I'm always going to be afraid. "What if I didn't do it right?" In order to overcome that, I have to ground my awareness in my Self. I have to know who I am, so that regardless of whether you think I'm the biggest fool who has ever walked the face of the Earth or whether you think I'm the greatest, it doesn't change how I feel about myself. That's the only way to overcome the fear.

The other piece of it is to recognize that the greatest tragedy is not failing, but never stepping up to the plate of your life. The greatest tragedy is looking back on your life and knowing that you never stepped up to the plate because you were afraid you were going to strike out and they would laugh in the stands. That's the tragedy, that's something to be afraid of. We have this incredible gift, this incredible life, all these moments, and it is tragic if we don't use them.

The last piece is fear on the physical level, fear of actually, physically

dying. There's a great story about Swami Vivekananda, who was always teaching, "Stand up! Be fearless!" One day, a few of his disciples decided to test him and find out if Swamiji was really so fearless. He was in a lecture hall giving a lecture, and they dressed up like bandits. They came storming into the lecture hall with real-looking fake guns, making a lot of noise. Everybody screamed and ran under the chairs and out the doors. Swamiji kept giving his lecture, unphased as the (fake) bullets whizzed by his head.

Finally, humiliated, the fake bandits fell at his feet, took off their masks, apologized, and said, "But Swamiji, how is it possible? Were you not a little bit afraid? How did you do that?" And he replied, "The bullet which is meant to take my life will take it even if I'm surround by 100 guards, and the bullet which is not meant to take my life will not take it even if you fire at point blank range." If we can really take that level of faith into our hearts and move forward with that, that's the best antidote to fear.

I'll leave you with a true story of Pujya Swamiji, who was on an airplane about 30 years ago, before I knew him. The story was told to me by a man named Dr. Rao who was on the airplane with Pujya Swamiji. Dr. Rao was the Chief Editor of our Encyclopedia of Hinduism. Having just started the Encyclopedia project, Pujya Swamiji was flying all over America, raising awareness about the culture, the religion, and helping people build temples. He and Dr. Rao were on the plane, and there was a horrible storm. They were flying over Chicago, which is a place renowned for horrible storms. There was lots of thunder and lightning outside, lots and lots of turbulence, and the pilot comes on and tells people to brace into crash position, and that there may be a crash landing. The plane is plummeting hundreds of feet at a time. The overhead luggage compartments open, luggage is pouring out. The plane is going down and down. Everyone thinks this plane is going to crash. People are screaming, crying, holding each other. But Swamiji is writing on one of those yellow lined pads. He's just writing casually. The plane plummets another thousand feet, and everybody is screaming, crying, holding each other, "We're going to die, we're going to die!" The pilot is saying take crash positions, and Swamiji's writing.

Finally, Dr. Rao can't take it anymore and exclaims, "Swamiji, what are you writing??" Swamiji says, "My speech." Now first of all, Pujya Swamiji never ever prepares a speech in advance, so the idea of writing a speech is something out of the ordinary. Dr. Rao says, "Swamiji, there will be no

speeches, You are going to die. We're all going to die, this plane is crashing, there are no speeches."

Swamiji replies, "Well, see, here's the thing. I know I'm not going to die, and since everybody else thinks they are going to die and you're telling me this plane is going to go down, it means I'm going to be the sole survivor of this plane crash. When I'm the sole survivor of this plane crash, naturally they're going to want to take my interview, and since my English isn't so good and you're still sitting here next to me, I figured that I would use this opportunity to put some thoughts on paper so that if I had to ask you anything about how to say something in English, I could ask you before the plane crashes."

That is a true story. This is what fearlessness looks like. Now, most of us in our lives may not actually get there; that's a very special kind of fearlessness. But to be able to move through the world with faith, the faith that a child has in the mother's arms, the faith of knowing that it's not all on my shoulders, that there's a knowledge, a wisdom, a plan and therefore a Planner who is so much bigger, so much wiser than I am, who's taking care of it all.... that is living without fear.

There's a beautiful line in the prayers that we chant here every morning at Parmarth Niketan that says "*Tu akele nahin pyare, Ram tere sath mein*," meaning, "You're not alone, God is with you." If we can really live that, knowing that we're really in the Mother's arms, that we're being carried by God, allow that faith to take over. The faith will replace the fear in your life.

How do we deal with irrational fear?

First of all, we realize it's irrational. If I really, deeply, in the cells of my being know that something is irrational, I'm not going to be afraid of it.

In order for there to be fear, there has to be some part of me that believes that it is possible.

So when we see an irrational fear, the first part is to figure how we can take that awareness of the fact that it's irrational and get it from just the outermost layer of my brain deep into my being. The minute it gets deep in my being, my fear will dissipate. That's part one.

Part two is faith. Think of the Swami Vivekananda story. That faith, that

awareness that we are being taken care of. It doesn't mean I'm going to get every job that I wanted, it doesn't mean I'm always going to be healthy, it doesn't mean that people I love aren't going to die or leave me, but it means that on the core foundational level, I'm being taken care of and there is nothing to fear.

Look at children: the minute they're in the mother's arms, fear is gone. They may fall, they may be scared or hurt or crying, but mom picks them up, and while they may still be bloody or need a bandage, the fear is gone.

When we can live with the real awareness that we're in the Mother's arms, in the Divine's arms, then fear dissipates, like a child's fear dissipates in his mother's arms. Again, that doesn't mean everything's going to be perfect, but it means that we're being carried by the Divine and things are going to be as they should be.

How do we build confidence?

This is a challenge that we all face, but it seems so much more ripe and apparent when we're young. How do we have confidence in ourselves? Well, the real question is why do we not have confidence in ourselves?

There's no other species I've seen or heard of that is unsure of its own ability to be what it is. You never see for example a bird standing on a branch going, "Uh...maybe...maybe," or starting to move its wings and then backing out saying, "No no no no!" When a mother bird kicks out her baby bird for the very first time from the nest, half way down the baby realizes it can fly. After that, the babies know they can fly, and there's never a time that they don't remember it.

No other animal gets nervous in any way. Have you ever seen or heard of a lion just about to jump on its prey, but doesn't jump because it got too nervous? Never, because the lion knows it is the king of the jungle.

Only humans have this lack of confidence, and the reason is because we have so much fear and insecurity about who we really are. We have a deep inner sense of who we are, but then we have an outer culture that says you should be this or you should be that. What we're trying to do is mold ourselves to something that isn't us.

If you told a dog that it has to fly off a building, it would be nervous. There's no way it would jump. You could give it as many pep talks as you

want, but it won't jump. It understands that it doesn't have wings, and therefore cannot fly.

The sad thing is that we don't understand who we are, and so we don't have confidence in ourselves. Who we are, on the deepest core level, though, is not necessarily the CEO of a company, the President of an institution, Miss America, or a singer whose songs are in the Top 10 on the radio. Who we are is love, who we are is consciousness, who we are is divinity. . We are one with the creation.

Our confidence needs to come from knowing that we've been created by perfection, we've been created by infinity, by the Divine, who doesn't make mistakes. None of us is half baked or "half done." God didn't forget to put the salt in some of us or the sugar in some of us! Sometimes that's how it feels, but we have to understand that there's a perfection in the Universe of which we are a part. When we are a part of that perfection, then the confidence comes not in what we do, not in how good we are in math or another field, but the confidence comes simply in who we are as a being, and our ability to experience love, to share love, and to touch others our ability to connect with that consciousness which we are. That's what we're here for. It's all there, but we just have to tune inward.

I feel anxiety in many situations. Is anxiety a bad thing?

First of all, what's most important to remember is that nothing we experience is bad. The only bad thing is thinking that what we feel is wrong, because then we end up separating ourselves from ourselves. We want to be good, we want to be good people, we want to act in good ways, and think in good ways, so the minute that we label something inside of us as "bad," we've cut ourselves off from it.

The whole point of a spiritual practice is integration, union, and oneness. Yoga means oneness, yoga means union. So, nothing is bad. Certain things make us feel elevated, help us get in touch with the truth of who we are, the divinity of ourselves, the divinity of the Universe. They take us into the realm in which everyone is one. In contrast, some things we feel bring us down.

They take us out of the beautiful spiritual realm, into the flesh. It's not bad, but nonetheless, most of us on a spiritual path would rather be in a place of experiencing oneness and union, love, and consciousness than in this tunnel- visioned experience of greed, lust, and anger.

SATSANG: IN THE PRESENCE OF TRUTH

So when we look at anxiety, anxiety is not “bad,” however, what does anxiety do? It makes our heart race. When we feel stressed, when we feel anxious, our heart rate rushes, our blood pressure goes up, all of the energy of our body literally rushes to the extremities. It’s our fight or flight response. We biologically are primed and ready in that moment to either fight or flee.

That response is very useful if you were living in a cave and you had to protect your cave from tigers or bears or warring tribes who were coming at you with spears, but it’s not very helpful in the world we live in. You need that rush of adrenaline, that anxiety, that pumping heart to be able to outrun a bear or a tiger, fight off a warring faction, or climb a tree. This is good stuff for a very short period of time when our lives are threatened. But the places that most of us feel anxiety today is everywhere and every day – social situations, parties, friends, work, public speaking, presenting ourselves, going on a date. Everything that happens in our life brings up anxiety. So, life has become a life-or-death, fight-or-flight situation, and that’s where it becomes troublesome. We cannot live in a state of openness and expansion while simultaneously in a state of running or fighting. Either the world is something to be afraid of, or the world is something to be one with, but it can’t be both.

Every minute that we feel anxiety, what that’s telling us on a physiological level is that this situation is dangerous, and that’s not a healthy way to live. So, the question then becomes, how do we remove the anxiety, how do we stop feeling anxious?

The anxiety that we feel stems from the illusion that we are what we look like, how we perform, and what other people think of us. The minute we can get beyond that, then whether someone laughs at our jokes or smiles at us, or tells us we’re fat or stupid, or asks us out on a second date, it’s not about who we are so it doesn’t create anxiety.

Every time you feel anxious, ask yourself: is this really life and death? Is this really a situation where I want to separate myself from the world? And if not, then ask yourself how you can expand how you think of yourself. Ground yourself in your breath. Try to experience a state of oneness with the people around you, rather than a sense of separation, because where there’s oneness, there’s no fear. Where there’s fear, it’s because we feel separation. Anxiety is not bad, but it takes us from the truth of who we are. And on a spiritual path, we want to go closer to who we are.

How can we eliminate anxiety? How do we redirect ourselves through a situation that is causing us anxiety?

There are two possible situations: one, of course, is a situation from which we can literally remove ourselves, and that would be a good thing to do. Let's say I went out with some friends of mine to a dinner, and it turned into an alcohol fest but I'm not a drinker. Now everyone at the table is just drunk, they're starting to get very vulgar, and I'm feeling very anxious and uncomfortable. I'm no longer enjoying myself in this moment. They're talking about leaving and getting into cars and going for thrill rides, so now it's getting dangerous. The best thing I can do in this moment is physically remove myself from the situation.

However, in many cases, the situation we're in is one from which we can't always remove ourselves. The last thing we want to do is become so fragile that there are a very limited number of situations in which we can feel comfortable. We frequently try to create cocoons of peace around us including only that which we need in order to maintain our peace. The dilemma with this is it keeps much of the world out and limits us drastically. So we start to say, "I can't see you, I can't do this, I can't do any of this, because to do any of these things, or see any of these people, or go to any of these places, ruins my peace."

We frequently live in a very shallow peace, a shallow connection to the Divine, a peace and connection that exists only until I visit my parents or until my boss yells at me or until I'm stuck in traffic. That's not an ideal situation. Ideally, what we want is to be able to experience peace in the maximum number of situations. That doesn't mean every situation. There are some situations like the one I described above where it's perfectly fine to say, "OK everyone, hope you have a wonderful rest of your evening, it's time for me to go home," and we excuse ourselves. But mostly, the situations that steal our peace arise in our families, in our workplaces, and in the world we live in. We don't need to escape from these situations or run into a cave.

The answer then is to change how I identify myself w. My anxiety is produced because I have adopted or internalized what someone else said or did as what it means about me. I made a joke, no one laughed – it means I'm stupid. I said something that was serious, everyone did laugh – it means I'm stupid. See, all they've done is laugh or not laugh. I'm the one who's made up the whole story of being stupid. I'm the one who's

internalized the situation and made it about me.

The way to be in that situation is to just tune back into the Self. It's very important to remember: the people who are just trying to make us feel bad so they feel better are people who themselves are miserable. This is as true in sixth grade as it is in boardrooms, offices, yoga studios, parties, and gyms across the world.

If I'm in a situation where I'm feeling anxiety, what I need to do is check in with myself. Is their truth really my truth? Is what I'm feeling in this environment really who I am? Or is it just that these people or this person is using me to feel better about themselves?

There's a great story of a teacher who draws a line on the chalkboard and asks his students, "Without using an eraser, can anyone make this line on the board appear shorter?" Of course, no one can. It seemed like the only way to make the line smaller on the board was to erase part of it. But then the teacher says, "No, there's another way to make the line appear shorter," and he draws a longer line on top of it. So, the lower line hasn't actually changed, but now in comparison to the longer one, it seems shorter. This is sadly what happens to us. We are who we are. Yet, we judge ourselves based on those around us.

This is where our meditation is so important, because it gives us the Truth of who we are. Otherwise, I am who you say I am, I am how you look at me, I am whether you laugh at my jokes or touch my feet or give me an A or give me a gold star. That becomes who I am. So whenever we're in situations that make us feel anxious, immediately we need to reconnect with ourselves. Reconnect with our breath. Deep, low in the abdomen, just grounding ourselves back in our Truth.

The last but crucial component is we have to see whether we can feel within ourselves compassion for that person in front of us and an awareness that the reason they are making us feel bad, the reason they are trying to make us feel low, is because they feel low. This is why bullies in school are usually just miserable children. Parents explain to their kids who are being bullied, "Sweetheart, it's not you, it's because he's upset," or, "His parents are going through a divorce." This is true even when we get out of the school yard. People who bully others – physically, emotionally, mentally, in any way – do it because they themselves feel bad. So we check in with who we are, we connect with the Divine in ourselves, and then we try to

experience some compassion for whoever is making us feel bad.

The counterpoint that I'd like to reiterate again about this though is that this isn't true when we're talking about a loved one who really cares for us and who tells us, "You know, I think you need to stop drinking," or, "I think you've got problems with your anger." This also sometimes produces some anxiety in us, because the status quo is very safe. Very few of us want to look at ourselves. So, the first thing that we do, even when it is a loved one, is we lash out at that person. "It's just you, you're the one with the problem!" But at times like that, it's really important to check in with ourselves and ask ourselves, "Is this anxiety because I just don't want to hear what they're saying, even if it is true?" at which point, what we need to do is listen.

Overcoming Temptations

We live in a world where temptations are rocketing from all sides. How do we strengthen the intellect to control the mind?

Let's talk about temptations. Why are they so difficult to over-come?

We've got so many temptations in the world, but they fall into only a few categories. They are all things that make us feel better, or we think will make us feel better. So, there are temptations to eat things we shouldn't eat, to drink things we shouldn't drink, to have relations with people we shouldn't have relations with. Those are the most superficial layer of temptation. If I eat that, I will feel good. If I drink that, I will feel good. If I smoke that, I will feel good. If I engage in sensual pleasures with this person, I will feel good. It's the outer layers of temptation, and they're very difficult for a lot of people.

I remember when I was young, my mother was always on a diet. It's what people in Los Angeles do; everybody diets. My mother's always been very thin, but nonetheless she was always on a diet. I remember one time we had gone out to eat, and my dad is someone who really loves desserts. Now he's got great discipline. He's a very healthy eater. But, we were on vacation, and my dad ordered a hot fudge sundae for dessert. He and my mom were sitting next to each other in the booth. I was on the other side.

My dad is very methodical and slow, very peaceful, he takes his time, while my mother has much more frenetic energy. So, they're sitting next to each other and the hot fudge sundae comes. My dad is just surveying it, maybe taking in how beautiful it looked, and my mom had already picked up her spoon and was eating my dad's hot fudge sundae! Of course, he's very happy to share, the thing was huge. By the time my dad had actually picked up his spoon and took his first bite, my mom had already eaten three

or four bites. Then, she decided that she had had enough. She remembered she was on a diet and shouldn't be eating it, and so she picked up her glass of water and poured it on top of the entire hot fudge sundae! That was, of course, the end of my dad's beloved hot fudge sundae.

I share this story because temptations are so strong! Why didn't she just stop eating it? Let dad eat. Why did mom have to ruin the hot fudge sundae? When we're in the grips of temptation, particularly when we are depriving ourselves or disciplining ourselves or controlling ourselves, it feels like a great deprivation, and when it feels like a deprivation, temptation takes on a life of its own. Here was my mom, this well-educated, intelligent, wonderful, caring woman – what had the hot fudge sundae done to her? Once she decided she's not going to eat anymore that should have been enough. She didn't have to ruin it! She could theoretically just put down her spoon and be finished. But, temptations take on this power of their own. "I have to eat the sundae." So the only way to overcome her temptation for the sundae was the ruin it completely. This is how temptations run most of our lives.

So, that's our superficial layer of temptations. We are tempted toward things that we're going to take in – through eating them, drinking them, smoking them, purchasing them, or going to bed with them -- that are going to make us feel physically good for a very short time period.

If we go a step deeper, the temptations become things we're going to do that may not be physically gratifying or rewarding in the moment, but that are going to make us feel good later on. The temptation to cheat on an exam, for example, we know is wrong, but there's an overpowering temptation. I don't know the answer, maybe I should look at the paper of the person next to me while the teacher is not here. There are temptations to cheat in so many other ways – to cheat on our taxes, to cheat in our workplace. The world gives us so many opportunities to be dishonest for what seems to be our own best interest.

These are temptations for things we think are going to make us feel better. If I get an A on this exam, whether through merit or through cheating, I'll do well. Then I'll get into the right university, get the right job and be successful and happy. If I cheat on my taxes, I'll have more money and then be happy. Every temptation looms itself over us with this hypnotic call that if we engage in it, we'll feel better. There's even a temptation just to shop: you're walking down the street, there's a new coat, sweater, or pair of

shoes shouting at you, “If you just wear me, you’ll feel better, not just your feet but you’ll feel better overall about yourself!!” We had no intention of going in, but the temptation to feel better becomes overwhelming.

There’s a great story shared by a wonderful meditation teacher of a friend of his, who everyday would go into a pastry store on his way to work. But, then the friend decided to exercise discipline over his diet and to stop eating the pastries. He would make the pledge every day, but nonetheless he found himself every day in the pastry store. So, he goes to the meditation teacher and says, “I don’t know what to do! Every day I pledge to not buy pastries, yet every day without knowing even what happened I find myself with a bag full of pastries on the way to the office.” The meditation teacher says, “Well, one possibility is you leave your wallet at home.” And the guy says, “What, you want me to steal them??” The idea of NOT giving in to temptation is inconceivable. If I have money, I will buy them. If I don’t have money I will have to steal them. To not eat the pastries seems impossible.

The answer or solution is not about controlling the individual temptation. All that happens then is maybe you’ll control the pastries, then you’ll control the cake, then you’ll control the hot fudge sundaes...it becomes constant. The universe is full of temptations everywhere we look.

The only solution is to understand that within, I’m already full. The only solution is our intellect – not the intellect you get in university or in books, but the real power of discrimination – that makes us understand I am not my senses. I am not this chemical and electrical pattern of drive for reward in my brain that says eat or drink or smoke. That’s what’s going on in our brains. It’s just a pattern, a pattern of electrical and chemical firing, a neural circuit with our reward pathways. That’s all it is. But every time we give in, we’re telling ourselves that we are merely light bulbs able to be flicked on and off. Circuitry goes up and I’m on, circuitry goes down and I’m off. Each time we give in to temptation we are telling ourselves that we are only chemical and electrical patterns of behavior. No. We are more than that. We are not light bulbs or electrical circuit boards switching on and off. We are Divine. The best way to overcome any temptations is not just to discipline myself, but rather to recognize who I really am.

This is where spiritual austerities come in. If you look at the Hindu tradition, the Indian spiritual practices, what you’re going to find is so many practices of austerity – we fast, we stay up all night, we sit in

meditation without moving, we practice yoga.

When Pujya Swamiji was young and living in the jungle, He spent eleven hours a day standing on one foot. Why? His Guru was not in the muscle building business. It was not that he was training Pujya Swamiji to win some yoga competition or athletic competition award. It's the same reason why we stay up all night. The body needs sleep, we know that. Why do we go without food, go without water? It's all simply to teach ourselves that we are not just a stimulus- response reaction. We are not Pavlov's dogs. There's a consciousness in us, there's a purpose of our lives that is not just "eat, drink, respond to instinct."

We gain that ability in our spiritual practices. We all know that we are going to go back to eating again, to drinking water again, and to sleeping again. But the reason we practice these austerities is to have the experience of feeling our stomachs growl, feeling them send all the chemical and electrical patterns to our brain saying that they need to eat, but we know in our intellect that today is our fast. We're not going to eat. The signals come and come, the temptations come, you smell the food, but you know today is your fast. That practice develops a great awareness within ourselves that says, "Yes, my body may be screaming for food, for water, for sleep, but I'm sitting up all night doing *japa*, it's Shivaratri, it's Purnima, it's whatever day I've decided I'm going to sit up all night. My body may be screaming, but it's *ekadashi* and I'm fasting."

Please remember though, it's not about torturing the body or punishing ourselves. It's not because we've been sinful and need to be punished. People see penance and austerity as this way of torturing ourselves or punishing ourselves. No. It's simply to teach us, on a very deep level. It is to give us the experience of having all the neurons firing saying eat, drink, sleep, and then not doing it. In that experience we realize, "Wow, my body and mind are screaming at me to eat, I'm not eating, and yet I'm still here. They are screaming at me to sleep. I'm not sleeping and yet I'm still here. I have not disintegrated or imploded or ceased to exist simply because I didn't give in to my temptation. The wave comes, the wave that says eat or sleep comes, but I don't respond, the wave rises, eventually breaks and recedes, and I'm still here. That teaching is very deep.

We must learn that there is an "I" that is not the response to the stimulus. There is an "I" that is not just the feeder of my desires. When we connect with that, then that stays with us throughout our lives even though, of

course, we go back to sleeping and eating. The awareness stays. The teaching stays.

When I first came to Rishikesh, the prayers held in the Satsang Hall in the morning from 5-6am at that time were compulsory. I was not used to sitting on the floor so I could only sit about 25-30 minutes before my knee or hip would start screaming in pain. But the prayers go on for an hour, so most of the time, I would just change the cross of my legs or switch to a different position. But every once in a while, I developed a meditation technique of “I will not change my legs, no matter how much it hurts or burns. I will not change my legs. I will not move. Whether I itch, whether there is a fly on my nose, I will not budge.” It was actually an incredible experience, one I really recommend practicing every now and then. Even though normally in meditation, if you need to change the cross of your legs you do it so that you can go back to having your awareness be on your mantra or your breath or the Divine. Usually, we don’t want our awareness in our meditation to be on our knees or hips. But every once in a while, it’s an in-credible practice to just set an alarm and commit to not moving at all until the alarm goes off. The pain comes, the itch comes, but you just look at it, you don’t push it away.

This is really the fundamental key that I’m getting at. When the temptations come, we don’t push them away. It’s not “I’m not going to think about chocolate,” because then what are we doing? Thinking about chocolate. The center of my awareness is still chocolate, whether I’m thinking about chocolate or “not-thinking” about chocolate. My consciousness is still filled with chocolate. If I say to you, “Meditate now, but whatever you do, don’t think about ice cream,” what are you going to think about? Ice cream! Even if what you’re doing is “not-thinking” about ice cream, your consciousness is now full of ice cream. So, it’s not about pushing that away. It’s actually about recognizing it, seeing it, and acknowledging it, but not giving into it, knowing that it’s just a reaction. Whether it’s a reaction of my body to itch or move or eat, whether it’s a temptation that’s come be-cause of the media and advertising, whether it’s a temptation to smoke a cigarette or drink alcohol or cheat on my spouse or cheat on my taxes, whatever I’m tempted to do, we don’t get anywhere by pretending it’s not there.

When we really win is when we can look at it, see it, and not be overpowered by it. That was the technique I developed in my Satsang Hall meditation. Instead of trying to ignore my hip or ignore my knee, I would literally turn that into my meditation. In my mind, I would stare at my hip or knee

that was hurting and just be aware. And what you find is that when you actually look at it, the power becomes much less. Temptations act very macho when your back is turned, shouting at you and taunting you from behind your back, but the minute you turn around and stare at it, it's nothing but an itch or a pack of cigarettes or piece of cake or whatever else may be tempting you.

We must recognize that we are Divine. You are not a slave to a chemical and electrical pattern in the brain, and here's the exciting part: we can change the habits formed in our mind. These habits are what we call in spiritual semantics a *sanskara*; in scientific semantics we call it a neuronal network or a neuronal pattern. *We can change them.* If every time you are tempted to eat chocolate, you do, you strengthen the pattern that says when this network fires, I eat. Similarly, if every time you feel angry, you throw a temper tantrum, you're doing the same thing. If every time you feel angry, you slap someone, you're doing the same thing.

The Western model of psychology says, "Let it out, you need to get it out," but the problem is that you're not actually getting it out. It's not going anywhere. You can't unfortunately vomit out your anger or pain or shout out your anger or pain. People try but they cannot do it; it doesn't get out. All it does is lay an even stronger network and pattern that says: this is how I respond to anger. Every time you do it, you strengthen that network, you deepen that *sanskara*. So, the way to be free is actually to lay a different *sanskara*, a different pattern. Instead of having a temper tantrum every time you get angry, sit down, close your eyes, chant your mantra, take a walk in the park, or light a candle. . Then put ten dollars in your charity jar and let some charity benefit as you overcome my anger. Whatever it is, lay a new pattern, and slowly that pattern becomes deeper than the previous one.

This is the way that we do it. Not by pushing away anger or temptations or controlling them only through discipline, because that just causes you to contract, and there's so many things in the world that you're contracted from. Spirituality is not about contraction, it's not about withdrawal. It's about openness, with the awareness that the path of divinity, the path of spirituality, devotion, and yoga has so much more to offer. The joy I get from a piece of chocolate is nothing compared to the joy that I get in my spiritual practice. It's not a path of renouncing joy. It's a path of experiencing a greater one. That's what we do. It's not about pushing things away, but rather embracing something that is much deeper, much fuller, and much more real. Then, the temptations just drop off automatically.

SATSANG: IN THE PRESENCE OF TRUTH

Non-Judgment

We are taught to practice non-judgment, but how can we control this when we see educated people, wealthy people, harming others?

This is very difficult. One the one hand we're taught, don't judge. On the other hand, we see in our lives people making choices that are harming others. How do we not judge?

Here's where we have to be really clear with ourselves, on an emotional level, on a spiritual level, and on a level of being effective in bringing about positive change in the world. My judgment helps no one. If I sit here and I judge someone else, whether it's something superficial and silly – "Oh that person's really ugly/stupid" – or on a deeper level – "God that person is really not very spiritual, that person is eating meat or telling lies or cheating somewhere." On any level, from the most superficial to the most serious, my judgment helps no one. In fact, it harms. It harms me first, because now instead of seeing connection and oneness, my mind sees separation. I see you and I judge you, and it fills my mind and my heart with negativity. So that's where it harms me.

It also harms you because we're energetic beings, and even if I don't speak it, even if I don't say, "You're ugly/stupid/a cheater/not spiritual," on an energetic level that is reaching you, it's impacting you, it's effecting you. Our thoughts are things. Thoughts go out into the world as energy, and they actually impact people and hurt people. Also, it doesn't benefit the world. No other humans, animals or trees or water are saved because I'm judging you.

So judgment is something we need to stop, for my sake, for your sake, and for the world's sake. I also use a lot of mental time and energy judging,

which means I'm not doing something beneficial with that time. How many of us have ever been in a situation where somebody says something or does something, and afterwards all we can do is think about it, it keeps working in our minds, over and over again? Now it's harming us, harming that person, and stealing my time and energy from actually doing something that benefits the world. So that's why we should not judge.

But, the second piece is, just because we don't judge doesn't mean that we are supposed to sit back and just allow violence and destruction to happen in our world. Whether it's destruction of the environment, racism, prejudice, violence against women, or whatever area of violence there is – there's so many areas sadly – we are supposed to stand up and act, but we don't need to judge. We simply need to be aware that what is happening is not right, and – without judgment, criticism, or negativity – be able to intervene in whatever way we can with awareness and clarity, whether that means suggesting to someone that they act in a different way, or teaching someone, helping someone, or encouraging someone.. We are called to act. We are called to use our initiative, our ability, and our sight to bring about change for positive in the world. But if we're judging, then all we do is bring negativity.

So we see it, and in whatever way we are able, we try to change the situation, to protect the land, the water, and the people. It is up to us to do that. But we will be much more effective at knowing the right way to act, the right thing to say, if we're not in the mental throes of judgment.

We've all been in situations where we've done something wrong and we get criticized for it. The criticism hurts us, and it does not make us want to do the right thing. All the criticism does is hurt our hearts. We know this from being on the receiving end of it. When you make a mistake and someone says to you, "You're stupid, bad, worthless, ," we feel horrible. We don't feel empowered to change, energized to find a new way, or act in a new way. We feel like crawling into a hole and crying. Thus, when we are on the other side, when we see somebody doing something that we know is not right, we have to remember that ultimately our goal is to improve the situation, not to hurt that person, not to just lose our temper. We may be right, but being right does not give us the right to hurt people. So, first we get out of a place of judgment, and then we are able to see the most effective way of communicating this message, so that they are empowered and energized to change for the good. And that's the best thing we can do – for the people, for the animals, for the land, for the whole planet.

Compassion

How can we develop true compassion?

There is a disease and epidemic of separation – separation between ourselves and God, between ourselves and each other, between ourselves and the universe. Compassion reconnects us.

Now, this is very different from pity or sympathy, which stem from separation. Pity is me sitting over here and saying, “Oh, you poor thing.” It’s not bad, it doesn’t make me a bad person, but I’m separate from you. I’m in the viewer’s box watching your life.

Sympathy stems from pity: “Oh, I’m so sorry to hear what you’re going through..” Again, I’m over here, and you’re over there. It’s not a bad emotion – we’re not talking about “good” or “bad” – but an emotion rooted in separation. There’s this very safe line between us. I can even feel good about myself for being such a sympathetic being! “Look how much sympathy I have for you, look how much I care!” My ego gets inflated but I’m not actually of any use to you, because having someone say, “Oh, you poor thing, I’m so sorry for you!” doesn’t help much.

The only thing that really helps when we are going through a difficult time is actually having someone be there with you, whether they’ve got words to speak or no words, whether they take you in their arms and you cry in their lap or they just sit with you and your tears. That connection and comfort of having someone with you, feeling you, in this deep, dark, horrible place is actually the greatest life preserver.

So, compassion connects us. We talk about it so frequently in a spiritual life. We all want to cultivate compassion, we know we should serve, we know

we should help others, but if we're doing it from a position of separation, it's not going to help me or you. On the other hand, if I can actually connect with you and recognize that you and I are one, it doesn't mean that I turn your pain into my pain and now you're comforting me, but it means that I'm able to be there with you, and I can respond to your pain as though it were mine.

For example, say you are hungry. In the same way that I won't rest until I feed myself if I'm hungry, I'm going to take care of you. If you're sick, I'm going to serve you like I would serve myself. This way, you and I are now connected, and I'm not doing it as the giver, as the one who has, the one who's sitting up above. I haven't lowered you in my eyes.

If when we give, we look down upon the receiver, then we will never be able to receive in our own lives. If we feel higher-than, better-than, or separate-from the receiver, we will never be able to receive because we will always feel that somehow the giver is the better and higher person. So, it harms us when we're the "giver," and it prevents us from being able to receive.

Compassion brings the giver and the receiver into oneness. An example of this is if I trip and fall and I hurt my right leg, my left leg will pick up the extra weight. It's what we call limping. But no one ever says to the left leg, "Oh, you amazing left leg! You're such a humanitarian, you're so charitable, you're so wonderful, let me give you an award! Let me give you a gold star, let me appreciate you from morning to night!" The left leg does it because it understands that the right leg is self. There's a connection, a oneness, so the left leg never says, "Oh my God, me *again*? I just limped last week! Why is it always me? Why doesn't the right leg ever pick up extra weight?? Forget it, I'm not going to do it anymore! Drag yourself around!" It never says *anything* like that. If I injure my right leg every week for the rest of my life, my left leg will limp every week for the rest of my life. That is what real compassion is. We are really serving – not as a martyr, not as the good one, not as the righteous one – when we recognize the other as self, when we recognize the universe and world as one, and we recognize that whatever we have isn't ours anyway. It just flows through us, and in that flowing of giving, we get connected.

Lastly, we have to remember to extend compassion to ourselves as well. In that world we are connected to, in that world we are serving, in that world for which we are feeling and meditating upon loving-kindness, we

also exist. This means that the same compassion we have for others, the same piece of our heart that understands where they're coming from, how they're trying, how they're struggling, allows us to understand ourselves as well. So, we open up our heart of compassion, we open it to make space for our own shortcomings, our own failings, our own humanity, and we recognize that ultimately, we are one with ourselves, and the oneness we have with ourselves is the way to experience the oneness with God. Then, that translates into oneness with the world, but we must include ourselves in that. Otherwise, there's nothing to connect to.

How can we help others to become more present and compassionate?

On a spiritual and emotional level, the only ones we can really help are ourselves. Many people come in to satsang and say, "How can I make my spouse/children/in-laws/boss be more spiritual?" If I'm on a spiritual path, it would make my life much nicer if the people I live with are also on that path. If I go to the office and they're all focused on profits and the bottom line, and I'm on a spiritual path of compassion and loving-kindness, I'd like to bring some of that into the workplace. If I have children and all they talk about is what brands their jeans are and I'm on a spiritual path, I'd like to bring them along.

The real difficulty, however, is it can't be done in that way. Whether we talk about being compassionate, being present, or being spiritual, these are things that stem from deep within us. This is not behavior modification. This is not "fake it," this is not "act polite," this is not "speak quietly and know your place." This is not just how we act, this is really what's going on deep inside of ourselves, and the only person whose deep insides we can change are our own. There is no way to make another person experience compassion, presence, or spirituality.

This is true particularly if that's my goal. If my goal is "I'm going to teach you," whether I think I'm going to teach you math or whether I think I'm going to teach you spirituality, it's created a separation: I'm the teacher, and you're the student. Now, this might work with arithmetic, but if what I'm trying to do is actually give you an *experience* – because you can't teach spirituality – then it cannot be done in a place of separation. The only possibility that I have to help you experience compassion is through being deeply connected with you. The only way to give people an experience is through being connected to them. I cannot teach you to love. The only way I can begin, if my goal is to teach you to love, is to make you love me.

It's the only way. There's no way that you could teach someone to love someone else or to love something else. You can't say, "OK, on the count of 3, now you're going to feel love!"

The only way is to get them to experience love is by making them love me, and it's the only thing I have any control over. The only way to get you to feel love toward me is to get you to feel connected to me, and the only way to do that is if I'm connected to you. So, to make someone feel compassion or feel presence or feel spirituality, the only way we can even *begin* is to deeply connect with them, and then to just be an emanator and powerhouse of compassion, love, and spirit, so that the person near us feels that. When they feel that, it will awaken something inside themselves as well.

If I want to make you feel love, through my connection with you, through loving you, I'm able to slowly thaw the part in you that doesn't love. Only then will I be able to awaken love in you. But, I have to love you to do it. There's no way I can get you to experience love if I don't love you. So, the only way to help anyone experience spirituality is to emanate spirituality, the divine connection, so that in our presence others are in the presence of compassion, in the presence of presence, in the presence of spirituality, and in the presence of love. Then, that will ignite something divine in them.

There was a beautiful young boy, about eight or nine years old, here at the ashram from London recently, the son of a devotee of Pujya Swamiji's. He was here for about a week, and when he left, he said that he felt like someone had reached into his heart and turned the switch from off to on. Now, that's not something you can teach. You cannot sit down a young boy and say, "Close your eyes and experience spirit." Sure, you can put him in the aarti, you can teach him chants, you can do all of that, but we have no direct path to his heart and to his spirit, other than our own heart and our own spirit. That's why, whether our goal is to help someone else become spiritual or whether our goal is to find love, they may seem like very different goals, and yet the path is actually the same. We need to be such emanators of love, spirit, compassion, connection, and presence that people around us automatically feel it.

It's like when the AC goes on, if you stand near it you get cold, not because somehow you have done something, not because the AC shouted at you from across the room, "Become cold!", but because it personally emanates so much cold air, that if you get close enough to it even on a

hot summer day you can catch pneumonia. It actually goes inside you, and you can walk away feeling cool. In the same way, we have to literally first experience compassion and love and presence in ourselves, because otherwise we cannot emanate it. If that AC did not have a machine inside that cooled the air, or if its motor broke, it could not give you cold air, not matter how expensive or beautiful it may be.

First, we have to become just beings of love, light, and presence, and then people around us automatically will feel it. We have an inner switch for love and for spirit. So, it's all about us.

How do we deal with hypersensitivity? How do we generate compassion in our relationships?

We are all sensitive to the world around us. For those who are very sensitive, it pains us more when people hurt us or when certain negative things happen around us. So, how do we change that hypersensitivity into a quality that can actually benefit us and benefit the world, rather than hurt us?

We can only do this by recognizing that we can only properly respond to what other people do, say and experience if we are balanced, grounded, anchored, peaceful, and joyful.

Think about this for a moment: you're in a room with people you don't know. Maybe someone in that room has had too much to drink, or maybe they've had a bad day, and they call you stupid or criticize you in some way. You can understand, "I don't know this person, they've had a bad day, they've had too much to drink," and it doesn't go deeply inside you. However, then imagine it's a loved one who says this. In that case, it goes straight inside of us. What this means is that we have allowed other people and the experiences they're going through to define us.

One of the things I always emphasize is that if somebody hurts us, if somebody's acting in a mean, aggressive, or selfish way, it's because they are in pain. Instead of allowing ourselves to be pained by that, we must allow ourselves to feel compassion for what they are going through and understand that if they were in peace, then that's what they would exude. If what they're exuding is pain and misery and they're sharing anger, competition and jealousy, then that's what they're feeling, that's what they are literally manufacturing inside themselves. In this way, our compassion toward others serves as an inoculation for ourselves and it also becomes

what helps them.

We are not just receivers of energy, but we're also generators. When you talk about hypersensitivity, what you're talking about is a one-way street where I am determined by the world around me. Stressful situation, I get stressed. Peaceful situation, I'm peaceful. Somebody's miserable, I get miserable. It's a one-way street. But, you're not a one-way street, you're a two-way street. We are generators of energy just as we are receivers of energy. A beautiful way to turn that into a positive quality is instead of focusing on what's coming in, focus on what you can give out.

When we can be generators of love and compassion, we are the first recipients of that. If I'm generating love, I benefit inside. If I'm generating anger though, I suffer first! We each have that fullness, goodness, completeness, divinity, and infinite power within us to generate love, peace, and compassion. It will benefit you, and then, as a beautiful byproduct, it'll benefit the world.

When you feel yourself being hypersensitive, say to yourself, "How did I become a one-way street?" Shift your focus from the incoming energy to the outgoing energy. Shift your focus to the generator of energy within and allow that to heal you, and then to heal others.

What can we do for people who are suffering?

Compassion opens my heart so wide that you're now inside. It embraces this union of both of us.

When you're suffering, you just want someone to be present with you; you don't need them to fix you. You don't need me to try to fix you because you've already thought of every possible option as you've mulled over your problem. Really what you need is just my presence.

But, presence does not require misery. I don't have to be miserable with you, just present. In that presence, we open to that person to as they need to go in their misery, because their misery doesn't scare us. When we try to fix people, or tell them "It's all going to be OK" or "Don't worry," what that frequently means is, "I'm so uncomfortable with your sadness that I need us, as a collective, to get out of this quickly, so let's start talking solutions." But really what people need is for us to just fearlessly be present with them in their misery and their pain. That's not easy, but when we ask ourselves what we can do for people who are suffering, that's what we can do.

The last piece of this is that your presence – in compassion, in a state of connection – actually holds the truth of the existence of joy. When we are in pain, the truth of joy is very, very difficult for us to remember and realize. And, it's not something I want to hear you say. If I'm in pain, I don't want you to tell me, "There's a light at the end of the tunnel," or, "This too shall pass," or, "You should just think about the happy times." Platitudes do not usually help in times of grief. We don't want to hear it. But, your presence which holds the experience of joy, allows me to remember -- without having it shoved down my throat -- that there is also another truth.

But I feel guilty when others are in pain and I'm happy. What to do?

When we see people who are in pain or are suffering, we have to acknowledge them and take them into our prayers. That really is the deepest level of compassion. You should never feel guilty for being happy because when we're not suffering, there's always something to be happy about. Just because a loved one is having a difficult time finding something to be happy about doesn't mean that you should feel guilty for finding it. You can help them – hold their hands and be present with them through that difficulty as well, but it doesn't mean that you need to go down the dark tunnel of misery. You can hold someone deeply and truthfully while they are in misery without diving into the ocean of misery along with them. The fact that you are able to access joy in your life should be a gift to them as a light pointing the way toward another truth.

Love

What is the essence of love?

Love is an energy. Love is actually that which keeps us all alive, not just humans but the entire universe. It's Divine love that causes flower petals to open when the sun shines upon them, that causes trees to grow, as they are nourished from the soil, the sun and the rain. Love is what enables us to grow as well. In fact, there is a medical condition called "Failure to Thrive" in which children receive proper food, medicine, clothing and shelter but still don't grow. Over much research spanning many years, researchers finally discovered that it was an absence of touch, absence of love that thwarted these children's growth. If children are not held and loved enough, they don't grow. You can feed them all you want, clothe them all you want, give them everything, but they don't grow. So love is the energy that literally holds it all together.

When we love, on the deepest level, we are tapping into a source. It's not just that I'm in love with you, but through loving you, you become the medium through which I tap into the love that exists within me.

It's very easy to do that when someone loves us. When someone is showering us with love, with appreciation, support, and nurturing, it's very easy to love them. You become like the flower, opening its petals. You become like the tree growing in nourishing soil. Yet, if you've ever spent time in the forests, you know that even though most trees grow straight up, if there isn't light straight up above them, what happens? The trees learn to grow sideways. Some trees literally grow horizontally, pulled by an inner drive for light that is stronger than conforming to the vertical way trees are supposed to grow. Getting that light is the most critical drive, so the trees grow in whatever direction is necessary to access light.

In our lives, it's really easy to feel love in the presence of those who are loving us. But if we don't have those right now, and we need love to survive, like the tree needs the sun, how can we tap into that source of love? The great challenge becomes to tap into love, even through the eyes of a stranger. When I look at you, can I connect with content instead of form? Instead of seeing the form of a woman or man, with this color skin, this age, this height, this weight, these types of clothes, can I see your true content, can I see the Divine in you, can I see a way into Source? That's the possibility love provides.

Can love exist without its opposite? Can love exist without the absence of love?

You're sitting here in front of me right now. How do I know that? Because my eyes oblige me very nicely to pick up the signals of your physical body relay them back through my retina and optic nerve, ultimately into the occipital lobe of my brain and tell me there is a young man sitting in front of me. Should I be blind, I could still rely on my ears to hear your voice. Should I be blind and deaf, I could still rely on my sense of smell, my sense of touch, my sense of taste to experience your presence. But if I had no access to any of my senses, I would have no way of experiencing your presence here. You'd still be here though, of course. It just wouldn't be a part of my awareness.

Now, when you think about love, could love exist without its opposite? Yes, of course, love doesn't exist because I feel love. My ability to love does not create love. Look at a flower opening its petals, look at a tree giving out fruit, look at the way the natural kingdom works, look at rivers that flow. There is love in nature. Look at a rainbow, look at a sunset. My ability to experience love has not created love.

However, for my experience would I know love if I didn't know "no-love"? Similarly, would I know light if I didn't know darkness? We are able to understand and experience the world in opposites. It's frequently how our human brain works. The human brain is wired towards newness towards difference. For example, if you look at something for a very long period of time and it doesn't change, and you don't move your eyes, the image will start to blur. You can just try it. Start staring at something without moving your eyes for a while, and it will lose its sharpness. The brain stops responding. The brain basically decides, "All right, nothing new is happening here, I don't need to give it my full attention. I've

already understood what that form is.” Some of the areas that process visual information stop responding, stop reacting. But if the shape in front of me changes ever so slightly, I focus back in. So if you and I are doing a meditation together and we’re staring into each other’s eyes and neither of us is moving, neither of us is doing anything, eventually I’m going to see you start to blur. But the second that you smile or you sneeze suddenly, you’re going to come right back into full focus for me. How does that happen? Because my brain has started responding again in full force because of a change.

I mention that to show that we are frequently able to recognize the things in our world based on how different they are from what we’ve previously known. It’s just how the brain works. If there were only light, would we know light? Well, of course we would still be able to see each other, but we wouldn’t call it light. We wouldn’t notice it as light if there weren’t such a thing as darkness. In the same way, if we all only experience love, if we never experience the absence of love, would it still exist? Of course. But would we call it love or write poems and sonnets about it? Probably not, because it wouldn’t be new or different.

The opposites help us see, help us experience, help us understand, simply because of how our brain works. But our individual experience of love, our ability to feel love, does not make love exist, nor would our inability to feel love make love disappear. If there wasn’t love’s opposite, we might not know what love was, because it would be all there ever was. Love would still exist, but my experience of love would be different.

How do we love unconditionally? How can we avoid being hurt?

The only way not to get hurt is to stop living. There is a beautiful saying in Hindi, it works much better in Hindi but I’ll give you the English: “That which bends is that which has life in it; that which is rigid is a corpse.” When we are alive, we bend. We bend in humility, we bend in surrender, we bend when the winds and waves of life hit us so hard that we find ourselves flat on our face – literally or emotionally – and this is a hallmark of being alive. The only thing that doesn’t bend is a corpse. If you want to stop being hurt, you have to shut yourself off from life. When we care, when we love, and what we care about or who we love doesn’t act or speak in the way we want or treat us in the way we want, or do what we want, it hurts us. So, either we stop caring or we stop loving, or we accept that we’re going to get hurt.

But that's just Stage 1. There is a way to keep loving without getting hurt, but you can't just snap your fingers and make it happen. It is actually the practice of truly unconditional love.

We think we love unconditionally. If you ask most people to describe how they feel about their children or spouse, frequently you would hear an example like, "I love him unconditionally, but oh my God, he is such a slob. If he just would pick up his stuff I'd really love him!" That doesn't sound so unconditional. I may say I love someone unconditionally, but I keep getting hurt. Well, if it were really unconditional love – meaning no conditions – I wouldn't have such an attachment to what they do or say, and therefore I wouldn't be hurt.

Now, there's an important difference between unconditional love and apathy. Our lack of attachment is not a lack of caring; it's not apathy, and it's not indifference. It just means that my sense of well-being and happiness -- my inner Self -- is not hooked into what you do or say. I may love you, but if I need you to talk to me in a certain way or to live your life in a certain way, in order for me to feel happy, then that's a recipe for disaster. I'm going to get hurt. We don't have control over what anybody else does. We only have control over ourselves. So, the only way ultimately not to get hurt is to stop having that expectation.

That doesn't mean we stop loving, and it doesn't mean we stop caring. It doesn't mean we turn our hearts into stones. It means we work and work with ourselves to allow the love to be its own reward, because when love is not unconditional, it means that the things I need you to do are wholly for me. I'm going to tell you it's for your own good, but it's actually for me.

If you really look at the things that hurt us, it always has to do with an expectation we had of how someone was going to behave. Sometimes it's little like cleaning his room or remembering a birthday; sometimes it's big like not leaving us or betraying us. In order for love to be a path to spiritual awakening and true peace, we have to recognize that the love which we experience is its own reward. Love is not a guarantee – just because I love you, I don't have any guarantee that you'll love me back, bring me flowers or make the choices in your life that I want you to make. If the focus of my love is on you dancing to my tune, today or tomorrow I'm going to get hurt. Or, alternatively, you'll just become my slave, I'll squeeze the life out of you, which is not very fulfilling in a beloved! Many of us do that unconsciously – we pressure and pressure and nag and nag the people

around us in such a way that they just give up. We are squeezing the life out of them.

If what we wanted was a servant or a slave, we could find one, we could hire one. You don't want to live with one. You don't want your love to be that. Love has to be alive. And if love is alive, then you have free will. So, our focus on love needs to be on love as its own reward, not on how I can manipulate or convince or badger you to do what I want. The love itself is what feeds us.

Yes, you will get hurt sometimes, but you must keep going back to allow yourself to have that experience of love. That's what life is about. I don't just mean romantic love. It doesn't matter who you love. Love your friends, love the trees, love humanity, love pets, love God. But we've got to love, and being hurt is part of it until we can pull the hooks of our own heart out of other people's actions. That's the only secret to loving and not getting hurt. The only other option is to turn your heart into a stone, devoid of life, which isn't any really solution at all.

How do we practice giving and receiving unconditional love?

We're taught from early childhood that giving is more important than receiving. To give is the most important thing. So many cultures, Indian culture in particular, are really rooted in giving. But here's what interesting: this teaching holds true for everything except love, because I actually cannot give love unconditionally until I'm able to experience it in myself. I cannot give it until I have it. My intention may be very pure, I may want to love you unconditionally, but as long as I'm not able to love myself, I'm actually not able to love you. I may need you. I may lust after you. I may be attached to you. But I'm not able to actually deeply love you until and unless I know how to love myself. Love has to be something that, no matter how selfless we want to be, how spiritual we want to be, we have to start with ourselves.

When we talk about loving ourselves unconditionally, it's important that we recognize that what we are loving is the capital-S Self. It's the core of who we are. It's our soul, it's our spirit, it's our essence, it's consciousness, it is love. I may not love the fact that I'm addicted to smoking, I may not love the fact that I'm an alcoholic, I may not love the fact that I beat my children. In fact, I shouldn't love any of those things. The path is not how can I love hitting my kids, or how can I love being an alcoholic, or love

having a temper. The practice of unconditional love says that all these things that I do stem out of my inability to see myself, to understand myself, and to love myself.

When I don't love myself and I feel empty, I may drink alcohol or use drugs or eat an entire chocolate cake or max out my credit cards at the store. I'm trying to fill myself, I'm numbing myself, I'm escaping. When I feel empty, I need others to act in a certain way in order for me to feel OK. When they do, I'm great. When they don't, I'm furious. That therefore is where my anger comes from.

I have to understand that all of these things I do are not right and should be changed. They stem not from being a bad person, not because I'm evil or dark at the core, but because I haven't yet seen the truth of my own fullness and divinity. They stem because I'm living behind a veil.

When I'm really able to see, to see myself first, what I see is consciousness, what I see is Divinity, what I see is love. Yes, this body, this vehicle, has been through a lot, it's had a lot of challenges, a lot of things have happened to it that have created patterns of ignorance in my own mind. When I allow those patterns of ignorance to run my show, I act in ways that I later regret. When I allow those patterns of ignorance to run my show, I feel about myself in a way that's not true.

Let's say you were abused as a child. When we're abused as a child, the message you get is, "You deserved it, there's something wrong with you." Usually that's what we're told verbally: "You're bad, that's why I'm hurting you. If you were a good girl I wouldn't be hurting you." But even if they don't say it verbally, the message is clear: you've done something wrong. You are wrong, therefore you deserve the abuse. It's only decades later -- either with a lot of therapy or a great Guru -- that we realize it wasn't about us, it was about them, the abusers. You didn't do something wrong, you were just a kid. It was their mistake. Until we really deeply free ourselves of this unconscious thought pattern, this ignorance runs in the grooves of our mind, this ignorance of "I'm wrong, I'm bad, I'm dark."

We establish these patterns in our mind when we are young in which we blame ourselves for everything.

There's a way of thinking that children have called "magical thinking." It's just an aspect of child development. In magical thinking, we think that we have power over everything. It's a beautiful phase of life, as we really think

we can do anything. If I cry, mom comes, there's a breast in my mouth, and everything is good, the Universe is in my hands. And in this magical thinking, we think everything happens because of us, even if it is not something directly related to us. If a sibling passes away, a parent passes away, our parents get divorced, the house burns down, in the child's mind, she is the one to blame. So we then move through this world with patterns in our mind of ignorance that prevent us from loving ourselves, because even though you may have grown up to be a CEO or founded an NGO that feeds five million people in Africa every day, on the inside you still don't feel worthy. These are patterns that are so deep and so unconscious. They have nothing to do with what you're actually doing today, yet they are the cause of your subconscious patterning.

When we speak about receiving love, first we have to understand that who we are is Divine, and all of the rest of the mind chatter is ignorance. That doesn't mean we're bad. Ignorance does not translate as yet another person saying you're stupid. It's just the ignorance of the mind and the ego that says, "I am this body, I am what's happened to it," that's absorbed all of the messages of our culture, of marketing, of our parents, of everything that's happened to us. The sum total of these messages is you're not worthy, you're not good enough. "Why can't you be like your brother? Why can't you be like your sister? When I was your age I...." We've all got a different way in which that message went into us, but the end result is the same: you're not good enough and you're not worthy. And that's what needs to be broken first.

Here's the beautiful thing that happens when you learn to love unconditionally: when I'm able to actually love myself, then I'm sitting here experiencing love. Something that I always thought I needed someone else to give me, something I was always looking for outside, now here I am, sitting alone, experiencing it. What that teaches me directly, instinctively, experientially and automatically is that I don't need you to behave in a certain way, or speak in a certain way or do something in a certain way so that I can be okay. The minute that I let that go, then I'm able to love you unconditionally. As long as I need you to be a certain way in order for me to feel OK, then I cannot love you unconditionally.

When I'm not able to love myself and you unconditionally, I will love you only when you do things I want. If you bring me flowers or chocolate, cook me nice meals, tell me I'm beautiful, wait on me hand and foot, then I love you and it's great. But if you stop doing that, it no longer feels so great. If

I am not able to access the source of love within myself, I'm going to be really angry at you. I may not be able to articulate it like that, because I am likely not aware of it, but what I feel is that I no longer love you. Sadly, that's not the issue. The issue is that you no longer fill the parts of me that are holes. If I need to be told I'm beautiful to be happy, and you stopped telling me I'm beautiful, then I'm stuck with this hole inside myself and I don't feel happy. I blame that on you because you used to make me happy. So my love is conditional.

The minute I'm not dependent on what you say or do is when I can love myself. I certainly hope you love me also – it's so great to love lots of people and feel love from lots of people– but we no longer need it. Imagine you go out to eat with friends, and you're eating food like Indian food where people share. If you're sitting at a table with others, isn't it so much more fun to also have a bite of this and a bite of that, and to share dishes you think taste really good? If someone says they don't want to taste something of yours, or someone doesn't want to share their items with you, you're okay with that because you've got a plate of food in front of you! But if you were starving and your plate was empty and you needed someone's cauliflower to live, you wouldn't be able to take the "no, I don't want to give you my food" so easily. Our plate has to be full first. Only then can I love you even when you refuse to give me your love.

What is the yoga of relationships?

All people in our relationships can do is help us experience the love that exists within us. That's what the yoga of relationships is about, that's what being in love really is. We experience the love we have inside us already through the relationship. Loving someone becomes the catalyst for your own internal love manufacturing plant to turn on. That person may be the stimulus for you to start producing love, but the love is being produced within you. It is not dependent upon the other person.

We know this is true because when your beloved stands up and leaves the room, do you feel the love any less? Does anyone fall out of love every time the beloved goes to get a glass of water or goes to the bathroom? Do you fall out of love when the beloved goes to the office or the grocery store? Of course not! So it's not dependent on them.

If you're standing near an Air conditioner the air conditioner makes you feel cool. But the farther you walk away from the AC, the less cool you

get. The coolness is coming directly from the AC; you are not generating coolness inside yourself. Your coolness is entirely dependent upon this machine and how close to it you stand. But with love, it's not like that. Love is actually within you, but through the relationship, the beloved has enabled you to experience the place within yourself which is love. That's really beautiful. That's divine. When we talk about a "soul mate," that's what it is – it's the one in whose presence you are able to experience the Truth of your soul, which is love. It doesn't matter if it's a spouse, a friend, a sibling, a parent, a child, a Guru. When we experience that place within ourselves which is love, that's the point.

Unfortunately, we've filled up our relationships with a lot of baggage. When we move out of the experience of love into the everyday logistics of life – who is going to wash the dishes, go grocery shopping, change diapers, scrub the toilet – this is where we lose harmony and think we are falling out of love. What is actually happening is that you no longer are able to access that place within yourself which is love, because your ego, busyness, numbness, distractions and expectations have taken precedence and jammed up your internal love manufacturing plant. Rather than realizing that, though, we blame the loved one for not giving us the love we think we need from outside. We now expect the beloved to act in certain ways that fill that lack of love we are feeling inside. This is the problem.

The solution is very simple. It's not easy, but it's simple. The only way to have harmony in relationships is to stop expecting the other to behave in a certain way, speak in a certain way, and be in a certain way in order to fill our holes, and to be fully aware that the love that we feel is generated within. The beloved is a Divine vehicle, the one who has catalyzed it – fantastic! But if they start acting in certain ways, it's not their fault that we are no longer able to access that place of love within us. It's within us, which means it's our responsibility to turn back inward and find that place within us again. The beloved was just the one who showed it to us.

Harmony in relationships doesn't come from two halves becoming one, or two beings full of holes coming together with pegs that fill each other's holes. If I've got a square hole and you've got a square peg, we fit. Yet, over time, because I change, my square hole becomes a triangle. Your square peg, because you change, becomes round. Now you've got a round peg and I've got a triangular hole and it no longer fits. This is when we start to fight and we fall out of love. But, we have to recognize that we are not our holes, and that we are not even full of holes. We are whole; the holes

are just stains upon our psyche that we can clean. Then, we are able to be in relationships not as a triangular hole, but actually as a full whole being. Then it doesn't matter whether the beloved is square or round or triangular. We don't need them to fill us.

My dad is an incredible man who is a divorce attorney; he has spent the last many decades of his life from morning to evening with couples who are getting divorced. He is also a man who has spent many decades married to my mother, a wonderful woman but not an easy woman, and he has found deep peace which has been such a guiding force in my life. He gives a teaching that I want to share with you. The teaching is: you can either be right, or you can be married. It's not just in our marriages, of course. It's in all relationships: it is our commitment, our attachment to being right that keeps us from being happy. So you can either be right, or you can be happy. You can be right, or you can be peaceful. We have to make that decision in our relationships. Is being right more important than being married? Or being peaceful? In every situation when we find ourselves in conflict, we really have to ask ourselves: in this moment, is being right more important to me than maintaining peace? Am I prepared to relinquish my attachment to proving I'm right in exchange for peace in this relationship? If we can do that, if we can let the other be right, so that we can both be peaceful, then what we find is not only are our relationships peaceful, but we're peaceful inside.

How to Deal with Loss

How do we overcome the fear of loss?

We overcome the fear of loss by recognizing that nothing was ours to begin with. The fear of loss is rooted upon the illusion that I actually have something in my grip. If I've never had it, I'm not afraid of losing it. If I don't own anything, I'm not afraid of losing it. For example, I don't have a fear of losing my diamond earrings. Why? Because I don't have diamond earrings! You can only be afraid of losing your diamond earrings if you have diamond earrings. The fear of losing something is founded upon the idea that I have it. But when we think about things more deeply, nothing is ours. Nothing is ours. Every single thing, every single person, every ability is being lent to us.

Look just over the course of your life. We gain so much – you learn how to be a fantastic baseball player, you learn how to be a great doctor or engineer. Well, give it a few decades, let the normal course of life go on, and as the body and brain start to degenerate, well, you're no longer a fantastic baseball player, your hands shake too much to do surgery, you no longer remember the engineering equations.

We're attached to so much – our beauty, our degrees, our titles, our careers – but we lose those anyway. Even if nothing drastic happened and we just simply got older, we would still lose everything. Everyone retires. Everyone's body starts to degenerate at pretty much the same rate. We lose them. The same is true if it's our money. We'll eventually lose it, whether we lose it now or whether we lose it when we pass over. It's out of our hands. God may decide to give you a lesson a little bit earlier – the stock market might crash, something could happen. But that's just to teach you: "You thought it was yours, I needed to remind you: it was never yours."

It's not that God took something from us. People tend to bemoan their fate and ask, "Oh my God, why did God take everything?" Really? You owned it? Really, God took it? No! It was actually never ours, it was lent to us.

This is true about every ability we have and every possession we own. It's also true about our relationships. Eventually, whether through breakup, betrayal, divorce or through death, you're going to lose. It's sad, but until and unless we recognize that as an ultimate truth of life, we can't really live, because then we're grasping at something that is slipping inevitably through our fingers. Instead, if we are wanting enlightenment, spiritual awakening, self-realization or even just peace in life, we must ask ourselves: what is it that I don't lose? If I'm going to everything including my loved ones, well then being attached to these things, attached to never losing them, is an exercise in futility. I am going to lose them regardless of how hard I try to hold on. So, the question becomes: what should I be attached to? What should I make so dear that I become afraid of losing that? What is it that's not going to degenerate, what is it that's not going to divorce me or die? The answer is the spiritual connection. It's the Divine. And here's what's beautiful: it's not the Divine as separate from your loved ones, or instead of your loved ones. It's the Divine *through* your loved ones, and through everything in the natural world, because everything is pervaded by the Divine.

This does not mean, of course, that we love our loved ones any less or care about them any less. It does not mean that we pronounce: "OK honey, I'm not going to love you and be attached to you anymore, I'm going to love God instead." What actually happens is we realize: "Okay, instead of being desperately attached to that really beautiful young face, rather than being attached to that perfect body, rather than being attached to the way you look in those clothes, rather than being attached to the way you dance, I'm going to be attached to your essence, to your spirit, to the Divine that flows through you and as you, because everything else is going to change." The path becomes shifting our connection to the spirit, the consciousness, the essence, the divine in our loved ones rather than to just what they do and say, how they look, how much money they make, etc.

This is the only way that I have found to overcome that fear of loss. You can cut yourself off from life, saying you're not going to care about anything as you're going to lose everything, but all that does is contract the heart. What the heart does is love, that's what it knows how to do, and if you prevent it and prohibit it from loving for long enough, it atrophies. It becomes hard

and closed, and that is not the way to live. So, instead of cutting ourselves off and disconnecting, we ask ourselves, what am I going to love that I can love without fear? It's your essence, it's your divinity, it's God through you. I can certainly enjoy your form at this moment or my own form at this moment, and of course why not? God wouldn't have created so much beauty if we weren't supposed to enjoy it. But we don't get attached, just like we don't get attached to the form of a sunset because we know we've got about 45 seconds before it dips below the horizon. This is nature. So, we connect ourselves to that which isn't going anywhere, to that which is with us all the time, and then we enjoy all the transitory forms. We must never fall under the illusion that by grasping hard enough, we can prevent the Sun or the moon from setting, or prevent a green leaf from becoming red in the fall and dropping to the ground. You can hold on to that leaf all you want, but it's still going to dry out and fall to the ground. That is the law of nature. So instead of trying to bend the law of nature to our will and hold onto that which is in constant flow and flux, focus on that which is unchanging, the presence of the Divine. Challenge yourself: how many times during the day and in how many different people, in how many different circumstances can you connect with the Divine? If the divine pervades everything, it means we have infinite opportunities to see the Divine and connect with the Divine.

We talk so much about opening the heart on the spiritual journey. When we've experienced hard times and hard things, how can we still open our heart?

There's no spiritual scripture or real Guru who promises that on a spiritual path with your heart open, you will never be hurt. No scripture or Guru guarantees us, "Open your heart and you'll never get hurt. Open your heart and no one you love will ever leave you. Open your heart and everything will always go your way." There's no such promise. We must open our hearts despite the near surety that we will be hurt, because to live with a closed heart is to die while alive.

There a story of a man who goes to his Guru, and his son has died. The man is as miserable as one can imagine. He's furious at God, he's furious at his Guru, and he cries, "I've been a good person, I've been a good devotee, how can you hurt me in this way?" He goes to his Guru and says, "You're my Guru, bring my son back to life! This is unfair, this isn't right, I shouldn't be hurt like this, bring him back to life!"

The Guru says, "Okay, you're right. You are a good devotee, you shouldn't be hurt in any way that is different from the way other people have been hurt. I will bring your son back to life, but I need one thing from you. I need you to bring me one grain of rice from the home of someone who has never lost a loved one. With that grain of rice, I will bring your son back to life." So the man rushes out to find that family. He goes out from house to house, village to village, and of course he cannot find any house in which they haven't lost a loved one. Finally, he comes back to his Guru, bows at his feet and he goes, "I'm so sorry, forgive me for demanding that of you. I've spent the last several days immersed in the pain of others who have also lost loved ones, and I realize this is everywhere."

In our lives, we lose sometimes. We get hurt. It's the nature of the Universe, it's the nature of nature. If you love a certain type of tree, the ones whose leaves fall, if you love it for a year, it's going to lose its leaves. You can worship those green leaves as much as you want, but come autumn, those leaves will fall to the ground. You can love the summertime, but you're going to lose it to winter. You can love the snow, but you're going to lose it to spring. You can love your youth, but you're going to lose it to middle age and then old age.

Whatever we love, we lose. It's the nature of life. We have to accept that this is what life is. And so, an open heart is our choice, our choice to accept the incredible invitation of the universe to join it in co-creating my life. Closing my heart doesn't change the nature of nature. Closing my heart simply means that I'm in pain every day, rather than just on the days that I lose something. Closing my heart means 365 days a year, I hurt. Opening my heart means I may hurt sometimes, , but certainly not all the time, and an open heart is my only opportunity to actually experience love and joy. An open heart is a non-negotiable criterion for joy. Closing our hearts deprives us of every possibility for joy.

We don't get joy by just getting up every day, having a shower, and getting dressed. We don't get joy from hugging our dollars or rupees or cars or house. Has anyone ever actually embraced the lamppost of their house? Or the fender of their car? Or their wallet? The things we embrace are people, animals, trees, things that are living. Yes, we will lose them someday, they may also hurt us knowingly or unknowingly, maybe just by dying, maybe while living. . Or, you're going to hurt them. But our only possibility of real life, of any joy, of any meaning in life, is to stay open-hearted. To close our hearts is to say no to life, it is to turn down the invitation of the universe.

It's not always easy, I know that. The is where courage is needed. We usually think of the words "bravery" and "courage" as synonyms, but they're not. The root of the word "bravery" comes from armor, to be armored. The soldiers who were brave were brave because they had steel plates over their chest, steel masks over their heads, and 20-foot spears in their arms. They were able to approach a warring army with bravery because they were covered and armed.

The root of the word "courage," though comes from the same root as the French word *coeur*, meaning heart. The root of courage is literally an open heart. So, courage becomes our only choice. It's not a matter of "how to;" it's a matter of "I have to." Then what we do is we just fill our lives with as much love as we possibly can, and as much joy and meaning as we possibly can. Yes, some of it is going to hurt us, but if I can fill myself with enough of joy and enough love, where it's not only coming from one direction, then when I get hurt from one direction – one person harms me, I lose a pet, the leaves on my tree fall down – at least I've got other sources.

We should love people, nature, our work, and our spiritual practice, but the safest thing you can do if you don't want to be hurt is love God. God's not going anywhere. God's not going to betray you, tell your secrets, leave you for someone else or insult you. The saints and sages who lived in caves were so blissful. They had no family, no friends and no social life. You'd think they must have been lonely. But their inner connection is so strong that even living far from other humans, even living just with the river, the deer, the snakes and the sun and moon – they were so blissful, so peaceful, so fulfilled.

This doesn't mean you should cut yourself off and go live in a cave, but that inner connection inoculates us from the pain of loss, betrayal, and loneliness, because we've got something, we've got something that grounds and anchors us, something deeper than that which we've lost. Imagine having your best friend always with you, then imagine it a hundred times better than that! There's a beautiful line in the prayers we sing every morning at Parmarth Niketan that says, "*Tu akele nahin pyare, Ram teri sath mein.*" It means, "My dear, my love, you're not alone, you're never alone, God is always with you."

There was once a man who was so upset, and he said to God, "God, I was such a good devotee. I worshipped you and I prayed to you, but You betrayed me. My Lord, I had this dream last night in which my whole

life was spread out before me, and I was walking along the beach of my life. All along the way, I could see two sets of footprints, my footprints and Your footprints. But then, on this path of my life I was watching in my dream, I noticed that during all these hard times when I really was broken and shattered, when I needed You so much, there was only one set of footprints, not two, in the sand. My Lord, You left me when I needed You the most. How could You do that?" God replied gently, "My dear, that's when I carried you."

So that's the power of the Divine connection. Everybody else may hurt you, everybody else may betray you, but that spiritual connection, that's what carries you at these times in your life. That's what gives you the courage to keep your heart open, because you know God's carrying you. It doesn't matter what name you use for God or how you worship the Divine. When we connect deeply we become like a child in the mother's arms – absolutely fearless. If the mother puts the child down, they start to cry. In the mother's arm, there is no problem. Bring it on, my mom is here! That's how it is with the spiritual connection.

How do we deal with death? How do we deal with people around us dying?

Death is one of those things - most of the world falls into this category but it's easier to see with death – over we have no control. The only way to deal with it is through acceptance, because there is no alternative. Your lack of acceptance isn't going to change it.

Usually in our lives, we think that if I don't accept something – your child wants to marry someone you don't approve of, your loved one says he is having an affair, you're about to get fired from your job, – if we don't accept it, we think somehow that our anger or our silence or our pain is going to undo it. So, we live mostly in this myth of our own control, this illusion of our control.

The truth is, we have almost no control over anything that happens in life, other than our own lives. We have all of the control of our lives, and almost no control of other people's karmic packages. But death is the area where that hits home most clearly. We can't convince anyone not to die, we can't go on a hunger strike, we can't cut anyone off financially for not doing what we want, there's nothing we can do to try to prevent death from happening when it's time is there.

There are so many aspects to the pain of death. One is the loss of the

loved one. Another is the loss of the sense of control and faith, and of understanding the Universe. "This wasn't supposed to happen." We're usually not quite so torn apart if a loved one at ninety-five or a hundred years old passes away, especially if they pass peacefully in their sleep. We miss them of course, we're sad, but we that understand, their body was done. However, when it's not someone who had reached such an old age, we feel cheated by the universe. "This wasn't supposed to happen. It's not fair."

So, the other aspect of dealing with death in addition to the pure sadness and loss becomes accepting the lack of control. There's nothing you can do. That person has passed on, whether you accept it or not, whether you deal with it well or not, whether you try to manipulate God or not. There is nothing you can do. The beauty and the power of that awareness is it brings home so directly the truth that we're all going to die. Not just that person. I can't do anything even for myself. One day I will die.

When we sit at the sacred Ganga Aarti ceremony every night at Parmarth Niketan, just across and slightly downriver is the cremation ground for Rishikesh. Sometimes, if you look out downriver you can see a fire going at the time of our aarti. Usually in aarti I keep my eyes closed, but if I ever see a cremation taking place, I always keep my eyes open, focused and meditating on that fire.

The easiest thing would be to ignore it. We're over here celebrating; death is safely on the other side of the river. That is cutting ourselves off, though, from the fullness of existence. The deeper, fuller way is to realize that yes, today we're celebrating and someone else is mourning, someone else is burning, but tomorrow or the next day or a few years from now, it's going to be us standing over a burning pyre, mourning a loved one, and then tomorrow or the day after or a few years from now or even a few decades from now, it's going to be our body burning in the pyre. To hold all of that awareness at the same time is an incredible, deep meditation, to stay fully present in the aarti, in a joy-filled celebration of life, and also to allow ourselves to be there simultaneously in the cremation, to be the mourner and to be the one in the pyre.

Can you be burning and celebrating in the same moment in the same consciousness? Can you hold both of those in your awareness at the same time? It's not easy, but it's very deep if you can get it to happen. Our consciousness expands so fully in that moment that we realize , "Wow,

this is all part of the package deal of life. The joy, the celebration, the mourning, the burning.” Otherwise the river seems like a very safe barrier, but just a few feet above the water, the flames of their cremation mingle with the flames of our aarti and you can no longer tease apart which was a flame of death and which was a flame of life. That’s the only way to deal with death that I know.

It’s also, according to the saints and the sages, the way to deal with life. One of the deepest and most core tenets of Indian spiritual tradition is that until you can die, until in your consciousness you are able to fully understand and accept (you don’t have to love it) that this is part of the package deal of life, you can’t truly live, because then life becomes just running from death. That’s the source of the restlessness, anxiety, and fear. We really have to look at death in the face.

Lastly, on a specific note in terms of mourning the death of loved ones, hold on to the knowledge that when they were alive, it was their spirit you loved, not their bodies. You may have also loved their bodies. But on the deepest level you did not only love their body. It was their spirit, their essence, their soul you loved. If they went and got plastic surgery and looked different, you’d still love them. If they got into a car accident and their face got messed up, you’d still love them. If they had to get an arm amputated, you wouldn’t love them any less because they had less body, you’d still love them. There’s no physical part of their body that if they lost that, you would no longer love them. What you love is the essence and the spirit, and that still remains even after death.

Just as our loved ones’ bodies change so many times during their lives, as they grew, after death the body again changed forms; it’s gone back to the earth, but the Soul hasn’t gone anywhere. The Soul was never born, the Soul doesn’t die. That which you loved is still here. Please know that the connection you had, that love you experienced, is still here because it’s in you. Allow yourself to feel that. Otherwise, we get into the drama of, “They’re gone, they’re gone, they’re gone!”

Sadly our culture and other people encourage that drama. If you say, “Oh, I can still hear them, they still talk to me,” people will tell you to “Get over it.” Eventually they’ll send you to a therapist. But the truth is, you still can hear them. Not with these physical ears, of course. What you are hearing is not vibrating your tympanic membrane, but you can still hear them. Their inner voice is still there, and your inner ear, if it’s open, can

hear them.

Our culture is so focused on the body that people will tell you that you need therapy if you think you can still hear departed loved ones, that you need therapy if you still feel them with you. People will say that you're not letting go and you need help. Well, why? Why should you let go? You spent so many years loving someone, why should you let go? What is there to let go of? Their soul that is interlocked with your soul, the love that is still in you, how do you let go of that? Can you give yourself a love-ectomy? Somehow remove the love from you? You can't. There's actually nothing to let go of other than the concept that who you loved existed only in the physical form. That myth is all we need to let go of. Keep loving them. Of course, keep loving them. Love is beautiful, and what you loved anyway is their soul and spirit. That's still here. Keep loving that. Love the memory of their body, but love the presence of their soul.

Why do we feel depressed when we lose someone or something important to us? How can we deal with that depression?

Many times in life sad things happen. Maybe a loved one dies, maybe you get divorced, maybe you lose your job, maybe something else happens due to which, naturally, you feel sad. Society has now become so habituated to seeing depression as an illness, that I can't tell you the number of people who have told me that they have been prescribed antidepressants in response to tragic life circumstances, the most natural response to which is grief.

The response to a sad occurrence is to be sad. It is not natural to feel bouncy, ecstatic, or joyous in the midst of death, loss and tragedy.

So, we need to give ourselves time and space to mourn and be sad. Mourning is necessary not only when someone dies. We mourn the loss of opportunity, loss of relationship, loss of youth. There's so much in our lives that we lose that precipitates a natural and legitimate sadness.

It's really important not to lump every moment or even week or month of sadness into the category of clinical depression. We must first ask ourselves : "What have I experienced? What's going on? What have I lost?" That loss could even just be the loss of an idea: You had an idea of what your life was going to be like, or even what an evening or a weekend would be like. When that doesn't happen, there's a moment of mourning a natural sadness. This is the moment we need to encourage ourselves to go through

before we can then move on healthily with our lives.

In contrast, when one has everything, when nothing has happened to cause depression and yet one is feeling depressed, there are many ways to look at it. I will address just two of these ways. The first has to do with the brain. There are certain chemical imbalances and fluctuations that we associate with depression. But, there is a difference between being associated with and being a cause of something.

We know that depression, is associated with (not necessarily caused by) certain imbalances in the level of certain chemicals in the brain. We know that when we give people medicine that changes certain chemistry in the brain depression frequently lifts.

Another thing that we know is that people who have been traumatized in their childhood, even if it was fifteen, twenty, or thirty years before they started to experience depression, tend to have similar imbalances of chemicals in their brains. This leads us to say that trauma in childhood can be linked to the depression later in life which is associated with chemical imbalances.

For this reason, I do not advise people to categorically refuse antidepressant medication. If you have diabetes and there are imbalances in the insulin production levels of your pancreas, you would understand the benefit of taking medicine to balance your insulin. In the same way, sometimes the medicines are needed and deeply helpful to re-balance chemicals in the brain and bloodstream.

Additionally, it is really important to stay alive. If you don't stay alive you can't find happiness. Sometimes medication is exactly the life-raft that someone needs to prevent drowning in the ocean of depression.

A common down-side, though, and one worth contemplating is that many antidepressant medicines limit the spectrum of your emotions. If on one side of the emotional spectrum there is great joy and on the other side there is great despair, antidepressants chop off both ends of the spectrum, leaving you in the middle feeling somewhat "nothing."

You cannot numb yourself from the pain without simultaneously numbing yourself from the joy. This is why one of the great side effects of the medicine is emotional numbness. Even in situations when we are physically programmed to feel joy, the person would feel nothing.

OUR EMOTIONS

The other way of thinking about depression, if you are not going to take medication, is to realize that you have to find ways to experience joy again. One of the easiest and most effective ways is to help others. One of the greatest prescriptions for a general state of depression is service. There is a saying in psychology that depression leads to people feeling like “the piece of shit at the center of the universe.” It’s not just that depressed people feel depressed; there is also this “center of the universe” part of it which is treated beautifully by getting out there and realizing you are not the center of the universe! Serving others, helping those less fortunate, is a fantastic way to realize just how much we have to give. It works best when it is interactive. It can be with children, animals, old people, anyone, but you should try to serve a living being – a plant, an animal, or a person with whom you can connect, whom you are serving and whose life is getting better because of your presence and help. It is very difficult to do this when in the throes of depression, but it’s very rewarding and effective.

When you smile and hug a child who is deprived of his parents’ love, when you visit an elderly person who nobody has visited in six months, when you plant something and water it and see it slowly growing, when you make sandwiches and give them to homeless people, these moments of service are precious. When you string enough of them together, they can make you feel ecstatic in your connection to humanity and your efficacy in bringing light to others. Lying in bed at night you’ll be able to say, “It was a good day.”

How do we get over the pain of someone leaving us? Someone who we’ve built a life around and trusted?

We don’t get over it. What happens is that who we are expands enough to include it. It’s no longer a hole within us, but who we are expands to be able to make room for that pain and our joyful, peaceful lives as well.

The sting of the pain goes away, the same way that the sting of every pain – physical pain, emotional pain – goes away. The sting of it, the sensation of a knife digging in your heart, goes away. But the love that you felt, the love that you still feel, doesn’t go away, and there’s no reason for it to.

Your love is still here. Can you just for a moment allow your heart to feel the love? Just the love. Without the judgment that the brain does of who is where, where you are, where they are. Without the commentary. Can you just simply feel the love? The love is there, no? That love is still with you.

That love didn't go away with that person who left you. You're still holding onto that love. What happened is that you were habituated to experiencing that love in the presence of a specific person. That person's presence was connected in your mind to the love. Now that person has left you. You have the love without that person's presence, but the love is still there.

Our brains play all kinds of tricks on us. Our brains will tell us that we don't have the love anymore, that the love is gone. The love isn't gone, the love is with you. All that's gone, and I don't say this in any way to minimize it, but to just clarify it, is the familiarity of who you identified with the love. In that person's presence, through that person as a medium, you were able to plant and nourish and nurture this seed of love within you that now over the years has grown and grown. Now that person is gone, but the love that you nourished and nurtured is still there.

This is really important to know, because when the pain is fresh, the love is linked with pain because of the associations in the mind. But try, in your mind, in your meditation, to sit quietly for a moment with your hands on your heart, feeling the presence of the love but with the mind so quiet that it doesn't have a chance to start its commentary ("He left you, she left you," etc.), and all you do is experience the love. You'll know it's still there. Whether a person leaves us by choice, whether they betray us or cheat on us or abandon us, or a person leaves us because they leave their body, in both cases the love is still ours.

The other most important piece is: it's not your fault. There's nothing you could have or should have done differently. That person's karmic package was such that they were blessed with your presence, and supposed to be blessed with your presence, for only a certain amount of time. You came into their lives and you played a beautiful role, but in their karmic journey was that seed wasn't yet ripe enough to fully grow into that tree of love with you. Sadly, we don't have control over other people's karmic packages. It would be so nice if our parents, spouses, in-laws, children, if everybody did what we wanted them to – if they loved us, if they stayed with us, if they were honest with us, and if they didn't hurt us. Sadly that isn't a power that any of us has been given.

What we can do is realize that the love is still with us, and allow ourselves to feel it. It's there. Only your identification with the owner of this love just has to change. You are the owner of this love, not someone else.

YOGA & PHILOSOPHY



The Bhagavad Gita

What is the importance of the Bhagavad Gita?

The Gita is really the essence of all the scriptures and all of the other teachings. You could spend years and decades studying not just the whole Gita, but even just a chapter or a mantra of the Gita! It's the *essence*. It's something that on the one hand, there's never enough time for. Whether you devote months or years or decades, you're still going to come up short because it's so deep and so rich. But, on the other hand, it's not esoteric teaching. It's not the type of teaching that you have to have a lot of prerequisites in order to understand. The Gita is something that you can walk into the study of without prerequisites. With simply the understanding of five or six or ten Sanskrit words, you can embark on studying the Gita.

The Gita changes us, and it changes people of every religion and every culture. It is not just a scripture for Hindus, or a scripture for the battleground of Kurukshetra. It's for all of us.

I want to share some drops of that essence, some drops of that nectar, to allow it to just percolate within you and see what grows and what evolves within you.

First of all, it's really important to remember that while a battlefield is the stage for the teaching of the Gita, it doesn't mean that it's the only place where the teaching applies. For many of us, it's very simple to say, "Well you know, that's just not my reality, those aren't the problems I'm facing, therefore maybe the teachings aren't as pertinent," or, "I don't think of God in the form of Krishna, so therefore those teachings aren't applicable." Before you even begin talking about the Gita, it's important to remember

that that battleground in the Gita is the battleground within ourselves. It's the battle between – in oversimplified terms – the “good guys” and the “bad guys,” and in somewhat less simplified terms, our drive for our passions, ego, and desires – the Duryodhana within us, which says nothing is ever enough. But, the hole that I'm trying to fill is not a hole that has anything to do with how much land is in my kingdom. It's the hole in the heart. It doesn't matter how much I steal from you, or wrest from your hands, or earn or get or acquire, it's never enough.

It's also the aspect within us that's the ego, that's identified with what I have, that's identified with “I want to be the king,” “I want to be number one,” “Why am I not the one with the corner office, why am I not the one who's the highest or the best or the most sought-after? I should have all of that!” That ego is prepared to really do or say anything to get that.

So it's a battle within us, between that instinct and the instinct which is the opposite, which says, “Forget it! Peace is the most important, love is the most important, family is the most important, who cares? Who cares about the land, who cares about the Kingdom, forget it!”

But yet, it is also our duty to restore *dharma*. This cuts through a really important aspect of the Gita that comes up so frequently with so many people, particularly those of us from the West, which is the question of non-violence. If the very first *yama* of the eight limbs of yoga, if the very foundation of yoga is *ahimsa* – non-violence – how is it then that we end up with this scripture of yoga that seems to be saying “fight, fight, fight!”? Where's this dichotomy meet, and what does it mean?

This is where it's so crucial to remember that this is not a scripture about slaughtering your enemies. It's not a scripture about waging war for that which is your due, whether its land, title, kingdom, or the honor of your wife. It's a teaching on doing your duty, which sometimes isn't fun. Most of us don't necessarily face that type of battlefield, we don't necessarily find ourselves on a horse-drawn chariot facing our family members across battle lines with bows and arrows, but we do find ourselves sometimes face-to-face with literal, material, physical, as well as symbolic and metaphoric aspects of ourselves, our culture, and our family that are not what we know to be the highest Truth. Face-to-face with them, it's not easy, because we're literally facing down the self, or the shadow self, or however we want to describe it. It's a lot easier to think, “Well, forget it! I'm a yogi now, I'm just going to meditate, I'll just do my yoga, I'm going

to just find peace with this.”

On a slight but pertinent digression, there have been so many people for example in the wake of what's going on in the world who have come up with questions about things like, “How can I find peace with this?” As a yogi, our highest goal is not always about how to find peace with whatever is happening outside. Sometimes our highest goal is to find an inner peace within ourselves so that we're not reacting, so that we're not blind with rage, so that we're not in sympathetic nervous system overload where we can't possibly think properly, but where we're acting to restore *dharma* to *adharma*, to bring back righteousness to unrighteousness. This is what Lord Krishna teaches in the Gita to Arjuna. Krishna's teaching to Arjuna is: “Not so fast! Your highest goal here is not about letting them have it all, going into the mountains, and finding peace with the fact that you've lost your kingdom. Your highest goal is to be balanced, anchored, and grounded in yoga, and to restore the *dharma*, to fight the battle, to do the action.”

That's really important because when we start to experience the peace that we feel in yoga, it in and of itself starts to draw us. Then, there's things in the world that don't feel so peaceful and our instinct can become to just go back to that which made you peaceful in your pre-yoga days. It may have been alcohol or drugs or gambling or chocolate cake after chocolate cake. But, we must remember that our practice is a means to an end. It is the means to purify the self.

In the Gita, Krishna explains that yoga is that which purifies the self, but He doesn't say that it “brings” God. Yoga is that which enlightens you so that you can live in the light *which is already there* – it's the Truth of who you are. He reminds us over and over again that the solution is *not* in not-acting. The solution is not in withdrawal from action. Rather, the solution is in grounding and anchoring yourself in yoga – in that real union of the self with the Divine, in the *dharma* – and engaging in action.

Let's take just a few additional drops. One of my favorite teachings in the Gita is a line where Krishna says that yoga is the cessation of the union with pain. Yoga is actually breaking the union with pain. We are attached and united with our pain, whether it's our stories, our dramas, or our histories. We all love our dramas because they're exciting, and that pain is exciting. One of the (false) worries people about a spiritual path is that their life is going to become boring. We think, “If I didn't spend my life going up and

down, what would I do?" What would I think about if it wasn't always fighting and making up with my boyfriend or girlfriend or my spouse? If we just could peacefully and lovingly coexist, well, that would be really boring! What would we do, what would we talk about, what would we have to make up from, where would the passion come from? Yet, yoga is the cessation of that union with pain, so it's a surrendering in a way of the attachment to drama.

In the Gita, this stage of life, this whole existence is referred to as *leela*, which literally is translated somewhat imperfectly as "the divine play" or "the divine drama." This whole thing is a *leela*. We still have to play our role, and that's the teaching: do your duty. Lord Krishna is very clear about it. He tells Arjuna, "You are not the killer, just as you are not the giver of life." He basically tells Arjuna to get off his high horse, to not think of himself like that, he's not the doer, he's a tool, and he's playing a role in this drama! The best you can do is be a good tool. The best you can do is empty yourself, so that the Divine's will flows through you.

You're not running the show, but we all think we are and so we find ourselves in this trouble, like Arjuna found himself. The Gita opens with the *physiological* response that Arjuna is having, the stress response he's going through – his hair is standing on end, he's quivering, he can't think clearly. Well, anybody ever been in a situation like that when you're trying to make a decision? We know what that feels like! It's the "It's up to me, I'm the doer" decision panic. But Krishna tells him, "Stop, you're not running the show here, but you have a crucial role to play. I have given you this role and it is your duty to play this role. You are the restorer of *dharma*, you are a warrior, you are a king, your *dharma* is to be king now. As it happens, in order to be king, you have to remove these obstacles, which are your evil cousins who are blinded by their ego and greed."

This brings up another aspect. The evil cousins were literally the sons of "the blind one." Remember, nothing's in the Gita for no reason! It all has a purpose. The evil cousins were the sons of "the blind one," King Dhritarashtra, and the one whom voluntarily blinded herself, Queen Gandhari. They're the lineage of the blind.

We get blinded by our egos, desires, and attachments. In order for Arjuna to do his *dharma*, which is to be king and restore *dharma*, he had to remove them. If we came down with a horrible infection, even those of us who are deeply attached to natural sources would nonetheless take antibiotics if

our lives absolutely depended on it. Very few of us would be so attached to not taking the antibiotics that we'd actually say, "OK, no problem, I surrender my body to these bacteria." We'd take the antibiotics. Well, the bacteria have a life. We've committed ourselves to *ahimsa*, but if you've ever taken an antibiotic, you've committed genocide of sorts! We have wiped out entire populations based on the type of bacteria they were! But, we do it because we know that we have a *dharma* and duty to fulfill, and in order to fulfill that *dharma* we have to stay alive. Literally. There's a higher goal. It's not because I'm a vengeful person, but because I know I've got a duty here to fulfill, and in order to fulfill that I've got to stay in the body.

So, yoga is letting go of the attachment to the pain that our drama and ignorance create. When we talk about a Guru, a Guru is the one who removes the darkness and brings light. The darkness is the darkness of ignorance. The core spiritual teaching is that the core of who you are is light, is Divine, is pure, and is perfect. In many ways, it's the opposite from the teaching of the Judeo-Christian tradition, which has to do with the core being sinful and that there are things we can do to save ourselves or absolve ourselves of that sinful nature. Here, it's the opposite. Here it says that the core of who you are is pure and perfect, but due to ignorance you identify with this body. In your identification with the body, you experience pain, anger, and jealousy. These are painful things. Anger, jealousy, competition, and ego don't feel good. So, we experience the pain, based on that we act, and then we suffer the repercussions of that action in what we would call "bad" karma. It's not that I've been punished because I'm sinful. Rather, it's that I was ignorant, that ignorance led to pain, that pain led to me to engage in certain actions, and those actions had consequences. Whatever seeds you plant, that's what you reap.

When we connect in yoga in order to unite with the Divine, I have to disconnect from my attachment to the pain and drama. I can't simultaneously be connected in two different places. In order to unite with the Truth, I have to un-unite from the pain and from the ignorance. Yoga brings us out of that.

Another beautiful drop of the Gita is a passage where Krishna is talking about the ocean, and how so many rivers and streams flow into the ocean yet you don't see the ocean going up and down with the rivers. The rivers don't have any impact on the high or the low tide of the ocean. Whatever is entering the ocean, the ocean stays constant. The teaching therefore is that in our lives, yes, we're human, but we are actually yogis in a human

experience and in a human body, and it's not about how to stop these rivers and streams of our desires and human experience or the world around us, but rather to learn how we can be like the ocean so that no matter what flows in, we're constant.

Most of us go up and down, literally. Pujya Swamiji always talks about how we act like we're light bulbs which people come in and flip us on and flip us off. If someone says something nice, we're on. If they don't say something nice, we're off. But, we need to be like the ocean. Let the rivers enter, let the streams enter. Yoga is union, so it's not about how much of myself I can push away or suppress. It's about having an awareness of the rivers, of the streams, of the flow of my human existence, but it doesn't shake me.

If you have a glass water and you threw a rock in it, what would happen? It would splash all over the place. But, if I took that same rock and I dumped it into my full bathtub, what would happen? It would sink. It would make a little splash but not too much; it wouldn't flood my bathroom floor. Then, if I took that same rock and I dropped it in the ocean, what would happen? Very little. So, the teaching is not about how to remove these rocks from my life. Many of us have had the experience of, "I'm so peaceful, I'm so joyful, I'm so connected, so for God's sake just please don't come near me!" That's the equivalent of basically saying my container of peace is so small that your rock is going to undo me. The goal is not about how to keep this ever-growing list of people and places away from you so they don't rattle your peace. The goal is not to allow yourself to be splashed all over the place, but rather to expand yourself, to go from being the glass to being the ocean. Then, you may dump a rock in me but it's not going to undo me, it's not going to cause me to splash all over the sides, because I'm the ocean now. That's really the goal.

Lastly, Lord Krishna teaches that a yogi is one who is always happy, always satisfied – "*santushtaha satatam*." The Sanskrit of that is interesting because *tushta* also means happy and satisfied, but means happy from little things, temporary satisfactions, temporary happiness. But, *santushta* is ever-happy, ever-satisfied. In order to have that, I need to connect with something that is much deeper than that in the outside world which is making me happy right now. That's what yoga does. It literally connects us deep within so that we're able to have that.

Krishna reminds us that a yogi is one who is peaceful, joyful, and not

swayed by passions, and the reason that I mention that is because there's this very big movement happening nowadays that says that if you're not living a life from passion, there's something wrong. Now, passion is great. Should you happen to be someone with a passion for something, that's the driving force of your life. It gets you out of bed in the morning, and is helpful in healing for you and the world. You might even be blessed enough to make a living at it! But, what He says is that a yogi is one who's not swayed by that, which means I'm rooted and grounded in peace. It doesn't mean I don't care. The yogis care deeply. If I'm deeply connected, I become an ocean of compassion. It doesn't mean I don't care, it just means that I'm not swayed by it and I'm not blinded by it. So, in your practice, rather than worrying so much about what it is that makes the fireworks go off in your life, connect yourself with what grounds you and what anchors you that is constant. *That* is this ocean, and *that's* the practice of yoga – to go within.

Then of course, we become the most incredible doers of our duty and the most effective restorers of *dharma*, because we're so anchored in the Truth and our awareness of what our duty is that we can do it without being blinded. *That's* ultimately what we're all put here for.

Are there any other teachings from the Gita that have been especially helpful in your life?

When I first came to India, I had always thought that happiness and success came from things outside. Yet, in the Bhagavad Gita, there's a line in which Lord Krishna says a yogi is one to whom a lump of clay, a handful of dirt, and a brick of gold are the same. That's really interesting because we also know that a yogi is one with great powers of discrimination. Clearly Lord Krishna doesn't mean that as a yogi, you lose the ability to feel the difference. But, in terms of that which matters, that which actually is the Truth of my life, clay and dirt and gold are all about as equally able to fill me on the inside.

This was the teaching I got when I came to India. It wasn't given to me in the format of a book or a satsang discussion. Rather, I got it very experientially. It was much more like being hit over the head with experience after experience that literally knocked me off my feet and onto the floor. But that was the teaching: here are all the things that you thought mattered, here's what you thought it meant to be successful, here's what you thought you needed to be happy. Through some incredible grace of

God, I was given that at a very young age and not forced to go through decades and decades of looking in the wrong place for what I was looking for, and it's something for which I am very grateful.

For most of us, particularly those of us from the West, we really are indoctrinated into this idea of figuring out what we're going to be or what our role is. We tell ourselves, "I've *got* to become __" "I've *got* to be __" "I've *got* to do __." Or, we go the opposite: "I'm useless. I'm no one. I don't matter," or "Who cares? Let's just eat, drink and be merry!"

What I love about the moon is that the moon is beautiful. In every religion, there are so many prayers and songs written about the moon.

People often say the moon is so bright, but the moon actually has no light of her own. The moon is a piece of rock floating in the atmosphere, just like so many other pieces of rock. The only thing that makes the moon unique is that she has figured out how to align herself in such a way with the Sun and the Earth that she's able to reflect that light of the Sun onto the Earth. The teaching of the moon is, "Yes, although you are just a piece of rock, if you align yourself correctly, you actually can reflect the light of the Divine onto all of those around you." That's what the moon does. The moon is never really full or half or moonless, it's just she goes in and out of alignment.

So in our lives, when we feel lightless, first we need to simply ask ourselves, "How have I gotten out of alignment, and how can I get back in alignment?" Second, we must always remember that we've got this incredible ability to reflect light, love, and peace on the world around us. But, we must never get lost in thinking, "It's my light. I'm the manufacturer of this light." Rather, I'm the reflector of that light.

Yoga & the Yoga Sutras

How do the Yoga Sutras pertain to our lives?

The word *sutra* literally means a thread. In English, if you fall and hurt yourself and have to get stitches, the stitches are called “sutures.” It’s the same concept. It’s a thread that weaves together – in sutures, it is weaving together our flesh, and in *sutra*-s, it is weaving together our lives. This is what the Yoga Sutras are about.

There’s no *sutra*, even if we went through every *sutra*, that says, “Here’s how flat your palms have to be on the ground,” or, “Here’s how long you have to stand on your head,” or, “Here’s what your leg must look like in this posture.” Sure, we have a wealth of other texts and studies on the *asana*-s. But the Yoga Sutras focus on something much deeper than just the physical postures of our body.

It’s said that after God (in the form of Lord Vishnu) had incarnated as Dhanvantari – the God of health, the God who gave us Ayurveda – and made everyone healthy, there was still unhealth in the minds and in the hearts. So, Lord Vishnu was again beseeched to incarnate on Earth in a form that would give us not just what Ayurveda gave us for health of the body, but something that would bring us health of the mind, the heart, and the spirit, internally. So, Lord Vishnu incarnated as the Sage Patanjali, who gave us the Yoga Sutras. That’s the foundation of how these Sutras came to be.

The Sutras begin by saying “*Atha yoga-anushasanam*,” meaning, “Now, for the discipline of yoga.” Now, we are delving together into the discipline of yoga. This is important because yoga is a discipline. Ultimately it takes us into *samadhi*, moving through the eight limbs, but in order to get there,

it's a discipline. These days, when there's so many different types of yoga all over the world – acrobatics yoga and swimming yoga and yoga with my dog and yoga with my goats, yoga to music, there's so many! – it's important to remember that regardless of what you're listening to while you're doing yoga, regardless of whether the other members in your class are human or different animals, whatever the situation in which you might be doing your *asana* practice, yoga is a discipline. This doesn't mean that you can't be disciplined while listening to music or with dogs roaming around, but it means that my yoga is a discipline. If I lose that, I've lost everything.

Yoga is not just my practice on the mat, but yoga is actually my life. We always say, “yoga” is a noun, not a verb. It's not what you *do*, it's who you *are*. So in the discipline of yoga, it's not just about keeping your leg straight in *trikonasana*, it's about the discipline of the self. This is why, when Patanjali gave us the eight limbs of yoga, he didn't begin with *trikonasana* or any *asana* for that matter. He began with the *yama*-s and the *niyama*-s – the disciplines of life, how we are internally, our internal discipline, and how we are with those in the world.

While I don't want to go into the all the details about the eight limbs, this is actually very core when speaking about the Yoga Sutras. A lot of us think that yoga is just the third limb, *asana*, and sometimes we include the fourth limb, *pranayama*. But, yoga actually begins with *yama*-s and *niyama*-s. These are the disciplines of how we live in the world. They have nothing to do with the straightness of our legs or the flexibility of our spine, and everything to do with the straightness of our morals and our values. They have everything to do with the flexibility of our egos.

They begin with *ahimsa*, non-violence; *satyam*, truthfulness; *asteya*, non-stealing; *brahmacharya*, restraint of the senses (not always specifically just sexual discipline, but a broader concept of general discipline and restraint); and then *aparigraha*, non-hoarding and non-covetousness.

If we simply look at all of them as a whole, what we realize is that this is about how we move through the world from within. I can't not-steal or not-covet or not-hoard until and unless I have an experience within of fullness. I might sit on my hands and forcibly prevent myself from actually stealing your handbag or shawl or diamond necklace or husband, but that's not really what we're talking about. What we're talking about is something deeper. In order to not steal, covet, or hoard, I have to no

longer be moving through the world with an experience of emptiness or scarcity. If I consider myself “less than” in any way, naturally I’m going to want and need more, whether it’s more money, clothes, respect, love, approval, or whatever it is. Then, I’m going to have to figure out some way to get it, even if it’s through lying or stealing or something like that. I need it because I’m having an experience of emptiness and scarcity, and I’m moving through the world with this myth of a limited amount.

Now, we all know intuitively that of course this doesn’t make any kind of sense. We all know intellectually that there of course is an infinite amount of happiness and success possible in the world. Yet, on a deep level, a lot of us don’t believe that, and the reason that we know that we don’t believe that is the way that we begrudge each other’s happiness and success. If you’re really honest with yourself, take a moment and think back on times when people you know – even friends of yours – got a fantastic raise, got a promotion, fell in love, got married, had a child, got a house, whatever it was. They had these things that are just fantastic, beautiful landmarks of success and happiness, and while we’re happy for them on some level because we love them, much too frequently there’s a little bit inside that begrudges them that. If they lose it, although we’re sad for them because we love them and they’re our friends, there’s a little bit too much of a place within us that smiles. That horrendousness of the self, if we’re really honest and look at it within us, is not because we’re horrible or mean people, but because we’re operating under this cultural concept of scarcity. If you’ve gotten something wonderful, it means that there’s less of the wonderful-ness for me. If you’ve lost that wonderful thing, now there’s more wonderful-ness for me.

If I’m moving through the world with any kind of vision of scarcity in the Universe, any sense of lack within myself, I’m going to be stealing on some level, whether I’m snatching someone’s handbag or jewelry or whether I’m simply stealing someone’s time and resources. To force people to listen to you gossip, to force people to listen to you complain or judge other people or tell negative stories about other people is stealing their time and stealing their peace. To force people to do things that aren’t meaningful is stealing their time. To force them to do something against their own values is stealing them from themselves.

So much of the way that we shop, eat, and wear clothes is stealing. While we may not be stealing it from the store, the production of that item, in order to satisfy our constant clamoring for more and more and cheaper

and cheaper, is stealing as this is where sweatshops and child labor come in. Even though I paid the \$8 for the new sweater I got on sale, was the real price only \$8? In order to give it to me for only \$8, did I steal some child's childhood? Did I steal some woman's health? Did I steal something from the Earth, because the factory that made it, in order to provide things so cheaply, cannot put in a proper waste management system, and the waste is polluting the soil and water and stealing the health of people who live in that city?

This is where we start to understand the depth of the discipline that yoga is and the depth of what is required of us to be on a yogic path. But, the beautiful thing to always keep in mind is that ultimately, even though we may be practicing these limbs individually, the goal is *samadhi* or Divine bliss. So many times while practicing the individual limbs, we feel like we're really sacrificing something. I may have had a craving for a steak, but I'm practicing *ahimsa* so therefore I didn't eat the meat, yet on some level it feels like a sacrifice. I feel good that I've done it, but nonetheless there's a part of me that's thinking, "Oh, that steak would have tasted so good, I've given up so much." It's important to always remember, regardless of what limb we're focusing on at that moment, that the eighth limb is *samadhi*, which is ecstasy and bliss. *Samadhi* is a far deeper, far higher bliss than anything that you can get from a steak, or an \$8 sweater, or somebody else's diamond necklace, or someone else's husband.

So, we begin with *yama*-s, and then we move into *niyama*-s, which again is how we live but on a little bit more internal level – the purity of my body and my mind. When we think about cleanliness or purity, most of us just think of that as meaning to always bathe before yoga class. But, the cleanliness and purity that it really refers to is not just of the body before you get on the mat. It's about the mind.

Pujya Swamiji always emphasizes that we take in junk food not just through our mouths, but also through our eyes and ears, through the TV shows we watch, the music we listen to, and the conversations we take part in. It's all of that. So, when we focus on purity, it's really a purity of the *entire* self.

Remember, it's not purifying the core of who we are. Who we are at the core is already pure. According to Indian spiritual philosophy, that core, that Self, is Divine. The Upanishads tell us "*Isavasyamidam sarvam yatkinca jagatyam jagat*," which means that everything in the Universe, including us,

is Divine and pure. In that all, we are also there. The core of who we are is pure, divine, whole, and complete. The purification is of that which blocks us from seeing that and blocks us from living that.

There is a beautiful story of a Buddhist temple, and for hundreds of years the monks of the temple had been worshipping a clay Buddha. One day, the monks of the temple were cleaning it and they noticed that through a crack in the clay, something was shining from the inside. So, they slowly started to clear it away, and the bigger the crack got, the more it was shining from inside. Soon, they realized, "My God, there's gold inside our Buddha!" and they slowly cleared away the clay to discover that inside the clay Buddha, there was actually a whole Golden Buddha.

Later on, they found out that what had happened was that when invaders had come, they were looting, stealing, and melting down everything that was gold. Therefore, the monks of the temple of the Golden Buddha at that time didn't want their Buddha to be stolen and melted, so they covered it with clay to protect it, knowing that the invaders wouldn't be interested in anything clay. So, the good news was that the Buddha survived. The bad news though was that the monks did not survive, and so no one was left who knew that this was a Golden Buddha.

This story is such a beautiful metaphor for how we live. Who we are at the core is Self, and that Self is gold. We cover it with that which is not Self, the clay, whether it's our physical bodies, titles, careers, relationships, histories, or identities. We keep packing on the clay, and then when we feel like, "Oh my God, I'm just clay, I'm nothing," and we go out in search of gold.

Spirituality removes the clay. *You already are gold.* This is what the *niyama*-s are talking about when they speak of living in the purity of ourselves.

Moving into our last of the *niyama*-s, we get to *Ishwar pranidhana*, a surrender to the Divine. It doesn't matter how you conceive of the Divine or what religion or culture you come from. Yoga is not about religion. Yoga is about union with the whole and awareness of that. So whatever name or form you use to think of That, you surrender to That. When I surrender to That, it's a surrendering of the ego. Yoga teaches us to bend over physically, not just for our hamstrings, but to bend over for our egos.

If I don't surrender, I might as well stop my eight limbs right there. I can't go any further. If I don't bend and create space, there's no room for

anything else to come in my life. There's no room for me to unite with anyone or anything, which is what yoga is.

So after implementing *yama-niyama*, only then do we move through the *asana*-s and through *pranayama*. The eight limbs take us from the outermost aspects in terms of our actions – what we do in the world, our choices in the world, our behavior in the world, how we interact with others as well ourselves – into using the body as a medium to experience Oneness.

This is important. As we emphasize that yoga is not just *asana*, it is also really important to emphasize the *importance* of *asana*-s. The weight of *asana* tends to be on a pendulum swing – either you're in a class that's all about *asana* and yoga is *asana*, or *asana* gets sort of a bad name, as if it's just "merely" *asana*. But the eight limbs are not necessarily sequential; they're not rungs on a ladder. It is possible to enter the river of yoga through any of these limbs as a *ghat*, even *asana*.

I mention this only because I have experienced it, not in my body but when I had the wonderful blessing of being in Pune while BKS Iyengarji was still alive and being in the room where he was practicing. He used to go into his hall where his students were practicing for a few hours each day, and in order to be in that room you had to be one of his advanced pupils from somewhere around the world. I got in because my mother was an advanced student, and I was there visiting her. He was well into his mid-80's at this point, and he would come in and go into variations of backbend or shoulder stand or *setu bandha* – not the type of *asana*-s most people would think of as "meditative *asana*-s," like *padmasana* or *siddhasana*. All of his students would of course try to keep up, everyone wanted to do what Guruji was doing, so he would get into the posture, and they would follow suit. The room was full of people in their twenties and thirties – advanced students and teachers – yet they couldn't keep up with him! You would see their faces red and sweaty and their hearts beating fast. His eyes would be closed or just half-closed, and he'd come out of these postures twenty to thirty minutes later – I mean, who's ever heard of anyone staying in a backbend for half an hour? – and his eyes looked like he had just been in the most intense meditation. He clearly was entering the river of yoga through *asana*.

It's always really important to me to share that, because even though that's not how most of us experience *asana* – I certainly have never had meditative, ecstatic, *samadhi* experiences in *trikonasana* or a backbend like

I experience in meditation – but I know it’s possible because I’ve seen it happen. Shri Iyengarji himself emphasized that the body was the medium for that experience. So, it’s important that when we discuss the eight limbs of yoga, we also include the fact that *that* is actually possible. It’s not typically the way most people experience *samadhi*, but when Shri Iyengarji spoke about how each of these limbs could get you there, he was speaking from the position of a man who actually had experienced that.

Then we move on. We begin by using the body, and then we use the breath,. Then as we get ourselves closer and closer into the experience of what yoga really is, we withdraw the senses, bringing our minds from being in a million places to being in one place in single-pointed focus – *pratyahara*.

This is crucial, and in fact the second Yoga Sutra actually tells us, “Yoga is that which brings a cessation of the fluctuations of the mind.” So, when we’re speaking about moving through the limbs of yoga, Patanjali has described what happens, and then he’s given us the tools of how to experience this. When he says in the second Sutra, “*Yogesh chitta vritti nirodha*,” what we know is that yoga is that which causes a cessation of what our minds usually do – which is this up and down, sideways, clockwise, counter-clockwise, turning – and then he gives us actually how to bring about that cessation.

This is an important point to stop on for a moment, because what it teaches us if we think about it deeply is that we already have yoga within us. Yoga has become to us something where it’s about more and more certification, more diplomas, more degrees, but right there in the very second Yoga Sutra, after he has said, “Now we begin talking about the discipline of yoga,” he tells us that you’ve already got it within and that the only thing that is preventing you from experiencing it is the fluctuations of the mind. Clearly these fluctuations are not “you,” and if you can just use the practices to get the mind to be still, yoga is already there. Sure, get diplomas and certificates, why not? But, do not think that those are what is giving you yoga. What’s giving you yoga is when you can make the mind still.

There’s a beautiful story of the Buddha when he was out walking with some of his disciples. They stopped to take rest and the Buddha said to one of them, “Please go get me some water from that river.” So, the disciple went to get water, but at the very moment he went, a bullock cart walked across the river and threw all of the mud. The disciple went back to the Buddha and said, “I’m so sorry, I can’t get it for you because the

water is too muddy.” The Buddha responded, “No problem, we’ll sit for a while.” After some time, He sent the disciple back and said, “Now go and get me some water from the river.” The disciple went, came back, and said, “I’m sorry, the water is still muddy.” The Buddha responded, “No problem.” After some time, He sent him again, and at this point all the dirt had settled and the disciple was able to get a bucket of clear water for the Buddha. He brought it back to Him, and the Buddha said, “See, it’s not that the drinkable water wasn’t there, it’s just that the dirt had gotten moved by that bullock cart and you simply had to wait for it to settle. It’s not that something happened to that water to make it drinkable. You just had to wait. You had to wait for the dirt to settle.”

In the same way, what yoga gives us is a more active waiting you could say, but it gives us the ability and the way for that dirt to settle, through how we are with ourselves, how we are in the world, through using the body and using the breath, so that we can experience that clear, beautiful water.

Another way to think about it is another parable. The Buddha was in the woods in the forest with a disciple on a beautiful, full moon night, and they looked down at the lake but there were too many ripples on the lake to be able to properly see the reflection of the moon. So, they waited – again, He tells them to wait – and meditated, and after some time the lake became clear and the reflection of the moon was perfect.

It’s not that the meditation made the moon fuller or brighter or clearer, but what the meditation did was give time for the ripples on the lake to settle so that they could see the reflection of the moon. That’s really important, because these days a lot of us have taken to a spiritual practice much like we take to everything else in life, which is, “I’m not good enough, I have to work and work, I need to stress, strain, and squeeze myself,” as if this is going to be yet another thing we’re not good enough at. What these teachings remind us is *it’s within you*, and the only thing that blocks it are these very superficial ripples of the mind, the lake, the river. It’s the mind.

The practice of yoga which Patanjali tells us about in the second Yoga Sutra is how to quiet the mind, and when this gets quiet, in the third Yoga Sutra Patanjali says, “And then This appears.” “This” is our True nature. It’s not that the mind becomes quiet and then you become somebody brand new who you’ve never been. It’s your True nature. You simply become who you already are, but who you didn’t know, who you couldn’t hear or see

because of the noise of the mind. That's what yoga gives us.

The eight limbs take us all the way up through meditation and into *samadhi*. The reason that I want to mention this for sure is because as *asana* is not the first limb, it's also not the last. You don't want to think that just because you've gotten a perfect *asana* practice, or what feels like a perfect *asana* practice, that your yoga is done. Yoga takes you all the way into *samadhi*, so even if you're not BKS Iyengarji who actually experiences in backbend or shoulder stand all the way up to *samadhi*, don't worry about it. Use the backbends and *asana*-s to get the body healthy and strong enough so that you can sit still for long enough to go into the practices of meditation, and therefore to have the experience of *samadhi*, which is that union, that "I am That" upon which we meditate, when the lover and the beloved and love itself are one experience. In meditation, I'm meditating *upon* something. In *samadhi*, the lover and the beloved become One, so there's no longer a distinction between me as the lover and you as the object of my love. It's "me" as the small self, united with the Supreme Self, which is just Self. That's ultimately what yoga gives us.

Lastly, I want to share one more Yoga Sutra, which for me is something that encompasses and really embodies a lot of the interaction between our *asana* practice and our life: "*Sthira sukham asanam.*" That's translated as: "That which is stable, that which is joyful, is *asana*." Our *asana* should bring us joy, and should bring us stability. On a physical level, it means don't wobble or strain too much, but it also has a deeper meaning. In the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna devotes several stanzas to describing the *asana*. Now, Patanjali is speaking about a posture of the body, whereas Lord Krishna is speaking about a literal seat upon which we sit (that is also called an "*asana*"). Krishna talks about what it should be made of, how thick it should be, how hard or soft it should be, but after describing it, He says, "Once you are established in *asana*, you are ready to begin the practice of yoga." To me, that's very profound, because it clarifies in a way that nothing else I have read or heard that *asana* absolutely isn't the fullness of yoga, and yet, that it is a crucial part. Remember, the Bhagavad Gita is 700 stanzas, it's the Word of God, spoken in the middle of a war when time is precious, yet He has given emphasis to the *asana*. He has emphasized that once you are established in *asana*, then you're ready to begin the practice of yoga.

Coming back to the Yoga Sutras then, *sthiram* – that which is stable – *sukham* – that which is joyful – *asanam* – is *asana*. Yes, we're being given a

description of what *asana* should be, but it goes much further and deeper than that, because remember, yoga is the full union. These scriptures don't exist in a vacuum. Lord Krishna and Patanjali are both incarnations of Lord Vishnu, so when you look at it on a deep level, that which Patanjali is telling us is being given to us by the same Being as Lord Krishna, who is giving us this in the Gita. So, you can look from one to the other and realize: if *asana* is what we have first in order to be able to begin our practice of yoga, and *asana* is that which is stable and joyful and brings us stability and joy into our lives, then that's what *asana* is. Flipping back and forth from the Yoga Sutras into the Bhagavad Gita: once you are established in *asana* – so once you are established in stability and joy – you are now able to begin the practice of yoga.

Stability and joy is needed in order to begin the practice of yoga. Pujya Swamiji speaks so frequently about the importance of not complaining and not grumbling on a spiritual path. He always says, "Where there's grumbling, there's no God!" That's one of His very sweet quotations, and I think about that when I think about this, because we may call what we are doing yoga, but if we are not stable, grounded, and connected to a source of joy, a source of *sukh*, then it's not yoga.

This is where it's important for us, as we look at bringing yoga in our lives, to really understand it in its fullness. If yoga is just for my body, why would it have to be stable and joyful? "No pain, no gain," right? "Harder! Push!" – we here this at the gym all the time. But with *asana*, as a component of yoga, what we're looking to build is the Self, not the muscles! This is where the stability and the joy is so important. Exercise is very good for us, but it's not important to be stable or happy with exercise because it's not *asana*. *Asana* is a crucial part of yoga, and yoga is that union. Where there is instability, where there's the fluctuations of the mind which leads us to *dukh* or unhappiness (the opposite of *sukh*), there isn't union, and there isn't the possibility of union.

Who is a Yogi in today's world?

The actual Sanskrit word "yoga" literally means to unite, to connect.

Now, when most of us think about yoga or uniting in yoga, sadly we tend to think about things simplistically as just uniting our nose to our knees or our hands to the floor, and this is where things have gone awry. You get people who can twist themselves into all sorts of positions, and they

consider that yoga. It's good for the body, nothing wrong with that. The body is a temple, and we only have one. It's our vehicle for awakening and consciousness, so we have to take care of it. But, that's not the end.

The physical exercises are part of a path, not the end in and of itself. They're what take us to the experience of yoga. The actual union of yoga is the union of the Self to the Divine. That of course doesn't mean it's a specific form of God, it doesn't mean that until and unless you have a religious experience, it's also not yoga. Whether we worship God with name or without name, with form or without form, in a specific way or not in a specific way, it doesn't matter. That connection is to the Divine spirit, and that's the same spirit that runs through each of us, through all of creation, and through the Universe. It's the connection of this physical being – this very temporary, very fallible physical being – with that which is eternal, infinite, Supreme, and perfect.

It doesn't matter how fantastically you bend or how long you can stand on one leg, if you walk off the mat and you're denigrating yourself or others or any aspect of creation, if there's violence, if there's untruth in your life, it's not yoga.

The eight limbs of yoga that Patanjali gave us lead us all the way up to *samadhi*, that divine ecstasy, that bliss of true union, but we begin with the *yama*-s and *niyama*-s, which are like the Ten Commandments of a yogic life – how to live.

The first three of these are non-violence, truthfulness, and non-stealing. Let's look for a moment at just non-violence. Violence is violence in word, in deed, to yourself, and all of the negativity. It's all of the nonsense that goes in all of our brains saying, "You're worthless, you're stupid, can never do this, you're nothing, look how much better they are." It's violence to yourself. We have violence to the Earth through what we consume, how we consume, and how we live.

The next is truthfulness. Anytime you tell yourself that you are this body, that you are your bank account, your career, your relationships, the ten pounds you gained that you wished you hadn't gained, your good or bad haircut – anytime you tell yourself that you are that, that's lack of truthfulness. You've just violated the most fundamental principle of yoga, and no amount of bending or stretching or standing on your head undoes that.

Then there's non-stealing. Stealing doesn't just mean that while your back is turned, I take your necklace or jacket. How many of us steal people's time? Steal our own time? Gossiping, useless conversation, negativity, complaining – you're stealing someone's time. We steal resources from Mother Earth, from all of the humans and animals with whom we share it, whether it's the water, the land, the food, or the grain.

So, when we look at being a Yogi, our path has to include all limbs, including how we live. We're not beginning with *asana*, but we're also not ending with *asana*. We're understanding that until and unless we've had that experience of absolute union – that joy, that bliss, peace, and experience of being One with the Universe, with the Divine, with the spirit – our yoga is not “done.” That's where we're going. Through every aspect of the eight limbs, whether you make non-violence your yoga, *asana* your yoga, *pranayama* your yoga, or *swadhyaya* your yoga, you actually can get there as long as you're aware of where you're going.

When we're doing the *asana*, there are two things to recognize. One is that this *asana* is helping me take care of this temple of my body, helping me use this physical being, this vehicle for awakening and consciousness that I've been given. The other recognition is that through this body, as a medium, I actually can experience a full, yogic union. There's no rule that says it has to happen in lotus pose and it can't happen in triangle pose, or it has to happen with your eyes closed and it can't happen with your eyes open. It's all about what's happening inside. If you make yourself aware of both of those, then not only does the body become vibrant, healthy, and flexible, but we actually take ourselves to yoga.

How do I become a good yoga teacher?

First, you become a yogi. These days everyone wants to teach before they've learned. Really! People actually ask, “Do I really have to go through the beginning course? Can't I just go straight into the teachers' training course? I just did a beginning weekend yoga course, can't I go straight to the teachers' training?” We've got an almost epidemic of people wanting to become teachers, without actually wanting to learn!

In order to become a yoga teacher, you have to first become a yogi. You have to be able to give people something more than what they would get by watching Youtube or reading a book, because otherwise, why bother? Let them just watch Youtube, let them just read a book. If all you've done

is read a book and watched Youtube and you're just giving that back, then you're not really teaching. You have to first make it your own.

This is true of whatever we're teaching. If we all look back in our lives, whether it's math or history or any other subject, the best teachers we've ever had are teachers who love their subject and who understand it so well that they can say, "OK, you don't get it this way, no problem, try it this way instead." It's so much one with them that they can change it and adapt it based on whoever is sitting in front of them. Yoga is the same.

To become a yoga teacher, first we become a yogi, and then we automatically can teach. Yes, there may be certain, specific courses you take on how to teach certain *asana*-s, how to work with people with certain physical problems, but that's a technician. It's important, it's good, and we should learn it before we certify ourselves or others. But, that which really touches people is that which is within you. So first become a yogi, and then you'll automatically be a teacher.

I know that going to yoga class is good for me, but I find that I resist. How can I be more inspired to get to class?

Whether it's yoga class, meditation, or so much in our lives that we really know we should be doing, somehow, we resist. If some ad came on the internet that said for fifteen minutes a day, you will have health, happiness, peace, and prosperity, we'd all rush to click, buy and download it as fast as we could! Fifteen minutes a day is nothing. But, when someone tells us that we should meditate fifteen minutes a day at least, we resist. Or, that we should do yoga a little bit at least every day, we resist. We have the time. We watch TV, we go on social media, hang out, go for tea or coffee – we do all of this stuff. We have the time. But, the problem is that on some warped level, we do not see how our own inner health, peace, stability, and joy are actually of more value than reading the newspaper, or posting an image of us looking like we're in peace and happiness on Facebook! We'll spend fifteen minutes figuring out what we should write with our post so that we look like we're really, really peaceful or really, really happy. We'll pose and take and re-take the picture so many times, thinking, "I don't look happy enough, I don't look peaceful enough."

We have the time, but what we haven't yet learned how to do is to really put our deep Self first. We put our shallow self first, we put our lowercase-self first – got to have nice clothes, got to get my hair done from the right

person, got to wear the right makeup, got to look the right way, got to get the right-sized waistline, got to wear the right size of clothes, got to have the right complexion. I'll do all of that for my lowercase-s self, for this physical body, but when it comes to my deeper Self, my capital-S Self, my True Self, why am I so unwilling to do what's needed?

This is a very, very crucial point that so many of us struggle with. I brushed my teeth, ate breakfast, but why don't I go to yoga, why don't I meditate? Part of the reason really, sadly, is that we've actually just been so indoctrinated for so many years to place our importance on the external world. If the advertisement said fifteen minutes a day to a slimmer waist, fifteen minutes a day to a clearer complexion – even sixty minutes a day – we'd still do it. We would find the sixty minutes a day, go to the gym, work out, go to the beauticians', put masks on our faces, go for facials. There's always time, but we've been so indoctrinated to believe that *that* is what's important to spend our time on. This becomes the problem in our life. We go after that, we buy all of the products, download everything, order everything, wear everything, get all of the face masks, get the creams, get the facials, get this, get that, but inside of us we're still feeling empty. We don't have that real sense of joy or peace, and that's what yoga brings us.

The word “yoga” means union, and it's the union of my self to the Divine; a union of that individual, lowercase-s self to the Divine Self, to the truth of who I am, to the light. Whether we choose *hatha* yoga (the physical yoga), *bhakti* yoga (the yoga of devotion), *gyaan* yoga (the yoga of wisdom, knowledge, and learning), or *karma* yoga (the yoga of service and action), it's all yoga and it will all bring us into awakening.

Yoga is not just the exercises. The exercises are wonderful, as this body is a temple and the medium to our awakening. If I were brain-dead and didn't have the ability to be conscious of myself, I wouldn't have the ability to awaken. It literally requires consciousness of consciousness, awareness of presence, which is why it's said that humans are the highest birth. We're certainly not the highest in so many ways. We tend to do things to others that no animal on earth would do to each other, yet we call them the “animals.” No animal harms another just for the fun of it; no animal harms another for no reason. They only harm when they feel threatened or need food. So, we may act worse than animals, but humans are said to be the highest because they're the only species that has the consciousness of itself, that has the ability to look at itself. If we cannot be conscious of the self, we cannot awaken. That's what yoga brings us.

We keep the body healthy because the body is the temple. If the Divine lives in our heart, then the body is the temple for it, or the church or the mosque or the gurdwara or the synagogue or whatever religious background you come from. The body is the place in which the Divine lives, and it's the medium for our awakening. Also, it's that which enables us to sit and meditate. If I'm super sick and I can't stop coughing for example, it's going to be very hard to sit and meditate. If every half second, I'm coughing, it's very hard – not impossible, but very hard. If my back really hurts and I cannot actually sit because it's paining me too much, it's hard to meditate. If I've got a really high fever that's ravaging my body, or diarrhea that's sending me to the toilet every five seconds, it's hard to meditate in those other four seconds in between. So, we take care of the body, we keep it healthy, strong, and flexible so that we can utilize it for our awakening and utilize it as a vessel and vehicle to serve others.

But, the yoga, the real union happens when we're connected inward. Whatever form of yoga you do, recognize it as the way that unites you with your True Self, that's uniting you with all of that you're looking for. Yoga is that which unites us with real joy and peace, because these come with Truth and that Divine connection. We should be practicing our yoga in the same way that we couldn't walk out of our house without brushing our teeth. When we don't recognize how disconnected we're living, we don't realize the need for something that connects us. But, once we start doing it, then it's even more than brushing your teeth! If you haven't deeply connected with your Self, it impacts every aspect of you – how you feel, how you think, how you breathe, how you move, how you walk. So just start. In the beginning, it may be some system like “no breakfast till yoga” or “no teeth-brushing till meditation.” Whatever you've got to do, just start like that and then slowly it will become its own habit. Then, you'll really see the beauty of it and really see the divinity of it.

Should we learn the more detailed aspects of yoga, like mudras?

The science of yoga, which includes *pranayama*, includes the *mudra*-s. All of these sciences are very powerful, but they're not all appropriate for every single moment, because they all have different impacts on us.

In the same way that you wouldn't do the same *pranayama* first thing in the morning that you would do before trying to go to sleep at night or when you had a fever, or you wouldn't do the same *asana*-s in all situations, you're not going to do the *mudra*-s all the time in the same way. In America, I

remember my yoga teacher would have a room full of a hundred students, out of whom fifty or sixty we're all doing one *asana* the same way, but then he had a huge portion of people doing different things because this one was pregnant, these ones were on their period, this one had high blood pressure, this one's depressed, this one's got jet lag, etc. The rule always was that we were supposed to come up before class and tell him if we were suffering from anything. So, two-thirds of us would be doing the same *asana*, and then at least one-third of the people if not more he would put into different variations of that *asana*, or different *asana*-s entirely which were more suited to their physical-emotional state.

In regard to the *mudra*-s, you really should take them as a science and as a healing modality. Anything that is wonderful for us is not necessarily wonderful in every single moment, in any capacity. Even water, which we need so much, which is the nectar of life, could be harmful if you drink too much in too short a time – it could throw off the whole balance of salts in the body. So, you don't want a situation where you take these *mudra*-s and throw all of them into every situation, but this is where your relationship with them grows. As your awareness of yourself gets more and more subtle, you're going to know which *mudra*-s impact you in what way. There's of course a science of these *mudra*-s and how they impact, but you're going to have a personal science: here's where I find this useful, here's the impact I find on that.

So, don't worry, you're not going to harm yourself, but there's a science and there's a sacredness to it that I would really encourage you to hold on to, and to understand the time, place, and amount of each of them in the same way that you would with anything that's both scientific and sacred.

Desires & Attachment to the Fruit of Our Actions

We are told not to feed our desires, so what do we do?

It's not the desires themselves that are the problem. Desires are wonderful. The desire to be on the banks of Ganga, to have an experience of inspiration, is what brings people to Rishikesh. The desire to experience spirituality and Divinity is what makes people come to Ganga Aarti at Parmarth instead of spending the evening in a bar or club or coffee shop. Desires are actually the energy that moves us. If we don't have any desire, why get out of bed in the morning? If there's no desire for anything at all, nobody would ever get out of bed.

So why do we get out of bed? We get out of bed because we have desires. It may simply be a desire for breakfast or to pet your dog or go to the gym. Most people get out of bed because they have the desire not to lose their jobs by missing work or to let the house become dirty by not cleaning it or to make sure their children get to school and have a packed lunch to take. Alternatively, those on the spiritual path may get up to meditate or do yoga because of our desire to advance on our spiritual path and experience deeper spiritual connection. The desires that propel us out of bed are of myriad varieties but they share one aspect in common: they are all desires. If we desired absolutely nothing, there would be no reason to get up.

On a spiritual path then, why do we say let go of your desires? The reason is not because act of desiring is wrong, or even because the desire itself is wrong. The reason that the sages, saints and *rishi-s*, and even Bhagawan Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita exhort us to be free of desires is because when we desire something to happen and it doesn't, we become very upset. For example, if you want a new pair of pants for your birthday, that desire is not a problem. What happens though is if you don't get the new pair of

pants, and you become frustrated, angry, and upset. Then, you complain to your loved ones: "But I told you I wanted a new pair of pants!" When we're young, the "I told you" tends to be toward our parents; as we get older, the "I told you" tends to be towards our loved ones, other members of our family, or sometimes even God. When we don't receive the object of our desire we feel dejected and depressed. That is the problem.

This is the issue with desires. When they don't get fulfilled, we lose ourselves. The outer situation becomes my inner condition. That's a recipe for disaster. The outer situation keeps going up and down: It's summer one day, winter the next day. It's warm one day, cold the next. The stock market is up one day, down another day. People are nice to us one day, mean to us the next day. We like the way we look in the mirror one day, not the next day.

When my attachment is to the fulfillment of my desires, then it's not in my hands, it's in your hands. I'm happy if you treat me well, I'm happy if you do what I want. If our children clean up their rooms, we're happy with them. If they don't clean up their rooms, we are angry. Our rational intention is that they should learn to be tidy, but what they actually learn is that mom and dad's emotional state is dependent on the location of their toys. If their toys are scattered on the floor of the living room, mom is angry; if their toys are on shelves in the closet, mom is happy. It's a lesson that goes very, very deep. We are teaching our children that one's emotional state depends upon what other people do.

This is where in the Bhagavad Gita Lord Krishna is so specific about relinquishing the fruits of our desires, the fruits of our actions. I may have a desire. Say I want to become CEO of a particular company, so I get up every day very early, go to work, and I work hard, honestly, and sincerely. Nonetheless a year goes by, two years go by, and I'm not getting the promotions I need. The desire is in my mind, but the fulfillment of that desire is in someone else's hands, the hands of my boss or my supervisor. When they don't do what I want, I'm depressed. This is why Lord Krishna says we must give up the attachment to the fruits of our actions.

When we talk about relinquishing desires, it doesn't mean, "Thou shalt lose your energy for life. Thou shalt become dull and listless. Thou shalt never want anything. Thou shalt relinquish thy creativity, initiative, and compassion." That's not what Lord Krishna is saying. What He is saying is that the only thing in your hands is your own actions and your own

response to the world around you. Do not hook your inner emotional state on someone else's actions. That's what we must relinquish.

Where do the desires come from?

Desires other than those for spiritual awakening and for experiencing the Truth of our own infinite, divine nature come from ignorance and illusion. Note that this doesn't mean they are bad or evil. It means simply that they stem from ignorance. The truth of our essence, our real Self, is whole, complete, and perfect. Pujya Swamiji always laughs at the advertisements on self-development programs, as though God somehow has done half a job and we need to finish it up! We are not half-baked. We are here as perfect creations of a perfect Creator. In nature, you would never look at a rose and say, "It is not a full rose." Sure, maybe it's not fully blossomed yet, or it might be cold or dark so that the petals are closed, but the moment the sun shines, it fully appears. It doesn't need a course, a certificate, or a degree to make it a rose. Our only problem is we live in ignorant identification with our physical body which is fallible, finite and transitory rather than identifying as the perfect, infinite, eternal consciousness which is who we really are.

That ignorant identification leads most people to always crave something more, regardless of how much they have, whether they are a sweeper on the street or a billionaire CEO. Most people always feel like there's just a little something more that they want.

That yearning stems from ignorance of the full, true self. Who we are is complete. Our essence, our spirit, our consciousness, our soul is complete and perfect, because we are not just created *by* the Divine, but *of* the Divine. All of God's perfection, completeness, and wholeness is manifest in all of the aspects of the Divine. There is nothing lacking in us.

In basic mathematics we learn that infinity divided by any number is still infinity. So, infinity divided by ten billion is still infinity. So if we have been created out of the infinite, we are infinite. This is what the *shloka* in the Upanishads teaches us: "*Purnamidah*," meaning "All is whole."

What happens, though, is that in order to walk on our journey in this Divine *lila* (drama of the Divine), we have been given a body. The soul takes birth in a body. The body has a lot of things associated with it - it experiences coldness and heat, hunger and fatigue, sexual energies, so many aspects that we identify with the body. We also have a mind, and that mind takes

the chemical and electrical behavior of the body and interprets it in ways that create cravings and neuroses.

I will give you an example. The body sends a signal to the brain saying, "I am hungry." This is a very simple need. Maybe your blood sugar is dropping, maybe the cells of the body are not able to perform their duties efficiently without glucose or lipids or protein. However, as this signal percolates through the channels in our brain, it gets translated in the emotional mind as: "Stupid, you're already overweight. You've got to get into that dress tomorrow. You ate too much for lunch and don't deserve to eat now. Starve yourself!" Or, perhaps our mind responds in the other direction and we begin dreaming of high carbohydrate, high fat foods: "I hope mom makes macaroni and cheese tonight. Maybe Then I'll have chocolate cake for dessert." We get lost in a food fantasy! One simple physical reaction – a stomach sending a signal to the brain letting it know it's empty, or the bloodstream needs glucose – has turned us into complete, neurotic, fantasizing, way-out-of-the-present-moment beings. That's what our mind does.

Our society gives the mind also a lot of fuel: "You need to look like this, you need to own that, you need to wear this." If you want to be as satisfied as the people in the commercial of Pizza Hut, you'd better have your dinner in Pizza Hut tonight. Even if you feel satisfied with life, all you need to do is open up a magazine and see an advertisement to suddenly have doubts and complexes about your appearance, what you own, what your life is like, and even about who you are.

That's all fuel for the games of the mind. Out of those games comes the desire, and this is what can lead us to misery. For example, you are sitting on an airplane reading a magazine and you see an advertisement of a beautiful woman walking her child to school in their bucolic suburb of tree-lined streets. Her beautiful husband is standing on the porch of the house waving to them with a briefcase in his hand, as though he's on his way to work. Now, if you are single and wishing to get married, or if you are married and wishing you could have children, or even if you are married with children but wish your life were a bit more perfect, you see this advertisement and it triggers a feeling of yearning in you for that perfect moment. Now, if that advertisement is for the shoes the woman is wearing, suddenly you find that you want to buy those shoes. If it's an advertisement for the handbag on her shoulder, suddenly you want that handbag. You may not consciously realize clearly the link between

your own insecurity or dissatisfaction and this ad but immediately you are overcome with an urge for new shoes or a new purse.

Now, the damaging drama of desire begins to work in your subconscious mind. That which is fueling the desire is not satisfied with the new shoes, because it was never actually about the shoes. That which is fueling the desire is the conditioned beliefs we hold that say we are not enough, what we have is not enough, what we do is not enough, what we look like isn't enough, our lives are not enough. So, these desires are actually just means to an end to feel better about ourselves, to finally feel enough.

Our minds create the illusion that if we just eat certain yummy foods, wear new clothes, own new possessions, live in a certain area of town, go for a certain holiday, get the right job, go to the right party, then we will be happy. Hence we live in a constant state of desire for things big and small. Something is constantly fueling our desires. Yet, the real desire – the desire behind the desire – is simple the desire to feel whole and complete, the desire to finally feel enough.

That is why we say it is ignorance that fuels desire: ignorance that you are this body, ignorance that you are this mind, ignorance that you are anything other than whole, complete, and perfect.

When we fulfill our desires, when we finally achieve the object of desire, whether it's a chocolate ice cream or a new job or a pay raise or a new mobile phone, we might feel better, temporarily. Ignorantly we then associate "feeling better" with what we've just done – ate ice cream or bought a new phone, etc.

However, this is a very subtle but very insidious mistake. Satisfying a desire is not what makes us feel better. It is not in receiving the object of our desire that we actually feel so good. What makes us feel so good when we finally get what we've wanted is that temporarily we are no longer desiring it. It is the temporary absence of desire that makes us feel so good, not the actual desire we've just fulfilled. It is the absence of a desire that makes us feel better, not the object of it. This is a crucial life lesson. , Otherwise we think, "Well, that made me feel so much better last time, so I should do it again," without realizing that it wasn't that object. It was that temporarily you were free from desire.

How do we get out of being controlled by our desires?

Whatever spiritual practice you have, get in touch with that within yourself that is whole and complete, connect to the fullness and wholeness of your own being. When we are already full we become free from chasing desires and can realize the state of desirelessness.

Typically what we desire is what we have been conditioned to desire. Desires tend to be very cultural. Even if you take something as simple as what we look like, those are desires conditioned by culture. For example, in some cultures, being very skinny is considered beautiful. I remember when I went back to America for the first time after being in India for a while, I saw billboards on the streets with advertisements for jeans or clothes. I looked at them and thought that if one couldn't read the words, one would think they were billboards to raise money for Oxfam or UNICEF, because the models looked so sick and emaciated! That is what is considered beautiful in America, a frame so thin that frequently models stop menstruating due to lack of sufficient body fat. Yet, India, up until very recently, was a culture focused on being a bit plump. In fact, in Hindi the phrase "to lose weight" is actually literally translated as "to become weak." On the other hand "healthy" frequently means chubby or plump. "She's very healthy," could easily mean "She's quite fat." Both outlooks are conditioned by their culture, but plump girls and women in America starve themselves to lose weight and skinny girls in India yearn to gain weight. Neither group feels good about themselves.

Ultimately, foundationally, our core desire is to experience the truth of the Self, which is boundless, perfect, complete and whole. When we experience that, the sense of fulfillment actually stays with us, because it comes from within.

What about our desires for sex, alcohol, drugs, etc.?

We're not born with a desire for drugs and alcohol. We're born with a desire for joy, connection, and peace. The drugs and alcohol, the shopping, the binge-eating, come when we're not fulfilling that. When we're not feeling joy, peace, and deep connection in our life, that's when we turn to alcohol and drugs, or shopping, or over-eating, or indiscriminate sex, or whatever our coping mechanism may be. There's no inherent or innate or evolutionarily advantageous desire for drugs and alcohol, over-eating, indiscriminate sex, or shopping for things we don't need. These are not core desires. They're not even what we would call positive or functional desires. They're actually simply desires to numb my awareness of the

present moment. We turn to drugs and alcohol to push away our present moment, push away what we're feeling, push away what we're going through, push away what we're experiencing.

So, if you have a burning desire for drugs or alcohol or seven chocolate cakes or to "shop till I drop," don't fix yourself on the goal of becoming desireless. In those moments, those desires are actually a very important message. Don't just push those things away, but understand what is going on, what are you looking to push away, what sorrow are you looking to drown, what emptiness are you looking to fill, what moment are you looking to get out of? They are great, great keys to our own introspection. So, when you have strong desires for things that you know are not good for you and you know internally are not a path to getting love, joy, and connection, it's a great opportunity to introspect.

Nobody who has ever been drunk or used drugs really thinks that they're going to find deep joy through that. You only have to do it once before you wake up the next morning and think, "Oh my God, what did I do?" We do it again only because we are pulled by the temporary break it gives us from our moment.

These are the two types of desires. One type is for that which catalyzes something in our lives. Desires for a new job, a pay raise, a promotion, a spouse, a nicer house, a fun new technological gizmo. These are generally fine to have as long as you don't attach your peace, joy, and happiness unto whether they actually get fulfilled. Have the desire with an awareness that you don't have any control over the results. You must still plan, of course. You must still use your initiative and creativity. But if it doesn't happen, you don't end up so miserable that your desire wasn't fulfilled. This is how to live with that type of desires.

The second type is desire not for a specific object per se, but rather desire to simply escape your present reality. Then, you try to change whatever it is that you need to escape. Rather than looking for drugs or alcohol to get out of the moment, how can we turn the moment into something that we can live with, that we can learn and grow from? Otherwise, you spend your whole life just drinking your way out of moments, eating and smoking your way out of moments, shopping your way out of moments. And that's not what we were put here on Earth for.

Why do we have regrets?

We have regrets because human nature is that we are never satisfied. We tend not to have regrets when actions don't cause a loss for us. For example, we regret that we didn't work hard on a project, and therefore didn't get the promotion. We regret that we didn't put in extra time or energy into a plan or idea that could have become successful, and now we think, "Oh my God, I could have become a billionaire by now!" We regret that we didn't spend time with our loved ones only after they grow up and move away or after they die. We only regret things that have caused us some pain or loss in the present moment.

However, we rarely regret the wrong things we did that propelled us forward.

Those we rationalize as means that justify the ends. So for example, say you didn't put in enough time on a project but somebody else did, and you claimed their work as your own, got the promotion, and now you're a billionaire. In all likelihood you won't regret that.

The regret comes because we are never satisfied, so we regret decisions that we think, retrospectively, would have brought us greater happiness in the present moment. We regret choices we made that we blame for our present dissatisfaction. However, the regret that should come tragically doesn't. Very few of us actually stop and wonder, "Whose head did I smash into the ground to get ahead? At whose cost have I become so successful?" We rarely ask ourselves: "Who have I pushed out of the way to get ahead? Who have I hurt?"

We tend to rationalize and justify those decisions which benefitted us and regret those that didn't. What would really benefit us is to realize: "Oh God, I haven't been able to cultivate as much compassion as I would have liked. I haven't been able to cultivate enough spirituality. I haven't served as enough of a tool in God's hands. I haven't loved enough, served enough, given enough." Those are the regrets we should have. The more we can be satisfied with what we have on the material level and dissatisfied with where we are on the level of compassion, giving and generosity, love and patience, – the better off we'll be as then we will keep working on opening our hearts and expanding our consciousness.

How can you remember in day-to-day life to not get attached to the fruit of your actions?

In the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna tells us that we must stand up and do

our duty, sincerely, fully, to the very best of our ability but we must not be attached to the fruit of our labor. This is a deep and difficult spiritual injunction. In my life, it's been a constant lesson to be able to continually remember this. It's not easy at all, but simply the intention to remember it, the intention to serve for the sake of being of service, for the sake of fulfilling your duty rather than being hooked into the outcome is a fantastic spiritual practice. Even before we are perfect at it, we benefit greatly as it leads to a much deeper satisfaction with every minute of life. No longer are we dependent upon an outcome, but rather we are dependent upon our own sincerity in performing the task, and fortunately our own sincerity is in our hands while the outcome is not. .

I'll tell you a personal story from back when I lived in America. When I lived in Palo Alto, we had a backyard where I grew a few potted herbs – basil, mint and a few others. When we moved to San Francisco, we had a window sill garden instead. They were holes in the outside of the kitchen window that pots could be put in and one could grow flowers or, in my case, cooking herbs. I planted seeds for basil and mint and other herbs, but they wouldn't grow. I kept getting new seeds and nicer seeds and replanting them, but they nothing would grow, not even one pot. I started to feel really badly about myself. I started thinking, what kind of a useless person am I? I can't even grow a pot of mint! I can't even grow a pot of basil! I'm useless!

One day I came home early from my PhD program, looked out the kitchen window, and I saw that the cat we had adopted was playing in the pots throwing the dirt and the seeds out all over the place! Of course nothing would grow. The cat tossed the seeds onto the pavement down below.

Even when we are attached to what happens, literally to the fruits or “leaves” in this case of our labor, we have no control over it. I did everything – got the best organic seeds, planted them in the right temperature, had the right amount of sun and shade, watered them properly, did everything, but I could not control our cat from jumping into the pots while I was away at school.

It's not easy. Obviously, when you put time and energy and effort into something, it's very difficult not to be attached to how it comes out. But it's very much like meditation – you lose the awareness of the mind, and then you bring it back, then you lose it, then you bring it back.

Additionally, when our minds are focused on the fruit, the results of our actions, rather than on performing the action itself, we lose the ability to be in the flow of the universe and to hear the voice, the signal of the universe telling us how to perform the action better, more successfully. The universe could be screaming at us, "No, do it this way, not that way," but if our attention is stuck with the fruits of our action, we won't hear that voice. So we not only lose the spiritual benefit of being present, being mindful, being aware, being in the flow, but we also miss the very practical benefit of being in tune with the wisdom of the universe which guides us in our actions if we stay open to it. There is an intelligence in the universe but we have to be open to hear it. Being stuck with the outcome, the future, keeps us from benefitting from the intelligence in the universe which only speaks to us in the present moment.

When we are attached to a certain action bearing certain fruit, then we are focused not on our action but on the fruit, which means we're not in the present moment with the action. That means that we're not going to be effective and efficient because we are not present with what is needed in the moment. The only way to have anything bear fruit is to just be a tool, a vessel, and allow the Universe to flow through you. But if we're not here with the action, if we're already there with the potential end result, we don't know what the Universe needs in this moment.

So being present with the action itself without latching onto the future fruit is a constant practice, but it makes life meditation, because the moment we find that we've drifted elsewhere, we bring ourselves back.

Dharma

If you don't know your purpose and you feel empty, how do you find the right or correct path for your life?

We open ourselves to the light. If we're in a room sitting in the dark, and you turn off all the lights and I say, "Where's my way out, where's the door?" I could sit there all night driving myself crazy trying to find it. Now, it's just one room, I could probably eventually find the door, but when the room is our world and when we don't know it very well and it's very big, and there's a lot of different ways to go, when we turn on the light, it shows us the path. We don't need to sit in the dark and wonder where we are going, where is the door, and where is our my path? All we have to do is let in the light, because the minute that light comes, we can see.

That light is there already. Pujya Swamiji so frequently gives us the example of the Sun that's shining but our curtains being drawn. We pray to the Sun and we do Sun salutations and we chant Sun prayers, but the Sun is there, it's just that our curtains are drawn. So, we can spend our lives sitting in the dark or fumbling to find the door, or instead of that, we can let in the light. The minute the light is there, we can see the doors, we can see where they lead, and we can see who we are, and then we automatically know where to go.

What's the difference between karma and dharma?

They're actually very interlinked concepts. It's like saying what's the difference between your breath and your blood? Well, they may be composed of different things, and yet the truth is that they really work very interlinked. They work together to keep us alive. You can't pull

breath away from blood and expect blood to be able to keep you alive, or pull blood away from breath and expect breath to keep you alive. There's an interlinking-ness. The same is true with karma and *dharma*.

In brief, *karma* is action. *Karma* yoga for example is the yoga of action; it is the path of attaining Divine union through action. This is in comparison to *bhakti* yoga, which is the path of attaining that state of union through devotion, or *gyaan* yoga, which attains through study and knowledge. *Karma* itself is both the action and also the effects of that action. So, it's sort of the means and the end. I engage in *karma*, and I receive *karma* from the *karma* in which I've engaged. That which I do is *karma* – it's an act – and the repercussions of what I've done also are my *karma*. I plant an apple seed, that is *karma* as it's an action, and when I eventually get apples, those are also *karma*. The literal and metaphoric fruits of my *karma* are the apples.

Dharma doesn't actually have a very good, simple translation in English. *Dharma* is a very complex concept. It's translated frequently as “the right way” or “the right path,” but it's much deeper than that. We talk about things like the *dharma* of water is to make wet, or the *dharma* of fire is to burn. That is the right way – fire that doesn't burn isn't very effective fire, water that doesn't wet you isn't very effective water – and yet, there's an element to it that's more than just a path or a way. It really implies an inherent aspect of who we are that's more than just what we do. As burn-ness is to fire, as wetness is to water, so is our *dharma* to us. So, your *dharma* is really staying true to what your nature is and fulfilling that.

If fire thought that it was water and tried to wet you, it wouldn't be able to do that, but it also wouldn't be doing its job as fire because it would be so busy trying to be water. This is where *dharma* includes both who we are and what we do.

There are two levels of *dharma*. We have our universal *dharma*, which says that the right way is honesty, integrity, righteousness, compassion, non-violence, and generosity, all of the “good things.” These are traits that every religion of every culture and situation say is the right way. There's very few situations where you would say integrity is not the right way.

But then, there's also individual *dharma*. Fire versus water. A rose versus a jasmine. A warrior versus a painter. They're different. On the universal *dharma* level, both of them should be honest, have integrity, and have compassion. Both of them should be good, dharmic people and both of

them should live with the awareness of who they are, and not try to be the other person. That is what would lead both to misery and ineffectiveness. So many of us grow up wanting to be someone else, or to be something else. We have idols. I remember when I was growing up I wanted to be Jane Goodall. If you had said to me, "What do you want to be when you grow up?", it wasn't so much a what, it was a who. I wanted to be Jane Goodall herself. Well, she's a wonderful woman, she's done amazing work, there's nothing wrong with Jane Goodall. In fact, she's a hero. And yet, it wasn't my path. So many of us grow up with these idols, with these visions of who we're supposed to be and what we're supposed to be, whether it's a fireman, a policeman, a rock star, a doctor, or an engineer. The idea comes to us from all sort of different places, like our friend circle, our society, magazines – in my case, the National Geographics I had pasted on my walls. Sometimes it comes through our families or our culture, which say that it's better to be a doctor than a painter and it's better to be an engineer than a violinist.

What's important when we talk about *dharma* is to recognize exactly what Lord Krishna told Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita, which is probably the richest teaching on *karma* and *dharma* that we have. Arjuna wanted to leave everything and go away, and Arjuna gave very good arguments: killing is wrong in general, and killing is wrong in this case because they are family, it's only a piece of land after all, forget it, who cares? Lord Krishna then doesn't say killing is right, he doesn't say to Arjuna that his family and his Gurus were worthless and they deserved to die. What he said was, "You have one job, and one job only in this life, and that is to fulfill your *dharma*. You are a warrior. You are not a monk. You are not a renunciant. You are not one who belongs in a cave in the jungles. You are a warrior, and the *dharma* of a warrior is to protect the society." Now of course, that was not a global teaching, that was a specific teaching addressed to Arjuna on the battlefield. Many people misunderstand it and question whether Lord Krishna was advocating violence, but it wasn't about that. It wasn't teaching, "Thou shalt be violent, thou shalt kill thy family members, thou shalt kill thy Gurus, thou shalt wage war over land." It was a teaching about one thing and one thing only – "Thou shalt understand and fulfill your *dharma*." Arjuna's *dharma* was to be a warrior, and that's why it was crucial for him to fulfill it.

Dharma is the "why," and *karma* is the "what" – the what I'm doing. The actions I'm performing are based on my *dharma*. The repercussions I will get from that *karma* again are based on my *dharma*. For example, taking a

knife and stabbing it into someone's chest is a bad act. It will give us bad *karma*. But, that's only true if you're a murderer, and it's not true if you're a surgeon! That's what surgeons do. They take scalpels and knives, and they stab them into people's chests in order to save their lives. Sure, it doesn't always work, people die on the operating table or post-op. In both cases the end result could be death, but the surgeon is fulfilling his *dharma* as a surgeon, and if he fulfilled it with integrity and sincerity, he's not going to get bad *karma* for the fact that this person ended up dying post-op. But the murderer who stabs somebody to rob them or because they're high on drugs or whatever the reason is absolutely going to get the karmic fruit.

So, the *dharma* is the "why" and the "who," and the *karma* is the "what" and also the "what then."

There's a beautiful teaching that Pujya Swamiji taught me very soon after I first came here that said, "Engage yourself in *karma*, under the shade of *dharma*, with an awareness of Brahma." This was the mantra before I was given a mantra. "Engage yourself in *karma*" – yes, we act. As Krishna says in the Gita, we can't help but act. I could sit on my hands and squeeze my eyes shut, but I'd still be acting. Acts of omission are just as much acts of commission. Failing to act is just as much an act as acting. If there are people suffering and there are things that need to be done and I have the ability to do them but I am not doing them, that is an act. It's just an act of omission rather than an act of commission, and I'm still going to get that *karma* from the act of omission.

So, we engage in *karma*, we engage in action "under the shade of *dharma*", both the universal *dharma* as well as this individual *dharma*. My duty may not always be pleasant. Arjuna really would much rather have run off to the jungle and meditated rather than have to take up his bow and arrow. He was prepared to pretty much do anything other than take up his bow and arrow. But, that was his *dharma*, and as a warrior he needed to do that. Lord Krishna tells him, "To die in the fulfillment of your *dharma* is far better than to live happily in not fulfilling your *dharma*."

Under this shade of *dharma*, I am fulfilling my duty "with the awareness of Brahma" – with the awareness of God. It doesn't matter whether we say Brahma or Christ or any other way we envision the Divine, it's just the awareness of being a tool in God's hands. God is actually doing it all; I'm not the doer, but I've been blessed to be chosen to be a tool in God's hands. I've been blessed to be used. We must allow ourselves to be used and not

to judge how and why we're being used, or be jealous of other people's *dharma*-s, but just to be grateful that we're getting used. God can see if we're more like a hammer or a paintbrush or a spoon, and can put us each to proper use so we're not trying to hammer in nails with spoons or paint pictures with hammers. God has properly chosen each of us for the task that we are best able to fulfill.

Is there a universal dharma of our time?

There's absolutely a universal *dharma* for humanity right now, and each of us has a separate individual *dharma* in that as well. If we said our universal *dharma* right now was to grow a garden, one of us would go out and buy the seeds, the other would get the soil ready, somebody would open the packs of seeds and start planting them, someone else would water. So even though there's one umbrella universal *dharma* which is to garden, nonetheless each of us has to play a different part. It's the same way in the universe today.

If I had to say personally what I believed today's universal *dharma* is, I would say that it is to break the walls of separation. If we look at every single thing that is afflicting us today, from war to terrorism to poverty to crime to environmental destruction, every single bit of that is rooted in separation. It's rooted in me feeling like I'm this physical being, which means that I've got cravings of the flesh – I want to eat certain things, drink certain things, if I were an aggressive violent person I might want to rape certain people to take it to another extent - that I act upon. I am this flesh, so I'm going to eat what it wants, drink what it wants, go out literally and grab and take whatever it wants, whenever it wants it, because I've got to have it. So, I believe I'm separate from the Universe and that I am this physical being that leads to all of those actions.

It also leads us to the emotions that begin the violence. I see something, and it makes me angry. Out of my anger, I respond with violence. I see something, and I covet it. Out of coveting, I steal it. All of these are emotions and then actions that begin from an experience first of just being this body. I am this separate individual over here and I don't have access to all of the wonderful things that you have over there, so if I see that you have a wonderful thing, I'm going to want it for myself. If you do something that makes me angry, I'm going to respond with violence.

But on a deeper level, that feeling of separation keeps us from recognizing

that we're all one. We're rooted these days in separation, on the basis of the color of our skin, our religion, our caste, our gender, our countries, and so many other factors. I'm so many different ways different. So, if I had to say what the one path of a universal *dharma* that we all need to be engaged in today is, it would be to break the borders of separation and to recognize our oneness. We must recognize our oneness with people who are starving and make choices for that, our oneness with people who are suffering and make choices for that, our oneness with people of different colors, cultures, religions, races, and countries so that we're not fighting over who's right and who's wrong.

Again, each of us is going to play our own role, but if one thing could ease and help the situation we're in today, one thing that is most crucially needed, it would be a recognition that we're not separate, a recognition that we're linked. Science is telling us this now. Quantum physics is showing us how when the monarch butterfly goes extinct – a species of butterfly most people haven't even heard of in most of the world – it's going to affect the rest of the world. Certain types of bees are going extinct, and it's going to affect the rest of the world. We're *that* interlinked. Forget just humans of different colors, or humans who subscribe to different religions. We're so interlinked that the extinction of a bee puts the human race at risk! The extinction of a specific type of butterfly puts the human race at risk! If we could open ourselves to that oneness and that connection, I think we'd find this world a much more positive place to be in, and we would certainly have a much more positive hope for our future.

Karma

What is the difference between karma, destiny, and free will, and what is it that determines things? Is it our karma that determines it? Is it our pre-written destiny? If so, then what role does freewill play?

This is a concept that comes up a lot because this is the stuff our day-to-day life is made of. Something's not going right, and people question if it's their fault, if it's some fault in their stars, if it's the fault of something they did three lifetimes ago that they don't even remember, let alone have the ability to correct in any way. Or, if things are going wrong because somewhere there's a book and it's written that this is going to go wrong, regardless of what they did three lifetimes ago, regardless of anything they've done in this life.

This is a really complex topic. Karma and destiny is something you could literally do a year-long course on!

In a nutshell, where we are right now in this moment is because it is our destiny to be here. The sum of all of our past karmas – this life, past lives – have brought us here. You cannot in this moment be in Paris instead, you cannot be in Australia instead, you cannot have eaten something different for lunch, you cannot be married to a different person. Where you are in this moment is your destiny. It's not changeable, not by a snap of the fingers, not by a mantra, not by the waving of a wand. That's what's written. Through all of what we've done in the past, all of our astrological signs, we are meant to be here.

The reason that you know that is *because you're here*. The laws that govern the Universe are laws of perfection. You never see cucumbers coming off of apple trees. As long as it's in Nature's hands, in God's hands, the laws

govern it perfectly. So we're here because that's our destiny. That's the sum of our karma.

But, what we do here, both literally in the room you're currently sitting in as well as in a broader sense with our families, our bodies, our jobs, and our lives as they are, is what's creating our destiny of tomorrow, next week, or next year.

This is where free will comes in. Free will cannot rewind history. You're here because you're meant to be here, in the body that you're in, in the relationships that you're in, with the amount in your bank account that is currently in your bank account, and with any sort of struggles that you may be having. All of that is your destiny in this moment. But what you want next week to look like, or next month or next year, is where free will comes in, because right here right now you have free will. You can keep reading and absorb, or you can make shopping lists in your brain, or you could get up and leave. You've got absolute freedom. You have absolute freedom in making whatever choice you want to make, and that's what creates those actions, the karma, which give us the fruit which we will have tomorrow, next week, next month, or next year.

This is why, along with free will, we've also been given intelligence, compassion, creativity, and all of the things that help us make the right decisions. So for example, let's say that in this moment, you have an apple tree that gives you apples but you are allergic. You feel miserable because you always wanted an orange tree instead, you think oranges are so much better than apples, and you question why everybody else has juicy oranges and you've just got these hard apples that you can't even eat. You can't snap your fingers and turn your apple tree into an orange tree. You can't wave a magic wand. You can't do the orange *asana* or the orange prayer or the orange mantra and turn the apple tree into the orange tree. And yet, if what you really want is oranges, you can plant some orange seeds, so that next year in addition to having an apple tree, you've got an orange tree.

The truth though is that what our *sadhana*, spiritual practice, and prayers actually are for is not about, "Oh God, show me how to find orange seeds, show me how to plant the thing that I want," but rather, "Oh God, let me learn to see this apple tree as the blessing that it is, let me see the sweetness of the apples." It's not about getting something else because apples make me break out in hives, but rather, "Oh God, free me from this allergy, and until you have freed me, give me the ability, the compassion, and the

wisdom to gather together all of the local school children and give them baskets to pick the apples. Until and unless I can enjoy them, at least let me use what I have for others.” Then tomorrow my destiny will be hordes of school children flooding my property, singing and dancing and loving me and picking apples.

Along with that, if what I really want are oranges, this is where my intelligence comes in and the guidance from the Guru comes in, to find the orange seeds.

The example that we always give on this is the cow. Say your destiny in this moment is to have a cow. Wherever you are, you've got a cow and you can't change it to a different animal instead. Well, the cow gives us milk, and if we drink the milk and we use it to make *ghee* and *paneer* and yogurt, we will be healthy. The cow also gives manure, and if we spread the manure in our fields, it's a fantastic organic fertilizer and we'll have great crops. But if instead I eat the manure and I spill the milk on the ground, I'm going to be sick and my crops will die. But that's not because God deemed it so, or my destiny was to be sick. My destiny was the cow. By utilizing my free will with the cow, by not using my intelligence, by not seeking guidance, by not having the right vision and the right understanding to know what's to drink and what's for the field, by not being able to discriminate between the white stuff and the brown stuff, I'm sick and my crops have died. It's not about blaming God or the universe for deeming you to be sick and to have failing crops. Rather, it's questioning what *we* have done.

A really important last part about this is that it doesn't mean we should feel guilty. We tend to go from one end of the spectrum of “It's all God's fault, it's the universe's fault, it's my crummy destiny” to “It's all my fault, I've got everything wrong, I'm the problem.” None of us are intending to get sick or to kill all of our crops. We only know that there's this white stuff, there's this brown stuff, there's this yellow stuff in our life, and we don't know what to do. This is where *sadhana*, guidance, our mentors and our Gurus come in. We have to look around at the people we know who are healthy and have great crops and ask them, “What do you do with your white stuff? What do you do with the brown stuff?”

Karma, destiny, and free will are much more complex than that, but in a nutshell this is how they all interact. Right now you're here because it's your destiny, but what you do in this moment and in every moment after

this moment is creating your tomorrow, your next week, your next month, and your next year. That's the freedom we have, and it's the power we have. It begins with the power of our thoughts, which have the power not just to create something different next year but to create something different right now and right here. Science is actually now showing us what our *rishi*-s and sages have said for thousands of years – that our thoughts are literally creating the world. Not just my world, but my thoughts are impacting your world and the entire world. We have that incredible power. There is now research that shows that our thoughts have the power to change the rate at which trees grow, flowers blossom, and immune system cells divide. There is now research that shows that our thoughts have the power to impact warring peoples and nations thousands of miles away from us. Our thoughts have the power to impact the molecules of water and how they are bound together in a glass hundreds of miles away. *That's* the power of thought. When it's put with intention, concentration, and meditation, it literally is the best tool we have.

Don't spend too much time worrying about what is written in your stars or written in your destiny. Ask yourself right here, right now, "How can I use the power of my thought and intention to create the reality that I want to live in?" That's the power we have.

What does it mean to burn karma?

People speak frequently, kind of colloquially, about burning karma, but we don't actually burn our karma in terms of any sort of fire. The reason why the word gets used colloquially is because fire purifies. When we do the sacred *yagna* fire that we perform each evening on the banks of Ganga before the *aarti*, it's a purifying ritual. We offer into the *yagna*, into the fire, all of that within us which needs to be purified. Fire purifies.

Perhaps the word is also used because sometimes it literally burns! Getting through our karma is not always fun and is not always something that feels good!

When we talk about karma and purifying karma, really what the goal is with karma is to *finish* it. That's ultimately the goal. Let's move from the concept of "burning" karma to the concept of finishing karma.

The way that karma gets finished in the big scale is when we recognize that we are not the doer. See, each individual karma gets finished quickly. An example of short-term karma is: I feel thirsty, I drink water, my thirst

is over. That's a short-term karma. An example of a slightly longer-term karma is: I plant a seed in the ground, a few months or years later that seed sprouts, and I have a tree. More long-term karma includes things like I harm someone, I cheat someone, or I betray someone.

In the short-term karma, I immediately get the negative consequence. In the longer-term karma, that negativity festers within me, creating pain in my life. It's not that I cheat you, so tomorrow or five years from now someone is going to cheat me. It's not like a ping-pong that just goes back and forth. If I cheat you and bring pain to you, karma says I'm going to experience pain. It's not tit-for-tat, it's not that I hit you on the left shoulder so tomorrow someone is going to hit me on the left shoulder. It's that I will experience the pain that I have brought into your life. Maybe I experience it by how badly I feel about what I did to you. Maybe I experience it through someone else hurting me in a similar or different way. But, I'm going to experience that pain.

Now, all of those karmas burn out quickly, whether it's short-term or long-term. The minute that it happens, it's over. Whether it's my thirst, whether it's the seed, whether it's the pain. But then what happens is we keep creating new karmas. I'm thirsty so I drink the water, and that's finished. Five minutes from now, I'm hungry so I eat something. A little bit later I want something. A little bit later, I hit someone. A little bit later, I plant a seed. A little bit later, I cheat someone. A little bit later, I lie about something. All of these are creating new karmas, or as Pujya Swamiji says, creating new files, opening new files.

Now here's an important point to remember about karma: ultimately, the goal is to be free of *any* karma. Most of us only think about wanting to be free of "bad" karma. Most of us think, "OK, how can I get good karma? I'll do something good, then I'll get good karma in exchange." Good karma feels better than bad karma for sure, it's much more enjoyable than bad karma, but on a spiritual level, the goal is actually to be free of *all* karma. Good karma is just like a golden cage, or a cage that's made of cookies. OK, so it's golden or it's sweet, but it's still a cage. The point is to be free, not to see how beautiful or expensive or good-feeling of a cage you can be in. A silk cage may feel good every time I rub up against it, but it's still a cage. So yes, we would like to move from having bad karma which brings pain to us, but the goal is to not have karma at all. So how do we do that?

If everything we do has a reaction – I do something nice, I get good karma,

I do something bad, I get bad karma – that’s very simple. But how do I become free of karma? Not one karma, not five karmas, not just my bad karma, but how do I burn the cycle of karma? In the Indian tradition, we are taught that the reason we come back, life after life, birth after birth, form after form, is because we have karmic fruit that we are left to get. But, the philosophy is that ultimately we should break free of this cycle of having to come back. We are the Soul. The boundless, ceaseless infinite Soul, caged inside our minds.

I want to just mention here that Pujya Swamiji always stresses that we can find freedom here in the body. We can find that *moksha*, that liberation, that heaven, that *nirvana* or whatever word or concept you use here in the body. In India, people often think that they can only get *moksha* after they die. But Pujya Swamiji always reminds us, we can have it here in the body. It’s not the body that is the cage, it’s the *mind* that is the cage. This is a very important distinction. It’s not my arm or my leg that is the problem. It’s not my arm that decides to pick up a cup and throw it at someone and hurt them. The thought begins in my mind. If I don’t have a thought in my brain that says, “How dare that person! I don’t like them, I’m going to throw something at them,” my hand would never just pick up a glass and throw it. The problems actually are in the mind. It’s the mind that gets angry, experiences jealousy, and has desires, so it’s ready to do whatever it needs to get its desires fulfilled. It holds resentment and grudges, wants another person to suffer, and holds on to our identities that say, “This is who I am.” So it’s the mind that actually keeps us bound and chained, not the body.

So with the mind then, how do we really become free of the karma? Well, it is said that when I realize it’s not me who’s doing the actions and I realize that I’m just a tool in the Divine’s hands, then I don’t get stuck with the karmic fruits.

Our first thought it to think that maybe we should just not act. If every act is going to bear fruit and every action has a reaction, well then I just won’t act. But in the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna explains very clearly, with no room for doubt, that the answer to karma is not “don’t act.” You can sit here on your hands and close your eyes and mouth and put ear plugs in your ears, but that’s not going to prevent you from accruing karma for two reasons. One is that your mind is still on, and thoughts are where it all begins. The second is that not fulfilling your duty, not acting, is just as much action as acting. If we are sitting down and suddenly somebody

tragically falls down and is gasping for air and nobody does anything, that act of omission, that act of not-acting accrues just as much karma for us as acting would have. If I act and try to help, that's good karma. I've done something good. Whether I'm able to save that person's life or not is not in my hands, but simply by acting, by trying to help, by doing my best, by having sincerity, that's the right action. If I can do it knowing that I am not the actor, that I'm just the vessel for the Divine to act through, then not only has a good action been done but I haven't even accrued any binding karma because I've done it just as a vessel.

Sometimes when we do good things – usually, actually – we think that we are the actor. “Oh my god, did you see me? I saved that guy's life. I was so good, so quick, so efficient. I saved the guy's life.” Now, yes the action was good, the karma I get may be good, but it's still going to bind me. That ego is what binds us.

Not acting doesn't save us from the karma. If somebody falls and hurts themselves and I don't help them, that non-action is going to get me what we would call bad karma. I'm going to get the results of the fact that I didn't do what I could to help someone. If I make a whole bunch of money, and I don't use that money to help people and I just keep hoarding it, or I've got great skills – I'm very smart, I'm very artistic, I'm very creative, I'm very efficient, whatever my skill may be – but I don't use those skills to help others, it's like sitting down and watching somebody have a heart attack, or sitting down and watching somebody fall and suffer without doing anything. We're going to get the results of that non-action. So Lord Krishna clarifies that the only way to really be free of karma, of this binding chain of karma, is to remember that we're not the actor. We're just a vessel.

When I conclude speaking, the microphone is not going to stand up and take a bow or expect applause. It's not going to tell people, “Oh my God, I was so smart, did you hear what I said?” The microphone understands it's just a tool. We all understand that it would be ridiculous for the microphone to stand up and take a bow, because obviously I was the one speaking and the microphone was just a tool. But if you take it a step deeper, well, I'm also not the one speaking, I'm also just a tool. I'm being used the same way the microphone is being used, so it becomes equally absurd for me to stand up and take a bow, equally absurd for me to say, “Oh my God, that was so great, didn't you hear that?” It's not *me* any more than it's the microphone. As I'm using the microphone, the Universe, the Divine is using me. Spirit is using me.

In our lives, whatever we are able to do and whatever work is able to happen through us, we have to understand that we're not the doer, we're just the tool. When we can do that, then we don't get stuck with the karma of what we do.

If tomorrow I build a school and I'm convinced that *I'm* the builder – I'm the one who worked hard, I raised the money, I gave that money, I'm so generous, I'm such a philanthropist – well, building the school was a good thing to do and I'm going to get good karma for it, but I'm not going to be free. Instead, we should use our lives to say, "Oh God, there are children who don't have a school to go to, but I know you want them to blossom and to flourish. Can you use me in some way as a tool, however you think best, to bring a school for these children? Let me and my ability be a tool for that school which I know will help these children." You see the difference in those two ways? The first way binds me to that good karma and the second way frees me, because it's not me who has built it but the universe or God who has built it. I've just been blessed to be a vehicle for the building.

So that's the highest goal, and this is true in whatever we do. The highest manifestation of that is freedom. If I'm not free, all the good karma in the world isn't going to make me happy. I could rub myself against a silk cage or eat the chocolate out of the chocolate chip cookie cage I'm in, but if I'm in a cage, I'm stuck. So the goal and the question becomes: how can I be free? Not free of my duty or my actions, but free *through* my duty, free *through* my actions. That's how we really "burn" karma.

Meditation

What is the True Self and how do we realize it in our lives?

When you go to the scriptures, which is the highest source, and you say I want to learn about the Self, about what the Self is, what you will find are a lot of descriptions that go around an exact definition. They're honest about it. They say that what they're doing is going around the Truth. What they give, is words that give an idea, give an aspect, give a reflection, but the scriptures emphasize that in order to really know the Self, you have to go within and meditate to experience it for yourself. They even give some different practices. The experience of the Self is one that we can only have through experience, not through reading about it. This is why the scriptures, the great sages and saints have all, for thousands of years, pointed us inward. If you want to learn math or science, the experts will tell you all the equations, all the tenets, all the details. You just have to learn it. You don't need to rediscover it. But for knowledge of the self you cannot experience it through someone else's words any more than reading a menu can satiate your appetite or someone's description of water can quench your thirst.

So we are given descriptions around it: it cannot be cut by knives, nor dried by the wind, not burned by fire or wet by water. It is eternal. It was never born and never dies. It is infinite, complete, and perfect. It is the divine. These are aspects, attributes of it, but none of them is an actual definition that enables us to know, to truly experience in this moment, the truth of the Self. For that, we need to go within and discover it. That is why the scriptures and the sages point us toward meditation practices as that is the only way we can know.

The experience of the self is expansive, unbounded, unbordered. It is an

experience of love – not just love for an individual or several individuals but simply love; it is awareness, full, complete, awareness without judgment, for everything is perfect. Everything just is. It is stillness but a stillness that is alive, that is full, not a stillness that is the absence of movement. It is silence, but not a silence that is the absence of sound, a silence that is alive and full. It is truth, eternal, unchanging truth.

One of the ways in to who we really are is by realizing what we are not. So there is a meditation practice called *Neti Neti*, that is literally, “not this, not this, not this.” As we remove layers of identification – “I’m not the clothes on my body, I’m not my skin, I’m not my blood, I’m not my muscles or organs” – slowly we reach a place, a state in which the Self just emerges.

The reason the scriptures and sages give us these practices is because we can connect with what the Self is through realizing what the Self is not. For example, if you ask me, “What does a naked body look like?” Well, I could try to use words, I could verbally try to describe it to you. I could talk around what a naked body looks like. I’d talk about some tone of flesh, I’d talk about some hair, some openings, orifices, but that’s all talking around it. I’m not going to be able to give you a clear idea of what nakedness is by these descriptions. The best answer I could give you is to tell you is to go take off your clothes and look in a mirror. If you really want to know what a naked body looks like, the fastest way to do it, rather than me talking to you about it, is to say “Here’s a mirror, now go take off your clothes, and you’re going to have the answer immediately.” So this is what the practice of meditation is for.

What is meditation?

Meditation is a noun, not a verb. It is more who we are than just what we do seated on a cushion for a few minutes or hours each day. Meditation is knowing and living as the true self. It is not some very complex, esoteric skill that only experts can perform like feats of gymnastics or doing long division without paper. Meditation is actually that which gets us back in touch with who we really are, but without judgment or analysis. Meditation creates the stillness in the mind so that we’re able to actually live and experience the truth of who we are. Our problems are not outside, they’re inside. We have these minds, and minds run around and they repeat stories to us – stories that we’ve taken in from our culture, stories we’ve taken in from our life, stories that we’re too much this, not enough that, we are like this, not like that, we should be like this, not like that. It’s

that judging, commentating voice. We internalize that voice over our lives, and what most of us hear all day long is that voice on constant repeat. If you actually really start to listen to your thoughts, you'll notice that the vast majority of them are utterly useless and make little sense.

If you're a person who considers yourself intelligent and thoughtful, there's nothing quite as humbling as actually watching your thoughts. If you've never done that, you may assume, "Yes, I think very deeply and I'm very contemplative." But the truth is, most of us just aren't, most of the time. The mind just does its thing, running on indiscriminate autopilot most of the time. Then of course in the midst of that "monkey mind", the judge bellows loudly what is wrong with us and how we should be. That's what fills most of our minds most of the time.

Then there come in the thoughts about who others are, who they should be, what they're doing, what they should be doing, and all of the judgment, yearning, longing, wishing and aversion that fill our minds and our thoughts. It's not who we are, it's just what our thinking mind has been habituated to do and it now runs automatically on autopilot.

Meditation gives us the experience of what it would be like if this weren't going on all the time. So it's not a very complex skill, but the lack of complexity doesn't mean it's easy. Simple and easy are not synonymous. Meditation is simple, but it's not easy. It's not easy because of the games that the mind plays. Don't think that unless you've got lots of free time to learn the complex skill of meditation, you won't succeed. If you're able to just breathe it out as it comes – whatever "it" is that comes – and bring the awareness back to the breath, it will ground you back into the truth who you are.

A deeply powerful way to re-center ourselves, even in the midst of our daily busy lives is to bring the breath and awareness to the area just below the navel, about two inches below the belly-button. It's a very special energy center or *chakra*. It's considered in many cases, in many ways, as the core, as the source of the self, and it's a place from which many saints and sages (even from different religious traditions) meditate. So, resting there, connecting there in this energy center grounds us back into who we are. Otherwise, most of us tend to just flop around in our minds and consciousness. We react instead of act. Who we are is determined by what's happening around us. If somebody says something, we react. If somebody does something, we react. The awareness of who we are tends to exist

usually on this very superficial level, in simply how we are interacting with the world around me. So we are peaceful, elated, angry, frustrated, powerful, powerless, fulfilled, unfulfilled, all based solely on the situation around us and how we react to it.

Meditation brings us back into a place of real awareness – awareness without judgment, awareness without analysis, just open-eyed witnessing awareness of who we are and what’s there when we remove the non-self from our identification. Through meditation, you become able to peel back layer after layer.

There are so many different techniques of meditation, but I keep it really simple in satsang teachings because I don’t want anyone to think, “Oh wait, I didn’t understand all of that, I didn’t get that, now I’m never going to be able to do it.” Even if someone comes to satsang only for one evening, they should be able to get enough to go home with, fully inspired and empowered. So, a simple technique is to just keep your awareness on your breath and keep bringing your awareness back when it wanders. This is actually enough. You can add in a mantra, if you find the mind wanders too much. You can even add in an open-eyed meditation if you find that the closed eyes causes the monkey in the mind to jump around too much. Watch a candle flame, look at an image of the Divine that evokes feelings of divinity in you. While you do that, just keep bringing the awareness back to the breath in the body. As you breathe, you’ll notice there are places that are tighter, places that are freer. Again we’re not analyzing, we’re not going into stories of how our body became tight or injured. It’s not psychotherapy. We’re simply noticing if something comes up, and then bringing our awareness back to the breath.

The body is a very fluid container for the breath. It grounds us in the body, and also connects us to a divine consciousness that’s not just outside, but that’s both outside of us and inside of us – that entire creation, that entire spirit or soul or divine universe. The breath roots us in this body, in this physical form and also connects us to our infinite, expansive true Self. Like a tree we can then grow – rooted into the Earth and rising into oneness with the universe.

Why must the mind be controlled?

You must realize we are not talking about controlling or subduing the mind with a whip. That’s not the goal. The mind simply needs to be

trained to work *for* us rather than *against* us. The mind is a beautiful tool, a beautiful organ, a beautiful muscle in many ways, and what it needs is to be understood and trained. I avoid words that imply a struggle or a fight, because ultimately it's all taking place within ourselves, and so we don't want one part trying to subdue or vanquish another part. . Ultimately, we're one whole being, so I try to avoid speaking about conquering or annihilating or forcibly controlling any parts of us by other parts. All parts of us need the same thing: compassion and love and to be seen.

So when we talk about controlling the mind, it's not about controlling it with a whip, or sticking it in a vice. The goal is to train it to be a great tool in our hands rather than the master of the show. For example, we may say that we don't want our minds to be impacted by the outside world. But, taking cues from the world around us is what helps to keep us alive. If you step off the curb to cross the street when suddenly, out of nowhere, a speeding car comes, if you've subdued your mind so completely that it's not bothered by any external stimuli, you'll just keep walking into that speeding car. If you've controlled it so completely that regardless of the horn, regardless of the sight, you walk straight into the speeding car, your life will not have a happy ending!

Really what we're looking to do is train it rather than stifle it or suppress it. Let it pick up cues from the external world, whether through smell, sight, or sound. The world is glorious – the smells of flowers, the sights, the ability to look in the eyes of each other, to behold a sunset! A sunset is beautiful, and love in someone else's eyes is even more beautiful! So picking up cues, being receptive to the world around us, hearing music and allowing it to change the frequency of our bodies, is beautiful. But we don't want to be a slave to those outside stimuli, and that's the issue.

Normally we end up becoming a slave to stimuli. We simply just react. Our lives become stimulus/response like Pavlov's dogs. But that is not the highest calling of our lives or the highest use of our minds. That's why the mind must be trained. Let's say you're walking down a street in New York City. You'll see restaurants, maybe printing shops, cafes, lots of other people, an ATM machine, maybe a music store. The streets are filled with innumerable stimuli – a barrage of visual, auditory stimuli. No one can actually absorb all of it. So we're all seeing the world through a filter of our personal minds and attention. Imagine you're walking down that street starving – you've just gotten off of work, you haven't had anything to eat since breakfast and it's seven o'clock in the evening, so you're very

hungry. What are you going to notice? The music store? No, of course not. You're going to notice the restaurants! "Do I want pizza? Mmmmm. Chinese food. Or maybe an avocado sandwich at the deli. Mmmmm. Oh up ahead, there's a wonderful smell coming from the Indian restaurant! I'll eat garlic bread!" So, that's what you're going to notice. Restaurants. If you aren't hungry, but you are driven by sensual desires, you'll notice attractive people on the street, "Oh she's hot, oh he's sexy," etc. You'll notice that instead.

What we see is actually determined by the mind. If a hundred people walk down the same street they will experience it in a hundred different ways. It's not that they invent their experiences. They are actually all correct. One person saw the pizza store, the other saw the beautiful girl, the other saw the ATM, another saw a dollar bill on the ground, someone else just got a cast off her leg and kept her eyes on the ground to make sure she didn't fall, somebody else has a picnic later in the day so he keeps looking up to make sure there is no sign of rain.

So training the mind is having control over what gets absorbed. That's what meditation gives us. Meditation is a practice, a tool to help us master the mind. When we say focus on the breath, what does that do? It takes our awareness from a thousand places and brings it to one. It doesn't have to be the breath, it could be your mantra. It could be a candle flame, it could be awareness in general. There are entire schools of meditation based purely on the practice of awareness. We teach that if you itch, bring the mind back to the breath, but there are schools of meditation that say if it itches, allow the awareness to be with the itch and name the itch: "Itching, itching, itching." None of the techniques is right or wrong, none is better or worse. They're all just different ways, different mechanisms, to take the mind from jumping aimlessly amidst a thousand places to one place. The techniques help us take our mind, which should be our best friend but ends up as our worst enemy, and help us get a little bit more familiar with it, help us befriend it, help us train it. "Ah, you were in a thousand places, now you're in one, whether it's my breath, whether it's my mantra, whether it's my itching foot, you're in one place."

From that one place we're able to take it deeper, and we're able to eventually get into an awareness of who we are that isn't the mind. If I thought I was my thoughts, and now there's a space between the thoughts, then who am I? Who am I in that space between my thoughts? If I am my mind and I am my thoughts, then the moment this thought ends, who's thinking the next

thought? In the space between thoughts, do I disappear?

So ultimately meditation brings us into that awareness. But first we have to bring the mind to one place. Slowly, slowly, slowly, over time, it'll happen. It's hard for everybody in the beginning. The nature of the mind is to be all over the place. Bring it in, and slowly what you find is that the space between the thoughts grows and grows, and you start to be able to experience more of what it's like between the thoughts. Then when you move into the world, things begin to happen around you. People do things, people say things, but you're no longer reacting, because you've cultivated a habit of non-judging, non-analyzing, non-reacting awareness. There's no meditation I know of that's the "scratch your ankle, scratch your head" meditation. My mind may be aware of the itching foot, if I'm practicing an awareness based form of meditation. I may be aware of the aching back, but we don't react.. It's a training in awareness without reacting. That cultivates an entire new habit for us which stays with us, not just in meditation but in our interactions in the world. Suddenly the person in front of me becomes my itching foot – here they are doing something that's provoking me, I want to react, I want to say something, I want to do something, but I know I have a choice, because I've cultivated that in meditation. It takes a little time though.

Another super important aspect of meditation is that as my mind becomes still, as it withdraws from the habit of reaction, into that space in which I begin to experience the vastness, the infinite nature of my Self and my connection with the entire Divine universe, I become aware of the divinity of others as well. A lot of times in the beginning on a spiritual path if there is not enough humility, surrender and depth of sincere practice, people may touch an experience of divine connection but not gain the full experience or full meaning. They then use that experience to further separate themselves from others rather than to connect. So you hear people say: "I'm living in God consciousness, therefore you should take out the trash tonight, because that would disrupt my God consciousness." Or, "I'm in God consciousness so you should massage me, touch my feet, and take care of me and do the dishes." If we really are living in God consciousness we realize that everyone and everything is God. God is not bounded by my body, so if I'm really having God consciousness, then it's the consciousness that you and I are One, One in God, One as God. That consciousness has to begin with the Self, of course, because only then can we recognize it in others, but if we're really living in God consciousness, it means we are interacting with the entire world as God and as consciousness. That is a

goal, and it's a beautiful goal.

Sadly, the human mind and the human ego are so subtle and manipulative that if we just give them an open field on which to play, that's exactly what they'll do. They'll take a spiritual experience and run with it, but instead of running into surrender, truth and expansion, they'll run straight into arrogance, ignorance and separation. This is why we have meditation techniques, it's why we come to satsang, it's why we pray, it's why we sit at the feet of the Gurus, it's why we engage in spiritual practice. These practices help us get grounded in that Truth, so that our consciousness doesn't just become an open field for the play of ego, mind, illusion and ignorance.

How do we experience the Self or Soul?

Meditation connects us with our true Self. Our Self is One with all; there aren't really plural souls but rather One Soul, of which we are all varying forms and manifestations. However, despite the oneness of the Self, way in which we each experience that Self is different. Because we're in different bodies, with different histories, different *sanskara*-s or patterns, we're going to experience that Self differently. Although you and I are meditating on the same –Soul, because of the different vehicles, my way of experiencing the Soul is going to be different than your way of experiencing the Soul. Certain meditation techniques are going to work for me, different ones will work for you. It's not because we are going to different places, but just because our way of experiencing it is different.

What runs a microphone? Electricity. What runs a light? Electricity. What runs a camera? Electricity. The same thing is running them all. The electricity running into the microphone is the same as the electricity running into the light or the camera. However, because the vehicles are different, the experience of that electricity, the manifestation of that electricity, is going to be different. Fans give air, lamps gives light, microphones gives sound. So, when we go to meditate, we're meditating on Self, but I'm going into it with my specific, personal medium of consciousness, which is my brain, my mind. You're going into it with your specific, personal medium of consciousness, your brain, your mind.

Ironically, the same brain/mind which, when it's not in our control, prevents us from experiencing the true Self, is the very brain/mind which is needed in order to experience it. The answer to knowledge of the Self

is not to get rid of the brain or mind, although they frequently are an obstacle to our deepest experience. This is the paradox. We actually need them in order to have the highest and deepest experience. The physical brain is the medium through which I experience consciousness. It is *not* my consciousness, but it is the way I experience it, the same way that my eyes are not sight but they are the medium through which I experience sight. My ears are not sound, but they are the medium through which I experience sound. If I didn't have eyes or ears, the world would still have sights and sounds but I would not be able to experience them. Similarly, if you were brain damaged and had no brain activity at all, the Self or Soul would still exist, of course, but your ability to consciously experience it diminishes. Obviously, you can't chant your mantra if you're brain dead or bring your awareness to your breath or meditate upon the question "Who am I?" Your brain is required for that, even though ultimately these practices take us beyond the brain, beyond the mind.

So, each of us goes into meditation differently, and we connect with it differently even though ultimately we are connecting with the same divine infinite consciousness. A rather simple way to think about this is the example of a rock concert. Everybody's sitting in the same rock concert. Some people are sitting right next to the speakers, and they think it is great! They're dancing and singing as the vibration of the bass moves through their bodies. But for other people, it's physically painful in their ears and they want to go home. The sound is the same. Each person is connecting to exactly the same sound coming out of the same speaker. But the way that one person's ear senses it and their brain perceives is different from the way someone else's ear and brain perceive it.

In the same way, when we go to connect with the Self, the Self is One, but we're going into with the mind. It's my mind that tells me to chant my mantra, focus on my breath. It's my mind that is aware I've trailed off on a thought, and that reminds me to bring it back. The mind is not always the enemy. In times like that, the mind is the friend saying, "Ah, you've gone astray, bring it back." So, the differences in our physical brains and non-physical minds impact our experience of the Self.

How can we be a witness to our feelings, and analyze our thoughts and emotions, and at the same time be in the present moment? I find myself sometimes observing my thoughts, words and instincts, which leads me to understand myself better, but it removes me from being in the present.

There are two different aspects. We speak sometimes about understanding, and contemplating, and we also speak about witnessing. The question is really, how do we balance those? If I'm trying to see and analyze and understand, it takes me out of the present. Yet, understanding is important also. So how do we balance that?

We balance it by doing both of them at different times. For example, when I take a shower, it pulls me out of my sleep. It wakes me up entirely. How can I stay asleep and bathe at the same time? Well, you can't. . It's very important to sleep, and it's also very important to bathe, but you can't do them at the same time. In the same way, both of these aspects of understanding and witnessing are very important to our spiritual practice, but they frequently don't happen together.

So, one aspect is the witnessing. This is the non-judgmental, non-analytical, non-contemplative, non-introspective act of simple witnessing. Just being present in the moment without judgment. You meditate, watch your breath and when thoughts come you don't allow your awareness to hook into them. You don't analyze them or judge them. A physical sensation like your stomach growling may come, and the witnessing mind just notices and brings the awareness back to the breath. The thinking mind would hook itself into the sensation, leading to thoughts like, "Oh my God, I'm so hungry! I haven't eaten since last night! I wonder what's for breakfast..." Then, the analytical mind would come in and say, "God you know, I read this article that says it's not good for your adrenal glands to go hungry for so long, maybe I should change my meditation time..." Or, the even deeper analytical mind says, "Why am I thinking about food?"

Each of those is a very valid issue to ponder upon – we have a body. If something in our schedule is not working with the physical health and stability of our body, that's an important point to address. But not during meditation. It's also important, if the same thoughts keep coming back into our meditation, to investigate why that is. Why are certain thoughts or certain types of thoughts besieging me? That's important to analyze. But, not while we're witnessing.

Human beings are the only species that have the ability, that we know of, to be aware of their own consciousness. We're the only beings that actually have the ability to watch ourselves consciously. If I start to get angry, but my meditation practice is strong, then my witness watches the anger come. I see it but it doesn't drown me because I am rooted in the consciousness

of my witness, watching the wave of anger draw closer and closer but not actually getting impacted by it. If, on the other hand, I don't have that ability, if I haven't cultivated the ability to witness, then as soon as anger comes I find myself screaming, shouting, hitting things, drinking, using drugs, repressing it, or developing ulcers. I have become the anger. This is why we say "I am angry." We identify so completely with the anger, if we have not cultivated the witness consciousness, that we truly feel we have become anger in that moment. The witness enables us to see it, recognize it, but not identify with it and therefore not be drowned by it. It becomes like a wave crashing on the beach down below while we sit on a cliff high above the waters. We are aware but not drowned.

The witness consciousness gives us, first in our meditation then in our life, a different place to sit. Most of us sit in the center of the drama of our lives: "I'm happy, I'm sad, I'm hungry, I'm sleepy, I'm excited, I'm nervous." That's where our consciousness sits. If I say to you, "How are you right now?," most of us are going to give an answer from smack in the middle of this drama. "I'm excited, ecstatic, aarti was enthralling, I'm nervous, I'm worried about my exam tomorrow." Whatever the answer may be, it's going to come from right in the middle of the drama.

The witness teaches us to sit, instead of smack in the middle of the drama, in the consciousness of the one who simply witnesses.

We need to be able to witness, and while we're witnessing we cannot analyze, because, absolutely, any analytic activity of the thinking mind takes us out of the spacious awareness of the witness.. In the awareness of the witness, we are just there. We're not judging, analyzing, or following our thoughts. We're just aware of them, like watching the waves go up and down.

However, as I began, analysis and understanding are also very important; they just require a different time and place. So, for example, if you notice in your meditation that the same thoughts keep arising all the time, for example if you notice that you are always extremely hungry during meditation, it is helpful to analyze that. There are two possible reasons for this experience. One reason, of course, is simply that you may be going too long without food and your stomach is growling. However, the constant hunger in meditation could also be another, much deeper issue. If you find yourself always hungry in meditation, even when you've just eaten, then that becomes something worth thinking about. What's the inner

emptiness? What is that hunger that arises when you close my eyes? What are you hungry for? What are you longing for? Or, why are you looking to run into the next meal or snack instead of sitting in meditation? What is it that's coming up for you in meditation that you would like to numb with food?

If certain fears or desires or experiences like hunger keep coming up, this is worth analyzing because that's the stuff that's preventing us from fully connecting with the Divine within ourselves. But, the time for analysis is not meditation. In the same way that we have a time to sleep and a time to bathe, recognizing that both are crucial but not simultaneous, we have a time in which we cultivate the ability to just be present and a time in which we contemplate and introspect.

Lastly, the analysis and the understanding take place in the mind, and the "being present" takes place in the heart, in the spirit, in the soul, in consciousness. The mind separates, the mind thinks *about* things. In meditation, the goal ultimately is union, union with the Divine, the Universe, the Creator and the Creation, so if you relegate your meditation to your thinking mind, then you lose the opportunity to connect with your heart, to sit in consciousness and in awareness. So, we have to have separate times for both.

God & Religion

Why do people worship and remember God only during the bad times and not the happy times? How should we remember God during the happy times as well?

This is a very common and very sad situation, but something that we're all acutely aware of. In fact, one of my favorite stories is a story of a beautiful saint who had the capacity to kiss away and touch away any ailment, any injury, and any illness. One day, a leper came to her covered with wounds, just oozing. She held him and she kissed and she healed all of the wounds, except one. Then, she sent him away. As he walked away, her disciple said to her, "Amma, when you have the ability to cure all the wounds, why would you leave one? Why wouldn't you cure him completely? Why would you keep him suffering?" She replied, "Because that one wound keeps him calling out to God."

That's a really common situation. When things are going well – our lives, our work, our occupation, our school, our social life – we very rarely remember God in those times. The times that most of us remember God is in times of fear. We cry out, "Oh God, please do something!" Or, we remember God in times of great sorrow, "Oh God, I'm alone, I'm scared, and I've been hurt!" Those are the times we turn to God.

Of course ideally though, we need to remember God all the time, but how? Look at what Kunti asked Lord Krishna of at the end of the Mahabharata. At the end of the war, Bhagwan Krishna said to her, "Kunti, you've suffered, you've lost so much. Ask something of me, let me give you something. Throughout it all, you've maintained your devotion, you've maintained your piety, and you're such a divine Shakti. I want to give you something. Ask of me any boon." Kunti replied, "I want suffering."

Krishna questioned, “What do you mean? Why do you want suffering? I’ve just told you I’ll give you any boon.” And Kunti said, “Because I realized that when things are going well, I forget You. It’s at times when I’m struggling and suffering that I remember You. Those are the times that I feel closest to You. Those are the times when I feel really deeply connected to You. Those are the times that I feel like You are with me. When everything is going well, those are the times that I feel that I forget You.”

So, this is very common. But obviously the goal of our life is not how we can remember to suffer so that we can remember God, or how we can bring suffering into our lives just so we remember God. Instead, how can we, when things are going well, make sure that we remember God?

This is the benefit and the power of what a regular spiritual practice is. Many people come to the ashram and say, “I’m going through this horrible crisis, I need a meditation practice, I need a mantra, I need some technique.” The problem with that is that at the moment of crisis, it’s very difficult to implement a meditation practice. When your mind is going a million miles an hour, when your world has been turned upside down, that is a very difficult time to bring in a spiritual practice. We need to bring in a practice long before the times of crisis. This is why all of our spiritual practices are every day. None of the deep traditions say meditate when you feel like it, or go to temple/church/gurdwara when you feel like it. What they say is *every day*.

These practices keep us deeply connected to the Divine every day. Pujya Swamiji always says that when you talk to God, it’s prayer. When God speaks back to you, that’s meditation. We practice every day, good days and bad days. It’s like how sometimes people ask whether we do the Ganga Aarti at Parmarth every day. I always say rain or shine, 365 days a year. If we know in advance it’s going to rain, we go under cover. The time may change based on the sunset, but every day, rain or shine, we do Aarti. Otherwise, if you say, “Well, we’ll only do it on sunny days,” or “Oh, it looks a little cloudy,” or “A little too hot” – every day there will be some excuse. This is what happens with our spiritual practice, and this is where the importance of *every day* comes in.

The last aspect of this is gratitude. The way to stay connected with God when things are going wonderfully is to ask ourselves: why are they going wonderfully? Most of us try – we work, we plan – every day, and

sometimes things go very well, sometimes they don't go very well. It's very rare that when something really bad happens in our life, we can look back and find a time in which we consciously were not trying to make it go well. That's very rare. We try to make our lives go well. Mostly, we try to succeed, to be healthy and happy, and to find peace. Sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn't. That means that there is a force, a power, a grace that is more than just what our plan is, more than just what our implementation of the plan is. So, when things are going wonderfully – we're healthy, peaceful, and joyful – we have to remember that there's a grace and that we need to bring gratitude into our lives.

Set aside a time every day for gratitude – whether it's a list, whether it's a journal, whether we name the things we're grateful for, or whether we simply say, "Thank you God for my life, thank you God for everything that is right in my life, thank you God for waking me in the morning, for filling my lungs with oxygen, for my life." That reconnects us, and that's something we can bring into our lives every single day.

Then of course when things are going badly, we're already connected. We don't have to start to find that inner voice. In the times of difficulty, we don't have to start figuring out how to get connected. So many of us in those difficult times wonder where our inner voice is and where that divine guidance is. We want to hear God's voice but we don't know which way to turn, how to find it, or where it is. As I said, it's very difficult in a time of crisis to connect.

It's like if you stand outside of a baby nursery that has one hundred babies inside, and suddenly one baby starts crying. To an outsider they all sound exactly the same. There's no way an outsider could tell one baby from another baby by the sound of the voice, but the mother knows. Immediately, the second there's a cry, the mother knows – that's her baby – because she's so connected to it. It's the same thing in our lives in times of difficulty. We've got so many voices going on in our mind at the same time – the voice of fear, anger, pain, desire, and ego – and then someone says, "Well, listen to your inner voice." They're all inner voices, they're all coming from inside, so how do we distinguish one from the other? How do we know which inner voice is the Divine voice versus the inner voice of fear, pain, ego, grabbing, pushing, aversion, or conditioning? The only way to know is through being so connected to it that, like the mother hearing the cry of her baby even amongst one hundred other babies' cries, we can hear it. This is why we need to bring in a daily practice, because

in those times of chaos when fifty inner voices are screaming, it's very difficult to tease them apart.

Whether it's prayer, meditation, chanting, or anything else that connects us within, make sure to do it every day. There's nobody who says, "I didn't eat any sugar yesterday, therefore I don't need to brush my teeth this morning. I only brush my teeth on days when I eat really badly." We brush our teeth every day, regardless of whether we ate salad and *daal* or a bag of jelly beans. We brush our teeth any way. It's part of our daily practice. In the same way, our spiritual practice should not be something that we say, "Oh no, not today, today I'm ok, I have no problem," or, "No, not today, I'm too crazy, forget it." *Every day.*

I remember when I first came to India, before I had even met Pujya Swamiji, a beautiful saint here told me, "Every day, like how you take a shower to wash your body, in the same way every day you need to pray, because it washes you on the inside. Just like every day you get up and have a bath, in the same way, every day you must get up and pray." This is what we do, and it keeps us connected.

Who wrote the scriptures, who wrote the Shastras, and how did they know what to write? How do you know that God is real?

Sage Vyasaji codified the scriptures, meaning he put the teachings into one place and put them in order, so you could say that he spoke them. As he spoke, Ganeshji wrote. But, what Sage Vyasaji was speaking was the wisdom that had existed forever. He never claimed, "I'm creating this, this is my novel I'm writing, this is my invention." This wisdom was timeless.

Whatever religion we look at, the holy books and the scriptures have been given to us by the Divine. Each of them may have a different person, sage, or *rishi* who was able to get it down in written form, but the actual Truth has come from the Divine.

How do we know that they're real, and how do we know that God is real? We know that God is real because of the presence in all of the things that are filled with God. Let me give you an easier way to think about it. Right now, just looking in the room where you are sitting, how do you know that electricity is real? The lights are on, maybe a fan is on. But can anybody see the electricity? No, you can't see electricity. We know it exists though because of how it comes through. It comes through the light as light, comes through the fan as air. It's going to come through your blender in

one way, it's going to come through your toaster in another way, it's going to come through your computer in another way, depending on what the vessel is. The vessels may be different, but it's the electricity which gives us all of it. If there was no electricity, it wouldn't matter how beautiful your lamp was or how expensive your fan was, none of it's going to work.

When we think about knowing that God is real, most of us try to do it the same way that we try to know most things in the world - with our senses. Can I see it with my eyes, can I hear it, can I taste it, can I smell it, can I touch it? But knowing God is like knowing love. If you have ever loved anybody – a parent, a child, your siblings, your friends, your spouse – if I say to you that I don't believe that love is real and I want you to prove it to me, how are you going to do that? Is there any way you can prove it? You can't prove it. You can't prove it with your five senses. You can't say how much love weighs, or what its measurement is. You can't put it on a slide and look at it under a microscope and say, "Yes, it exists, I see it." But, we know it exists because we *feel* it, and that knowledge is so true that it doesn't matter whether a hundred people say love doesn't exist, you know that it exists because you feel it.

This is how we know God is real. Like how we described electricity, when you look around you at the universe, God is in everything we see. Could you make me a mosquito? If I set you up in a science lab and I gave you all the things you needed, could you make me a mosquito? No. Why? Scientists who study mosquitos can tell you exactly what a mosquito is made of, but we still can't make one. We cannot create anything that requires life. The very best that we've been able to do very recently is simply duplicate something, but we cannot create new life. So, when we see life, we know there's God.

Now, that doesn't mean that evolution doesn't exist. I'm not saying that all of us have been put here because God is sitting up in heaven and has waved a wand that zaps us into existence. We've come into the world in the most biological, natural, evolutionary way. But if you look at science, if you look at how we got here, if you look at evolution, it is obvious that somewhere something or someone knew what they were doing because it is way too perfect and way too complex for even today, with the best scientists and the culmination of thousands of years of scientific study. Even at this time of the pinnacle of science, we still can't create a mosquito let alone a mountain, a river, or a person. So, when we see that which exists, we know there's someone or something through whom that exists,

like when we look at the light we know there's electricity even though we can't see it. When we look at the Universe around us, we're able to see that Divine spark.

The last piece is that it's not just that God created us. Rather, it's that *in* all of that creation God exists. The scriptures remind us that everything in the Universe is pervaded by the Divine, and so it's not just that God created us like an artist and then left the workshop. The same way that you can see electricity in all of the devices, you can see the Divine in all of creation, whether in a rainbow, a tree, a loved one, a beautiful bird in flight, or whatever it is that touches your heart. We get a different expression of divinity through all of the different vehicles and vessels. If you start looking at the world and seeing the Divine in each expression, you're going to start to see the Divine so much that you'll *feel* that God exists. You won't need to use the brain to understand or to prove it, but you'll feel it and you'll see.

Is religion required to access God? Can we have this experience of light, this experience of moving toward or unfolding into awakening or enlightenment without religion? What role does religion have to play in it?

Religion gives us a way to connect with the Divine. It's not essential. The Divine is infinite. As we always say, it doesn't matter what name or what form you use to connect. Whether you connect to God in the form of Krishna, Ram, Ganesh, Jesu, Allah, Adonai, or no name or form, it doesn't matter. God is in everything.

On a spiritual level (because religion plays a lot of other roles culturally), what role religion plays is it gives us the discipline. Yes, of course, God is accessible and available without religion. It's not that you have to be in a temple or church or mosque or synagogue to experience God. It's not that God is more in those places. Yet, very few people who don't self-identify as religious spend very much time contemplating God or connecting to God.

What religion offers is a way to have a path and to go into this. Of course, religion gets co-opted by politics and power. It has been done for centuries. There are so many things which make us wonder why religion is even necessary – politics, power, money, etc. But if we could actually isolate religion from all of the things that are not religion – from politics, from

power, from money – and just have the core of religion in its fundamental purity, what religion offers us is connection. For people who are not self-motivated, for people who close their eyes and sit in a dark room yet don't connect automatically with God, for people who may sit with their eyes closed but make shopping lists in their head or think about yesterday or tomorrow, for people who want to embark on a spiritual path but don't know where to turn, for people who want to connect to the Creator, religion is a way of connecting.

You don't need it. Let's say our goal is to get into Ganga. Parmarth Niketan has a really nice *ghat* that goes into Ganga, and if you go down a little farther there are other ashrams with *ghats* that go into Ganga. If you keep going down a little farther, there are beaches from which you can get into Ganga. Do you need to get into Ganga by a *ghat*? Of course not. Could you dive off a rock and end in Ganga just as well? Of course. The *ghat* serves the purpose for people who for example may not be expert divers. It's a lot easier to get in walking down one step at a time and where there are chains to hold onto when the current is strong. Not all of us are good swimmers. It's easier to get in sometimes when other people are there. You think, "OK, well at least the guy downstream would catch me if I washed away!" But, Ganga is Ganga. The goal is just to get in. So no, just as you don't need the *ghat* to get in, you don't need the religion to access God. You could just go jump off the rocks. But, just like how we see people diving off rocks and getting injured, despite their best intentions, sometimes people don't know how to get in. Then our ego takes over, and ends up creating more darkness.

If you've got a way in that's not through religion but it connects you, fantastic! Don't worry about religion. But, if you sit in a dark room and you close your eyes and all you can do is make a shopping list or worry about yesterday or worry about tomorrow, then something organized might be helpful. It doesn't mean that you have to buy into the politics, it doesn't mean you have buy into the power, it doesn't mean you have to get co-opted, but it means that sometimes, it helps. It helps to understand what I'm focusing on. Here's a mantra I can chant, a song I can sing, a story I can listen to, and image I can envision. It's very helpful to have a deity rather than trying to deeply connect with nameless, formless infinity, but if you can do it, fantastic!

How can we be spiritual, particularly in the Western world, without being tied down to any religious path?

I think religion unfortunately has gotten a really bad reputation. I'm not saying it shouldn't have as it has been abused across the centuries, but religion in its foundational purpose is not actually bad. The "bad" of religion came by the way it was packaged, transmitted and co-opted for so many other purposes. Ultimately though, the goal of religion is to have us be close to God and to give people a way to understand their connection to the Divine.

The reason so many of us these days want to be spiritual but not religious is because religion has become so much about boundaries, walls, borders, us vs. them, power, land and money. But, if we could take religion back to what it really meant, then what it really does is the same thing as spirituality.

Spirituality at its most basic is being connected to the Spirit. What the word "spirituality" means is "of the Spirit" or "pertaining to the Spirit." It's in contrast to being of matter and pertaining to matter and the material world. In the material world, in the world of matter, we are very focused on physical form – what our physical form looks like, how it feels, what it wants, what it fears, etc. Spirituality, in contrast, is about the Spirit. We are no longer bound by the form, but we are now looking at the content, which is the Spirit.

To be spiritual is just to live with the commitment to be focused on content, not form. That life can be lived regardless of where you are. It's an inner commitment to be connected to that spirit which flows through all of us. Our whole approach to life shifts and it doesn't matter where we are living. You can live in Rishikesh and be the most materialistic person in the world. Tragically, simply living on the banks of Ganga is not an inoculation against materialism. Happily, living in Los Angeles, Manhattan or Paris is not something that prevents you from being deeply spiritual. It's an inner commitment.

All of the religions at their foundation are inherently spiritual and inherently based on the concept of spirit and interconnectedness. What I have just explained has no connection to any particular religion.

One question though that you can let percolate inside of you and see what might flower from it is: Why am I pushing religion away? Anything in our lives that we push away, rather than simply avoid, is a wonderful signal to us that there is something there to be investigated.

The way religion is preached and practiced in much of the world today tragically tends to be much more about form than content. For those of us who are committed to content instead of form, there is absolutely an issue with many of the religions, and it can lead us to a sense of avoidance.

But again, let this seed just be within you: might there be something actually in the religion in which you were born, in the religion of your family, that actually is beautiful, wonderful and beneficial? You don't necessarily have to buy into everything, but that doesn't mean there aren't parts of it that are beautifully inspiring.

The nice piece of it is, while God can certainly read our thoughts, in most cases the priests, ministers and rabbis standing on the platform cannot. So, just by being there, praying and being part of a spiritual and religious environment (they don't necessarily have to know that you are not buying into all of it), you can be benefiting by that environment, by people coming together in the name of God and singing God's glories.

You can pretty much find faults in almost any organization, whether it's a religious, social, political, or environmental organization. But, that doesn't mean that we throw out *all* organizations. It means that as we move through the world, we take what benefits, inspires, touches, and uplifts us, and we don't get bogged down in the things that don't work for us. If it's OK with you and God, don't worry about anybody else!

Ultimately, whether you call it religion or you call it spirituality, it is really in fact just about you and God. If you and God are OK, don't worry about anything else.

If we can see the Truth in many different ways and from many different paths, what is the right path to Truth? In the Hindu path, there's a teaching that says the Truth is one and that the sages call it by different names. In another teaching, we're told to let all the noble thoughts come from all the directions. We've got this teaching that is rooted in the idea that there's so many different ways of getting at the Truth, but then how do we know which one is right when they seem to be conflicting?

Where there is conflict, you can actually be pretty sure there isn't Truth. There's two types of truth. We've got our capital-T "Truth" – eternal Truth, unchanging Truth, the Truth of the stuff our scriptures are made of that's just as true today in Manhattan or Paris or London as it was true in Kurukshetra or Ayodhya or anywhere else thousands and thousands of

years ago. Then we've got what we'll call our lowercase-T "truth." It's still true, it's not a *lie*, but it's only true at this intersection of time and space. So right now, let's say it's 8:30pm on a Monday in India. That's true. That's not a lie. Yet, it's a lowercase-t truth because it's only true for us in our place on the Earth. If I pick up the phone and call someone in London or California, it's won't be 8:30pm for them. Also, it will no longer even be true for us in 60 seconds, then it will be 8:31pm. It also wasn't true for us a minute ago when it was 8:29pm. It's only true at this intersection of time and space.

Where you get conflict is in lowercase-t truths. I could get on the phone with someone in California and say it's 8:30pm, and they will say no it's not, it's 9:00am. Both are true. But if I didn't have the wisdom to understand the fact that we were both right, we could get in a big fight over it: "It's not morning, what are you talking about? Look outside it's dark! Are you crazy, are you blind?" The person would say to you that you are blind, it's sunny, the sun is up, it's gorgeous, it's a brand-new day! We just started fighting enough that we could actually start killing each other over it if it were serious enough.

Conflict arises with lowercase-t truth when we try to turn it into capital-T Truth.

Say it's hot in this room. That's *my* experience. Somebody else could say it's not hot, and that's their experience. We could be in the same room at the same time but have different experiences. Say we're having a meal, and I think the meal is excellent and you think it's too spicy. Same food, same time, same dish, sitting across the table from each other, yet we could have entirely different experiences of the food. Now most of us have the wisdom to understand that I could be hot while you could be cool, I could enjoy the food while you are sweating out of your scalp, it could be night for us and morning for someone else. But now let's imagine though that I decided that my experience of this food was not just lowercase-t truth but capital-T Truth, so much so that I thought this food was perfect and that this is canon. For you to so much as insinuate that you are sweating out of your scalp is sacrilege! Now all that's happened is I have taken my experience of the truth and turned it into a global, timeless, eternal, all-pervasive Truth. That's my mistake, but should I happen to be someone with a lot of followers and a lot of power, I actually could try to start a movement in which anyone who thought that chilies were spicy would be shot and killed! Anybody with any other thought than that chilies are perfect and should be in everything should be hanged! This is a silly

example, but you can see where things start to go awry.

If it's real Truth, the Truth that our scriptures talk about, the Truth that may have different names but is One, there actually isn't conflict. There may be conflict in interpretation of that Truth, because typically those Truths come from scriptures that are written in ancient languages. We are dependent upon different people to translate and interpret those scriptures for us, yet people who are translating and interpreting are human and fallible, and might even be biased or have their own agenda. So, you end up with different interpretations or translations, but if you actually had the ability to understand the scriptures in their original language, what you would know is that there is no conflict in that Truth. If it's capital-T Truth, it's the same for everyone.

Why do we have rituals?

The point of rituals is not that God is somehow happy with our rice or our *ghee* or our flowers. He created them and they're His, God doesn't need us to offer them back! It's not that there's some great preference of the grain of rice over a grain of amaranth or a grain of barley. *The rituals are for us to connect.* The rituals are for us to step out of our other life and other duties and to actually make some time for God.

When you love someone and you go home with a flower, it's a ritual. When you bring home chocolates on your anniversary, it's a ritual. But, it only works if there's love behind it. If someone has done something really awful to you and then they send you some chocolates, and you know that it's only so you'll stop being mad at them, it's not going to have that kind of an impact on you because you know that this person is just trying to buy you. But, if someone who really loves you makes you something, like your child cooks you something homemade, even if it's horrible you're going to love them anyway because it was made with love.

So with rituals, it's not about the intricacy of them. It's about the love behind them and the connection behind them. The main point is to do that which you can do with love and with connection.

What is the meaning of the yagna ceremony?

When we perform the *yagna* ceremony on the banks of Ganga, we offer into the fire a mixture of seeds. The seed is a symbol of our ego.

If you plant a seed in fertile ground, shine the Sun on it, and water it, that seed is going to sprout. Then, it will grow roots. Later, when you want to uproot it, it's going to be very difficult. It's much easier to uproot a sapling than to uproot a tree.

When our egos grow, in the same way their roots grow into us – around our hearts, around our identities, around our emotions, around everything that we think of as “me.” Then, someone comes along or a practice comes along or our higher nature comes along and says, “I've got to uproot this thing,” and it feels like it's pulling all of us out with it.

The symbolism of the *yagna* is that if you take a seed and you roast it before you plant it, you actually can never get it to sprout. It doesn't matter how good the soil is, how much rain, or how much Sun – the seed will never sprout. So when we perform the *yagna*, through the seeds we are offering our ego with a prayer of, “Oh God, roast my ego, roast the seed of my ego, so that no matter who tells me I'm wonderful and perfect or who tells me I'm horrible and worthless, or that I deserve or do not deserve, regardless of what happens in my life, that seed will not sprout and these roots will not grow in me.” Then, when I want to work on removing the ego, the roots are not sunk into my being and I can become free of it.

Why should we go on yatra? Is there anything beyond going on a great yatra, such as the Kailash Mansarovar yatra?

The only thing beyond taking a *yatra* is actually having the *yatra* on the inside. When we go on *yatra*, whether it's to Badrinath, Kedarnath, or Kailash Mansarovar, why do we go? For *darshan* of Bhagwan, to get *punya*, to find peace. Maybe we'll even find *moksha*. This is why we go on *yatra*. But when the *yatra* goes inside, it makes us realize actually how simple – not easy, simple and easy are not the same thing – it is.

When we go so far on *yatra* for *darshan*, peace, *punya*, *moksha*, we realize everything is inside! It's all inside!

When Pujya Swamiji brings people on *yatra* to Kailash Mansarovar, Gangotri, Badrinath, etc., He gives everyone one *sutra*: “less chatting, more chanting.” On *yatra*, you're in cars many hours of the day, so everyone chats a lot. He always says, “Less chatting, more chanting.” The chanting is what actually takes us on the *yatra*.

We have to go on a physical *yatra* because in our daily lives, how many

of us really dedicate that amount of time for the *darshan* of God? We go on *yatra* for a week or a few days, we wait in long lines, yet none of us ever think, “Oh, never mind, this line is too long! If it doesn’t move in ten minutes, I’m not going to wait!” None of us think that! It doesn’t matter if it’s a line that takes ten minutes or a line that takes ten hours, we wait! None of us ever say, “Oh, I got to the *mandir* but it was a ten-minute wait, so I left.” But, whenever we talk about meditation or doing *sadhana* in our daily lives, we say, “Oh no, I don’t have time.”

Going on *yatra* changes our mental framework. When we’re on *yatra*, we are ready, however many hours it may take, however long the line is, we will have *darshan*. We will not go back until we have *darshan*. If we actually sat down in our daily meditation with the same commitment, how wonderful it would be! This is what Buddha did. He said, “I will not get up until I’ve had Enlightenment.” We should have that same commitment in our daily practice as we have on *yatra*.

We go on *yatra*, we stay in *dharamshalas*, we eat whatever we come across and it’s all considered *prasad*. I’ve never heard anyone complain, “Oh no, at that ashram the *prasad* didn’t have enough salt!” Nobody says it, there are no complaints. No one says, “No, the ashram bed was not very comfortable in Kedarnath.” You never hear that. We all understand that we are on *yatra*. Six people in a room, two people in a single bed, on the floor – we are ready to do anything, we are ready to sacrifice everything, because we’re on *yatra*.

We have to understand that we are on *yatra* in our life, and we have to put the same amount of emphasis on having that *darshan*, on having that experience in our regular lives. In our regular lives, all of our attention is on the food which doesn’t have enough salt, the pillow that is so hard, this is dirty, this problem, that problem. We say, “I only have exactly six minutes for meditation then I have to go, today I don’t have time for sure.” So, to start the inner *yatra* simply requires an acknowledgment that we’re on *yatra* always.

I believe God created Jesus Christ, and that He’s the Son of God. But, you say Krishna is also the Son of God and that we’re the children of God, so I’m confused.

In a short nutshell, we say figuratively that we’re the children of God because we’ve been created by and out of the Divine, but we don’t talk

about it as a family lineage because that would mean that there are some people who are not in that family. We believe that *everything, everyone, and every being* in the Universe is Divine.

In basic math, when you have infinity and subtract one hundred, what is the answer? Infinity. What is infinity divided by 10? Infinity. Anything that comes from infinity is infinite, and of course infinity remains. So, it's not that God has incarnated over here in the form of Krishna and is no longer over there, or that there's only enough God that it can incarnate in one being. God is infinite, and since God is infinite there are an infinite number of manifestations of that Divine.

We are also taught that God comes on Earth in a specific form when it is needed to bring back light to the darkness. When there is too much darkness, too much *adharma*, and too much unrighteousness and we need to restore light, *dharma*, and righteousness, God comes in a specific form. But, God is here all the time, in all forms. Every being on Earth is the Divine because we've been created out of that. There's a beautiful line in the Upanishads that tells us everything in the Universe is pervaded by the Divine. There is nothing that is *not* pervaded by the Divine. That means that not only are we the children of God, but really what we are at our core is Divine.

Going back to the specific question about Jesus Christ – yes, Jesus Christ also is Divine. He came on Earth as the scriptures say. There was ignorance, there was darkness, and God came on Earth in the form of Jesus Christ to teach, to bring back light, to bring back the message, and that light is now what is bringing light to so many people.

So, yes to Jesus, yes to Krishna, and yes to every being, every river, every mountain, and every tree! Lord Krishna said in the Bhagavad Gita, "In whatever form the devotee worships me, I appear to the devotee in that form." So, if you worship God in the form of Jesus Christ, God will come to you in the form of Jesus Christ. If you worship God in the form of Krishna, you'll see God in the form of Krishna. If you worship God in the form of the tree in your backyard, in the form of your grandmother, in the form of the river, God will come to you in that form because God is infinite. God is omnipotent, all-powerful, can be any form, and is not limited. So, yes Jesus, yes Krishna, and yes all of the Divine creation.

Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gita that when you come to Him, He will

take away all your pain. But then why does He push us away, even when we surrender to Him? Does God forsake His devotees?

God never pushes us away. What happens though is we are only able to see God, feel God, and experience God typically in situations that feel good. So, when bad things happen, we feel like God has forsaken us.

It's become very common. Somebody actually sent me something once that had been posted on Facebook entitled "Proof that God Exists." The whole story had to do with a man who had been speeding, gotten pulled over by a policeman, and he was going to get a ticket but luckily the policeman was someone he knew from church and therefore the policeman didn't give him a ticket. The story said that this was proof that God exists because look, he didn't get a ticket! Now of course, if he had gotten a ticket, it would've been proof that God *doesn't* exist, or at least certainly wouldn't have been proof that God does exist! So, it's *us* who go away from God because in our minds it's, "Oh wow, I didn't get the ticket, that's so great, thank God!" If I did get the ticket or something more serious happened in my life or in the life of someone I love, we would feel like this means God isn't there or God has pushed us away or forsaken us, or God is angry with us. It's not that God moves away from us. It's that when bad things happen, wee, in our hearts and in our minds, move away from God.

When Lord Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gita, "I will always be there for you," He doesn't say, "I will make sure that only the things that you want to happen will ever happen." There's no scripture in any religion or any language that I know of in which God says, "Come to me and I promise you will never have a sick day in your life, you will never lose a loved one, and you will never be fired from your job." There's no promise from God that ever was like that. But, God does say come to me and your *suffering* will cease. The reason we suffer is because our level of happiness and peace is rooted in the things around us which constantly go up and down and constantly change. When we surrender to God and connect to God, we are grounded and connected no matter what is happening in the world. It doesn't mean if you speed, you're not going to get a ticket. It doesn't mean you won't get sick. It doesn't mean that the natural things of life including loss of loved ones, bad health, and failures won't happen. Of course they will. But when they happen, you will be facing them as someone who's grounded and connected. You will be a boat that is anchored. There will still be storms in the ocean, but rather than being an anchorless boat that gets tossed around, you will be an anchored boat.

God never says bad things won't happen, and He definitely never, ever pushes us away. If we feel far from God, that's when we ask ourselves, "Where did I go? What was I hoping would happen that didn't happen and I've pulled away?" There's also the flip side – we tend to forget God when good things happen. Things are going so well that we tend to forget God! *It's always us who forgets. It's never, ever God.*

Why did all of the Gods and Goddesses use to come down in Divine incarnations to the Earth in a variety of different forms, yet they don't come down now?

There are so many different stories of how the Gods came down from Heaven to Earth. Yet, we look around now and see our world in trouble, and it seems the Gods are not coming. But, the answer in short is that they *do* come down.

How many eyes do we have? Two, of course. Yet, we actually have three, as we have our third eye located in the area of our forehead, between the two physical eyes. This is the place where we put the *tilak*, also known as the *aagya chakra*, and it is the seat of our power of discrimination.

Usually, discrimination is something that we look at as a bad thing. Black people vs. white people, pretty people vs. ugly people, rich people vs. poor people – we don't like to discriminate. We like to embrace everybody. But sometimes discrimination is very important.

We don't want to discriminate against people, but sometimes it is very important to use discrimination in another way. It is very important to discriminate between Truth and non-truth. The *aagya chakra* is our energy center for that kind of discrimination. It is the energy center in which we are able to see that which is True and that which is not true.

Say there is a young boy sitting in front of me. If I close my third eye and only use my two eyes to look at him, I will say, "OK, he's a very cute young boy. He wears glasses and seems to be missing one of his teeth. He is studying in school..." Now, these things are true, but they're not the whole Truth. If I open my third eye, what I see is the Divine in the form of the little boy. He is only a little boy at this moment – he was not a little boy before, he is not going to be a little boy forever. He is studying in school right now, but he wasn't studying in school before and he won't be studying in school in the future. The real being, the Divine inside him, I can only see with my third eye. These two physical eyes cannot look

inside him.

Now, how does this pertain to the question about the Gods coming onto the Earth? Well, when Lord Rama came on to Earth, what did Rama look like? Did He come with wings? No. How many arms did He have? Two. How many legs? Two. So basically, He looked like a man, right? On the outside, how did Rama look different from any other man? What was different with Rama? We could say things like, "He was a good man." Well, yes, but there are a lot of great men. Or we could say, "He could shoot a bow and arrow," but again, there are lots of people who can shoot bows and arrows, and that's not why we called Lord Rama God.

You could say that Rama was blue, but that is actually only because He was God that we have portrayed Him that way. Blue is the color of infinity, like the ocean or the sky. When we color our Gods blue, it is because they are infinite.

When Ram was on Earth, if you only had the two physical eyes to see, you would say, "Well, he's a tall man, he's a strong man, he has one head, two arms, two legs, a bow on his back and a bag of arrows," but you wouldn't know He was God. You would only be able to see that He was God if your third eye was open. That's why we do all of the practice to open our third eye, so that we can see the Divine. When Rama lived on Earth, do you think everyone knew that He was God? No, of course not. We only know this because afterwards people told us that God came on Earth and lived in this form. But, at that time, it wasn't that everybody said, "Oh, you're God!" Even those who loved Him and said, "You're a wonderful king, you're the best king in the world," didn't know He was God.

It's very important to keep our third eye open so that we are able to see the Divine. God *does* keep coming. In fact, God is in everything. In our scriptures, we are told that everything in the Universe is pervaded by God. *Everything*. But, you have to have your third eye open to see it. If the sun is shining but you wear a mask over your eyes, will you see it? If music is playing and you have ear plugs in, will you hear it? No. But, does that mean we have to bring the sun or start playing the music? No, of course not, it's already there. Instead, get rid of the ear plugs! Open your third eye, take off the mask, take out the ear plugs, and then you will see God is everywhere you look.

Enlightenment

How do we realize God?

It's such an incredible, mysterious, and almost tragic irony that we think of realizing God as something that we're going to find. That if we can just look carefully enough, then we're going to be able to see God in everything, in the midst of everything. It's not by looking carefully everywhere that we're then able to see God *amidst* everything. God is actually *in* everything. It's a tragic irony because we spend our lives looking everywhere.

There's a great story of a man who was a very sincere seeker, and he went here and there looking for God. He studied so much, went to so many teachers, went to so many places looking for God, roaming around, but he couldn't find Him. Finally he gives up in great frustration and despair, and he sits down under a tree on the banks of a river and cries out, "Fine, forget it, God! I realize I'm never going to find You, You're not findable. I'm so upset because I really wanted to find You, but OK, fine." At that moment, a fish jumps up out of the river and starts flapping around in the air, crying, "Water! Water! I need water! I'm going to die without water!" The man sees this and yells back, "You stupid fish, you just came out of the water! There's nothing but water in the river, you were surrounded by water. If you could just stop flapping around in the air screaming for water, you'd realize you were in the water!" And the fish replies, "Ah, and the same thing is true for you. You are crying and screaming for God, roaming around, flapping around for God, and just like I'm surrounded by water, you're surrounded by God. Inside you, not only outside you, but also inside you."

When we think about realizing God, it's not about how in the midst of everything else I can find God. It's not like a "Where's Waldo?" puzzle, in

which there are 500 things on the page that are not Waldo, and you have to look really carefully so you can find him in the midst. *All* of it is God. So, the question becomes, how can I see God in everything? How can I see the truth in everything? If we believe our scriptures, if we believe the teachings of the saints and the Gurus and the enlightened masters, what they tell us is that every single thing on Earth is God. *That's* the truth. Our identification with the body, mind, personality, and identity is all false. That's what we refer to as *maya*, the illusion. The truth is God.

I was recently in Vienna at this beautiful inter-religious gathering and several of the leaders were talking together about how actually in all of the religions, they say there's only one God. They were discussing how followers misunderstand and think that the various religions actually disagree, and the leaders were marveling about how the belief is actually the same – we all believe in one God. One of the religious leaders though turned to Pujya Swamiji and said, "But in Hinduism, you people say that there's so many gods." Before Pujya Swamiji had a chance to answer, somebody else who was there, another Hindu, said, "No, no, we also believe in just one God, everything is a manifestation of God." But Pujya Swamiji then pointed out, "Actually, what we believe is that it's not one God, it's *nothing but* God." That's a very subtle but very important distinction. It's not one God sitting out there somewhere. It's *nothing but* God.

Realizing God is about seeing the truth in the world. It's why in so many meditation practices, yoga practices, and *kriya* practices, in so many different traditions, we focus on the third eye. The third eye is a *chakra*, the *agya chakra*, or an energy center, and that particular energy center is the energy center of the power of discrimination.

This is why we put on *tilak*. It reminds us that all of the problems in the world begin with our two physical eyes. I see something, it makes me angry. In that anger, I act, I speak, I do stupid things, and I get the repercussions of those things. If I don't act or speak, my anger festers inside me, and I also get the repercussions from it such as ulcers and heart disease. I can't meditate. Or, I see something and I feel jealous. I question why that person has something when I don't, and I think, "If only I could look like you or have that *saree* or jewels or car." We see something and we covet it. We see something and it makes us feel lustful. All of the problems tend to trace back to what we see with these two physical eyes. So the reason that we put *tilak* on is to remind us: "God, let me open this eye, let my *agya chakra*, my energy center be awakened with that power of

discrimination – not discrimination of black/white, thin/fat, pretty/ugly, but discrimination of truth from falsehood – so that I can actually see the Truth. And what is that Truth? The Divinity. With these two physical eyes, I see you as a beautiful woman or handsome man. With this third eye, I see you as Divine, which happens to be in the container of a beautiful woman or the container of a handsome man. All of the meditations on the third eye are about opening up that center so that we can see the Truth. *That's* how we realize God. Whether we do it through actually meditating on the third eye specifically, or through our meditation and prayers, that's what our *sadhana* is about: to be able to see the Divine, to see the Truth, to recognize that all of these are just different containers.

A beautiful metaphor for this is the sun that is shining, and as many glass containers as I place on the ground is as many reflections of the sun that I'm going to get. The reflection may look slightly different between a tall, transparent glass with water in it and a shallow, empty pot, but they're all reflections of the same sun. The containers are not illusions, but the illusion is assuming that what I've got is just a glass or a pot, where really what I have is the sun.

How do we know if we've attained enlightenment or Self-realization?

When things are real, we feel them and we know them 100%. If you're standing in Ganga up to your neck, people on the shore could be shouting at you, "You're dry! You're dry!", but it wouldn't have any impact on you because you would know you are wet. The experience of being wet is so real that it doesn't matter what people shout. Even if you have a voice in your mind that says you don't deserve to be wet and you don't deserve to be in Ganga, the minute you are standing there, the experience of being wet trumps every voice of doubt in your mind and everything anybody on the shore could shout at you.

The same thing is true when you are really in love. I'm not talking about when you are in lust, momentary passion, or instinct or impulse. But once you really love – it doesn't matter if it's a romantic love, love for your parent, or love for your child – you never doubt. There's no voice in your mind that says, "Do I really love my mom? Do I really love my child? Do I really love?" Once you experience it, you know.

If I'm sitting in a room with the light on, you could try to convince me that I am in the darkness, but it doesn't matter how much you say that. I know

the light is on, I know that I can see.

The same thing is true with realization and enlightenment. When you attain enlightenment, the light is on. We all have the ability to know the difference between being in the light and being in the dark.

And yet the good news is, it's not all or nothing. We don't have to feel like we are hopeless and helpless just because we haven't fully gotten there. It's a process of unfolding, of opening every single day, every minute and every moment. Once we are really living in the light, the darkness has no hold over us. It's like that beautiful saying about how a single candle dispels all the darkness. No amount of darkness can do anything to the light. Once the light is on, the darkness is over.

When we think about our darkness, what is that darkness? Darkness in a room when the lights go out is obvious. But what's the opposite of enlightenment within myself? It's not darkness in terms of evil or bad, but it's darkness in terms of ignorance. The Indian spiritual tradition understands and speaks about darkness as ignorance. In that darkness of ignorance, I can't see, and when I can't see, I make assumptions. The assumptions are that I *am* this body, I *am* what I look like, I *am* what my career is, I *am* how much money I earn, I *am* all of these things. Then, what other people do determines my mood: "I was in such a good mood and then you did this. I was so peaceful, I was so happy, then you arrived, or you did this, or you said that."

When we're living in the light, that darkness doesn't happen to us. Most of us think that our inner situation, or *swastithi*, is determined by the situation on the outside surrounding us, or our *parastithi*. Thus, how I feel is determined by the world around me. *Swastithi* is determined by *parastithi*. When *parastithi* is going according to how I want it to go, my *swastithi* is great. If you do what I want, you say what I want, and it's sunny on the day I'm supposed to have a picnic, then I'm happy. But if you don't do what I want, you don't say what I want, and it rains on my picnic, then I'm sad. That's the darkness.

When my *swastithi*, my inner situation, is so full of light, then it doesn't matter what happens on the outside. It doesn't impact me. In fact, it goes the other way – my *swastithi* is so full of light that I change the *parastithi*. Instead of it being "*jaise parastithi, vaise swastithi*," or "as is the outer, so is the inner," it becomes "*jaise swastithi vaise parastithi*" – as is the inner, so

becomes the outer. When that happens, then we're living in the light, and that's what enlightenment is. It's just living in the light.

Pujya Swamiji always says that enlightenment is not like somehow suddenly your skin changes colors, or you grow horns on your head. It's an inner shift. But along the way, even if we're not quite there yet, even if sometimes what happens on the outside does impact us, we're moving minute by minute, day by day. Every minute is a new opportunity. If an hour ago I let my internal situation be determined by the outside, OK. Right now I have another opportunity. That's the great thing about being on a spiritual path in this universe, especially in the Kali Yuga! We get so many opportunities. Every minute, every moment is another opportunity to wake up. Missed it last moment? No problem, you have another opportunity. The world is going to keep presenting you with situations that put you at a fork in the road. The fork in the road is: where do I want to go with this? Something may have just happened and I can't change it, so I'm now at a fork in my road. Now it's up to me to decide where I'm going to go from it. How we think is actually what determines where we go.

If you walked into a train station and you said to the person behind the counter, "I'd like a ticket," what's the first thing they are going to say to you? "Where to?" Unless I know where I'm going, no one can sell me a ticket. I can go in and say I want a first-class ticket, or I want the cheapest ticket you've got, but they're still going to say, "Where to?" Until I know where I want to go, I can't buy a ticket, and each ticket I buy determines where I go. Sounds simple, sounds obvious, but we don't pay attention to that in our lives. Every time I'm at this fork in the road, every time something happens – someone says something, someone does something, the stock market crashes, my house burns down, or little things like I got yelled at, I got scolded, someone was mean to me, I was cheated – now I'm at a fork in the road. Where do I want to end up? Each road takes us to a different place, and each thought about what has happened is a ticket onto which train we are getting on.

The mistake that most of us make is we buy the tickets and get on trains that our family did, or our culture did, or people around us did, even though on a conscious level we know we don't want to end up in that place. But, one train cannot take you to two different destinations. If you get on a train to Calcutta, you cannot imagine that you'll end up in Chennai. If you want to go to Chennai, you've got to buy a ticket and get on a plane to

Chennai. If what we want in life is to be enlightened, or even if we're not so ambitious and we just want to be happy and peaceful and fulfilled, then why do we keep buying tickets and getting on vehicles that are taking us to misery, competition, jealousy, and lack of peace in ourselves? It's not conscious of course, but that's where the crowd is going so we just kind of follow the crowd and we end up on the train to misery. But every moment gives us another opportunity: "Ah, I got on the train to misery last month. I remember the whole crowd was going in that direction, so I joined them. I don't want to do that again. I've got a choice." You've landed at the station, and now it's up to you: where are you going to go?

There's even more good news! Say this minute I get on the wrong train: I have a thought of anger or "I hate you" and I start plotting vengeance, or I just let it eat me up inside. But, 15 minutes later or an hour later, again I have another opportunity to say, "Wait, I've done that before, I know where this train goes, I don't want to go there anymore!" We can then stop and get on a new vehicle! We know where the misery train goes, we know where the anger train goes, we know where the competition and the jealousy and the ego trains go, as we've been riding them our whole lives. They will always be there, so why not just see what happens if you jump on the forgiveness train or the "let it go" train? The "well, maybe it was supposed to be like this" train? Maybe it wasn't that the universe made a mistake and I just have to forgive the universe, maybe this actually was how it was supposed to happen. Maybe the universe actually knew exactly what it was doing, when it made this happen. Maybe the plight of all of the farmers with desiccated fields was more important than the picnic I had planned before it rained. Maybe it's not actually about me and my picnic. We always feel like it's about us, and it never occurs to us that maybe this wasn't really about me at all. Maybe instead of it being about me and my picnic, it rained because it was actually about the millions of farmers depending on this rain, or the children without water to drink.

Remember, the light is on. In the darkness, the light is off and we think it's about us, and we respond like that. When the light is on, we realize that it's not about us, and we can let it go, we forgive, and it doesn't impact our *swastithi*.

The Role of the Guru

Why do people search for a Guru? Why should we have or need a Guru?

The word “Guru” literally means the remover of darkness. “Gu” means darkness, and “ru” means remover of the darkness. So, the Guru is the one who removes the darkness and brings light. As we look at ourselves, we have to ask what darkness is it that we are needing to remove?

In the Indian spiritual tradition, there’s no concept or teaching of evilness. Instead, it’s a teaching of ignorance and the darkness of ignorance. It’s that darkness that we need light for. It’s not that the core of who we are is dark. The core of who we are is all of the same qualities that we worship, envision, and connect with in the Divine.

If you think about the qualities and characteristics that God has – grace, compassion, love, consciousness, infinity – these are the qualities that we have at the core. That’s who we are. We’ve been created not just *by* the Creator, but *of* the Creator.

There’s a beautiful mantra that teaches us that when you take anything from wholeness, completion, and perfection, what you get is wholeness, completeness, and perfection. It’s the same thing as we learned in our elementary school math class! What is infinity minus 100? Infinity. What is infinity divided by 10, or divided by 100? It’s still infinity. In the same way, each of us currently existing – the seven billion humans, plus however many animals and plants exist, everything in the creation – has been created not just by the Creator, but of the Creator. So at its core, the Truth of who we are is wholeness, completeness, perfection, light...all of it.

And yet, when we speak then about darkness, the suffering that would lead us to think, “Oh my God, I really need a Guru!” – it’s the darkness of ignorance. It’s not that the core of who I am is dark, it’s not that I need someone to turn me from being dark to being light. It’s that I need someone to remove the darkness that doesn’t allow me to see the light and to live in the light. That darkness comes when we identify with the body, with this external identity, with what we look like, where we’re from, what we own, and how much we make. All of that is the root of suffering.

If you took a poll and just asked people, “What are you suffering from?”, each person would give an answer that has something to do with the illusion of thinking that we are the body and our relationships. People might say things like, “I’m suffering because my mother-in-law just can’t let me live my life, she’s always criticizing me.” What another person has said or done has created suffering in them. Or, “I’m suffering because I worked for three months on this project, and then someone else put their name on it and took it to the boss.” So again, the suffering is because they’ve identified with the “doer” of that project, with the person who didn’t get the raise or the credit or the promotion. Or, “I’m suffering because it was the holiday season and I gained 10 pounds, now none of my clothes fit and I feel really ugly when I look in the mirror.” So again, they’ve identified with something that’s outside. We would all have a different cause of suffering, but each of them would be due to something that’s connected to the physical body, to our identity and how it relates to others, and to this sense of “I” as a separate being and therefore entitled to the raise, promotion, recognition, slender figure, and all of the things that we’ve identified as being uniquely entitled. *That’s* the darkness.

The light is who I really am. That wholeness, that completeness, that perfection. That which wears this body just like it’s worn so many other bodies, life after life. That which has current relations just like it’s had in so many lifetimes. But it’s not who I am. If I identify as a doctor, or even identify as someone’s wife or mother or child, or I identify as beautiful or rich or smart, well, at some point that’s going to shift. My relationship will shift: I’ll retire from my job, I’ll no longer look in the mirror and see someone I identify as beautiful, the stock market will crash and I’ll no longer be able to identify as rich. If I thought that *that* was who I am, then not only will I have lost a job or lost a relationship, not only will I have an empty nest or lost my looks, but I’ve also lost me. Anytime anything shifts in any of that, I go with it because I’ve hooked my identity into those things. That’s the cause of our suffering, so that’s the darkness.

The Guru means the remover of darkness. The word is actually very telling, because it does not mean the Guru is the creator of light. Even though these may sound synonymous, they're actually not, because the light has always been there. We just cannot see it, and we do not live in it. The Guru removes the darkness so that we can see the light. When we see, then we experience and we live in the light.

The Guru shines the first light, holds the light, then allows us to live in the light, because it's not just a matter of seeing. This is a very different light, this is a light that not only shows us but also gives us an experience. We actually live in the light.

How important is it to be initiated by a guru? In the perspective of a non-renunciate householder who is on a spiritual path but not looking to take sannyas, is initiation or diksha by a guru important or necessary?

The initiation by the Guru has nothing to do with whether we're going to take a vow of renunciation. The Guru is the one who removes darkness and brings light. That's the role of the Guru. The Guru is not someone who touches you on the head or waves a magic wand and turns you from a householder into a renunciate. The Guru's role is to bring light to whatever *dharma* you're living, to whatever role you have in your life, to whatever path you are on. It's not just that the Guru's initiation is for renunciates. Everybody needs light. Those of us in orange robes who have taken vows of renunciation need it, yet those who have not taken vows also need it.

All along the way, whatever role we may be in and whatever we're doing, the grace of the Guru is crucial, and here's why: God is there for all of us of course and we all know God is there, but it's very difficult for us to live like that. The Guru does not create God or bring God. He doesn't lasso God and bring God to you. Yet, it's very difficult of us to live in our light. We are so over-identified with the roles that we play and our body - with its history, with its personality, with everything it's doing, with all of its feelings, "I am angry, I am sad, I am this, I am that." We believe it so deeply, that that's we think we are. Yet, that's darkness. It's not "evil" darkness. It's just ignorant darkness. It's the darkness of ignorance that all of us need to be free of. It's the ignorance that says I *am* what I'm feeling, rather than just recognizing it as patterns that are going on in my head due to habits, due to *sanskaras*, due to experiences, due to my subconscious. It's not you. But it's difficult for us to live like that.

In theory, in an ideal perfect situation, the Guru would not be required. It would still be a wonderful joyful bonus, but we would be able to find the path, to find the way, and to connect to God on our own, because ultimately all of the tools we are using are from within us. What every Guru does is point us back within ourselves. There's no real Guru who says, "Memorize my teachings. Spit back out my teachings. Remember my name. Chant my name." Every Guru, in their own language, in their own way, is turning us back into ourselves – meditate, look within, pray, chant, do *japa*, etc. Whatever the particular tradition they come from, it's all about going within. So ideally, we wouldn't necessarily need a Guru because we'd already be within and able to connect to that Divine inside of ourselves.

The problem is we don't live in an ideal perfect world. We have our egos, desires, fears, and history of our lives which have patterned us to have certain desires, jealousies, complexes, confusions, and illusions. If we don't have a Guru, then we live our lives looking at the world and acting in the world through the lens of our anger, jealousy, confusion, and ignorance. That's where we need the Guru, because the Guru is the one who actually shines the light for us through our own ego, ignorance, illusion, and jealousy, and actually shows us the Truth.

The Guru comes in and shines a light for us, so that we can actually see the Self. The Guru is not going to do the work for you. Many people have that impression of the Guru. They think, "If I just find the *right* Guru...if I still have to work, forget it!" or "I've got the wrong Guru, I need a new Guru, a new mantra, a new teaching, a new yoga course to get a certificate in. If I just find the right one, I won't be so plagued, I won't have so many troubles, it won't be so painful in my life. The Guru will just do the work for me. The Guru will turn my darkness to light automatically." But, it's not exactly like that.

In America we have car washes, where you can sit in your car while your car goes through and gets washed. First the sudsy water comes, then the machines with the sponges come and scrub your car, all while you're sitting inside it. The Guru is not like that. It's not like you just get to sit in the car and watch the Guru scrub you clean and bring light into all your darkness and do all of the work for you. The Guru shines the light, showing you the truth of who you are: here is the truth, here is the path. You're lost in the jungle of your own mind, you have no way out, and the Guru has the light, shines it, and shows you where the path is. *But you've got to walk it.* The

Guru is not going to walk it for you. The Guru removes the darkness and shows us the light, but we have to walk it. We have to keep our eyes open. The light may be very strong, but if my eyes are closed, it doesn't matter how bright it is. I have to open my eyes.

Most of us sort of expect that if we just find the right Guru or the right mantra, or in some cases the right husband or wife, or the right job (it's not that all our minds are set that is has to be the Guru that's going to fix us), it's just going to come. Despite my closed eyes, it's just going to just flood me with light. No. The Guru brings the light, but I've got to open my eyes and I've got to walk the path.

So, whether we are a householder or whether we are a renunciate, we all need the light, we are all lost in the darkness of our minds, in the jungles of the stuff that goes on in our minds, jungles which are far denser than any jungle you could be lost in on Earth. The Guru shines the light for us.

Now, it doesn't always feel good. If you imagine that you are lump of clay on a potter's wheel, and the potter is going to turn you into something, what does the potter do? Every time the wheel goes around, the potter hits it! That's how the potter makes the cups and bowls! They're going to whack that lump of clay every time it spins around, and then they're going to take it and stick it in the fire! Anyone who has ever done pottery before knows that it doesn't matter how good of a shape your bowl or cup is, until you stick it into that kiln it is not done. So, the Guru is going to hit you (of course, not physically) in an effort to mold you, and then just when you think the spinning is stopped and the dizziness is wearing off, you get thrown in the fire. But when you come out, that lump of clay has actually been turned into art.

If you jump off the potter's wheel or you refuse to go into the fire, it doesn't matter how brilliant the potter is, they cannot make art with you.

This is the same with the Guru. The light gets shown, we get beaten into shape, we get thrown in the fire, but along the way we start to realize, "Wow, all this time, I thought I was just a lump of clay. Wow, now look at me!" Somewhere along the way, art has been made. We know that it wasn't us who did it, we were just the lump of clay. It was the grace of the Guru, it was the grace of the artist that turned that lump of clay into art.

If you haven't found your Guru, don't worry. That's just another concern for the mind. Don't worry. They say that when the disciple is ready, the

Guru appears. When you're ready to open your eyes and see the light, the Guru will come. But until then, don't worry, because there's actually a lot of Gurus who have already lived. Even though having your own personal Guru who actually is going to see you and teach to you and give a mantra to you is by far the most powerful, until you have that make use of all the Gurus who have lived in the past and left teachings and legacies and so many messages behind. There's so many places to turn for light on our path.

We all need that light. Wherever we are on the path, we all still have our egos. The ego is the cause of the darkness. The ego will tell you many things along the path: "Keep your eyes closed, this is reality, that whole light thing is just a myth. This is real. What I'm telling you is real, I know the truth, I've been with you your whole life. Who's he? Who's she? They've just shown up. I know the truth. You are your history, you are that stuff that's happened, you are your anger, you are your pain, you are your misery, you are your shortcomings. I know you, I've been living with you for decades, I'm your best friend." *That's the game the ego plays. That's where we need the light, because otherwise the ego just runs the show.* So, we need the Guru to bring the light and to show us the light.

What is your feeling about the role of a Guru in this age of heightened awareness of spirituality and accessibility of spiritual knowledge, science and technology?

We've got books, we've got YouTube, we've got everything online. We've got so many different classes, programs, CDs, trainings, programs, and certificates in whatever you want to learn. Enlightenment certificates, enlightenment classes, everything is there. I can only imagine how many videos there can be on YouTube about how to get enlightened in four minutes! It's all there. So the question is, do we still need a Guru? The answer is definitely yes.

We still need a Guru because all that knowledge has always been there but we have problems understanding it. The Gurus did not come into existence because God is somehow so esoteric or so difficult to reach that we needed someone to channel or translate. Connecting with God is not like learning quantum physics, where you really just can't wake up one day and get it, you really need someone who gets it to explain it to you. But God is not like that. God is not complex or esoteric or difficult, or some sort of long equation. The Gurus are here not because God is difficult, but

because *we* are difficult. We live our lives with a veil of ignorance in front of our eyes. But, we don't know that we do, and that's the game of the ego. We live our lives not seeing God, not because God is not there but because of we have a veil over our eyes. So the role that the Gurus play is not to bring God, but to pull that veil off our eyes so that we can see.

The ego is incredibly insidious. When we say ego we don't just mean arrogance, we mean all of the games. It can actually even be the exact opposite of arrogance. You could say, "I'm the least arrogant, I'm the most humble, in fact I'm so worthless that I wish I would just die!" – that's also ego. The ego runs the whole spectrum of every concept we can have about ourselves, from "I'm the best" to "I'm the worst." Whatever I think I need is also ego: I need this raise, I need this job, I need to marry this person, I need to have this child, I need to live in this place, I need people to treat me a certain way, I need to fulfill this potential that I have. This is all ego. Everything that pulls us out of the consciousness of who we really are is ego. It's not bad, it just keeps us from seeing God. It keeps us from connecting with who we really are, because whether I think I'm the best or I think I'm the worst, both of them are wrong. Both of them are keeping me from knowing who I really am.

The Guru removes the veil, removes the layers, so that we can see who we are. Then we know how to live. When we're living run by our egos, we always make a mess, whether we end up fighting with people, neglecting everything in the world to get ahead in business, or not fulfilling our potential because we don't even know what our potential is. All of this is because we don't know we are. Somebody could come in and say, "You have this potential to become the head of this or the CEO of that or the President of this," but that's not your potential. *Your potential is to allow the Divine to flow through you in every minute.* It has nothing to do with a career choice. It has to do with how we live from the moment we wake up to the moment we sleep, and even the moments we're asleep. That's the potential. Even if you decide your potential is to be a billionaire CEO, you're still selling yourself short because that's not who you are. So what the Guru does is remove every ignorance that says who we think we are, what we think we need, and where we think we're going. The Guru removes the veil so that we can see the Divinity in ourselves. When we can see that, then we have a chance to see the divinity in others, and seeing the divinity in others is the only possibility we have for actually connecting with people, for actually serving the world, and really for doing anything.

The Guru removes the darkness of ignorance and brings the light of truth of who we are, what the world is, what our relationship to the world is, where we're going, and how we're going there. The Guru brings *light*, not teachings that we can get in a book, a certificate, a course, or even a teaching. The Guru brings the actual *touch* of having that veil removed to allow light in our lives.

The Guru gives us the actual experience of that Divine we seek. Ideally, theoretically, yes, we'd be able to experience this alone, as it is all within. But what the Guru does is actually not just theoretical. It is not just someone handing you a treasure map and saying, "Walk ten paces ahead, take a left turn, walk four paces to the left, dig down ten feet, and you're going to find a clue." It's actually someone giving you the *experience* of that which you are looking for and it ignites us on our spiritual path.

We know theoretically that there is this thing called God, this thing called the Divine, this thing called Bliss, but we don't actually know what that is, and we would not necessarily recognize it if it landed in our laps. What the Guru does is actually gives us an experience of that, so that when we go within, when we meditate, when we pray, there is something pulling us back to that experience rather than sending us on this very random, sort of blind treasure hunt.

This doesn't mean that there aren't examples throughout history of people who have become spontaneously enlightened without a Guru. Ramakrishna Paramahansa is one, for example. But, those people are very few and very far between. They are souls who were pretty much enlightened before they got here. They are here to show the way to the rest of us.

For the rest of us who are plagued by ego, confusion, ignorance, desires, and fear, the Guru is very necessary.

Why are some people averse to having a Guru in their lives, or even God for that matter? How can we change our perspective?

If we are stuck with our perception, if we are still stuck with that control and it's so hard to let go and be devoted, this is when we bring in the *gyaan* yoga path, the path of wisdom. We actually say to ourselves, "OK, I've been running my life for a certain number of years. I've been trying to manage things for a certain number of years of my life. This is what, with my clarity of vision, I am able to see as the result of what I was doing." It

doesn't mean it was a disaster. I mean, on a personal level, I could look back at my life and say that it seemed like it was going fine, and yet, what it didn't have was the actual experience of bliss. It didn't have the actual potential for peace, for the transformation that a path of devotion takes you on. So, you begin actually with a very rational approach and actually examine what your life looks like when you control it. Then, when most of us are very honest about it, what we realize is that we don't actually do such a good job! We may be able to put things together on the external level – we can make money, we can build houses – but in terms of our deep inner level, we're not able to actually give ourselves the experience that we're looking for in our life through what we are doing.

That moment of realization, whether we've had it with God or the Guru, is when we come to an experience of, “OK, God. I've done everything I know how to do, and it's not working. Now I have to take this leap of faith.”

It's like when you go to the doctor. Most of us dislike going to the doctor, but some of us *hate* it. We all know people who, no matter what happens, will never go to the doctor until it's really bad. I know for me on a personal level, every time I get a cold, it begins with a stuffy nose and I get a little fever, and I will do *everything* Ayurvedic I possibly can to avoid taking any sort of allopathic chemicals. I end up going through *jars* of honey, which I mix with all kinds of different pastes for this and for that, going through bottles of what looks like dirt from different types of plants, gargling this and that, the whole thing. But then, it doesn't go away. At the end of the day, no matter what I do, I end up with bronchitis. Now, this is not true for everyone, this is a personal history of my life and my lungs, but I end up with bronchitis, and I end up on antibiotics. Thus, in the end what I've done is wasted two to three weeks of my life in which I've had a fever and haven't been able to do anything because I'm sick. And yet, even though I know this is the pattern, it is so difficult for me and my ego to say, the minute I get sick, “Maybe I should be smart this time and take the antibiotics from the beginning rather than wasting yet another three weeks of my life being sick and miserable.” Every time things like this come up, we always think, “Oh, I can do it, this time I'm going to do it.”

This is what happens in our life. We think, “Oh, I'm going to figure it out this time. I'm going to attain my peace, my joy, my enlightenment. I don't need anybody's help.” We, again and again we find that we keep falling.

Eventually, you get to the point. Sooner or later, you say, "OK God, I've done this enough. I know where this is going, I've seen this before. This is my pattern. I don't want to do this again. I'm now ready to admit that I don't know the way. I don't know the answer and I don't have the tools." It doesn't mean that there's something wrong with me, just like it doesn't mean there's something wrong with me because for a whole variety of reasons my lungs happen to be weak and I end up needing antibiotics. That doesn't make me a weak person or a bad person. Needing to have a Guru, needing to have God in our life does not mean that we're somehow weaker people. It actually means that we're stronger, because we're able to admit that we can't do this alone, and since God or the Guru are the ones who are actually there and where we want to be, we ask them to carry us across this ocean.

From that, we move into the devotion. First we have to understand that we're not going to do it ourselves, because otherwise relinquishing control is very difficult. Most of us tend to be a little bit over-educated for that, a little over-indoctrinated for that, and we try to hold on. Eventually though, we realize it's not working. That's when we shift into the devotion. It shouldn't be our last resort, but in many cases it ends up being our last resort. The beautiful thing about that though is that it's no less magical. They never say, "Yeah, yeah, I know I'm your last choice!" It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter whether they're first choice or last choice, they're ready. That's the grace.

How should we approach Pujya Swamiji as the Guru, or a Guru in general?

Different people respect and revere Pujya Swamiji in different ways, in the same way that there's so many stories in the scriptures about how God appears to us based on what our wish, desire, or particular vision is. What we're taught and told in many ways in the scriptures is that God is infinite, and therefore God appears in infinite ways to people, depending on the different connections that people have with God and their perceptions.

If I go to God and say, "Oh God, please just help me get an A on my exam tomorrow," that relationship is going to become very different whether I get the A or I don't get the A. If I get the A, I'll say, "Oh God, you are so great, God gave me the A on this exam!" However if I don't get the A, I'll say, "Oh God, You let me down. I prayed, I chanted all my mantras, I did everything, but nonetheless God You let me down!" We don't think about how maybe we didn't study or maybe we didn't know the material.

In our minds, we think, “I prayed to God for the A and I didn’t get the A, thus God has betrayed me.” Well, that’s a very simplistic, almost material vision of God. It doesn’t make it *wrong* or *bad*, because since God is infinite in everything he can also be the bestower of A’s. But, it’s a very shallow and simplistic vision, and when God is so much more infinite, why would we only go with the vision of an A on an exam?

I share this with you because when we come to the Guru, the situation is often very similar. Some people may come, and because He is someone who is of the highest level, the highest goal, the highest level of spirituality and attainment, He is seen as some sort of bestower of boons. He is seen as someone who is here on Earth in life but free, while the rest of us are here because we have to be here to work out our karma. Our saints and Gurus are here by choice. They’ve come down – we use the word *Avatar* – by choice to help the rest of us. So sometimes, people come and they bow and they say, “Oh please, can you get my child into the school that we want her to go to?” It’s not “wrong” or “bad” to do this, but it’s very limiting for us. If all I can see in front of me is someone who maybe has the power to get my child into school, to get me a raise in my job, to make me more beautiful, or to make the boy I love also love me, if that’s the highest vision and goal that I have, then I’m cheating myself.

So when we ask how people respect and revere Him, well, it depends on who the person is. If I’m a very materialistic person and all I can think about is what I can buy or what I can have or how much money I can get or how beautiful I can become, then when I go to God or I go to the Guru, that’s what I’m going to ask for. These will be my prayers.

But, if I’m a deeply spiritual person, I’m going to see someone in front of me who is not only a messenger, but is also like a raft. If there’s an ocean and I know I need to go across, a messenger will simply say to me, “Swim.” Well, that’s helpful if I know how to swim and am strong enough to swim. But even more powerful than a messenger who says “Swim” is someone who can be a boat or a raft and just say, “Come on, climb on, I’ll take you across.” When people see a Guru, the power that the Guru has for us is to actually not just say, “Swim,” but to give us the experience of actually being carried across. We have to have that vision though. We have to understand that there’s an ocean, and that even with all the material possessions, we’re still drowning in this ocean of illusion, this ocean of ignorance, and we need someone who can help us get across. So many people come to Him for that. Our oceans may seem different, we may

have different experiences of the ocean, but a real Guru is able to help people across their own oceans.

Lastly, just because it wouldn't be complete if I didn't include this, for people who see Pujya Swamiji as a man – who don't necessarily come with a spiritual mindset, who are not asking material questions but are also not asking spiritual questions, who haven't come to ask anything at all – what they see is someone who has completely dedicated Himself, whose entire life, whose every breath and every moment, is spent in the service of others. Someone who wants nothing for Himself, who only wants that His world family – humans, animals, trees, rivers, fish, birds, everything – should be taken care of. Even people who are not religious or spiritual see that, and they have deep, deep respect and reverence for that. Most of us think only for ourselves, what we can get, or at most we think for our little families, parents, or children. To really live with the world as your family, 24 hours a day (not 9-5, not Monday through Friday) is very inspiring. So, many people see Pujya Swamiji not just as a spiritual religious saint, the messenger, the boat, or the Divine holy being, but they also see Him as someone who symbolizes the highest that we should strive for in our lives.

What do we do when we are misled by a “fake” Guru?

We are all here in human form. The real enlightened masters may be in a human body, but they are what we call free, or *jivamukti*. They've attained liberation in the body but they're here by choice. But, those are very few beings.

Not nearly everyone in saffron, not nearly everyone who claims to be a Guru is actually enlightened. The truth is, that's not even a prerequisite to be a Guru. You can learn from someone, you can gain a lot from someone who may not necessarily be enlightened. They may just be somewhere on the path, at a place from which they can give you guidance and teachings that are beneficial for you. But here's what happens: they are living a human life, with all of the human issues. Many times what happens is followers start to grow very quickly, and a Guru, who may have gotten into this very sincerely in the beginning, may develop so many followers who are telling him, “You are God, you are Divine, you are perfect.” If that person is not really enlightened or has not done intense, personal *sadhana* and intense personal psychology to help them through their own egos, to help them even recognize their own egos, to help them with their desires, then what ends up happening is the ego grows. The more people that

come, the more the ego grows. Then the Guru starts to think that he or she *is* God and *is* perfect, and they lose the ability to hear anything anybody may be saying about something not being quite right. It then goes on and on, until one day it finally blows up and explodes.

But, here's the point for us. Most of us would love – in fact it's the ideal situation – to have an enlightened Guru who is giving teachings of enlightenment. But sometimes, they aren't. Sometimes, the teacher may be able to give teachings that are very powerful, and that's why they are attracting so many people and so many people are benefiting from their teachings. The Guru may be corrupt or a problem, but when the people who are doing the teachings are sincere, they're benefitting from them. This of course means that there's something in the teachings themselves, separate from the Guru, that is true and beneficial. Your doctor may be crazy, but that doesn't mean that the medicine he prescribes you is not going to work. Now, it would be nice of course to have a doctor who was very sane, brilliant, wonderful, perfect, and who prescribed the right medicine. In an ideal world, it would always go together. But what you see frequently in the spiritual world, more frequently than it should happen sadly, is that the teachings are pure and beneficial, as evidenced by all the followers who are benefitting from them, but the vessels through which those teachings are coming are not actually that pure. The vessels have gotten slightly contaminated – by ego, desire, greed, lust, by whatever it is. But as a follower, *don't lose faith in the teachings just because the vessel they came through has proven not to be perfect.*

We put a lot on the Guru. Again, if it's an enlightened master, no problem – you can put everything on them, you're never going to be let down. But if the teacher is not enlightened, if it's just a *sadhak* human being who happens to have attained some realization, has attained some awareness, who has learned some teachings, who got into this sincerely but who ended up getting wrapped in their own *maya*, in their own ego, in the whole drama, and ended up getting pulled off the track by temptations, ego, fear, or greed, *remember that the teachings only came through the guru.*

If you have benefitted by the teachings, don't say "fake." The Guru may not be someone you want to have faith in now. They may be someone who has definitely not conquered their ego, greed, or lust. That is fine – they're human like a lot of other humans. Don't bow down to them, fine. Don't have faith in them, fine. But, don't lose faith in the teaching that came through them just because the vessel wasn't perfect. Sometimes, for some

reason, God chooses very imperfect vessels for very beautiful teachings.

In a situation like this, I would say hold onto the teachings if they benefitted you. Whatever the Guru has done or is doing, that's between the Guru and God, or the Guru and their own *karma*.

Don't ever feel badly about people or Gurus you had faith in who turned out not to be worthy, because ultimately you learned something from the experience. The fact that they deceived you is now their *karma* for them to deal with. But *you* don't have to deal with them. You had faith, and that faith will bear fruit, whether they were worthy of your faith or not. Through the teachings, through the experience of having faith, you've grown and you've evolved.

How do we tell the difference between a real Guru and a "fake" Guru?

If you have found someone who's really enlightened, you're in the best shape. Of course though, it's hard to tell, because if we're not enlightened it's hard to tell someone who is. However, I can give just a few hints from my personal experience on how to know if someone is real or isn't real.

The first and the most important thing, from what I've personally seen, is that the more someone tries to convince you that they are enlightened, to convince you that they are the right Guru for you, to convince you that they are the best, the most divine, and the most enlightened, the faster you should run in the other direction! Those who are really enlightened are perfectly content to just sit and meditate. They're not looking to grab people, they're not looking to make tons of disciples. Or, they're perfectly content to serve the world. For example, when people come to meet Pujya Swamiji, He meets them because as a Guru that's what He does, but if nobody is there, He's very happy to meditate or to work on plans to serve the world: where to plant more trees, where to build more toilets, where to open more schools? He's not looking to convince more people. He doesn't worry when nobody comes to meet Him in a day. So, if you feel like the person is trying to convince you or sell you themselves, run as fast as you can in the other direction.

The other hint that I'll give is: the more complex a Guru makes something, or says things like, "You can only learn meditation from me because meditation is SO complex, and I'm the only one who has distilled this complex teaching into something that a peon like you would understand, the greatness of me has distilled this down to your level...if you spend

the next three years studying under me and give me tens of thousands of rupees, I'll give you the teaching," again, *run in the other direction*. Remember, spirituality is about coming back to the Self. It's not like learning to play basketball or the piano, or learning to do something that we don't do naturally. Spirituality is coming back to who we are; it's coming back to the spirit. Meditation is connecting with the Self. So, the practice is a practice of removing that which is not Self, but there's a lot of ways to do it. Those who try to make it seem really complex, really esoteric, who try to make it seem like there's only one right way to meditate – again, these are people who are trying to sell you something. If anybody is trying to sell you something, it means they've got an agenda. If they have an agenda, then I would argue that they're not really enlightened. That doesn't mean that they're a bad person or that their teachings aren't of good value. It doesn't mean that they won't be beneficial, but to me that would be a cue that this person is not really quite enlightened yet.

Lastly, when you're in the presence of a real Guru, you feel something different inside yourself. But, it's not the Guru's charisma. That takes a little bit of subtlety to understand, because when we are in the presence of a very charismatic leader, you also get a sense of excitement. This is how people as horrendous and corrupt and evil as Hitler were able to mobilize people. As evil as he was, he was incredibly charismatic. Throughout history, if you look at both the great leaders as well as the evil leaders, the one thing they have in common is charisma. So, what you want to understand subtly within yourself is: am I attracted to the charisma of this person, or am I attracted to something deeper? Charisma gets our mind excited, makes us feel like, "Oh, I'm going to be part of something! This person knows the way!" But with enlightenment, we feel it in our hearts, and instead of being frenetic and hyper like how charisma inspires, it feels very peaceful. That's a slightly subtler distinction that you have to ask yourself, but you'll be able to understand: when you are in this person's presence, do you feel that which you are looking for? The Guru not only teaches us, but actually gives us the experience. So if what you're looking for is peace, love, stillness, and divine connection, do you feel that in the presence of the Guru? If you do, then what it means is the Guru has been able to give that to you, and we can't give what we don't have. If the Guru has been able to give you that feeling, that experience, it means the Guru has that. In that way, that Guru is the right one.

Devotion

What is devotion and bhakti yoga?

Devotion or *bhakti* is love, but it's that full love, that love that's not asking anything in return. Devotion is not about what are you going to do for me. So many times these days in most of our relationships, they become give and take, they become a 50/50, they becomes "I love you when you are doing what I want you to do, speaking the way I want you to speak, treating me the way I want you to treat me." But, miraculously, no matter how much I may profess my undying, unconditional, eternal love for you, the minute you're no longer doing what I want or acting the way I want, I no longer am able to access that love. I shout, I criticize, insult, I sulk and walk into the other room, whatever it is. Whatever my reaction may be, they are reactions that are the opposite of love and connection. So, devotion is that love which doesn't ask for anything in return.

Devotion is that love that loves just to love. Devotion is that love that is its own reward. It's not "I love you so that I will get this" or "I love you so that I will feel like that," but in devotion, the love is its own reward. Just loving you is in and of itself a reward. That juice, that *ras*, that essence of life.

Bhakti yoga is the path of devotion. Whether it's singing, praying, or doing *puja*, or even doing things like gardening or cooking, it brings us into that union with the Divine, because remember yoga is union. We're uniting with God. But, as we speak about so frequently in here, God is infinite, which means that your *bhakti* yoga doesn't have to be focused on a specific image of God or a specific statue or a particular name. *Bhakti* yoga is any way in which you connect through love to the Divine. It can even be with another person, as long as what you're loving is *essence*. You're loving God. You may think you're loving this person, but if what you're loving is the

essence of who they are, not just their body but really their soul, then what you're loving is God. You're just loving God in this form or God in that form. There's no rule in *bhakti* yoga about which form of God or which name of God it has to be, but that devotion, that love is what brings real meaning in our life.

There's a beautiful story from Hanumanji, who is the epitome of devotion. At Parmarth, we chant the Hanuman Chalisa every night before the Ganga Aarti to instill in us that devotion, that *ras*, that essence, that juice. So, there's a beautiful story about how, at the end of war in Lanka rather, after Sita Ma has been rescued and Lord Rama has been victorious, Sita Ma gives Hanumanji this beautiful pearl necklace, and she says, "Now Hanuman, these pearls are very precious. Be very careful with them, this is a special gift for you, for the hero you've been, for how you saved me." So she gives Hanumanji this pearl necklace, and he proceeds to take the beads one by one, look at them from the top and from the bottom and from the left and from the right, and then he puts them in his mouth one by one and bites them! Remember, Hanumanji is in the form of a monkey, so he's very good with the mouth and the teeth. He puts it in his mouth and bites in and then spits them out onto the ground! Sita Ma watches as he does this pearl by pearl by pearl. Finally she can't take it anymore, and she exclaims, "Hanuman, what are you doing?? I've told you that this pearl necklace is very precious, you're biting them, you're spitting them on the floor, what are you doing??" And Hanumanji says, "See Sita Ma, I'm looking for my Rama in these pearls. You said they were precious, and if they're precious, then it means my Lord Rama is in the pearls. If Lord Rama is not in them, then they're worthless."

This is such a beautiful lesson in devotion, because when you're really devoted to the Divine, whether in some Divine form, whether in the form of humanity, whether in the form of nature, whether in the form of your child or your mother or the tree in your backyard or your grandmother, if what you're loving is essence, you're loving the Divine. So when you're really devoted, it doesn't matter how expensive, how sparkly, how beautiful the necklace may be, if the beloved is not there, it's worthless.

This is really the essence of devotion. All of that which I really want in life comes from loving God, comes from being connected to God. The reason for that is because our love for each other is usually conditional love. For a fallible human being, our love is typically conditional. As I said in the beginning, they do what we want, they act like we want, they speak like

we want, they treat us like we want, and we love them. They don't, we don't.

When I'm connected to the Divine, when I'm really in love with the Divine, with spirit, then these small little things that used to bother me – my expectations, my desires, my ego, my fears, my longing, my temptations, all the stuff that we're looking to detach from – automatically lose their hold on me because I've become reattached to the Divine. The fruit of devotion is being immersed in love for the Divine, with the Divine. Usually in life you have the lover, the beloved, and love, but in *bhakti* yoga that union brings the lover the beloved and the love into One, so there's no longer any separation.

We have in India these two paths. One is the non-dualistic path, the path of *advaita*, which says everything is God, there is nothing but God, there cannot be a lover or a beloved because there's no separation, there's only, it's all God. Then we have the dualist path, where we do have the lover and the beloved, but on that path, at the highest level, at the deepest truest level, of course it's all God. Of course. Of course we are all One. And yet, being in love is so beautiful, feels so good, and is the path to everything else – all of the happiness, all of the peace, all of the joy – and life comes from that from that love! So yes, on the highest, most intellectual awareness level, I can tell you, "Yes, it's all God," but being in love with God, being able to have this *bhakti* yoga is so beautiful and such a beautiful path to connect with God. So this is the perspective *bhakti* yoga comes from.

The last point about this though is that we speak about *bhakti* yoga, the path of devotion; we speak about *gyaan* yoga, the path of wisdom; and we speak about karma yoga, the path of action. It's important to mention that the paths are not actually separate. They are three phases of the same love. You can begin anywhere, it doesn't matter, but if wherever you begin is real, you end up with the other two. So for example, let's say you begin with *gyaan* yoga, path of wisdom. Well, the more you learn about God – God inside you, God outside you – the more you love, and the more you love, the more you want to serve. When you love someone, you love to bring them breakfast in bed, you love to bring them things, to take care of them, to surprise them with chocolates and flowers. We do these things because we love. So, you can begin anywhere of the three and it'll take you into all of them. It'll take you into that union of yoga. Don't worry about which one comes more easily. For many of us, the path of love and devotion comes more easily. For others, the path of knowledge comes more easily.

For others, the path of service comes more easily. But don't worry. They'll bring you to that union of all three of them, to that confluence.

What is devotion? What's the benefit of devotion? Why be devoted?

For those of us from the West, devotion is a very difficult subject. It comes much more easily to people in India who are born and raised in this beautiful culture, but for those of us who come in from outside, we're not so used to a culture of devotion. Yet, devotion is probably the best answer to anything that ails us – physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually, and in every aspect of our life.

Here's the thing about devotion: we are already devoted anyway. Even if you say you don't want to be devoted, we are devoted. It's just most of us are devoted to our own egos, to perceptions of how things are, to getting our own way, and to enjoying our life the way we want to enjoy it. So, we're actually already devoted. The problem is that we're devoted ourselves to things that lead us deeper and deeper into anxiety and depression. Not having real devotion in your life is one of the easiest ways to be depressed. If all we are attached to, all we're connected and devoted to is our own perception, getting our own way, our own egos, misunderstandings, achievements, career ladders, finances, social circles – if those are the only things I'm devoted to, it's a sure equation, a sure prescription for depression.

Real devotion takes us out of ourselves into something that is so much bigger and so much more eternal. Our lives, on the physical level, on the mundane level, are constantly changing. Sunny day today, rainy day tomorrow. Stock market up today, down tomorrow. Everyone is nice to me today, mean to me tomorrow. If this is what I'm devoted to, my life goes up and down. But, if what I'm devoted to and connected to is something that's eternal, something that's bigger, deeper, more profound than just this physical life, then it gives me a chance to actually plug in to what Pujya Swamiji calls the Divine Powerhouse. We really get a chance to be connected to that energy, and from that, everything is possible.

Look at Hanumanji. During the war in Lanka, Hanuman serves as the devotee of Lord Ram and ends up being really the hero of the war. He's the one who rescued Sita Ma, he's the one who helped Lord Ram win this entire war against Ravana, but at the end of the war, and at the end of the war he is asked how he could have possibly done it. Hanumanji is in the

form of a monkey! How did he do it, how did he fly across the ocean? During the story, he performs all of these feats. He flies across the ocean to get to Lanka. He carries the entire Himalayas in his hand in order to bring back the herb that's going to save Lakshman's life. He holds the Sun under his arm to stop it in its tracks. He makes himself enormous, he makes himself tiny. He does all of these miracles. And at the end of the war, he's asked, "How did you do it?" Now, what does Hanumanji say? Well, what he *doesn't* say is, "Well, I've been training and lifting at the gym, going through this wonderful process to learn to fly, I've got the best trainer, best coach," or, "I got some magic herbs, a wonderful *vaidya* gave me the herbs of invincible strength." He doesn't even say that he had some kind of a magic mantra. Nothing like that. What he says is, very simply, "I just close my eyes and I take Lord Ram's name, I take God's name, and it happens."

It happens. This is the fruit of devotion. This is the magic of devotion. It makes things happen. It's not that it always makes things happen in the outer world. It's not that we become devoted with an ulterior motive that if I get devoted, then I too can fly. Hanumanji was not devoted so that he could do magic tricks. The miracles were due to the devotion, not the other way around. Many times in our own life, it's internal. Look at Meerabhai, an incredible, historical example of devotion. She is handed poison, but in that poison what she sees is nectar, Lord Krishna's nectar. I love this on a personal level because it's the intersection of science and spirituality. It actually was poison. The bowl was poison, we have the history. This is not mythology. And yet, this story shows that what matters more than actually what we're taking in is how we think about it. What matters more than what is happening in our life is our perception of it. This is what Meerabhai was able to do through devotion. She was so convinced through her devotion that everything that came to her was Krishna – if there's nothing but Krishna in the world, than this bowl is also Krishna. There's nothing separate from Krishna. So, even though what she was given chemically and molecularly should have killed her, her perception of it as nectar from Krishna was strong enough to overpower the molecular structure of the liquid. She gets given a basket of a poisonous snake. But again, everything is Krishna. So by the time she's got the lid off the basket, what's in it? A garland of flowers.

This is the power of devotion. It literally, alchemically transforms our lives. It is what carries us across this ocean, this ocean of *samsara*, and breaks the bonds of this cycle of birth and death. It's only devotion. It's only that love.

We talk about the practice of non-attachment or detachment as this great spiritual virtue, that if you want to go anywhere spiritually, you have to be unattached. It's a question that comes up so frequently in satsang: how do I detach myself while living in the world, from things with my family or things with my job or whatever it is that's causing us stress and frustration and depression? And again, devotion is the answer.

Bhakti (Devotion) is actually the Mother of *Vairagya* (Non-attachment or Detachment). Now, what this makes us understand is that detachment is not a pushing away. It's not saying I don't want to pay attention to these things in my life, I don't want to be attached, because if my attention is just on that then what I'm doing with my life is "not-being-attached." I'm still thinking about it. If we say, "OK, I'm not going to be attached to my children," and all day long we chant this mantra "I'm not going to be attached, I'm not going to be attached," well, my brain and my mind and my mental energy is still centering around my children. I might as well be attached to my children, or to my job, or to my possessions, or to whatever it is I'm trying to detach from. If I'm doing it by trying to push that away, then my energy, focus, mind, and attention are just as much with them.

So devotion again is the answer, because through *bhakti*, we get *vairagya*. This is because as we are devoted, as we have *ras*-filled, juice-filled, beautiful *bhakti*, we actually re-attach ourselves to the Divine, to something that is eternal, much deeper and more profound and higher and bigger than anything that we are stressed or worried about or attached to on this plane of existence. So, by reattaching ourselves to the Divine, we are automatically pulled us away from the attachment to things here. That's what fills us. Devotion is key for *vairagya*.

In order to be devoted though, we have to let go a little. The enemy of devotion is control, control and ego, because I cannot simultaneously be devoted to you – whether you as my Guru, you as a being, you as Divine – and trying to control everything. Every minute I try to control is a moment I'm not surrendered.

In order to actually bring devotion into our life, we have to let go of control, control of how we thought the Universe should be, control of how we thought our lives should be, control over what we think we should get, control over how we think it should be. Whatever comes from God, we must see as *prasad*, like Meerabhai, and that's the transformation. It's not, "How can I look at that bowl of poison and scream at God, scream at

my husband, my in-laws, the maid who brought it in and try to control it that way?" No. How many people are we going to keep screaming at, how many people are we going to keep trying to change? The only way to change is to change our perception. That's the fruit of devotion. Meerabhai's devotion didn't change her husband, in-laws, or the maid who brought her the bowl, but it actually turned the poison to nectar. That's what devotion does.

Can you explain a little more about the connection between bhakti (devotion) and vairagya (detachment)?

Detachment is the English translation of the Sanskrit term *vairagya*. Now, that idea is a great virtue. It's something that is extolled over and over again in the scriptures and by the masters that we must have *vairagya*. The problem with the translation though is that what you end up getting when you say "detachment" is disconnection, and we start to think that being spiritual means to become disconnected, that we shouldn't care. This is where you get all of that which I call real false spirituality. It's the, "Look at how detached I am, look at how disconnected I am, let the world suffer and die, let them go hungry, let them be miserable, I'm detached." Then we feel good about ourselves for that, because we convince ourselves that that is a spiritual way to live! The person in front of us trips and falls, and we say, "Oh, must be their *karma*," and we keep walking on our way!

There's no enlightened spiritual master I have ever heard of or been blessed enough to be near who isn't an ocean of compassion, who isn't an ocean of caring and connection and service. This is why the greatest service is being done by the masters, because they care so deeply, they are so deeply connected, that the hunger of the world, the thirst of the world, the pain of the world, the misery of the world is something they experience as their pain, and that's why they serve. They don't serve as separate. They don't serve as in, "Oh, I'm so great." They serve because the world is Self. They're really seeing the Divine in all – in the hungry, in the sick, in the miserable, in the trees, in the rivers, in the children – and so they serve.

So now, we get to this aspect of detachment and this aspect of devotion. How do we understand these two seemingly conflicting aspects? The way that I came to understand it was when I was listening to a beautiful Saint speak about the scriptures and talk about how the birth of Vairagya. In the scriptures, virtues are personified, so Vairagya was a child who was the offspring of the character Bhakti, who personified devotion. For me, that

explained everything. If *bhakti* is juicy devotion – not dry, disconnected, apathetic devotion, but juicy, *ras*-filled devotion – how can it give birth to apathy, detachment, and disconnection? It didn't make sense, and this is when I realized that the English translation isn't exactly correct.

The way of understanding it is: we begin with Bhakti the mother, so we devote ourselves to the Divine, with deep love and deep devotion for the Divine. When that happens, then we have what you could call re-attachment. So, instead of being attached to the things of this world, instead of being deeply attached to my car or my house or my clothes or my jewelry, I've become attached to the Divine. When I've become attached to the Divine with such love and such juice, then naturally my attachment to the other things is going to dissipate, because I've found something that is so much richer, so much fuller, so much deeper, so much more fulfilling than that which I was getting from looking at my car, from looking at the clothes in my closet, from buying jewelry after jewelry item. There's of course nothing wrong with these things, but now I'm able to use them for what they are, not as objects of my attachment. So when we reattach ourselves through *bhakti* to God, then we automatically end up with this *vairagya*. Instead of pushing ourselves away from the world and disconnecting, it's connecting to the Divine so deeply that I'm so filled with that joy, that *ras*, that love, that whether somebody is nice to me or not nice to me, or dances according to my tune or doesn't dance according to my tune, or brings me flowers and chocolates or doesn't bring me flowers and chocolates, it doesn't send me going up and down, it doesn't turn me from joyful to miserable, because I'm no longer hooked into those things. Instead of being connected to the waves on the ocean that go up and down on the surface, I'm connected to the depths, I'm connected to that which is eternal, that which is unchanging.

Vairagya is powerful, but I would be careful about the word detachment, because detachment tends to easily get co-opted into indifference, laziness, and apathy, and that's not a virtue. The virtue is the re-attachment to the Divine that leads us actually into compassion and service for the world, and an automatic dissipation of my attachment to the things of the world, not because I've pushed them away, but because my hands have become so full of something richer and more meaningful and more fulfilling.

How can we stay devoted and connected anywhere?

The Divine is One that is infinite enough that God exists not just on the

banks of Ganga, but exists in the same infinite way in New York, Los Angeles, Miami, London, Sydney, and wherever we go. Otherwise, it wouldn't be God, it wouldn't be infinite. If God only lived in one place, we would lose the whole concept of God being infinite. So if we know that, then the question becomes why is it so hard to see God and to connect to God?

A lot of that has to do with the environment that were in. So many people come to Rishikesh, come to Parmarth, and feel so connected to God, and are so worried that when they go back to wherever they come from in the world that they're not going to find that connection there. Rishikesh is an environment that is buzzing with spirituality. If you say to people on the street, "How are you?", they say, "Oh, *Ganga ki kripa*, just the grace of Ganga." Or, they say, "Bas, *Bhagwan ki kripa*, it's just God's grace." If you ask someone what they are planning to do the next day, they say, "Well, whatever is God's plan." So even in everyday conversation, even our non-religious, colloquial conversation is invoking God.

Rishikesh is also though a very devotional world. We gather together on the banks of Ganga, to worship, to sing, and to pray every night. Everybody who's here is here for some spiritual practice, whether it's deep meditation, whether it's yoga, whether it's philosophy. Rishikesh may be many things, but it's not the shopping capital of the world, it's not the diamond or gold capital of the world. Nobody comes here with just the aim of shopping. Instead, you've got people who have come here looking for the same thing – spirituality – and that helps. Don't underestimate that, because this is the same reason why in college it's so much easier to study in libraries than to study in your dorm room. The book is the same and your brain is the same, so theoretically you should be able to learn that material wherever you are. But, anybody who's ever tried to study in a dorm room with music blasting, people running up and down the hallways, people drunk, you know that you find yourself reading the same paragraph over and over again. There may be a vague recollection that you've already read the same paragraph, but it's not sticking. Yet, if you take the same book, the same brain, and you go sit in the library, you can study. It's not though just because it's the difference between quiet or noisy, it's the whole atmosphere. That's what you have in Rishikesh.

Don't underestimate the power of a place, the power of *satsang*, the power of association or your *sangha*, your group. These things are very important. This is why in the Indian spiritual tradition we emphasize *satsang* so

much, because being together, being in the association, is very powerful and it changes us. We're energetic beings, we're picking up on each other's energy. If the energy around me is frenetic, moving in and out, drinking, reading comic books, being stupid, it's going to be hard for me then to really channel my energy into study and focus. But, if I'm in a place where everybody's energy is study and focus, then it becomes very conducive to me.

So, when you are not in Rishikesh but in the place you live, try to find a *sangha*, find a group. You don't have to click 100%. When you go back, there is a level of acceptance of something being enough, even if it's not perfect. For example, when I was back in California for a few months when Pujya Swamiji sent me back, after being in India for several months and having such a life-changing experience, there were local organizations that I went to. There was a Paramhansa Yogananda organization, there were a couple other organizations, yoga studios. Now, they weren't a 100% exactly what my devotional practice was, but they were close enough. They were much closer to my heart than the student union or the coffee shop or the cafeteria or my dorm room. So, you may not find a place that feels exactly right – I'm not saying it's going to feel like being in Rishikesh – but at least it's a group that's committed to the same practice. That's very powerful.

Another point to remember is that the Divine to whom you are devoted lives in everyone, so literally, as you walk down the street, start a practice – can you see God in everyone? I don't mean theoretically, but literally, can you look in people's eyes and find it? It's hard, it's especially hard in big cities. People are stressed, they're not open to you seeing the Divine in them, but can you see it? Make it a challenge for yourself. See how many people each day you can see the Divine in. Then, it 1) makes your spirit to practice a little bit more broad, and 2) it brings a sort of almost fun element into it. The spiritual practice, instead of being drudgery, becomes fun! How many can you get today? You got five yesterday, how many can you get today? Who can I see on the subway? Who can I look at and really get that sense of Divinity?

On another level, when we're aware of the fact that we're all One, which of course is what our spirituality tells us, then it means we're One with each other. If I can't see God in you, can I see me in you? Can I have a connection with you of "Oh yeah, that's me in there." In this way, you end up with a much deeper and fuller and richer experience of being there.

The last part I want to share about this though is a true story of when I was back in Los Angeles with Pujya Swamiji. I had been in India at this point for about a year – again, this is after I first left India – and I said to Pujya Swamiji, “Swamiji, I know you say God lives everywhere, but why is it that I feel God so much more in Rishikesh than in Los Angeles? I mean, I understand intellectually when you say that God is everywhere, but why don’t I feel God here in Los Angeles in the same way I feel God in Rishikesh?” And Swamiji replied, “Yes, God is everywhere, and God isn’t any more in Rishikesh than in LA...but Ganga is Ganga.” That answer has stayed with me over twenty years, because it really is the epitome of the “yes, and yes” answer. Yes, God is everywhere. Yes, you can connect with God everywhere. And yes, there is something very special and different about Rishikesh. Neither undermines the other. They coexist. It’s the “yes, and yes.”

How can we be faithful, but not blindly faithful?

The concept of blind faith is actually, I believe, a Western concept rather than an Eastern concept. In the East, in the traditions of India and the countries to where India’s various faiths have reached, the traditions are rooted in faith, rooted in devotion, and people’s lives are fed from that faith and devotion.

Things happen. You may have faith in someone that it turns out wasn’t really worthy of your faith, but nobody ever, whom I’ve heard of in history at least, regretted that they had had faith. The faith in and of itself. See, faith has two aspects – the one who has faith, and the object of that faith. So, if I have faith in you, one part of this faith packages you, but the other part is me. Even though it may turn out that maybe you weren’t necessarily the right person to put my faith in, I’m still so grateful for the experience of having faith. The faith itself has changed me.

There’s actually a beautiful story, a very traditional common story of the Indian spiritual tradition of a man who has this Guru, and he’s got great faith in his Guru, and he wants nothing more than to be able to walk on the water. So he says to his Guru one day, “Guruji, please give me the mantra so that I can walk on the water.” The Guru says, “OK, you’ve been such a good faithful disciple, I’ll give you the mantra.” The Guru writes the mantra on a leaf, and then he folds the leaf up and gives it to the man and tells him, “Hold this folded leaf in your hand with the mantra written on it, and you will be able to cross the water. But, whatever you do, don’t

open the leaf. The mantra is secret. Just hold it in your hand, and you will be able to walk on the water." So the man takes the folded up leaf with the mantra that the Guru's written and he walks out onto the water, and he's amazed, he's walking! About halfway across the river, he gets curious, thinking, "My God, what is it? What is it that this man could have written on the leaf that has kept me able to walk on the water? I'm defying physics! I'm defying the laws of Nature! What could have been written on the leaf?" So, he opens up the leaf, and as he opens the last fold, he sinks into the water. As he's sinking, he catches a glimpse of what's written on the leaf, which is "Faith."

The story is one that's a very traditional story, it has some different incarnations, but a very traditional, fundamental story of this spiritual tradition of India, in which faith itself is the magic. It's not so much the object in which I have faith that's the magic, it's my faith which is the magic. People know that, which is why stories like this come out of this tradition. So, I believe that the concept of blind faith – a derogatory, negative term, the concept of a sort of faith that is without my rational mind, faith without my common sense, faith without this tool that has been fine-tuned in the educational system and in the societal system – does not come from the Indian tradition.

So, when the questioner asks how to have faith without blind faith, well, we have to look at what does blind faith mean and why is it a problem? Sure, there's lots of stories in history of people who have faith in someone who wasn't worthy, and it's not just religious leaders. You can have faith in doctors and then they give you the wrong advice, and you either get sicker or it'll turn out you were never even sick to begin with! We have faith in our spouses that they are not going to betray us, but then they do. It's a very common and typical aspect of life. So, having faith in someone that doesn't turn out to be a perfect vehicle for our faith is actually somewhat common.

When we think about faith, the really important issue for me is not so much the difference between faith and blind faith, but the difference between faith that is attached to the object of the faith, and faith that lives within me. You see a lot with people, for example, with faith in God. I have faith in God, but then my child dies, or something else horrible happens to me, and I lose my faith in God. We think things like, "I believed in God, I worshiped God, I prayed to God, but God betrayed me. God let this horrible thing happen to me." Well, what that's done is it's said that I

don't have faith, but I have an attachment to my perspective of what God is supposed to do. Having faith in someone, whether it's God or a being, means I'm not dictating the results. If I go to a restaurant, order a plate of French fries, and the waiter goes away, I have "faith" you could say that the waiter is going to bring me a plate of French fries. It's what I've ordered, it's on their menu, and I've paid for it. But you wouldn't really use the word "faith" there. This is a business transaction, this isn't about faith. If the waiter brings you anything other than French fries, you don't pay, the business contract is null and void. But that's not faith, that's a business transaction.

So, if something bad happens in my life and I lose my faith in God, what it means is that it was a business transaction. It means I had "faith" only as long as God was going to deliver to me what I had ordered, like in a restaurant. In a restaurant we order French fries, in life we order health and we order success and we order happiness and we order all the things that we want. Yet, when they don't come, if we lose our faith, what it means is it was never really faith to begin with. It was a business transaction.

Faith means I have faith that whatever is right for me is that which is going to happen. So the object of my faith may be my doctor, but the real faith is faith in the Universe. My doctor may have given me bad advice and I may have gotten sick, I may be angry at my doctor, but if the faith was real and it wasn't just a business transaction of that particular doctor then what I know is, whatever has happened is that which was meant to happen. Life is not about not ever getting your heart broken, life is not about never being disappointed. There's no promise of that anywhere. There's no scripture that said, "Have faith and you'll never be disappointed. Have faith and you'll always get A's on your exams. Have faith and your stocks will always go up. Have faith and your children will never get sick." There's no scripture that says that. There's no real Guru who says that. That's not what faith's about. Faith is not the transaction, faith is not about I see you as a vending machine and if I put in my dollar bill and I push the button for chocolate, I have "faith" chocolates going to come out. That's not faith. Faith is when I know inside that there is an intelligence, and in this moment I'm connecting with that intelligence through you, but if it turns out that what I had ordered is not what I get, I still have faith.

I believe that the concept of blind faith comes from the West, because here in India people get disappointed and betrayed just as much as they do anywhere else in the world, but their faith is so strong that you hear people

say, “Oh, it must have been God’s plan.” The doctor gave me the wrong medicine, I got sick, “Must have been God’s plan.” My husband or wife cheated on me, “Must have been something written into my destiny that I’m supposed to learn from.” There’s always a connection back to the faith itself, separate from the object in whom they had faith. That faith is what keeps them going.

So when we ask how to have faith without blind faith, what I would say is have faith in the Universe, have faith in the Divine, and make sure that it’s not a business transaction. Make sure that my faith is not “I have faith that if I do eleven Shiva *abhisheks*, my son’s going get into the college that I want him to go to.” That’s not faith. It’s business. It’s a contract. Faith is, “God, I know that whatever You plan for him it’s going to be right, because whatever You plan for all of us is right, and we’re in Your hands.” That’s the faith that actually keeps us going.

The only thing that could be labeled as “blind faith” is when I’m attached to someone specifically as the vehicle of the Divine will, and I refuse to use all of the information that I’m getting which says that maybe this isn’t the right person to have faith in, and I’m not looking at it. That’s blind, that’s the blind faith, and that’s what we need to be aware of. If we’re getting the information, we have to keep our eyes open, keep our ears open, and then change what we’re doing. But, that’s the only piece of it that’s blind. The rest of the faith is that which keeps us going, whether the person is worthy of it or not worthy, so we should always hold on to that.

Renunciation

Why did you renounce the worldly life?

It's a question that arises frequently and tends to be rooted in the concept that the material world has so much and I've forsaken it, I've renounced it, I've sacrificed all of the good things in life for the spiritual path. How could I do such a thing and why? That tends to be the underlying base of these questions.

For me, renunciation was not a rational decision of my thinking analytical mind. I didn't wake up one day and say, "I know what I'm going to do today! I'm going to renounce all of these things and people in my life and go on a spiritual quest." For me, it was actually something that just happened. I had come to India traveling in the midst of my PhD degree program. I had no intention of staying, no expectation of staying. I wasn't consciously looking for a Guru; I wasn't even consciously on a spiritual path. But standing on the banks of Ganga, something so deep and so powerful happened to me, on every level of my existence and awareness that I knew I was supposed to stay.

An analogy that I use to describe it is: imagine that your feet are size eight but that you've spent your whole life wearing size six shoes. Everybody has always told you your feet are size six, and they give you pretty size six shoes. So, you wear the size six shoes, and in the beginning maybe you say, "But my feet hurt!" and they say, "Yes, yes, don't worry, that's what shoes feel like." Slowly you just get used to it. It's not that you are living in pain or suffering; you assume and believe that this is just what shoes feel like. Then, one day, someone slips your foot into a size eight shoe, you realize with great joy, "Ah, so this is what shoes feel like." Then, ironically, people ask you, "Don't you ever want to go back, don't you miss wearing

the size six shoes? Are you sure that you always want to wear size eight shoes?" And you just think, "Really? Why in the world would I go back to something that didn't fit?"

It's not a perfect analogy because my life was actually really good in America. It wasn't like a pair of shoes that didn't fit, but it just wasn't who I was exactly, it wasn't the deepest, the highest, the fullest expression of who I was. So, my life there was wonderful in so many ways, deeply rich and fulfilling in so many ways, but when I came to Rishikesh and I had the experience of divinity on the banks of Mother Ganga, it's felt like rather than sacrificing something, I've been receiving something.

The comments that people make and questions they ask about my life choices almost always have the underlying theme of sacrifice, what a great sacrifice I've made to be here. But that has not been my experience at all. For me it has definitely been an experiencing of gaining much more than what I had to renounce. For me it has been just a choice of the best package deal for my life I could imagine.

Every time you go to a restaurant, you have to make a choice – this or that, it can't be both. When you're getting dressed every day, you can't wear two pairs of pants. You make a choice. Everything is a package deal. You cannot look smart in a suit and be comfy in sweatpants at the same time. You make a choice. The "worldly" life is one option of life package deal, and the "renunciate" life is a different option, a different package deal. Neither is all good or all bad, neither is all luxury or all hardship, neither is right or wrong, better or worse. They are just different packages.

We only have 24 hours in a day, regardless of which package for your life you choose. You only have a certain amount of energy. You have to eat, you have to sleep, you have to bathe. So, we're left with only a certain number of hours left in our day that are really in our hands, and the question is "What way of spending those hours is most in concert with what's most important to me?" For me, the choice to be in a place that enables me to dedicate myself to spirituality was worth all of the soy lattes, all of the cars, all of the comfortable beds, all the cozy relationships that I had been accustomed to. You can have the most comfortable bed in the world, but if you need to take a pill to go to sleep at night because of your anxiety or depression, the quality of bed doesn't really benefit you much.

What I have found here in Rishikesh, here in the life of renunciation as a

sanyasi, is a package deal. It's not perfect, but as a package it's much more fulfilling to me and meaningful to me than the package that the life that I had before, or the life that I would have if I went back, or any life package deal I could envision.

One of the tragedies of the New Age spiritual teachings is this concept that "life is a buffet," and that you really get to just pick and choose whatever you want. Life is not usually like that. You can't simultaneously live in Paris and live in LA. You can't simultaneously have children and have the freedom of not having children. You have to make choices. It's not a matter of figuring out how to make life a buffet, because you can't. You also can't usually pick and choose between packages. "This package would be great if only" because that's just a recipe for misery.

I'll share a funny, true story: Pujya Swamiji and I were in Switzerland a few years ago running a spiritual retreat in the Alps. From the Zurich airport we drove straight to the retreat center. Along the way, we stopped at a wonderful fresh marketplace which had a coffee bar. As you may have gathered already, I enjoy coffee, but I don't enjoy powdered coffee. So when I'm out of India in a place where there's the opportunity to have nice filtered coffee, I'll usually take up the opportunity, particularly if I've just gotten off an overnight flight. So I followed the Swiss woman who was organizing the retreat and who picked us up at the airport up to the coffee bar and I said to her, "Please order me a café latte but with soy milk rather than regular milk." She gave me a funny look and replied, "You please tell them. I cannot" Now, this was a woman who is a beautiful devotee, an incredibly generous, dedicated selfless woman, and I could see on the counter that they had a carton of soy milk, so her refusal to order the soy latte was confusing to me. I asked her, "What do you mean? I don't speak German." She said, "That's OK, they speak enough English, you tell them." So I ordered my own café latte with soy milk, and they gave me a bit of a funny look but made the coffee for me. Later when we were back in the car I asked her why she needed me to order the coffee when she was ordering everything else. She explained that in Switzerland, you take things exactly how they are and you do not ask for anything to be changed.

She shared that the month earlier she had a group of friends visiting from California. She took them out to a restaurant, and they all did what those of us from California are used to, which is to order like this: "Well, I'd like this item but actually instead of that bread can you put it on this bread, instead of that spread can you use this spread, and instead of this side dish

can you give me that side dish instead?"

The waiter replied, "I have a wonderful idea. Why don't you go home and cook yourself dinner exactly how you'd like to eat it?" Now in California, you can go to a restaurant and the waiters can handle that kind of stuff without even a pen, they're so used to it. They don't even have to note down your changes. But in California we've been a bit spoiled because the world isn't like that, and even dining in most places isn't like that. We've really been spoiled to think we can walk into any restaurant in the world and say, "I want this dish but instead of that the way you normally do it,, I want you to do it differently for me." Life isn't like that. Life resembles dining in Switzerland much more than it resembles dining in California. Life offers us opportunities and options and packages, but it's not a buffet.

When I chose the life of renunciation, I was aware of that. It isn't that I think marriage and children are bad, or that I thought orange was the color that suited me better than any other color and I was dying to be able to wear orange all day long. Giving up marriage and children and wearing orange were pieces that came with the package of the life I wanted to live here, the life I knew I was meant to live here. The full package being offered to me here was one that is so much richer and fuller than the life that I had been living.

It's not perfect, but none of the package options is perfect. The only thing that makes life perfect – whether you choose the "worldly" life or the life of a renunciate – is how you deal with it, how you respond. That's what's in our hands, that's what brings peace and joy. There are a lot of people I know who are married with children and who are miserable, and there are a lot of renunciates I know who are also miserable. And, of course, there are many people who are married with children and happy as well as many happy renunciates. You cannot decide which way is right objectively.

For me, I discovered that this path was much simpler and purer in the ability it offered me to live the truth I had experienced and the truth I wanted to live, without having so many encumbrances. It's not that you can't live a spiritual life married with kids. Of course you can. The scriptures are full of stories of people who are married with families, even *rishi*-s and sages. But for me, all of this was so much more beautiful and full and fulfilling than all of that life ever had been to me. I was twenty-five, I grew up in Los Angeles, I had seen all of that life. When I came to Rishikesh and had this experience, it opened up a world for me that was so

much richer than anything I had known before. So, it was not a matter of renouncing, it was not a matter of pushing that life away. It was a matter of simply opening myself more and more to this life which filled me so much there was no more room anything else.

Going back to the menu example, everything on the menu may look really good before you've ordered and eaten, while you're still hungry, but once you've made a choice and you've eaten and are full, it doesn't matter how good something looks, you're no longer hungry. It's only a temptation as long as you're hungry. Once you're full it is no longer tempting. For me, what I have found here is so filling that there is no hunger or thirst or yearning for anything else. For me that has been the path. It has been much more a path of embracing than of renouncing.

The Purpose of Prayer

Should we pray for something from God, or is it that whatever we've gotten is due to our past karma anyway? What role does prayer or God have in this? Is it that we pray for a certain thing or situation, or just that it's all karma?

Prayer plays a very deep and important role in our life, but the role is not to change our external circumstances. It's not, "Oh dear God, please make me 6 feet tall, or make me 20 years old again, or give me a singing voice that sounds like Mataji's." It's not that. God could do anything, God is infinite, but for our own spiritual growth, the highest level is not about going to God like He were Santa Claus or someone with a magic wand. Ultimately, what prayers to God should be – and this *is* what changes our circumstances amazingly – are, "Oh dear God, help me recognize the Truth of who I am. Help me see the beauty and wholeness and perfection in who I am, help me unfold and blossom into the greatest perfection that I can be. And mostly, dear God, let me just be a tool in your hands." That's the highest prayer, just to connect with God.

Pujya Swamiji always says that when you talk to God, it's prayer, and when God talks to you back, it's meditation. So, when God answers our prayers, what we get is not a castle, a mansion, a Mercedes, or a perfect figure, but we get meditation. Meditation is that deep experience of the peace, the love, the wholeness, and the consciousness which we really are.

Prayer is very important when we utilize it to just go to God. It connects us to God and is the way of talking to God. But for so many of us, our lives have become just ways of getting what we want. If we're hungry, we go to the nearest drive-thru. If we want something, we just go online and order it. Everything has become this immediate gratification.

One of the examples that we talk about frequently is the example of a vending machine. For so many of us, we've learned to see the world and the Universe as a vending machine. So, we want something, and we are told that if we "just" do this prayer, say this mantra, get this degree, look like this – whatever our metaphoric dollar bill is – we then put that into the machine, push the button, and we should get out whatever we want. We are taught that if we don't get what we want, it's because we've got the wrong mantra or certificate in the wrong thing or the wrong Guru or we've been praying to the wrong God. Our whole model has become about getting what we want. It's all about just fulfilling our desires, or, as Pujya Swamiji says, getting our lists.

Instead of that, if we recognize that connection with the Divine is actually not the means but the end, that *that* is the goal, that when we are connected with the Divine everything else is automatically there, then suddenly there is no list. Then suddenly it's not about, "Oh God, now that we're connected could you please get my kid into the college he's trying to go to, could you please get my landlord to stop harassing me for my rent, could you please take off the 10 pounds I gained over the holidays?" Suddenly, none of those things matter because we're connected to the Source.

So, we pray, yes. It changes our circumstances, yes. But that's not because we've prayed for the outer circumstances to change, but that through our connection with God, our own mind has changed. Then, since our mind has changed, our reality has changed. We are creating our realities. It's neither about just a sense of "accept it" and never trying to change it, nor is it about asking God to change it. It's about asking God to give us that level of connection, that level of awareness, that level of experience of who we are, through which our vision changes, through which *who we are* changes. As we change, so do our circumstances.

Truthfulness

If the truth is not kind or beneficial, then what do we do with it? If Lord Krishna reminds us that we're only to speak that which is kind and beneficial in addition to being true, if something is only true, what do we do with it?

In the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna makes it so beautifully clear that right speech – *tapas* of speech – has to include truth, but it also has to include kindness and be beneficial. What we speak, in order for it to be dharmic speech, right speech, has to be true, kind and beneficial.

First of all, there's a lot of truth that doesn't necessarily need to be spoken. Just because it's true doesn't mean it needs to be spoken. For example, we all have personality issues that we face with family members, with colleagues, with people in our social circle. Unless that person is someone with whom we have made a commitment that we are going to grow together, to move together hand-in-hand on a spiritual path, like a husband and wife for example, if it's not someone like that, then the highest good is not for us to figure out how can we tell each other everything about the other one that bothers us. There's no point. It doesn't serve anyone. Yes, in a marriage, you don't want to brush things under the carpet too much. Occasionally it's OK. Even in our marriages, if your husband or wife does something that bothers you or makes you angry, it doesn't mean we have to always bring it up. Many times, we can choose peace. We can choose happiness. We have an option. If the loved one does something or says something and we feel very annoyed inside, at that moment of feeling annoyed, we're at a crossroads in our path. One path is the, "I have to share it, I have to tell them, I have to tell her, they should know how I feel, they should say sorry, they should promise they're never going to do it again, my feelings are the most important." The other path is, "Right now I want to feel peace,

right now I want to feel is love, and I have the power. I don't need this person to apologize, to bow at my feet, to cry all over my toes in remorse and guilt in order to feel peace and joy. I've just convinced myself that I do. I've convinced myself that until that person acknowledges what they've done, apologizes, feels remorse, and promises never to do it again, I can't get in touch with my peace or my joy. That that's sitting in their hands. That they've got the reins of my happiness in their hands. But that's not the truth. I have them."

So, we're at that crossroad, and there is no right answer. There are absolutely times in our lives, particularly in a marriage, in which we've committed deeply, in which it really is important to share with the loved one that something is really causing pain. Sometimes that is much more important than just letting it fester inside. But then there are also plenty of times in which letting it go, just choosing love in that moment, choosing peace in that moment, choosing ease in that moment, is a very real possibility.

Those of us from abroad, much more so than Indians, have really been raised with this disservice I believe, which is that everything must be talked about, everything must be processed, everything must be worked out. If I'm a little bit upset about this or that, or you hurt my feelings a little bit here or there, we have to spend the next two hours or five hours or two days processing this. This is a very Western invention. In India, it's not like that at all. It's one of the reasons I think that people in India actually have such longer lasting, stronger marriages than people abroad. They're really able to just say, "Oh forget it." This is not in a way that they're holding a grudge, not in a way that it's festering inside, not in a way that they feel like they're the martyr who's always having to let it go, but just a real conscious decision to choose peace, to choose love, rather than to choose processing, rather than to make sure the other person understands. They love us. That's more important than always understanding us.

So that's one aspect of what do we do with the truth. If we can let it go, let it go! You're going to be happier, your loved ones are going to be happier, not to feel like everything they do hurts you, like everything has to be processed. And you're going to find that you have a lot more free time on your hands, because all the time that doesn't go into having these elaborate long discussions is time that we're able to use for so many other things.

So that's one thing to do with the truth – we let it go.

Then there are times when it's bigger, or it's more important for us to then just let it go. But it's still not kind, it's still not beneficial. What do we do with it then?

Well, the truth doesn't actually have to always be spoken verbally. So, for example, let's say there's someone in my life, a loved one, and I've noticed that they've started making decisions that aren't necessarily in their best interest. Maybe they've gained a lot of weight, maybe they've started drinking a little too much alcohol, maybe they've taken up cigarette smoking, maybe they've gotten themselves into a bad relationship. Now, bringing that up is certainly kind if I have that person's best interest at heart, but most of us know that in 99 out of 100 cases, it's not beneficial because it goes nowhere. Very few people say, "Well thank you so much for noticing the weight I've gained by stuffing myself full of chocolate cakes to numb my depression. I'm so glad you pointed that out to me, I had no idea! I hadn't noticed that my clothes were tight, I hadn't noticed that I spend most of my time with my hand in a chocolate chip bag these days. Thanks for pointing that out." Nobody says that. Nobody says, "Oh thanks for mentioning that I've been drinking a lot. I hadn't noticed all the empty bottles lying around." What happens is people become defensive and they push us away. So not only was it not beneficial in terms of helping them, but it actually now has created a wedge between us in which I've lost my possibility to be able to help them at all.

This is where we start to look for other ways of expressing the truth, instead of just sitting the person down and saying, "I notice you've been drowning your sorrows in meaningless sex, in gambling, in chocolate cakes. I noticed that you've gotten yourself involved in a relationship with someone who is abusive. You should get out."

Everybody's got a head on their shoulders. In Hindi, there's an expression about how "everybody eats *chapatis*," meaning, we all know. If I've been beaten up by the person I'm in a relationship with, I know that. The black eye is on my face, the bloody nose is on my face. I don't need you to tell me that that person might not be good for me. But if I'm still in a relationship, it means that for some reason I'm not looking at that. If I'm still doing the eating, doing the drinking, doing the gambling, doing the promiscuity, that's not because I'm stupid, it's not because I can't see it. It's because for some reason it's serving me right now, for some reason there's something going on in my life that I don't want to be looking at, I don't want to be dealing with, that I'm turning to these poor substitutes for. There's

something going on in me emotionally that's created a situation where I keep coming back home to somebody who beats me, or to someone whose cheating on me, or to somebody who's not good for me, or some other reason. There's very little that we can tell somebody that they don't already really know about themselves. So even though it may be true, and in this case even though it may be kind – we're really trying to help them – if they're not going to take it and they're just going to get defensive and it's going to push us away from them, then it's not beneficial. So what do we do?

There's ways of holding that truth that's not speaking it. For example, in the cases that I gave, how can we be a good friend to this person, to help them through what we know they are going through, without naming it? We don't have to say, "I noticed you've been drowning your sorrows in alcohol." All we have to do is reach out to them as a friend, spend more time with them, give them more love, create more space for them. Instead of mentioning the alcohol or the food or the gambling or whatever they are doing, we create space in which we say, "How's your life? How are things going? How's your marriage? How's your job?" And if they're our friend, maybe we have some intuitive way of knowing what might be wrong, and we ask them about that. "How are things going for you? Is there some way that I can be of help to you, of use to you, is there something you'd like to talk about?" Then, we are able to stand there as containers, as pillars, as models of that love, and they may open up. We're able to hold the truth and respond from the truth, without necessarily having to speak it and shove it down their throats.

The last piece of this is the stuff that's neither kind nor beneficial, and that's the stuff that we definitely don't want to say. It may be true. Somebody may have gained a bunch of weight, the dress they're wearing may make them look really ugly, they may have made a really bad decision in something that's irrevocable. They may have just married someone we think is horrible for them. It's a situation where they can't change it, or they can't change it right now anyway. And so, pointing out the truth is just hurtful.

And that's when we learn the fourth aspect, the fourth thing we have to ask ourselves: does it improve upon the silence? This is true about anything we speak. Does it improve upon the silence? If not, there's always silence, and silence is wonderful, silence is beautiful. The place we get into trouble with is when we're uncomfortable with the silence and so we just keep

talking. We say things we shouldn't, we say things we later regret. This is where it is so important to just allow ourselves to be comfortable in the silence, and to know that there's a sacredness in the silence. It's one of the great gifts that a practice of silence gives us, that a practice of meditation gives us. To get comfortable in the silence.

The Significance of Sound

What is the significance of sound?

Music is not just entertainment. Music is energy. Sadly these days, so many of us think of music as simply entertainment. “I like this music, I like that music, this is my favorite band, this is danceable, that’s not danceable.” But Indian culture actually had such deep awareness of the science of sound that it’s the only religion in the world, that I know of, that actually has an entire scripture – the Saam Ved – dedicated to sound.

Here’s what’s interesting about that: it’s not Indian sound, it’s not Hindu sound. It’s the science of sound itself.

Many years ago I had the wonderful opportunity to be in Venice, Italy. From Venice, we went to a big yoga program that was being held in Assisi, and in Assisi we went to the very ancient cathedral of St. Francis. There was a program there of Gregorian chanting, which is the ancient and sacred chanting from the Catholic tradition. Pujya Swamiji was there along with another very renowned saint who has since passed away. The Gregorian chanting went on for quite some time. After it ended and the rest of us were thinking, “Oh, this is so beautiful,” Pujya Swamiji and this other Swamiji, both very learned and renowned, looked at each other and simultaneously said, “It’s the Saam Ved.”

The sound we were hearing in a cathedral in Assisi was the sound of the Saam Ved, and that in a way sounds much more amazing and miraculous than it really should sound. These things should actually be the normal. Deeply spiritual people, living in different places, worshipping God in different forms and in different ways but deeply connected to the Divine, having deep meditative practices, were able to connect to and channel that

same Truth in a very similar way. So in Italy we end up with Gregorian chanting in the Catholic lineage and in India we end up with the Saam Ved in the Hindu lineage, but that truth of the science of sound was so much the same that even though neither of them had ever heard Gregorian chanting before, they immediately recognized, "This is our Saam Ved." Words are different, but the tune is the same.

Whatever we are doing, whether we're singing, whether we're making music with our hands, or whether we are speaking, we're doing something that creates sound. We may think, "Oh I just said it, it was joke, I didn't mean it," or I may yell and say afterwards, "Oh, I didn't mean to yell, I was just..." but we don't realize the impact of that on a physiological level. We know the emotional impact, we know how it feels to be yelled at, but sound is actually energy waves. The way I know what you are saying is that it comes out of your mouth, creates waves that enter my ear, and then tells my brain what you are saying and whether it's a very low frequency sound or a very high frequency sound. The waves vibrating differently in your ear don't just create understanding of words in your brain, but create an energetic impact on you, and this is really the power that sound has.

People do this all time jokingly but it actually is science: if you take a dog and you say, "Oh you stupid, stupid ugly thing!" in a sweet voice, it's going to come up and wag its tail and rub itself against you, because it thinks you are loving it. But if you yell at it, "I love you!", it's going to whimper, because what it is picking up on is the *sound*, not the words. The tone of being angry, regardless of what you are saying, is going to make the dog whimper. The tone of "I love you", even if you're saying mean things, is going to make the dog wag its tail and rub against you, because it picks up on the energy.

It's important for us to understand, especially those of who come from the West, the real power that sound has. It's not just "I like this kind of music" or "I like that kind of music." How can we use sound – music, the sound of our own voice – to actually change the energetic waves in the world around us?

PEOPLE



Living Human Values in Our Daily Lives

We associate good human values – honesty, patience, forgiveness, compassion, sacrifice – as values that only the saints or the rishi-s or enlightened ones can abide by, but how can each of us live these values in our lives, even in the most difficult circumstances? Why is doing this vital to our growth and our progress?

First of all, human values are not things for only the saints and the sages and the *rishi*-s. This is the stuff our lives are made of. In any culture we are a part of, whatever culture you come from, we have a set of human values. In Indian culture, we call them *sanskaras*. An important aspect of *sanskaras* are these values and ethics – honesty, compassion virtue, generosity, giving. But it's not just Indian culture, it's all cultures. Most of us get these in our religion or our spirituality, or we get them from our parents or even our grandparents. But this is not just the stuff of enlightened masters, this is the stuff that if we want to survive as a civilization we need. Yes, obviously we need it if we want to be enlightened, but we need it even if we're not looking for enlightenment, even if we're just looking for how to live in society, how to create a society that lives in the light, lives more in the light of honesty and cooperation and compassion than one that lies in corruption, in lies, in deceit, in stealing and competition. These are building blocks of life.

In fact, when you look at the limbs of yoga that Patanjali gave us, before we get to *asana* (limb #3), before we get to *pranayama* (limb #4), the first two limbs are the *yama*-s and the *niyama*-s, which are how we are to live. Nonviolence, truthfulness, honesty, non-stealing, non-hoarding – all of these virtues of sharing and giving. In the *yama*-s and *niyama*-s we get *aparigraha* – non-hoarding, we get *asteya* – non-stealing, but these are just different words for saying generosity.

SATSANG: IN THE PRESENCE OF TRUTH

This goes into every aspect of our life. Non-stealing does not just mean that I don't lean over and grab someone's shirt off their back. Non-stealing means how I live every day – what I eat, what I buy, what I wear – is affected. So much of that which our society is made up of, the commodities, actually have been produced through stealing – through stealing the land, the resources, the water, the health, the time of women, of children. This is where sweatshops come in, this is where child labor comes in, it's where indigenous people end up losing their land. Every one of us is compelled, if we want to live a life that is yogic and dharmic and righteous, to uphold these virtues. They are values that are crucial in all of our lives.

The flip side of these values is the “me, me, me, me” – the ego life, the “I, me, mine”-focused life. “What about me? Where am I in all this?”

Pujya Swamiji always says so beautifully, “I is always capital. Doesn't matter whether it's at the beginning or middle or end of a sentence, it is always capital. And that capital 'I' is a wall. It's a wall between us, on an internal level between me and my real self, me and my heart, me and my spiritual progress, between me and the Divine. It also becomes a wall between us, because the more focused I am on 'me,' the less able I am to connect with you.” So, He says the answer is that we bend the “I,” we make it horizontal, and it goes from being a wall to being a bridge - a bridge between me and the Divine, and a bridge between us. It's the “I” that makes us contract on the inside. When you're in a fight with someone, it's always “I don't want to give in, I'm right.” But that sense of holding on to our “right-ness” causes us to contract on the inside, and it makes us separate from our loved ones. It makes us stand even taller, makes us more rigid.

This is why in Indian and Asian cultures there's an emphasis on bowing. Why do we bow all the time? It reminds us to be humble, be a bridge. Rather than standing rigid and tall, if I can bow, I become a bridge that reconnects us. Whether it's myself to my own heart I've lost, because I've contracted and constricted so much on the inside that I've lost even the way to my own heart, or with my loved ones, with my community, with my colleagues, with God. Sometimes we get so set in our own ways, set in what we think is right, that we lose our ability to be a bridge, and that's where we lose.

All of these virtues – compassion, patience, giving – they're virtues of connection to each other and to ourselves as Divine beings. When we have

patience for ourselves, it's the Divine one in us seeing and recognizing the human one in us. It's the True Self seeing and recognizing the vehicle, the vessel.

If your car breaks down on the side of the road, you don't beat it. You know it's not the car's fault, it didn't wake up in the morning and plan to break down, it's just what happens. It's the same thing that happens to us humans. We make mistakes, we forget things, we forget ourselves. So these virtues of love, of compassion, of patience, of caring, of generosity - they're not just for others in the world, they're for ourselves, from ourselves to ourselves. Without that, we can't take another step on our spiritual path. Until and unless I can have compassion for myself, until and unless I can see myself as worthy of love and compassion, how can I have compassion for another? How can I connect with someone if I'm not even able to open up to who I am? Who would it be that is connecting with them? If I'm not open, then it's just my brain, my mind, which is an instrument of separation. Our heart is the instrument of connection.

If I have my heart all locked up, there's no way I can connect with another being, there's no way I can have real compassion for another being, real love, real generosity. Then everything I'm doing is just for myself. I may give to you, but I'm going to only give to you so that I can feel better about myself. That's not bad, it's certainly better than not giving at all, but it's not quite as high as we can go.

So, we need to realize that on the one hand, yes, we're only human, we're not the *rishi*-s or the sages. But on the other hand, we need to recognize that all of these virtues are not just for our enlightened masters, they're not just for *rishi*-s and sages. The *rishi*-s and sages gave us these tools for us. The teachings of yoga, the scriptures, the insights, the truths – it's not “this is how a *rishi* should live,” it's not “this is how a *yogi* should live,” it's not “this is how the enlightened masters should live.” They already know how to live, they don't need a booklet! The booklet is for us.

Often, what we do is we let ourselves off the hook a lot. In the name of compassion, or rather under the guise of compassion, we're actually not being compassionate to ourselves. To deprive ourselves of the highest possibility of who we can be internally is not compassionate. To say, “oh well, you're not a *rishi* or a sage, you've had a troubled life, you've been abused, you've been abandoned, you've been betrayed” – whatever our story is – “therefore don't worry honey, just sit on the couch and eat

potato chips forever, that's OK. Don't worry. Yeah, be angry. Hit people no problem. We understand you've had it tough. Sure, become an alcoholic, become a drug addict, it's OK, you've got the story to back it up. It's not your fault, don't worry." That's a lack of compassion for ourselves, because that's saying you don't have it within you to connect with your true self.

Your whole identity, your whole story – that's not the True Self. That's just where this body has been. It's what happened to this body. Not the Soul. Not the True Self. The True Self has never been abused or abandoned or cheated or lied to or forgotten about. The True Self doesn't have complexes or depression or anxiety or fears. That's all the stuff of this body/mind. So to allow ourselves to spend our entire lives in the jail of this body/mind is not very compassionate. It's not holding us up to the possibility of actually who we are. The highest level of compassion actually says, "Get off the couch, let go of the bottle, let go of the cigarette, stop hitting people, this isn't who you are. Wake up! Yes that stuff happened, it happens to so many of us, but that was Act I of your life. The curtain has dropped, the intermission has passed, the curtain has now risen on Act II of your life. It's a brand new day, brand new scene, brand new stage, brand new place, but you need to show up. You're the only one that is missing for this Act II of your life." That's the highest level of compassion.

We don't berate ourselves when we slip – we all slip. We don't berate ourselves for again having fears or judgments, impatience, or pain, but we don't allow ourselves to keep slipping into it. We keep holding ourselves up to the highest Truth of who we are. That's the deepest compassion, the deepest generosity, that's what patience is for. It's not, "Let me be patient while I waste breath after breath, minute after minute of my life." It's, "Let me have patience while I climb these steps, let me have patience while I open these curtains to let the Sun in, let me have patience while I peel my layers back one by one." That's the stuff we need patience for. And then of course, we can have it for others.

Make no mistake – these virtues are not virtues just for those living in the caves who are already enlightened. These are virtues they've given us through their enlightenment to help us know who we are and to help us be able to get closer and closer to that. These are for everybody.

The Body

If God made us perfectly, which we always say he did, is it wrong to embrace the naked body if we're still able to accept that it is just a vessel or vehicle that we are in?

There's nothing wrong at all with the naked body, even from the deepest, highest spiritual level, even for those who are on paths of very strict celibacy and renunciation. There's actually entire lineages in fact of Jain monks who are naked. Winter, spring, summer or fall, in their own ashrams, on the streets, in functions, they are naked. So, there is nothing at all that is wrong or not spiritual about the naked body.

When we talk about embracing the naked body then, we're talking of course about sensuality. Well, if you're in a relationship that is a married relationship, a monogamous relationship, a dharmic relationship, there's nothing wrong with the body. Yes, the body is a vehicle, it's a vessel, it's important that we don't identify as it because otherwise I then become a slave to it, whether I'm a slave to physical hunger that wants me to eat five entire pizzas and ten chocolate cakes, whether I'm a slave to my fatigue that wants me to sleep 12 hours a night, whether I'm a slave to my physical yearnings. In any case, the point is that we are not the slave to the physical body, to all of its calls, to all of its desires, to all of its yearnings.

In Indian spirituality, you'll see that people for example will fast. It doesn't mean food is wrong. People will go without water. It doesn't mean water is wrong. People will stay awake all night doing *japa*, doing meditation. It doesn't mean sleep is wrong. Even married couples – dharmic, monogamous, married couples – will come on *yatra*, come to the ashram, and sleep in separate beds. They'll enter a phase of life after their child-bearing years in which they live like brother and sister. It doesn't mean

sex is wrong. All of these calls of the body are natural, they're biological. There's nothing inherently wrong about them.

The wrongness comes when we become a slave to them. When chocolate cake is front of me, pizza is in front me, hamburgers are in front of me, my mouth is salivating and I eat them. It doesn't matter what my mind says, it doesn't matter what vows I've taken, it doesn't matter what I know to be right or healthy, I eat. If there's a six-pack in front of me, if there's a bottle of whiskey in front of me, it doesn't matter what vows I've taken, what I know to be wrong or right, I drink. I hit the snooze on my alarm every morning and never get up to meditate or do yoga because my body screams, "I need more sleep!" No matter how many times I vow that I'm going to get up, every morning I hit the snooze. The body has sexual urges and we act on them, but then we suffer when they're not in married, monogamous, dharmic situations. We suffer the repercussions of having acted out of impulse, instinct, and desire, the same way that we suffer the repercussions the next morning of five pizzas or twenty chocolate cakes or a six-pack of beer. Whatever we've done due to the call of the flesh, we end up suffering. It's not because God has punished us, it's not because it was wrong and we're bad. It's because when we don't use the power of discrimination that we have, when we make the choice for pleasure over *dharma*, over our spiritual path, inevitably at the end of the day we suffer.

So, when we talk about embracing the naked body, it's a vague question. If the naked body is that of your child and you're bathing them, by all means, embrace your child. If it's the naked body of your husband or wife in a dharmic relationship, by all means, embrace it. But if it's a path towards simply fulfilling calls of the flesh, there's not an awareness that there's actually a being inside – the real Being inside – who is the One watching you experience hunger, the One watching you experience thirst. This is why we fast, this is why we stay up all night. Even though we know we're going to eat again or sleep again, it connects us in that moment with the One who is aware of me being hungry and not eating, the One who is aware of me being tired but not sleeping, the One who is aware of the itch in my leg or the burn in my hip when I'm meditating and not changing the cross of my leg, because I've committed to just sit and not move. When we embark on any of that, it connects us very deeply.

It's not about that these things are inherently wrong. Unless you're wearing orange and you've taken vows of renunciation, there's nothing inherently wrong with these things. It's just that we need to remember that we're not

the slave to the desire, we're not the slave to the flesh, we're not the slave to the instinct. I'm the One watching it. That connection and that awareness is really what our path of restraint is about. It's not that anything is inherently wrong, it's that the question is, on my spiritual path in my life with my goal, I don't want to be, as Pujya Swamiji says, the light that people just switch on and off, on and off, on and off, so that when my stomach growls, I eat. When I experience fatigue, I sleep. No. There's another Being in me that says, "No, it's my fasting day," and in that moment of fasting, in that lightness of fasting, not only does our *sadhana* come much more easily, but we actually access and connect with the One who is watching me get hungry, the One who is watching me be about to eat and reminding me, "Ah, no, it's our fast today, we're not eating."

That's what the point of all the restraint is. There's nothing that's inherently wrong or bad, it's just a value judgment of where do I want to go? At the end of this naked embrace, where will I be, and is that where I want to be? Ten minutes from now, an hour from now, a day from now? Because it all has a ripple effect of repercussions.

We also know that it is never enough. We always find ourselves saying things like, "OK, this is the last time, from Monday morning..." We want to keep doing whatever we're doing and we think, "OK, what's the farthest next point? Monday morning. Between now and Monday morning, I'm going to actually be satiated. Between now and January 1st, I'll be satiated. On New Year's, I'm going to start, on my birthday I'm going to start. Somehow between now and then it's going to be enough." The point is, it's never enough. That's the nature of desires. Desires just breed more desires. So, the question becomes, when do we say, "This train is not taking me where I want to go, I need to get off this train and onto the one that is taking me where I want to go, which is spiritual awakening, which is peace, which is real joy, real bliss, not that which just keeps coming from this pizza or that chocolate cake or this naked embrace. I need real lasting joy and peace." It's not on that first train. Eventually we have to get off and get onto the other one.

As sanyasis, both you and Pujya Swamiji have chosen the path of renunciation. However, India is also the land of tantra and the Kama Sutra. Both stem from centuries of Indian tradition. How do such contrasting beliefs fit together?

So, we have a culture that on the one hand emphasizes renunciation, where

saints and *sanyasis* and *sadhus* are seen as the highest of the spiritual realm, that this is a place to attain to. *Vairagya* or non-attachment is a great virtue, a great goal of people on the spiritual path. But then of course on the other hand, it's the land of *tantra*, it's the land of the *Kama Sutra*. How do these things go together?

It's a good question and it's one that comes up a lot. Basically, there isn't nearly the discrepancy that it seems. The study and the science of *tantra* and books on things like the *Kama Sutra*, are actually simply parts of a tradition in which every aspect of life should be sacred. For most of us in our traditions, we've got my spiritual practice over here for fifteen, twenty, thirty minutes, maybe an hour a day, whatever it is, and then I've got my whole other area of life over there. My spiritual practice is my holy time, my sacred time, and then the rest of my time is for my career, my family, my social time. Indian tradition says though that whatever you do, it needs to be done connected to God. There is not this distinction between the sacred and the profane.

A beautiful way of noticing it is even here on the banks of Ganga. In the West, we've got places and times for mourning, and places and times of celebration. Here at Parmarth, if you sit in our Ganga Aarti and look out across Ganga, just slightly downstream, what you'll see on some nights is actually the ghats where they perform the cremations. The very first time I saw that sitting in our Aarti, I thought, "Oh my God, what would it feel like to be at a cremation, to be watching your loved one have their final rites performed, and to be just across the river from all of these people singing and dancing and celebrating?" Because in the West, we have these compartments – this is a time of mourning, this is a place of mourning, thou shalt not laugh, thou shalt not sing, thou shalt not celebrate. This is mourning. But in India, there's no such distinction. I've realized how actually beautiful that is. The distinction between the mourners on the other side, the tragedy on the other side, the death on the other side, and the celebration on this side, the joy on this side – that distinction was only in my Western brain. We've got burning ash on our side, coming out of our *yagna* fire, out of our *aartis*. There's burning flames on the other side, coming out of the cremation. They seem very separate, we seem very safe over here where we're celebrating and singing, separated by River Ganga. But when you go just a few feet above the water, the flames of our *aarti* and the flames of their cremation mingle together. You no longer can tease apart what was a flame of life and a flame of death, a flame of celebration and a flame of mourning. And actually, that's so much more true about life

than this Western concept of compartmentalization.

If you sit on the ghats before the *aarti*, or you sit on some of the other ghats down the way, you'll see people swimming, people splashing, people screaming in the river, families having a great time yelling, "*Jai Gange! Jai Gange!*" Dogs are running up and down, kids are playing, and people are sitting and meditating. There's no concept of, "Shut your dog up, shut your kids up, stop splashing, I'm trying to meditate!" Somehow, the meditation and the family playing and the dog running and the kids screaming, in the Indian concept, actually are all part of the same experience. It's only my Western brain that says meditation should be over here, splashing families should be over there. In my Western brain, these are separate things, but in India, they're not. In India, this concept of life and death and mourning and celebration, sacredness, regular life – they blend together. They're not compartmentalized.

I mention all of this because when you bring in *tantra* and the *Kama Sutra*, we get questions like, "OK, so wait. Here is a culture that worships the sanctity of renunciation, and yet here is a culture that has an entire scripture on all the different ways you can have sex. How do these two things go together?"

How can one culture embody both?" The answer is to understand that in this beautiful, spiritual understanding, what it says is everything that we do in our life can be and more importantly should be sacred. You can actually take everything and make it a path to God. In God's view, there's no sacred over here and profane over there, pure over here and dirty over there. If it's done as an offering to God, if it's done as a way of getting closer to God, than everything can be sacred.

So, yes, in the Indian tradition, the path of *sannyas*, the path of renunciation, is the highest path. Throughout your life though, in the Indian tradition, you have four ashrams of life. You begin with your *brahmacharya ashram*, the first twenty years of your life when you study. It's your path of just being a student. Celibate, not because you've chosen a life of *sannyas* but because you need to focus on your studies. This is your youth, your student years. Then the next twenty years is the *grihastha ashram* stage, or the "householder" stage. You get married, you have a family, you have a career, you earn money, and give back to society. The next twenty years is the *vanprastha ashram* stage, in which you've done the marriage, your kids are now grown, in many cases they're married on their own, they have

their own jobs. This is when you start moving away from the business and the calls of the flesh. Then finally, the last stage is the *sannyas ashram*. That's what's given in the Indian tradition as the ultimate way of living your life. Even if you go through the whole married life, the whole *grihastha ashram* phase of life, nonetheless *sannyas* is still seen as the highest, final stage.

Of course, for those who do it sooner, yes, that is seen as the highest ideal. But what the *rishi*-s and the sages and the saints recognized is that it's not a path for everyone. It's not a path of denial, it's not a path of pushing something away, it's a path of embracing something else. If you can do it, great. But if you can't, if a path of renunciation feels like a path of denial, feels very difficult, feels like something that you cannot do without being frustrated, then they say no problem. Be married, *use* your marriage, *use* your fulfillment of your duties in the family as your path to God. No problem, that's also just as viable, just as good a path. The scriptures are full of stories and examples of people who through their marriage, through fulfilling their duties, whether to their spouse, their children, their parents, or their Kingdom, are the embodiments of the Divine.

So, the Indian tradition says, "OK, we recognize that during your daily life, in your married life, you're going to be having sex. So even that should be done as an offering to God. Even that should be done as a way of getting closer to God." That's what the *Kama Sutra* is about. It's about how we can take something that is an aspect of so many people's lives and rather than seeing it as the profane, rather than seeing it as separate from our spiritual path, if I'm married, if I'm in a dharmic, loyal, monogamous relationship, how can that relationship be my path to God? And this is what the *Kama Sutra* gives us.

Here's the part that they don't tell you though. The *Kama Sutra* is the only one we hear of, but there's actually so many *sutra*-s. The *sutra*-s are the way to take our daily life, our daily activities, and make them sacred. So, there are *sutra*-s on how to live every aspect of your day in a way that's sacred. But most of us don't hear about it, we just hear the *Kama Sutra* and think, "Oh, we're supposed to be out having sex!" No. You're supposed to be doing whatever you do – how you wake up, how you go to sleep, how you prepare food, how you eat food, how you go to the bathroom, how you live in your family, how you perform your duties, how you do yoga – as an offering to God. *That's* what the *Kama Sutra* is about. It's taking an aspect of most people's lives that for them is separate in their mind from their spirituality, and weaving it into their spiritual practice, so that even

that also becomes sacred.

It's not a dichotomy. It's a tradition that does in fact say that the highest level is renunciation, but if we're going to be doing anything else, make that part of your spiritual practice as well.

Why is renunciation the highest? It's the highest because the calls of the flesh are never ending. Anybody who has ever decided to just have one piece of chocolate or one bit of dessert or to just hit the snooze button one time knows how the calls of the flesh work. The calls of the flesh are never ending. And what the tradition says is, if you spend your life responding to the calls of the flesh, there's no end. There's no end. This is why today, now they're making pills so that men long beyond the age where men are meant to be procreating can keep doing it, because it's never enough. The 20-40 years that God gives us for procreation, it's not enough, so now we need pills so we can keep doing it. And so what the tradition says is, "OK, as long as you're 'doing it,' no problem, here's the sacred way to do it, here's the spiritual, dharmic way to do it, here's the way to do it and offer it to God."

And yet, ultimately, the real goal is to figure out how can we learn to experience that state of fulfillment without responding to the constant calls of the flesh? How can we not respond, whether it's the chocolate cake, the drink, the snooze button, sex, or anything else? How can we recognize that these are just calls of the flesh to which there is no end? It always just feels like one more time, one more time, one more time. How can you attain a higher level of fulfillment in life? That's what the emphasis on *sannyas* is about. It's not about denial, it's not about gritting your teeth and clenching your fists, it's not about something that's supposed to make you miserable. It's actually about something through which you experience a fulfillment that's much deeper and much longer lasting than what we get through responding to what the flesh wants.

In this culture, there's so many yogic practices on things like fasting. Now, food is inherently bad, so why do we fast? The fasting teaches us, "Ah, my stomach is rumbling, but today is my fast, I'm not going to eat." Through experiencing the rumbling of the stomach and not responding to it, what I recognize is, "Ah, there's a rumbling of the stomach, I don't respond, *and I'm still here*. I haven't exploded or imploded, dissolved, died, or consumed the universe." The calls of the flesh feel so strong that we literally convince ourselves that we have no choice.

Another yogic practice is staying all up night. Why do we stay up all night? We do this on nights like Shivratri and Krishna Janmashtami. Now of course, we could celebrate those holy days at noon, we can meditate to Shiva at 10:00 in the morning, it's not that Shiva is only there in the darkness of night. Why do we experience this? Why did the sages and *rishi*-s give us these practices? They gave them to us to teach us, "Ah, the body is screaming for sleep, but I'm meditating, and wow, I didn't die, I didn't get sick, I didn't melt, explode, or implode. The world did not end, I'm actually OK, and what a beautiful night I had."

When many married couples come to the ashram or go on *yatra*, they abstain from marital relations. Why? Just for the experience of, "Wow, we can be a room together, in two beds. We can be on this journey, this *yatra*, and actually abstain."

Why do we do all this? It's not because food is bad or sleep is bad or sex for married couples is bad, but just to give ourselves the experience of what it's like to abstain from the calls of the flesh and to recognize that there is a strength within us that is much deeper, much higher and much more profound than giving into these, and that the joy that you experience from connecting with that inner strength is much more than the temporary joy that you get from the chocolate, from one night's good sleep, or from having sex once. So that's where the emphasis on renunciation comes. You're not the body, you're not the biological urges, and if you can connect to the *shakti*, to the strength that withstands those, not because it's denial, not because you're miserable or frustrated, but because you've actually tapped into a source, then that's where the real strength comes. *Sannyas* is not a path of denial, not a path of frustration, not a path of deprivation, but a path of actually connecting to and tapping into something that's much more fulfilling.

We talk a lot about not identifying as the body and identifying as the soul or consciousness or love. What do we do when other people identify us as the body?

First of course, there's the individual level: "Oh you're hot, I'd like to take you to bed." That's an identification with the body. Or, "You're really beautiful, you should be the model in my magazine." Again, identification with the body.

But on a macro level, identifications with the body become categorized into

groups of the color of your skin, your gender, your religion, your socioeconomic status, where you were born, who your parents are, how old you are, what you in this body have earned or achieved or acquired. Based on these things, we have access to things, or we don't have access to things.

This is a two-part question, because there's an inner answer and there's an outer answer, and they are equally important. It wouldn't be full if we didn't do both.

On an inner level, we refuse to identify as that. So, you may see me as body, either on an individual level or on a macro level, but that doesn't mean I have to buy into it. Almost every woman has had a situation in their life, probably many, in which they've been looked at by a man in such a way that it is very obvious that he's looking at just the body, and he's not looking at it with the thought of, "God, I'd really like to get to know the soul inside," but rather as an object. We have this experience, but we don't have to internalize that. For most of us, it doesn't really bother us, we just understand that sometimes men are like that.

I remember when I spent a year in Ecuador after graduating university, I'd walk down the street and people would literally heckle me. In the beginning, it was upsetting and off-putting, but then I realized: this isn't about me. It's not about who I really am, it's just about my vehicle. It's like someone saying, "Hey snazzy, nice, new red car!" I don't have to buy into it, I don't have to respond, I don't have to feel like a body, I don't have to feel like a sex object. And yet, I also don't have to turn around and slap them. I don't have to respond or buy into this at all. All I have to know is that this is not about me. Because if I'm furious and I turn around and slap them, well, then it was me that they have insulted. I have identified as the being they heckled, and that's why I'm so angry. So that mantra becomes "not me, not me."

The same is true on the macro level. I'll give a personal example. We have gone to Kailash Mansarovar many times, and we've even built ashrams there. On the way, we go through Nepal. In Nepal, there's a very famous, incredible temple, and every time we go, we make it part of the itinerary to go and have *darshan* at this sacred temple. Unless you're white.

The rule theoretically is that you have to be Hindu to enter the temple, but really the rule is that you have to be brown. We discovered that by the fact that they would let in all kinds of brown people – Christians, Jews, didn't

matter, no one was checking what your religion was when you went in. Nobody was asked to recite mantras, there was no qualification to get in. The guards just stood there and everybody poured in. Unless you were white, at which point they would point at you and grab you and pull you out of the line.

I had an interesting, personal experience with that because with us on *yatra* was a man who worked in the Indian government. When they stopped me, I was actually really fine with it, I was very happy to sit and meditate in the garden while everybody else went in for *darshan*, but he wouldn't hear of it. He said to the guards, "This is ridiculous, she's a Hindu, she's a *sanyasi* for God's sake, she's not even just a Hindu believer but someone who has actually taken vows of renunciation in the Hindu tradition! Ask her anything, she'll answer anything!" and he tells me to start chanting some mantras. So, I start chanting some mantras, and he says to the guard, "Can you chant those?" And of course, the guard couldn't. So then the guard says, "Well, you have to be Indian or Nepali Hindu. She's American Hindu." So I say, "Well you know, half the group you just let in are carrying American passports, have never stepped foot in India, their parents or grandparents are from India but they were born in America or London." We had hundreds of people! And the guard said, "That doesn't matter, that doesn't matter." He clearly had no answer. As we got down point by point – what about this? what about that? – it became abundantly clear that it was about nothing than the color of my skin. If you're brown, regardless of where you're from or what your religion is, you get in. But if you're white, regardless of where you're from or your religion, you don't. I share that personal experience because there were two options: either I become angry, I become upset, and I feel insulted – I've given my life to this religion! I'm the Managing Editor of the 11-volume *Encyclopedia of Hinduism*! What other criteria do these guys need? – or you can say, "Not about me." And this is true regardless of what the situation is.

Now, I've purposely given a very personal and not very consequential example. There's obviously a depth that this goes that becomes violence. Whether it's apartheid by law or by practice, or rights of women or castes or color, it's violence. But it is important for us, before we address it on the outside, to address it on the inside. When someone attacks us, we understand that it's "not about me" because I'm not the body. I'm the consciousness, the love, the infinite, and if they can't see themselves in me, I'm going to still keep trying to see me in them, because ultimately, we're all one. This is the first step.

The second piece – and they should happen together – is the outer part. Spirituality is not about how I can be at peace with the problems affecting the world. It's not about how I can be at peace with the fact that there are children starving to death, how I can be at peace with the poverty in the world and what's happening to our environment, how I can be at peace with violence. That's not the goal. Those are things we have to fight against. We should be upset about it, insofar as our upset-ness is a catalyst to action and it doesn't render me unable to act intelligently. If I'm so angry and I've taken it so personally that my action becomes something that is not going to be effective or benefits others, then it's just me lashing out in anger. I need to be at peace only enough that I'm not reacting. When I'm acting not reacting, I'm able to plan. The truth is our brains don't work very well when we are stressed. When we're really upset, we're not very good planners and thinkers. When something has happened that has impacted us so much that we are furious and deeply miserable, we're not actually going to be able to figure out the way to act against it in a way that is effective. But that's what we are called upon to do. We need enough upset-ness that we act, otherwise we become complacent. It needs to impact us deeply enough that it catalyzes in us the action, but it should not paralyze us. These are things we need to work against. Absolutely. Because it is violence. If I've got the ability – "I" as the government, "I" as an institution – to give you food, water, employment, housing, and human rights, and I don't give it to you, that's violence. We are absolutely called upon to act against violence, but we need to do it from a place of clarity, otherwise it just becomes a useless war. It becomes the blind fighting the blind.

I'll conclude with just another personal story on this. When I first came to India, Pujya Swamiji took me to see some schools in a slum because He's always been very committed to education. We run a whole variety of charitable and humanitarian programs, and coincidentally after I had come, He had gotten a phone call from the head of a trust that was running 10 or 11 schools in this slum area. They didn't have any money, kids showed up every day, and a teacher showed up every day in each of these schools, but they had no money. The roof was leaking, there was no floor, there was no electricity, there was nothing. This person had called to ask Pujya Swamiji if we would sponsor these schools. So, Pujya Swamiji takes me to go see the schools, and I had never even seen a movie about what an Indian slum looks like – *Slumdog Millionaire* hadn't even come out at that point. We walk in, and it's what slums look like. We spent the day visiting the schools, and I'm just crying and crying. I cry the whole way back, and when we get back to the ashram, it's dinnertime and I can't dinner. I'm just

sitting there crying and crying, “Oh my God! Those kids! Oh my God, oh my God!” And Pujya Swamiji looks at me as the enlightened Guru that He is – living in the light and bringing that light to those of us around Him – and He says, “Are your tears helping those children?” Of course, I had to admit, “No.” So He looks at me and goes, “Your tears are only helping your own ego. You feel like a really compassionate person by how much you are crying and how upset you are, so you feel good about yourself. You’re saying, ‘Look how much I care, look how upset I am, look how deeply I’m impacted, aren’t I such a good person?’ But,” He continued, “Don’t kid yourself that your tears are helping anything other than your own ego. If you really want to help those kids, eat your dinner, sleep early, get up a 5am tomorrow morning and figure out how to raise the money so we can adopt all 10 of those schools.” And that’s the teaching.

How can we shift from illness to wellness, in body, mind, and heart?

If you look around the world or talk to friends or go on social media are New Year’s, what you find is everyone making resolutions about health. So, I’m going to exercise more, give up white sugar, white flour, eat more vegetables, etc. Whatever our New Year resolution may be with regard to our health or body, everybody has these very wonderful, intentional plans for what we’re going to do to bring about greater health. That’s great, there’s nothing wrong with exercising, nothing wrong with giving up as much processed food as you possibly can. You’ll feel better on every level. But, there’s a much deeper possibility when we talk about wellness and when we talk about health, and that’s what I want to look.

What is it on a spiritual level that we can look at that impacts our actual health and wellness? Well, the first, the word “wellness” is actually a relatively new word. People have only been speaking about “wellness” for the last few decades. But the word “health” in various etymologies has been around for about a thousand years. Here’s what’s interesting – originally the root of the word “health” was the exact same as that for “holiness” and that for “wholeness.” This means that there was no such way to have “health” if you didn’t also have holiness and wholeness.

What’s happened today is we’ve lost that sense of wholeness, we’ve lost that sense of holiness. In order to bring back our health, we’ve turned to gyms, vitamin supplements, and superfoods, but we’ve forgotten that there’s a way to be “super” that’s from the inside and that actually permeates out. Rather than having it just be something that I ingest, and some portion that

will make it into my bloodstream and some portion affect different organs of my body, there's actually a Source of Supremacy within us. That's going back to the root of wholeness and holiness.

Sadly, most of us have separated these things. This separation of body and mind is what I think has actually caused so much of what we suffer from. If you look back about 100 years, even less than that, what you find is we have eradicated so much of that which plagued us at that time, things that we used to get afflicted by from mosquitos, bad water, food, flies, and rodents, and yet, we're not actually that much healthier than we were last century. What's happened is that there has been a shift from illness which we catch in the air, from bugs, from rodents, or from bad water, into illnesses that don't seem to have a known cause. These are illnesses that are caused by what I refer to as simply "dis-ease." A doctor may not be able to diagnose it, a blood test may not be able to diagnose it, and yet there's a sense of disease in the body. "My digestion's a mess, I can't sleep, I'm fatigued, I don't feel vibrant." There's so much that's wrong with me, but there's no actual cause. This is due to our systems being out of alignment, having gone awry from that health/wholeness/ holiness confluence.

When we talk about holiness, it does not mean, "Thou shalt be religious, thou shalt go every day to your temple." If your spiritual path is not one in which the Divine has a specific name or form, don't worry as long as you can connect to spirit, as long as you are able to connect to that which isn't just the cells and the muscles of our physical body. Those cells of course keep changing. The cells of the body keep sloughing off and new ones come in, but there's an "I" that we've been saying long before we had these skin cells, these organ cells, and these blood cells, and that we're going to keep saying long after all of the cells of this body today have regenerated. What's that "I"? Who is that "I"?

When you connect with what that is, what you realize is it's not confined to the body as the body keeps changing. We realize that we are not the body, which means I'm not able to be thrown up and down by what happens to it. Most of us have a bad hair day or a pimple or a little too high of a weight on a scale, and we take that as "I" – I am worthless, I am ugly, I am unlovable. We take that as though somehow having more or less in a particular part of the body is the criterion for determining our worthiness to occupy our place on earth, as though it's the criterion for determining our lovability, as though it had anything to do with who we are.

When we connect through holiness to spirit, what we recognize is there's actually no place I end and you begin, which connects me not just to myself, but to the world around me. That connection is that which brings about health, not just in our minds, hearts, spirits and souls but actually brings health in the physical body. We know that people who are connected are healthier. Top research-based institutions are showing that people who are spiritual are actually less susceptible to illnesses and ailments. Dartmouth did a phenomenal study of people who walked in to their hospital after their first heart attack, and on intake, in addition to asking all the other normal questions, they also asked one additional question: how religious are you? Of course, this didn't mean fanatic, but how connected are you to the Divine? There were three options: not at all, somewhat, and very. What they found is people who checked not at all, after a period of six months, about 11% of them had a second fatal heart attack. This actually turns out to be medically standard. If you look medically at approximately how many heart attack victims have a second fatal heart attack within sixth months of the first attack, it's about that much – 10-15%. But of those who had checked "very," guess how many had a second fatal heart attack? None.

Duke University did a study where they watched people for twenty years, and they measured everything from what they ate, drank, and smoked, whether they exercise, their social circles, everything. What they found was that the people who regularly attended a place of worship – didn't matter what the place was – were 25% less likely to die of any cause during the course of that study. This is amazing when you think about it because we are not handing out multivitamins as *prasad* or communion. We're not running medical camps side-by-side mass, side-by-side our *pujas*, it's not "do *abhishek* here and go in and get a B12 injection over there!" Nothing like that! The air inside the places is no purer, the food is no better – in fact, I don't know about other religions but in the Hindu *mandirs*, the food is inevitably greasy *puris* and *pakorras* and *ghee*-filled sweets! So, what is it about attending these places that's serving as an inoculation? Interestingly, a lot of people thought that maybe it was just the social network, but what they found was that people who were members of a tennis club or a book club didn't get that type of medical benefit. So, we don't know exactly what it is, but we know that it is there, it exists, there is something in a deep spiritual connection that pulls you out of your home, off your couch, into a place of worship to connect with the Divine, whether it's the banks of Ganga for Aarti, whether it's an actual church/mosque/mandir/synagogue, it doesn't matter. Something is pulling us there to connect with the Divine that is changing us on the inside.

We also now know that the emotional neurotransmitters, which we always thought were relegated just to our brain and our emotional state, actually communicate with the cells of our immune system which have receptors for all of these emotional neurotransmitters. This means that what we think, feel, and believe is communicating directly with the cells of our immune system!

On a less scientific level, on a simple level of just spirit, we know that joy and bliss and connection is that which holds us together. It's the glue that holds us together. So, when I am connected, I'm healthy, I'm whole, and I'm holy.

There's my favorite joke on the subject of the man who goes to the doctor, and he says, "Doctor, there's something very wrong with me! Whatever I touch, it hurts. When I touch my head it hurts, when I touch my stomach it hurts, when I touch my back it hurts." The doctor is surprised because usually people have one complaint, so he runs every test and scan. Finally, he calls the man and says, "Good news, there's nothing wrong with your head, back, stomach, or shoulders. The bad news is though, your finger is broken. Since your finger is broken, naturally whatever you touch – it hurts. It hurts not because the problem is outside, it hurts because the problem is in this broken finger."

This is how most of us move through the world. Our lives hurt, but we blame it on the traffic on the freeway, our in-laws, our spouses or lack of spouses, our children or lack of children, our job or lack of a job. Whatever it may be, we blame it on all of these things outside, when actually really what's causing the pain is that broken connection inside, that broken connection between us and ourselves. The answer is connection to the Divine, to God – whatever name, whatever form – because that connection brings us in touch with is the source of joy and the source of health.

When you take a pill, ranging from an antibiotic to a paracetamol, what is it doing? It's kicking in your own body's mechanisms. Medicine that does not interact with mechanisms that already exist in our body is useless. In fact, that's how they've created all of that fake, chemical fat that goes into the non-fat potato chips and other non-fat food. They create these chemicals out of molecules which our bodies have never seen nor heard of and have no idea what to do with, and therefore they literally just pass straight through the gut because our bodies say that it is a foreign thing. Thus, it doesn't go into our bloodstream, it doesn't affect our blood sugar,

it doesn't make us gain weight. In order for something to impact us, it has to be hooking into a molecular system, a cellular system that already exists in our bodies, which means that within us already exists all of that which we need in order to heal ourselves. All of that which we are swallowing or injecting is just activating the mechanisms within ourselves.

What is the relationship between karma and disease? My friend has been diagnosed with cancer – is this related to her karma? If so, should she fight it, or is it meant to be?

The relationship between cancer and *karma* is really very much like the relationship between anything and *karma*. That which happens to us is because, yes, it is the fruit of the *karma* we have sown.

If we plant apple seeds, we get an apple tree that gives us apples. If we plant orange seeds, we're going to get an orange tree that will give us oranges. But here's what's really important when you look at disease. It's not that you've planted a seed of disease. It's not that we've somehow been cultivating and nourishing a disease the way that you do an apple tree or an orange tree. Rather, the reason that disease comes into our life is so that we can take the next step closer to the Divine. That's why everything happens, that's the ultimate point of the law of karma. It's not just a law of nature that acts in this way or acts in that way, it's not just like gravity that grabs you and pulls you to the ground. Karma is a law of nature, yes. But the ultimate goal of the cycle of karma is to be free of that, and to attain oneness with the Divine. So, disease does not come to us as a punishment. No one should feel like I've done something wrong, therefore I have this bad karma and I've gotten this illness. No. Sure, there may be some seeds in my life that I can look back on, whether it's lifestyle issues, smoking tobacco, eating certain things, or whether it's genetic issues, but ultimately what comes into my life comes in so that I can take my next step closer to God.

When we ask if we should fight it or not fight it, it's not about fighting it, it's about using it to peel back the layers of who we are, to peel back the layers of ignorance, of ego, of attachment, of identity, of all of the stuff that keeps us stuck, and actually connecting with who we really are. People who have been face-to-face with death through serious illnesses, through near-death experiences, always, if they survive, come back and say they wouldn't trade that experience for anything. Yes, they suffered, yes, they were scared, yes, they were sick, but what it gave them in terms of the

vision and the perspective of who they really are, what the Universe really is, and what their connection to the Universe really is, they wouldn't trade that for anything. So that's why illness shows up in our life.

When it does show up, don't think about fighting the illness, because remember, our body has created it. Even if it's something as external as say malaria – I got bit by a mosquito – well, the mosquito had malaria, but the mosquito just put it a little something in my blood. It was my system that took that, reproduced it, allowed it to enter the cells of my body, and allowed it to make me sick. So, all of that actually gets created within us, which means that if you're fighting something, you're fighting in the self, and we don't want to create war within ourselves. When you're already dealing with an illness, the last thing you need is also to be dealing with a war. Instead of thinking about fighting it, think about using it to learn what you were supposed to learn. Think about using it to open in the way you're supposed to open. Think about using it to peel back the layers of the self. And should you take treatment? Of course. We've only got one body, and the body is a temple. In the same way that when our body is tired we sleep, when our body is hungry we eat, when our body is dirty we bathe, when we're thirsty we drink, if I cut myself my other hand is going to come and hold it to protect it, we should do whatever we can to protect the body because it is a temple and it is our only medium to consciousness, into awakening. By all means, get as many minutes, as many days as you possibly can in this body. But remember that ultimately what matters is not the days of my life, it's the life in my days. So, while you're getting treatment, while you are working to heal the body, remember to focus not on just getting more minutes of life, but how to fill every minute and every day with what life is about.

That's also what disease does. It is like a mirror in our face saying, "Oh wow, yes, this is what life is about." It's not about all of these stupid little things that we worry about and get upset about and stress over. It's not about who is wearing what or saying what or doing what. It's about my connection to God, it's about my connection to God through my loved ones, it's about my connection to the Universe, it's about love, it's about truth. That's why I'm here. So, when disease comes, whether it's cancer or anything else, absolutely do whatever you can to heal the body, but remember that balance internally. Body-mind-spirit is so important.

Here's one last very important piece: a large percentage of people who get bit by a mosquito with malaria are going to get malaria, but not 100%.

A percentage of people who have a gene for cancer are going to get that cancer, but not all of them. In many cases, the number is not even 50%. Now of course in cancer, risk rates of 30%-40% are enormous, they're huge. But what we have to remember is that even if there is a risk rate of 40% of dying, it means 60% of people in this situation don't die. All of the statistics they give of "people who eat this or do this or have this gene are going to get this disease," well, some percent will, it's more than the general population for sure, but there's still an enormous number of people who don't get it. And the question becomes why?

The whole field now of epigenetics is giving us such incredible information about the role of the environment on our genes. What's the environment of our genes? Our blood. It's the environment our cells sit in. What flows through our blood? It's what we eat, the vitamins we take, of course the drugs if we take them, the alcohol if we drink it, the nicotine if we smoke. Of course. But what else flows through our blood? All of the stress hormones. They now have found receptors for emotional neurotransmitters in our immune systems. We always thought neurotransmitters were only in the brain, and that they were just a way for the neurons of the brain to talk to each other. But now they have found receptors for emotional neurotransmitters on the cells of the immune system. This is huge because it means that our emotions, which we thought lived only in our brain, are talking to, impacting, and affecting the cells of our immune system, which flow through our blood. So, just as important as the genetics of what's in that cell, perhaps even more important is the environment in which that cell sits, which determines whether those genes actually get turned on or don't get turned on. Simply having a gene for something doesn't mean it will get expressed. Simply engaging in a certain behavior doesn't mean it's going to have ramifications. Now of course, that's not a license to smoke, it's not a license to eat junk food, but what it means is never despair, and never give up, even if you've got a diagnosis. Even if the doctor says you've got an 80% chance of dying, it means you've got a 20% chance of kicking this thing. That's huge. Focus not on your chance of dying, focus not on what's not going to work, but focus on how you can be sure to be one of those who doesn't get it, whether it's the 5%, whether it's the 10%, whether it's the 50%. However many people there are who don't die from what you have, whatever a percent of people there are who have your gene but don't get cancer, be one of those. How can you do that? That of course is where all of our lifestyle comes in, our diet, our exercise, not being exposed to toxins so eating organic food, breathing clean air. But just as important is our inner environment, because we may take in beautiful, natural food

from outside, but if our inner environment is toxic, that's just as deadly.

Whether you're looking to prevent illness, whether you're looking to heal from it, or whether you're looking to just experience deeper, more profound and meaningful life, this is where the spiritual connection is so important. Remember, our thoughts and our emotions create our world, the outer world and the inner world.

The very last point though is that it doesn't mean you should feel guilty. If you have cancer, don't feel like, "Oh my God, I've done it to myself, I've thought the wrong things, I was too stressed." No. In fact, don't even wonder why you got it – it doesn't matter – you're here now, what matters now is the "now what?" Instead of using any energy to wonder why you have it, ask yourself, "What do I need to learn from it, what layers do I need to peel back, what is it in my life to teach me, why has cancer showed up in my life? And how can I heal this beautiful temple, in the body, in the mind, in the thoughts, in the emotions, and in the spirit?"

Appreciating Human Diversity

What do unity and diversity mean, and how do they coexist?

Unity and diversity are like the waves of the ocean. If you took a photograph or a video of the ocean, and you had a wide-angle lens so you could really get a very big, beautiful image of the ocean, what you'd get is pictures or video of lots of different waves – some tall, some short, some wide, some narrow, some that seemed to go on forever, some that crashed immediately, some that were blue, some that were half-white as they crashed into the shore. That's the diversity. But ultimately, they're all ocean.

That's the same thing with us. The diversity is the different colors, the different shapes, the different ways – I mean, seven billion people, every one of whom has a different fingerprint. It really is quite amazing! Just looking at the tiny little lines on our fingertips, and of all the people who have existed since they started collecting fingerprints, not two were the same. No two faces are the same, no two eyes are the same, so much so that now they're doing identification based on scanning the eye's iris. Amazing!

Not two are the same, and yet, we're all waves of the same ocean. So, either we can focus on the diversity - you're black, you're white, you're Hindu, you're Muslim, you're Christian, you're Jewish, you're Buddhist, you're rich, you're poor, you're fat, you're thin, you're old, you're young, you're my people, you're their people – or we can focus on the Oneness. It's a direct connection to the superficiality or the depth on which we live. On the most superficial layer, it's all about the diversity. There's nothing wrong with that. Again, that's not inherently bad, the garden is beautiful because of so many different types of flowers. A safari is so interesting because we see so many different types of animals. Humanity is so interesting

because there are so many different types. It's beautiful, but we must have the awareness of the underlying unity, so that we're able to appreciate the beauty of diversity but be connected to and grounded in the Oneness and identified with the Oneness.

Creating Change

The prayer for serenity is: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." So how do we accept the things we cannot change?

Well, first of all, there's very few things we can change. We cannot change the fact that it's raining outside. But, the rain is not the problem. The problem is my reaction to the rain, and that I can change. The rain is just rain. There's no universal good or bad. It's not that God likes it dry and doesn't like it wet, or likes it wet but doesn't like it dry, or likes the summer but doesn't like the winter. The problem comes from my mind which says, "Oh no! Another rainy day!"

In the same way, in our relationships, you cannot change another person unless they want to change. But the problem is usually not what the other person is saying or doing, but my reaction to it, my attachment to the fact that they should be saying or doing something different, and I do have control over my reaction. . When I change myself, everything changes. If you and I grab opposite ends of a rope, and you pull to the left and I pull to the right, there would be a lot of tension in the rope, a literal tug-of-war. I may scream "Let go!" over and over, you may not let go, and then I may say that the tension in the rope is because you won't let go. If you would just let go there would be no tension, then I would be in peace. The truth is that I can't make you let go of the rope, but I can let go of my side. That is in my hands. If I let go of the rope, automatically all of the tension is gone. Not just 50%. It only requires one person to let go and 100% of the tension is gone.

So, in our lives, when there is a problem, it's really important to look and to ask yourself, "First of all, can I change it? If I can't change it with my

words or my actions, can I change it internally, can I let go of my end of the problem?" It's not so much a matter of having to love or even accept everything; it's simply a matter of me realizing that the problems I face are due to my own reactions, my own tugging.

One person could walk into a room full of people and say, "Oh, so beautiful, this is amazing, we've got people of every color, every height, every culture, everybody's together, it's perfect." Yet, somebody else could walk into the same room and say, "My God, there's a chip here in the ceiling, why didn't they paint that, why hasn't this thing been fixed?" It's not about the room, it's about how I'm interacting with the room.

There are always things and people around us in the world that could be improved. But we must decide whether we want to look at the world through those eyes, or do we want to look at the world through eyes of love, eyes of seeing what's beautiful?

How can I help someone who doesn't want to be helped?

We should actually not try to change other people. First, it is actually impossible. You cannot actually ever change anybody else. The only deep change occurs when they, perhaps impacted, influenced, touched or taught by you, change themselves. That change must come from within. You cannot change another being. The most that you can get, unless they are open deeply to change, is behavior modification. For example, let's say your child's room is dirty, it drives you crazy, and every time you see his room you have a screaming temper tantrum. So eventually your child will learn to pick his clothes up because he doesn't want mom to have a screaming temper tantrum. He's modified his behavior. However, nothing deep inside him has changed. He has just made a very wise decision, consciously or unconsciously, that it's easier to pick up his jacket than to face mom's wrath.

But the truth is, the reason that you have a temper tantrum, the reason that it drives you crazy has nothing to do with a sweater or a pair of pants. If you go to a clothing store and see someone has left clothes on the dressing room floor, you're not going to have a temper tantrum. It's not the clothes themselves that upsets you so much. The true drama of your anger at seeing your son's clothes on the floor is that you feel disrespected and ignored. , You have gone out, bought the clothes with money you've worked hard for, you've given your children these garments out of your

time, your energy and your love. , In your mind you believe that fact that they're on the floor means your children don't respect you, they don't respect your time, and they don't respect your energy. So really, what this whole drama is about has nothing to do with sweaters and pants being on the floor or on chairs or in the closet. It only has to do with you not feeling valued or respected.

Now of course, your screaming temper tantrums every time your children's rooms are messy doesn't make them value you. Has anybody ever respected someone more when they yelled at you? It's actually the opposite. When people scream at us we think, "When are they ever going to shut up!" So temper tantrums never generate respect or love. Instead, your children simply understand that if they pick up their sweaters, mom won't have a fit. So they start picking up their clothes, but you still haven't gotten the love and respect you wanted in the first place. You get basic behavior modification, but that's not what you are looking for.

If your husband forgets your anniversary every year, and every year you cry and mope, maybe finally he hires a secretary whose job is to remind him of your birthday and anniversary. So now he shows up on time on the right date with chocolates and flowers because his secretary reminded him and she ordered the gifts. But you know it's all happening only because of his secretary. Are you happy about it? No, because your sadness was never about the chocolate and flowers. Your sadness was that, as your husband, that he should remember these important dates, he should love you and think about you, he should value you. Forgetting your birthday means, in your mind, that he doesn't value or love you. The fact that he now has a secretary who reminds him to take home the flowers she bought doesn't change anything in your heart. So, it's not fulfilling to you on the inside.

The reason that I give these two examples is that in both cases, we think that what we want is something outside, but really, we want something deep on the inside. We want a change in not actually how someone acts but in how they feel and think. However, tragically, we can never change that through coercion. By trying to do the impossible, we not only don't succeed in changing others but we also thwart all the great potential in our own lives, because we succumb to annoyance, irritation, anger, frustration, and judgment. Every time people do that thing that annoys us, we judge, we criticize, we get hurt, and we get angry. That becomes our nature, which means we're not able to fulfill the incredible potential that we have because the very nature of who we are has become warped in this fruitless

effort to do the impossible.

One of the most fundamental tenets of psychology is that that which bothers you the most about other people, bothers you because it's what you personally need to work on. Every time that you think, "This person needs to change," if that person has not asked you for help in changing the first question you need to ask yourself is: is it really *they* who need the help, or is it just that their way of being is difficult for *me* to handle? It's a lot easier for us to look outward and say someone needs to change than to look inward and realize we need to be more accepting and compassionate.

In most cases, it's only our own inner acceptance and compassion that can actually help the situation. You cannot force help on someone. All you get is resentment; your effort to change them actually pushes them farther away. So, instead, look within, and ask, "How can I accept this situation?" Remember, acceptance doesn't mean I think it's great, it doesn't mean I love it, it doesn't mean I would choose it, but it just means I recognize that I don't have the power to change this situation. Therefore, how can I have acceptance? And also, how can I have compassion, both for the person who is acting in a way that I think is wrong, and for myself who is so troubled by it that I'm trying to help them even though they don't want to be helped?

Acceptance and compassion create space, and in that space people are able to breathe. When they are able to breathe, in many cases they are able to look at themselves and realize they do need help, whether it's for something as obvious as alcoholism or a drug addiction, or something more subtle – ego, jealousy, lifestyle, neglect of their spiritual practice, their family, or their health. Whatever it is that seems wrong about how someone else is living, we have to first create the space for them to breathe into the awareness that they may need to change.

Realize that being in love is more important than being right, because being in love is the rightest thing you can do. Love actually has the power to change things. Being right doesn't change anything. Be love, because when you love, you exude love, and people around you feel love. Make a resolution that from now you're not going to try to change others. If you can change yourself, great, it's a bonus, but if you can't, at least stop trying to change others.

How do we help others who are struggling? I know someone who keeps

having challenges, but sometimes it gets really old listening to their commentary. Help me to help them.

Think back to a time when you've shared problems with someone else, whether they are emotional problems, relationship problems, health problems, or anything else, what did you want from them? You wanted somebody to listen, you wanted love, you wanted compassion, you wanted someone to be there with you. Connection is so important, and that's really what we're craving. We rarely go to our friends or colleagues or even family members to solve our problems. If something happened at work, and you go home at the end of the day and tell your spouse or your parent, you don't want them to solve it. You just want them to listen and understand or listen and have sympathy for you. I remember when I was young and I'd come home from school and tell my parents about something that happened at school that troubled me. My mom would say, "I'll come in tomorrow, I'll tell them! I'll fix it." I used to think, "No, no! Please don't come into school and fix it!" It was the last thing I wanted. No kid wants their mom to show up at school and fix things. You just want them to listen.

We're not looking for others to fix our problems. If a friend or a colleague is struggling with their spouse or child, they're not looking to us to give them the answer. People think about their problems, they're the ones thinking about it twenty-four hours a day, they're the ones living and breathing this problem. You can be very sure that before they've come to talk to you, they've thought about it a hundred times, and it's unlikely there's going to be something you can say that they haven't already said to themselves. What people want much more than answers is connection and compassion, and just to have someone there with them.

Don't feel like you are the fixer, or that you have to be the fixer. Just understand that someone is coming to you for love and connection. If you can give that it helps them, and you will also find that you benefit as well. Whatever we're sharing with others is being manufactured inside ourselves. If I'm angry and I'm shouting, well, where is that anger factory? I didn't buy it off a shelf and swallow it, no one injected me with anger. It's welled up inside me, in my mind and in my physical body, my blood pressure, my heart, my endocrine system, my digestive system.. I'm the anger manufacturer, which means that when I get angry at you, even if it is for something that you did, the first recipient of that anger is me. We have to be really careful about what emotions were manufacturing. Someone

else may have done something hurtful, but that doesn't mean that your anger factory has to go into overdrive poisoning yourself.

There's a beautiful quotation that says, "Getting angry at someone else is like drinking poison and expecting that someone else will die." I may shout at you thinking that somehow that is going to change you, but actually I'm killing myself. On the other hand, if I know that what you need is just love and compassion, I have to become the manufacturing plant of love and compassion. I may not have the answer to your health problems because I'm not a doctor; I may not know how to fix your marriage, or what to do with your unruly children. But you came to me, which means that what you need from me is not the medical advice you could get on the Internet, but just love and compassion, and that is something that I can give.

So, don't feel frustrated, don't feel annoyed, don't feel helpless because that person keeps coming to you with the same problems over and over again. This is just an opportunity for you to cultivate compassion, an opportunity for you to become a compassion manufacturing plant inside yourself. If it benefits them, fantastic. But the first beneficiary of that compassion and love is you.

I have worked to truly change myself. I've tried to forget the mistakes I have made in the past and move forward, but people around me keep reminding me of the mistakes I made. What should I do?

It's so hard. We try to change, we try to learn, grow, and evolve, but it's so difficult when the people in the world around us don't want to let us change and grow, when they don't want to let us embody this newness, this change, this betterment. So, what do we do?

First of all, before we can actually change other people's perception of us, we have to change our own perception. People are only going to accept that you've changed, they're only going to accept that there has been a shift, when it's real. The simple fact that a mistake happened in the past does not mean I have changed. If I lied a week ago, it doesn't mean I'm not going to lie today. If I cheated two weeks ago, it doesn't mean I'm not going to cheat today. The simple fact that the mistake I committed was in the past doesn't mean I've changed. Think for a moment about the people who have hurt you in your life; you're only going to let it go and continue the relationship if you feel they've changed and won't hurt you again. If somebody hurts you or they lie or cheat or abuse you, you're only going

to move forward with that relationship if they've really changed. It's very difficult to trust, to believe, to honor, and to have faith if the people around us have not actually changed, if they don't recognize that what they did was a mistake.

Similarly, we have to realize it is the same with us. We have, perhaps, done something in the past that we know was a mistake. We want to be free of it, but do we want to be free of it without changing, or do we want to be free of it because we have changed? That's an important distinction, and it's important to the people around us. So if you find that you've made these mistakes in the past and people are not letting you forget them, or they're not accepting that you've changed, ask yourself: have I really changed? Am I just trying to put the past behind me, because it's uncomfortable and I feel guilty or have I really changed, have I taken steps to be different? If I've lived with you every single day for the last thirty years, and every day for thirty years you've hit me, I'm not going to wake up tomorrow and believe that you won't hit me. Unless you have really taken steps to introspect, to reflect, to understand why you were harming me I'm not going to let it go.

Our ways of interacting with people are habitual. We don't necessarily process every word we say, every action or every reaction. Our relationships become a habit. So, if suddenly you change, I'm not going to know that you've changed or respond to you as a changed being unless that change has been really deep, really profound, and something that I've been able to see.

If people are not letting us forget our mistakes of the past, just 1) have patience and faith, both in the other people and in yourself, and 2) know that truth is a magnet, and when you live in that truth, people will respond. In America, I used to hear people say all the time to their children, "Do as I say not as I do." For example, the parents may be sitting around smoking cigarettes and getting drunk, but they try to teach their children never to touch these things. Or, they cheat on their taxes and lie to people but try to teach their children to always be honest. I frequently heard parents say to their children "Do as I say not as I do." It's a useless strategy, because children are going to do what you do, regardless of what you're saying. But it's not just children. In all of our relationships, we tend to respond to what people do more than what they say. Someone may profess love to us, tell us that we're their one and only, but if we can see from their actions that we are not their one and only, the words are going to ring very hollow.

So in our lives, if we're really changing, that change needs to come through our actions, not just our words. The words have to be there, but the actions have to be there even more strongly. When we've made mistakes in our past, whether it was a one-time mistake, or a habitual mistake, we have to remind people that we have changed, and we also have to embody that change.

OUR WORLD



Living As Mindfully & Harmlessly As Possible

What can we do about climate change?

I wish could share this with everyone, because the crucialness of the topic of climate change and our own individual role in either exacerbating it or mitigating it is perhaps one of the most important topics facing our planet today.

There's a beautiful story that I love of a boat in the middle of the ocean in which three men are stranded. They start to fight, there's sort of a tense situation, and in order to keep themselves calm, they draw invisible and imaginary lines down the boat, dividing the space in the boat up so that each of the men has his own 1/3 of the boat, much like young children do in their bedrooms. Although the lines were just imaginary, each of the men stayed in his 1/3 of the boat. One day, two of the men look over and they notice that a leak has sprung in the third part of the boat, and that water was now flooding into the boat. They panic and they shout at the third man, "Stop up the leak! The boat's going to sink and we're all going to drown!" But the third man turns to them and says, "Oh, don't worry, it's only leaking in my part of the boat..."

I love that story because even though there were "lines" drawn, we all understand that a leak in any part of the boat brings the whole thing down. That's the situation that we are in on our planet today. Our collective boat of our healthy, sustainable, physical presence on Mother Earth is sinking. It is up to us to plug up that leak.

When we talk about climate change, so many of us relegate it to the responsibility, the fault, and the duty of our governments, of multinational companies, and of the massive transportation industry. We sign online

petitions, we march, we pick8et. It's wonderful to show solidarity, it's fantastic, but there's a lot more that we can do, and there's a lot more that we need to do.

We had a group from Brazil staying at our ashram in Rishikesh, and they were speaking about how the city of San Paulo was almost evacuated due to a lack of water. An entire city almost evacuated due to lack of water. The Amazon rainforest, which produces 20% of the oxygen on earth, which absorbs 20% of the carbon dioxide, which provides us with 20% of the fresh drinking water on our planet, is being clear-cut at a rate of a football field a second.

Take a moment and just breathe. Inhale for three seconds, let it out for three seconds... In that six seconds that you just breathed, six football fields of Amazon rainforest have been deforested. For what? Primarily, for the livestock industry, so that we who have the power, the luxury, and the freedom to choose can choose to eat hamburgers, can choose to eat steak, can choose to have teak and mahogany tables and doors.

The Amazon rainforest is the holder of the oxygen and the water for this planet, and today, 90% of the 1.2 billion people on this planet who live in extreme poverty depend upon the rainforest for their lives and their livelihoods.

Sometimes we talk about how we need to reclaim our humanity. Which humanity? Our humanity in a vacuum? Our humanity that has the freedom and the ability and the luxury to buy bottle of water after a bottle of water? Our humanity is not in a vacuum. As we reclaim our humanity, we have to understand that our humanity is their humanity, and if 90% of those 1.2 billion people depend upon that forest, that is our humanity.

Climate change is taking place as we know due to several main gases. I'm just going to go through this very quickly, but the statistics are really important. The livestock industry is responsible for more carbon dioxide in the atmosphere than the transportation industry. Now, how many of us feel a pinch of guilt for the airplanes we take, for the travel we do? If we have the disposable resources, we'll make a donation to offset the carbon footprint, and yet that impact is negligible compared to what we're eating. Every single hamburger releases 75 kilograms of carbon dioxide into the air. That is the equivalent of taking your car and driving it, morning to night, non-stop for three straight weeks. The livestock industry is responsible

for 40% of the methane in our atmosphere just due to the cattle while they are alive. That which they emit from their various orifices puts 40% of the methane into our atmosphere. Further, when you include the clear-cutting of the forests and the burning of their wastes, 100 million tons of methane goes into the atmosphere. Go ahead and fly in the airplane, but make sure you order the vegetarian meal.

I want to also touch upon water for a moment, because water is an inextricable part of climate change. Not only is what's happening with our water an effect of climate change, and a repercussion of climate change, but the way that we are wasting our water is also directly linked in exacerbating climate change. The less water there is, the hotter our ground is. The hotter our ground is, the hotter our air is. The hotter our air is, the more water is pulled out of the earth.

In India, hundreds of thousands of farmers are committing suicide due to desiccated fields, yet the amount of water that we are utilizing simply to eat hamburgers and hot dogs and Chicken McNuggets is an amount of water that would irrigate not only the fields in India, but the fields throughout the world. 90% of the fresh water on this planet is used in commercial agriculture, mostly livestock. For every pound of beef we eat, 2,500 gallons – about 10,000 liters – of water goes into the production of that one pound of beef. Let me just bring that home a little bit more. If you shower every day, and you shower the way that people in the West shower, not like in India from a bucket, but actually from a showerhead from which water continually pores, and you shower for approximately eight minutes a day, in six months you will use 2,500 gallons of water. That means that every time we eat beef, we have to ask ourselves: am I prepared to go without bathing for six months to offset the water that has gone into this meal? Chicken uses about 1/3 of that water, so for chicken we'd have to go about two months without bathing.

We learned to turn off the tap while we brush our teeth, we put low-flush devices into our toilets, and we pat ourselves on the back for a \$25 donation to Greenpeace, but then we go out and celebrate at a steak house. I share this with you not to make you feel guilty, not to be the moral police, but simply so that every one of us understands the power we have. Even if we don't go fully vegetarian, every single time that sitting in a restaurant we choose a vegetarian option over meat, we are freeing up crucial water resources for the planet, we are putting water in parched throats, we are irrigating desiccated fields, we are helping our brothers and sisters survive.

The very last point I want to make is that it's not only what we eat, it's also what we buy, what we wear, and how we live, because everything that we use in the world, almost, is produced in a factory. Almost every factory is spewing noxious gases into the air, and has chemical waste that is polluting our soil, polluting our groundwater, going into our rivers, turning what should be drinkable fresh water into poison that is killing our brothers and sisters across the world. It doesn't mean don't buy. It means that we should not be so brainwashed and indoctrinated by the culture that says "shopping therapy," that says, as Pujya Swamiji always jokes about, "shop 'til you drop." Well, whether we drop or not, our planet is dropping, people around the planet are dropping. Everything we do has the power to mitigate what is happening.

Isn't eating plants also violent? They have emotions too, so then what can we eat?

It would be nice if we could live on air. It would be nice if we could tread through life, however many years we have, without ever causing pain or suffering, let alone death, to anyone. It would be so wonderful if we never had to kill anything or harm anything. Unfortunately, we can't live on air, unfortunately every day we are killing bacteria within ourselves. Anytime you ever take an antibiotic, you are killing millions and millions of little living bacteria within yourself. Every time we step on the grass, inevitably we are killing all kinds of tiny, tiny beings that live in the grass which are smaller than the bunny rabbit or the squirrel that we can see. The tragedy is that in order to live, there is an impact.

On one end of the spectrum are people like the Jain community, who have made a decision not only to not eat animals, but to not eat any root vegetables – potatoes, carrots, anything that we pull from the earth – because in pulling it up from the earth, we actually cause such a disturbance to the earth that innumerable insects are injured. On the other end of the spectrum is the "Super Size Me" community of bacon for breakfast and hamburgers for lunch and dinner. Most of us fall somewhere in between.

The point of our lives is about how we can create as much life, as much joy, and as much peace as possible. Since we can't live on air, we have to eat something. Vegetables, fruits, particularly things that the earth gives us to us – yes, they actually do have feelings, it's not a silly question. Science has shown by putting electrodes up against plants and that they absolutely do respond to different tones of voices. If you say to a plant, "I'M GOING TO

KILL YOU!”, amazingly the plant actually responds in a way that can be picked up by a meter.

However, that doesn’t mean that it justifies the violence that eating meat does, yet and that’s where these questions usually come up. The questions rarely come up from someone who says, “I’m going to learn to live on air and sunshine because eating vegetables causes too much damage.” The question usually comes up from people who say, “Why do I have to be a vegetarian? Why do I have to give up meat? I mean, the plants feel also, so what’s the difference?” This sort of justification and rationalization is an inherent part of our human existence, and it’s really important to look at it and to call it what it is and to see it. It’s the exact same thing that anybody who has ever been on a diet has experienced. When you start a new diet, at some point you break it and somehow you eat a cookie, but then what happens after we eat the cookie? “Oh, well, I’ve ruined my diet anyway, I might as well eat the whole bag. Let’s order a pizza now because I’ve ruined my diet.” And oddly enough, there actually seems to be some sort of a rationale there because so many of us do it! Objectively though, we all understand, on a serious note, that there’s a very big difference – even if all you are doing is counting calories – between one cookie and a bag of cookies and a pizza. In the same way, just because plants have an electrical response to tones of voices and different sounds, we cannot use that piece of information to justify the carnage that the meat industry creates, like the cookie was used to justify the entire pizza.

Let’s look at it a different way for a moment. Let’s say, even for a moment, that a cucumber had exactly the same emotional state and neurological response as a cow. We all know it’s not true. But let’s just assume for a moment that it did, just for the sake of argument. Eating the cucumber is only violent to the cucumber. Eating the cow is not only violent to the cow. Eating the cow is violent to our human brothers and sisters with whom we share this planet. Eating the cow is violent to every farmer whose field is desiccated and is on the verge of committing suicide because he has no harvest and cannot feed his family. Eating the cow is violent to our water supply, our air supply, to every single person on earth who lives on the edge of water that is rising with climate change.

The meat industry is the single greatest contributor to climate change. This is by a United Nations, not just Sadhvi says. This is a UN report. *The single greatest contributor to climate change is the livestock industry.* Whether we look at carbon dioxide output, methane output, deforestation, water usage, or

energy usage, the meat industry is the single largest culprit.

It also – this is where I was talking about violence – is pulling food out of the mouths of tens of thousands of children who are starving to death every day. We produce enough food on this planet to feed more than 10 billion people. Yet, over 1 billion people sleep hungry every night. Tens of thousands of children are dying of starvation each day. The reason for that is that the food that we produce, instead of being used to feed people, is being cycled to feed the animals who become the hamburgers and the hot dogs and Chicken McNuggets.

It takes 16 pounds of grain to produce 1 pound of beef. 16 pounds of rice, wheat, soy, or corn are fed to the cow, the cow eats and eats for years, a lot of is digested, it doesn't all turn into meat, and at the end of the day, pound by pound, for every 16 pounds of grain you put into that cow, you end up with 1 pound of beef. But, to make rice, to make bread, to make pasta, pound for pound, 1 pound of grain makes 1 pound of food. So, that means that every single time I choose to eat meat, I am literally saying I deserve to eat for 15 other people – let them starve, let them die. I deserve their food. That is a lot more violent than eating a cucumber.

I'm not denying the research that shows that plants also have consciousness. That is beautiful, that's what we talk about in satsang every night. "*Isavasyamidam sarvam yatkinca jagatyam jagat*" - everything in the Universe is pervaded by the Divine, even cucumbers! Even lettuce, even spinach! But that doesn't mean that by any scale, standard, religion, path, or value system that is worth anything, that you could compare starving people to the electrical response that a cucumber experiences.

Again though, the last point to mention is, because everything is interconnected and because there's consciousness in everything, we must take only what is needed. Just because a cucumber is lower on the totem pole of consciousness than our starving brothers and sisters, it doesn't mean I eat more than I need. Wherever we're eating on that chain, wherever we're shopping on that chain, whatever we're wearing on that chain, it needs to be as non-violent as possible. *Ahimsa*, the first tenet of yoga, is non-violence.

When you go camping in America in the national parks, they've got signs as you go through the ranger stations that say, "Take only memories, leave only footprints." If we can think about our life on earth like that, obviously

here we'd like to leave more than footprints in terms of inspiration and joy and peace, but what we take should be as close to just memories as possible.

What can we do to promote vegetarianism?

The report by the UN, entitled "*Livestock's Long Shadow*," is not one that the UN publicized. It's available for download online, but it was not something that got a lot of media attention – or any – because the meat and dairy lobby is such a powerful lobby, that they actually were able to squash it.

However, each of us has a voice. These days we moan and bemoan what social media has done to our lives. Yes, there's a lot of cons to social media in terms of how much of our day gets sapped, how many more pieces there are that just keep vying for our attention, but it's probably the most powerful tool that the general public has ever had in its hand. If we can use it like that, instead of just a way to zone out, instead of just a way to be distracted or to connect with friends, it's an incredibly powerful vehicle. Every one of us has that ability.

I'll give you one example: I was at the United Nations during the General Assembly week, and there was an event on world hunger. I was there, and they had representation from different religions, and they had representation from the World Hunger Project and the UN's hunger organization. Of all the speakers who got up and spoke about world hunger, no one in the two-hour event mentioned vegetarianism. So I said to the woman sitting next to me, a dear, dear friend of mine, "How is it possible that no one has mentioned vegetarianism in a program dedicated to world hunger?" And she said, "Well, it was really up to the religious representatives on what they were going to use their two minutes on." And I said, "No, I don't mean from a religious perspective, I mean from a hunger perspective."

This is a brilliant woman, an incredibly educated, well-informed, hero of mine in many ways, and she had no idea. I sat there and gave her a few statistics... she had no idea. If we can get this out, which we can, each of us in our own ways, we're helping. In that little moment, I was able to bring about a little shift. Whatever opportunities we have, wherever we are, we have to talk about it.

The issue is people don't like to talk about it. We want to be good people, we want to be spiritual people, we want to do the right thing, but we want

to be able to do it in fifteen minutes a day without changing our lifestyles. I can't tell you how many people come into satsang and ask some variety of, "What's the bare minimum I have to do every day?" And that sadly is really what we're looking for. What do I have to do? How many breathing exercises, how many *asanas*, how many rounds of chanting my mantra do I have to do so that I can walk out and give myself the spiritual stamp? This is sadly what it's become for so many people. We don't want to change our lifestyles. I want to keep up my shopping therapy, I want to still have leather car seats, I want to still eat whatever I want to eat, buy whatever I buy, I don't want my taxes to be raised, I want to keep up every habit and be able to feel good about myself at the same time. Unfortunately though, if you're really honest, it's very difficult to do that, but a little bit of inner uncomfortableness about what we ate or bought is actually the stuff that catalyzes us to make a different decision next time. And that's what's so important. So, let yourself be a little uncomfortable, both in your own life as well as in the places where we're quiet, and then let us not be quiet about it.

It doesn't mean being angry vegetarians. When I was a teenager, my friends used to call me a "vege-terrorist"! I've since learned a somewhat gentler approach, but we need to talk about it. We need to spread the word. Not everybody is going to change, but even if people ate meat 90% of the time and they stopped 10% of the time, the sheer impact on the planet would be phenomenal. But as Pujya Swamiji always says, quoting Mahatma Gandhiji, we have to be the change that we want. It's not just about ramming it down other people's throats. It's rather, can we be that change? Are we prepared to actually live spiritual lives 24 hours a day? When we do that, it gives courage to other people to do that. When we cut corners, it gives the message that yes, corners can be cut. Then, just use whatever capacity you have to get the word out.

There's a lot of crazy human behavior occurring right now all over the world with violence and war. What are some of the best ways to stay grounded in our heart space, and to know the best time to take action?

Our hearts do not prevent our heads from working. Staying grounded in our hearts does not disconnect us from common sense. Many of us say, "Well, I want to stay in my heart, but what about my head?" When the intellect is aligned, everything moves in the same direction. The heart-mind problem is only when they're not aligned with the Truth, when the heart is wanting to do something impulsive – when it's not our intuitive

heart but it's our impulsive heart, our emotional heart, our ego heart, our desires heart. But when the heart is really the intuitive heart, the deep heart, and when the mind is not the fear, not the conditioning, but the real intellect, the real wisdom, and the real knowing, then those two things are always in alignment.

When things are happening in our world as they are, we need to be there heart and mind. It's not enough to just have an open heart to it. It's not enough to just meditate on it and cry. It's not enough to post it on Facebook. It's not enough to just sign petitions. It's not even enough to just send a check to an organization that's doing peace work. It's great, all of those things are important, but every one of us needs to be a part, in heart and in action – *mindful* action, where the mind is there. Not mindless action.

The answer is not to get rid of the mind, the answer is to do mindful action. But what should my mind be full of? Not my ego, not about what am I going to do that's going to put me in the center, not about what am I going to do that's going to make everybody think I'm the hero, but what I can do that's really in alignment, which I know through my open heart because my heart is that which connects me.

I have a friend who is a scientist from America now living in London. She's worked at Princeton, she's worked all over the country for top Ivy League universities, a real academic scientist (so, not your typical New Age Institute, not a yoga teacher, etc.). She has spent the last few decades of her life doing research on the power of our thought and our intention to actually affect change in the world, that how and what we are thinking is actually impacting the world. Her research has shown: *our thoughts are things*. This is really important, and it's not in alignment with how most of us are raised and taught. *Our thoughts are things*. They do not exist only between our ears, they are not just the mindless ramblings or chemical or electrical behavior. They actually have a life that moves, moves beyond our mind into the world and changes matter in the world.

When things are wrong in our world, whether it's white supremacists, whether it's people shooting up schools, whether it's terrorism, whether it's climate change, whatever the problem is, we actually have many options of action, and an open heart is only the beginning. It's a crucial beginning, this is what the researcher found. It's not that *any* thought impacts things. The thoughts have to be done with an open heart, with connection, and with great intention. What that means is that when our hearts are really

open and we're really able to connect with the world, and are able through meditative practices to focus our thoughts and our intentions, we actually, even if we did nothing else, are able to affect change in the world.

But the great news is, we don't have to stop there. The great news is that in addition to our thoughts, in addition to our open heart, in addition to our intentions, we've got hands, we've got mouths, we've got legs, we've got creativity, we've got initiative, we've got skills, we've got intelligence, we've got technology and talents to put to use. Spirituality is not about, "How can I be in peace while everybody is dying around me?" It's not about, "How can I stay blissful while the world is suffering and collapsing?" It's about, "How can I stay peaceful and grounded so that my heart, my mind, my thoughts, and my actions are in alignment with what needs to be done?" If I'm not able to stay peaceful and ground, I'm not going to be an effective agent of change, I'm not going to be an effective vessel of God's will and Divine flow. So, my heart stays open and I stay grounded, because only in peace is my ego not flailing all over the place, only in peace is my fear not stopping me from doing things, only in peace is my desire not pushing me into something else.

I stay grounded in peace and I open my heart, because in that connection I know what's needed. When you've got a baby who no one else in the world understands, and the baby says, "Lalala," the mother will say, "Oh, she's hungry." The baby says, "Lalala," the mother says, "Oh, she's got to go to the bathroom." The baby says, "Lalala," the mother says, "Oh, she needs a nap." To anybody else, the "lalala" sounds exactly the same. How do you decipher tears of hunger, tears of "I have to go to the bathroom," from tears of needing a nap? The mother, who's connected in to baby, is not deciphering the "lalala" language, she's hearing the language of the heart. She's so connected that she knows intuitively and instinctively what's needed.

Our world requires that of us. Today, we've spent billions and billions of dollars on the think-tanks, we've spent billions of dollars over decades if not centuries on ending the same problems that we're faced with today, and we haven't gotten any closer. There's no correlation between the billions of dollars that have been spent and getting us any closer to living more selfless lives, to living more in tune with our world. So, what's needed is us to be connected to the world in such a way that we actually know what's needed and are able to take those steps. I don't mean that you have to go off and become the head of a country or the head of NATO or the head of

the UN in order to affect change. Each of us in exactly what our role here is, in the roles that we play every day, is a part of that change. But we have to have our heart open, and we have to stay connected so that we know how to move and what to do. And then, we have to move and we have to act, because our world today requires that, but we act from love, so that the Divine will can flow and so we can be effective.

What can we do about environmental destruction and deforestation?

Forests are actually what give us life. It is the trees that provide us with life. There is a funny saying that says, "It's too bad the trees don't give off WiFi, because if they did, we would plant them everywhere. But unfortunately, trees only give oxygen, which we need to live!"

We commit ourselves to the protection and preservation of the natural world, to protection and preservation of all of creation, and in that, how can we in our daily lives make choices, make decisions, and live connected to the Creator, and in service of that Divine creation?

There's two very simple ways to take care of our forest. Way number one: plant trees. Way number two: protect the trees that are already planted. It's the simplest and the most obvious way. Nowadays, one of the most beautiful *sankalps* or pledges that Pujya Swamiji leads us in so frequently is to pledge that on all of our occasions, on all of our birthdays, on all of our celebrations, we will plant trees. Instead of giving each other just gifts that go into store rooms and get locked up, things that sit in boxes on our shelves, we pledge to give gifts of life. On all of our occasions, on every anniversary, every wedding, every birthday, we will plant trees, and we will do whatever we can do to keep the trees that are already there.

For most of us, that sounds very simple. We think, "Well, I don't cut down trees, I don't have an ax, I don't go into the jungles and chop them down and burn them as firewood." And yet, if you eat non-vegetarian food, if you eat meat, your meals are cutting down the forest. The single greatest destroyer of the rainforest is the meat industry. They go into the rainforest and cut down the trees in order to graze the cows that later become our hamburgers. So, you may not take an ax, you may not go into the forest and cut down the trees, but if you are choosing non-vegetarian food, the meal on your plate is cutting down the trees of our rainforest.

Trees give us life. We all know this, we all learned it in basic biology, we inhale oxygen, we exhale carbon dioxide. That carbon dioxide either goes

into our atmosphere and leads to global warming, or that carbon dioxide is absorbed by a tree. Those are the only options. The trees are the only solution to global warming.

They are also the only producers of oxygen. We've got factories for clothes, electronics, cars, motorcycles, tires, everything, but we have no factories for oxygen. There's no factory that produces oxygen, except our forests. Our forests are the oxygen factories.

As we're connecting deeply, let us remember, as Pujya Swamiji always says, there can be a "Plan A" and a "Plan B," but there's no Planet B. This is the only one we have. If we destroy it, if we consume it, if we discard it, there is no alternative, there is no Planet B for us, for our children, or for our grandchildren.

We talk so frequently about saving the Earth and saving the environment. The truth is though, the Earth is going to be fine. The Earth existed a long time before we existed. We are the ones who require this very, very special, unique concentration and combination of oxygen in the atmosphere. If we ruin it, the Earth will exist, the Earth will be fine, but we will not be fine. So, it's our selves we are saving, its humanity we're saving, it's all of creation with whom we share this planet who are dependent upon that oxygen that we are saving.

So, we pledge to recognize that the trees are life, and in our commitment to life – my life, life for the planet, life for all of humanity, all of creation – we will do whatever we can do to plant more and more trees, on our birthdays, on anniversaries, on weddings, on every occasion. We will celebrate with life, by planting trees, and we will make choices in our lives – what we eat, how we shop, what we buy – that keeps the trees that are already there standing tall and alive. The Earth is not ours to consume and discard. The earth is ours to live in harmony with.

What is the meaning of the water blessing ceremony done at Parmarth?

Parmarth literally means "dedicated to the welfare of all," and that's really what Pujya Swamiji's message and mission is. "Dedicated to the welfare of all" means whatever they need. It's not that we have a vision in our minds of what we do, but we really do what the world needs. So, if it's hunger, we feed. If it's illiteracy, we educate. If it's sickness, we bring medicine and medical care. We really try to do whatever we need. If it's spiritual, psychological, or emotional illness, we do our best to treat that

also, because illness is not just of the body, hunger is not just of the body, but it's of the heart and mind as well.

One of the most serious issues that our world family is suffering from is a lack of clean water. We talk so much about violence in the world. If I said to all of you, "We need to take a stand against terrorism," everyone would all say, "YES!" Or, if I said we need to take a stand against religious war, or domestic violence, we'd all say, "YES!" And yet, actually every year more people suffer and die simply due to a lack of clean water than from all forms of violence combined.

This doesn't mean that we don't work to end violence, but it means that we also recognize that violence isn't only guns, missiles, and knives. Violence is also sometimes our lack of helping when help is needed. If someone is stabbed on the street and is bleeding out in front of us, and we don't help, that's just as violent as the person who stabbed them. So when our sisters and brothers are dying due to a lack of clean water, and we don't do anything about it, that's also violence.

We've committed ourselves, under Pujya Swamiji's leadership, guidance, and inspiration, to work for clean water, sanitation, and hygiene so that these people don't suffer and die. A very special, little ceremony we have is a water blessing ceremony. In the ceremony, there is a globe, which of course is a symbol of the whole world, and there are jars of sacred clean water in our hands. We offer the water to the sound of prayers onto the globe, and it's a prayer that all of our brothers and sisters should be able to access safe and sufficient water. Then, as we pray, we pledge that in whatever capacity we have, whatever time, whatever talent, whatever technology, whatever our experience or expertise is, that we will work for our sisters and brothers.

Privilege & Responsibility

How do we uphold both our privilege and our responsibilities with balance and with commitment?

When we think about privileges on a spiritual level, being alive is a privilege. All of that which we've been given is a privilege. This is where gratitude plays such an important role on a spiritual path. If I think I'm entitled to something, I don't see it as a privilege, I see it as my right. So, the minute that I start to feel entitled to things is the minute that I lose gratitude. The minute I lose gratitude is the minute that I lose the key to my connection to God and to joy. The practice of gratitude is something that so many of the spiritual teachings, spiritual teachers, spiritual lineages emphasize.

For so many of us, it's always about what's wrong - we lost this much money in the stock market, this happened at work, this is aching on my body, this is where a member of my family is annoying me, this is the traffic I got stuck in, this is what's happening to my mortgage. When we shift out of complaining into gratitude, it takes us from the stuff of our drama into the Truth.

So, recognizing that life is a privilege is the beginning of our gratitude. Everything is a privilege. Has anybody worked for their breath? Anybody worked for the water they drink? Worked for the fact that we wake up in the morning? Have we done something in our sleep that made us so worthy to be awakened in the morning, that the universe just knew it couldn't live without us? No, of course not. There's nothing that any of us does that is so crucial that the Universe couldn't live without us, that we've earned our morning awakening. There's nothing that any of us have done that has earned our breath, earned our water. It's a privilege, a privilege

of the Divine.

There's a beautiful poem by Khalil Gibran that speaks about giving. There's a beautiful line in which he says, and I paraphrase, we judge those we are giving to - this person is worthy, that person is not worthy, I should serve this one but not that one, this one deserves what I'm giving, this one doesn't deserve it - but that we should not judge because anyone who has been deemed worthy of their days and their nights by God is certainly worthy of whatever it is that we have to give them. What do we have to offer someone? A few dollars, a few rupees, a hand across the street, a hot meal, a little bit of help, a little bit of advice. What do we have to offer that's on any level as great as their days and nights that the Universe has already offered them?

When we really start to realize how much everything is a privilege, even our days and our nights, it does two things. First of all, it automatically brings in gratitude. The minute we realize, "God, I haven't done anything, I'm just here. I do my best, I'm nice to people, I try to help out, I try to give back, but there's nothing I've done on the scale of earning my breath, earning my days and nights, earning my being awakened in the morning. That's a gift," it awakens gratitude in us.

Second, it makes us realize what a responsibility we have. When we realize how much we've been given without having earned it, it awakens in us gratitude and responsibility of, "Wow, all this! For doing NOTHING! All this for just being here, and that too with my ego, that too with my desires, that too with my negativity, that too with all the minutes I waste." God is so great. God never says, "Well you wasted your last breath, I'm not going to give you another one. Look at you in the bar, look at you in the club, look at you gossiping, look at you stealing, look at you lying, look at you cheating on your spouse. Forget it. I'm not going to give you another breath, you clearly don't see the value of it, forget it." God never says that. God just keeps giving breath after breath, morning after morning, day after day, night after night. And when we really recognize that on a deep level, it inspires responsibility. If we've been given so much, what's our back? Back to God, back to the Divine, back to humanity, back to the universe, back to whatever we understand as that capital-P "Planner" of it all? Then, we start to live with that sense of responsibility. We don't take things for granted. Rather than wasting the breaths, wasting the days, wasting the nights, we honor them, we love them, and we want to get as much as we can out of them, to utilize them the best that we can.

How do you overcome guilt that has arisen from privilege?

Whenever we see the news, we go online, watch a TV, we see what's happening in the world. Children are suffering and dying of hunger, of lack of clean water, and lack of toilets. Women are dying in childbirth. There's so much needless, unnecessary suffering. So many people who don't have enough that if those of us who do have enough are deeply sensitive on some level, we're going to experience guilt. We ask why me? When we're honest with ourselves, when every one of us looks inside, we know we're not perfect, we know that we are not any more entitled to the good life than anyone else, we know that we still suffer from anger, greed, competition, jealousy, and ego. We then look at how blessed we've been, and there's an element of guilt. Why did we get to have such a good life, when so many others are suffering? There are two ways to overcome that – the inner way and the outer way, and both of them are equally important.

The inner way is to know that no matter how flawed I am – and we're all flawed – the flaws only come from my ignorance. At the core of who I am, I am pure and perfect and Divine, because God is pure and perfect and Divine. God did not just create, God is not just like a sculptor or an artist sitting there with His work station making human beings or animals or mountains. We've been created out of the Creator, the Infinite is manifest in infinite ways. So the qualities of God are the qualities that are in the creation, and that's the core of who I am. All of the stuff that I see in myself – the anger, ego, all of that – is due to my ignorance. Yes, we all have it, it's sort of part of the package deal of being human and not yet being enlightened. But, who I am at the core is Divine. What that means is that I am no less deserving of the bounties of this Universe than anyone else. As a manifestation of the Divine, I am entitled to the bounty of the Universe, it is my birthright. God is not like a teacher we have to perform for and please and then we get an A. God is not taking our test like that. By sheer fact that we have been born, we are deserving of all of the bounties of the Universe. We are children of the Divine. That's the inner work, to realize that.

The outer work is "Yes, AND..." YES, I am fully deserving of the bounty of the Universe because I am child of God, AND so are they. What that means is that if they have not received it, it is my duty to do whatever I can in whatever capacity I have to help them get it. Just as I am no less deserving, so are they no less deserving. If they ended up without it, they ended up without the bounty not because they are less deserving or are less Divine,

but because of a failure of our society to provide for all people. It doesn't make them any less deserving. If I have that awareness, it means that it is my duty to see in them beings who are equally deserving and to help them receive the bounties of the Universe in the same way that I have them. It's actually always our duty even if we don't have awareness, but of course trying to get people to act without first being aware is sort of an uphill battle. Our duty is to serve as much as we can. We've all been given so much, we've been given way more than we need on a material level. Our abundance of skills, abilities, and initiative have been given to us to use.

How do you maintain your energy to continue giving and giving for so long?

The beautiful thing about giving, when you give of yourself, when you give of your love, is it actually replenishes you. If I have just a glass of water of which I've already drank most of it, there's only a little bit of water left. If I had to give some of this to a large group of people, it would run out very quickly, or I would only be able to give a tiny bit to everyone because there's a finite amount. But when you give of yourself, when you give of your love, it's infinite. It's not about having to replenish yourself. The giving actually replenishes you.

The reason that it does that is because that which really fills us, really brings us the energy to live, that enthusiasm that pulls us out of bed in the morning, is deep connection. This is what helps mothers go on an hour or two of sleep for years, what allows them to sacrifice so much of themselves. That connection. So the connection to a being, the Divine, many beings, ourselves, or God in any form is actually what keeps us going.

If I withdraw all of my energy, all of my resources, I'm not going to give, I'm going to need to replenish myself. So, the question then becomes: from where am I going to replenish? With what am I going to replenish? With my glass of water, I would go to a tap and refill the water glass. But with my life force, what am I going to replenish that with? The only thing that replenishes it is life itself, a life of connection. This is why the spiritual practice and the spiritual path is such a great antidote in many ways to the fatigue that afflicts so many of us. Yes, of course, you need a good night's sleep. But many people, large percentages of people, tragically, particularly in the West, after long nights of sleep still feel drained, still feel burned out, fried, exasperated, frustrated, innervated, and de-energized. It's not because they're not getting enough sleep, but because that which

they are doing in their days has cut them off from life. What we need to do in order to stay energized is stay connected to real life, to the Divine in all forms – whether it's the form of your child, a sunset, a tree, all children in the world, or just every aspect of Creation, because it's all the Creator. Whatever you're serving, if we serve as we're serving the Divine, from that connection we actually get the energy.

So we emphasize giving. But how do we take something someone gives us graciously? Do we have to repay them? How do we take, how do we repay them?

First of all, what's really important to recognize is there's actually no giver and there's actually no taker. It's a danger that anyone who gives can fall into. Whether you're giving of your time, whether you're doing *seva*, whether you are giving money, whatever you're giving, there's always a very, very subtle ego trap. We often don't give at the highest level, we don't give because that's the right thing to do. We see that have a lot and others have so little, so we give. That's on the most basic level.

On the highest level though, we're not giving as separate. For those of us through whom something flows, whether money flows, medicine flows, schools flow, whatever flows, we're very aware that it's not us flowing. This is what Pujya Swamiji talks about all the time when He talks about just being the tool. To say that we are the givers, or that we are the doers, goes back to the joke we make about the microphone standing up and taking a bow.

We're told and taught in the spiritual tradition to give, not from a position of separateness, it's not, "Oh, you have so much, you have way too much rice on your plate, share it with your brothers and sisters." It's not that. It's that we give so that and because the Universe flows through us, and what the Universe is in its bounty giving, we are blessed to be vehicles and vessels of that. So whether the Universe is bringing sanitation, or the Universe is bringing a book, or the universe is bringing food, or the universe is bringing people to Parmarth and putting them in rooms and giving them the opportunity to be uplifted, whatever vessel we are, whatever aspect is being given, we're just a tool.

We have to remember this because otherwise your ego starts to get really sinister on you, saying things like, "I'm the one always giving, why don't they hold up their end of the deal?" or, "I'm giving so much more than

everybody else, I'm such a good giver." Right? You see what the ego does. And then you've lost it, you've lost the whole point. We are blessed to be utilized by the Universe as a vessel, we're not doing something so great. The Universe and the Divine is blessing us to utilize us in *seva*.

So then, how to receive graciously? Well, with the same awareness that we're not a taker, we're not separate from the giver, we're not less than. So many of us feel ashamed at receiving, saying things like, "Oh, you shouldn't have," and our brain is now thinking, "OK, now I have to give something back for this person, I have to do something, oh my God, now the ball's in my court..." It's a very stressful situation. When you've been given something, you've been given the beautiful moment to actually receive, whether what you're being given is simple as a hug, or all of the other things that are just symbols of that. Here in India a lot, people will feed you - have another *roti*, have another sweet, have this. It's not that they're trying to force feed you, it's just love, it's love shown through another *chapatti* or another sweet. Whatever gets given is the energy of love.

So the first piece is receive it as it's given, because if you start with the "Oh my God, you shouldn't have," you've just separated yourself from the force of giving in the Universe. It's not that person giving. That person has been utilized by the Universe to give you something. Whether you were hungry and it was a meal, you were sick and it was medicine, you were down and it was a hug, whatever it was. So it's not about repaying, it's about a constant awareness that what we are supposed to do is allow the Universe to flow through us. Sure, the premium, the good karma, the merits that we get by being a vessel of giving is a lot more than we happen to get when we are a vessel of taking. It's also a lot more enjoyable. If you look at kids who get a new toy for example, their excitement and joy for the new toy is over very quickly. But if you have them give it somebody else, it reignites all of that excitement and joy. Now they're thrilled, and that joy stays. So we try to be vessels of giving, and it feels a lot better, we're the first recipient of that Divine flow. But when we fling ourselves on the receiving end, don't allow your own self critic to tell you that you are any less worthy, that you are any less deserving, that that person shouldn't have, that now you have to repay them, as that all implies that you were not worthy. If you were worthy, just receive it. Repay them with love. Repay them by taking what they are giving in the spirit of the love that it's being given. That's what the whole point of our existence is about. Whether we're giving or receiving, it's about how can we be connected in love. It's not about the separation

between the haves and the have-nots. It's not about somebody sitting up here giving to someone down there. It's about each of them playing their part and that connection.

The last piece of it is to remember that when we give, it's the way for us to be most in touch with who we are, because we are only really able to recognize the Divinity that flows through us when it's serving others. Very few of us are able to really tap into the Divine flow within us, but when you find yourself blessed to be used as a vehicle for someone else, it's a very special and unique experience. Again, it doesn't matter whether you're making sandwiches and feeding them to the poor, whether you're handing out medicine or doing surgeries – that really hands-on stuff – or whether you're stuffing envelopes or making phone calls. We're all working in so many ways, and it's a gift to be in touch with ourselves enough to feel the way that who we are actually serves the world. It's not what we have, it's who we are.

Keeping Ganga Flowing & Unpolluted

What can we all do to keep the Ganga flowing and clean?

There's actually two different levels to this. One is the inner level, and the other is the outer level. Of course, they're not only interconnected but they're actually one, but for the sake of discussion we'll call them two different layers.

In the Indian spiritual tradition, it is spoken so beautifully and so deeply about how the outer world is a reflection of the inner world. As we think, as we live on the outside, so we create on the outside. We are literally manifesting our own reality, and that can be seen on many different layers of existence and spiritual levels. But even on the most fundamental and basic, we all know that as we think, as we live, that becomes the world that we create around us.

Pujya Swamiji always says so beautifully that if you're in peace, you're going to exude peace, you're going to spread peace, and you're going to manifest peace. But, if you're in pieces, you're going to manifest and spread pieces. In the same way, if we start to feel that everything is wrong in the world around us – the people in our lives, the work we're doing, the society, the situations we find ourselves in – and it becomes pervasive around us, we have to turn the looking glass from the outside to the inside. We have to ask, "If the world around me is full of negativity, what in the world am I manifesting? What in the world are my vibrations and energy creating around me?"

There's a great story of a wise man who is sitting on a road in the jungle, and a young boy is sitting with him. A man walks by and says to him, "Baba, that village up yonder, how are the people in that village?" The old

man says, "Well, where did you come from?" The man answers the wise man, "Oh, I came from the village down there, and the people there were horrible! They were evil and liars and cheats!" So the old man says, "I'm so sorry, but that's exactly how the people are in the village up ahead." The man was depressed of course, but he walked off.

A short while later, another man came by and says, "Baba, how are the people in the village up ahead?" The old man says, "Well, where did you come from?" The man answers, "Oh, I came from the village down there, and the people were beautiful! They were so kind and loving, giving, and selfless!" So the old man says, "I have great news! That's exactly how the people are in the village up ahead!"

After the man walked off, the young boy turns to the old, wise man and says, "Babaji, there's only one village up ahead. How is that you told the first man that the people are horrible and evil, and you told the second man that the people are honest and beautiful and kind?" And the old man says, "Because that's what they saw in their last village, which means it's what's in their eyesight. That's what they're going to see in this village up ahead."

So, on an inner level, that which is wrong with Ganga, or you could even say that which is wrong with our planet – the polar ice caps melting, the ozone layer being depleted, deforestation, pollution, starving children, the poverty, whatever aspect of our world we're looking at – is a reflection of us. So, that which is wrong with Ganga is that which is wrong with me. Whether it's a lack of care, a prioritization of material wealth, "development" over inner wealth, or our spiritual development, this is what's happening in all of our lives.

This is also what's creating our situation with Ganga. Our vision of "development" is factories, cement, asphalt, and cars. We're cutting down the trees and mowing through the forest to cover it with asphalt and cement, to build factories. These factories in turn spew toxins into the air which come down with the wind and with the rain.

It's even bigger than that, because that development then is a reflection of and also cause of – it's a cycle – our value system that says material possessions, that which is produced in a factory, that which I can buy in a shopping mall, is of the most value. The factories are spewing their waste into the ground and the polluted groundwater is going into Ganga, but

this is all because it's a reflection of our own inner world.

When we say, "What can we do?", on an inner level, we have to re-adjust our own priorities and re-adjust our own awareness that we are one. We're one with the flowing river, we're one with the hundreds of millions of people who depend on Her, we're one with the animals and all of nature. We have to recognize that an object's inherent value is not connected to the largeness of the factory in which it was created. Life is not based upon how many factories we can have. Those re-adjustments and recognitions will take care of the inner and the outer levels. The problem is a reflection of us as individuals and us as a collective society. And therefore, so is the solution.

SPIRITUALITY THROUGHOUT
OUR LIVES



Dharmic Relationships

How do we have dharmic spiritual relationships?

There are three different types of relationships. The first is with ourselves, and our relationship with ourselves is actually what determines the quality of our relationship with others and with the world.

It's very common for people to think more about our relationships in the world than with ourselves. We feel very spiritual when our focus shifts off ourselves and onto the world. , But your relationship with yourself is the foundation for your relationship with others. Who is it that relates with others? If you and I are having a relationship, well who's the "I" over here? So first, even if my goal is about a relationship with you, until and unless I'm able to come into this relationship with some level of grounding and centering and understanding, I'm not going to be able to have a skillful relationship with you. If we want to have relationships in the world, we have to begin within.

When we begin a relationship with ourselves, we may know on the deepest level that we're Divine. This is very important, because it's not what tends to be in the forefront of our consciousness. For most of us, when we look at ourselves in the mirror, what we see is that our hair is not the way we'd like it to be, our skin is not what we'd like, our body is not the shape we'd like and it can't do things that we'd like it to do. That dissatisfaction based on the physical form is the foundation for most of the relationship we have with ourselves. We say things to ourselves like, "I really should be taller, or fairer, or prettier, or more talented." Not only is this a recipe for inner disaster, but it's actually a dishonest, non-dharmic, relationship with the self, because it's telling ourselves that we are the shape of our nose, the color of our skin, the dimensions of our waist, and the talents of our body.

This is dishonesty. It's not just maladaptive, it's not just something that pains us ;it's actually dishonest.

The foundation of our dharmic relationships in the world has to begin with the awareness of who we are. The skin cells of my body have been sloughing off since I was a kid! My body keeps changing. All of our organs, every aspect of who we are on a physical level keeps changing. The cells keep regenerating. And yet, throughout our entire lives, we say "I." As a two-year-old, we say "I, me, my toys." You then grow up a little, but still say "I." You grow up a little more, still saying "I." We never say anything but "I," regardless of the changes in our body. There are no skin cells, no organ cells, no blood cells that are with us today, part of our bodies today, that were there when we first started saying "I." So who is that "I"? Where is that "I"?

When we talk about being consciousness, being Divine, it reminds us: this is who you are. So the first part of having a dharmic relationship in the world is to have one with yourself – to know honestly who you really are. Who you are is the consciousness within the body.

Then we move into *dharma* in our interpersonal relationships. What's most important here is that we go into those relationships knowing who we are. Most of the problems with relationships are that we think we need something from the other person. We think we have holes and we take that into relationships and believe the relationship is a way to fill our holes. For example, if in my childhood my parents or my siblings told me I was stupid and ugly, I might have a hole in me that says, "You are ugly and worthless." So, the relationship I'm going to want is one in which I feel beautiful and brilliant and important. So, it fills up my holes. When I'm with that person who tells me I'm beautiful or brilliant, I no longer feel full of holes. That's very nice, but very temporary. This is what we call the honeymoon period.

The problem is that over time, my holes change shape. I grow and change, and the person with me grows and changes – as we all do over time. Slowly that person's "pegs" no longer fill my holes. People change, grow, and evolve; there are seasons in our lives. When that happens, your pegs no longer fit my holes, and so now I say, "I have fallen out of love." But, there wasn't really love to begin with. There was just a filling of holes.

This is why it's so important to begin with the relationship to the ourselves,

because only when I know that I am whole and complete and full will I stop looking for people to “fill my holes.”

Then lastly is our relationship in the world. When I know who I am, and I know that what matters is my response, then that’s what I carry into the world.

A wise man was sitting on a road in the jungle, and a traveler walks by and says to him, “Baba, that village up yonder, how are the people in that village?” The old man says, “Well, where did you come from?” The man replies, “Oh, I came from the village down this way, and the people were horrible! They were evil liars and cheats!” So the old man says, “I’m so sorry, but that’s exactly how the people are in the next village up ahead.” The man was dejected to hear this, of course, and he walked off.

A short while later, another man came by and says, “Baba, how are the people in the village up ahead?” The old man asks, “Well, where did you come from?” The traveler replies, “Oh, I came from the village over there, and the people were beautiful! They were so kind and loving, giving, and selfless!” So the old man says, “I have great news! That’s exactly how the people are in the village up ahead!”

After the second traveler walked off, a young boy who had been sitting with the old man the whole time turns to the wise man and says, “Babaji, there’s only one village up ahead. How is that you told the first man that the people are horrible and evil, and you told the second man that the people are honest and beautiful and kind?” The old man explained, “Because that’s what they each saw in the last village, which means it’s what’s in their eyesight, in their vision of the world. So, that’s what they will see in all villages up ahead.”

It’s not the people, it’s not the situations, it’s the eyesight we have. It’s the filter through which we see the world.

Regardless of where it comes from the answer is to change our perspective and perception. When we move through the world -- whether in a relationship with one person, or in a company, business, or organization,-- if we expect the best, if we remove our expectation of the worst,, then we literally co-create our present reality and also our future.

I saw a sign once that said, “Watch your thoughts and you will see the future.” This is true. Our thoughts create our future. So, as we move

through the world and our relationships with the world, the *dharma* we bring is the power of our own thought.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly when we speak of dharmic relationships, is to cultivate and sustain the awareness of Oneness, an awareness of family. It's very easy to shut ourselves out from the world, particularly from the pain of the world. We have enough of our own pain, we think. The last thing most of us want to do is take on extra pain! Our own stuff keeps us up at night, why should we take on extra? Yet the truth is that we don't have a choice. That separation, those walls between us and the world, are actually the cause of our suffering.

Ironically, we think that if we can just somehow wall ourselves off, we can create a very safe, cozy little cocoon, but paradoxically we end up suffocating ourselves. The goal is actually to break those walls and allow ourselves to connect. Yes there is pain in the world, but there's also joy in the world, and opening ourselves up to the pain allows ourselves to be open to the joy. We cannot shut ourselves off from the pain be open to the joy. We have to let those walls dissolve and really experience that Oneness, that connection.

We look very solid, our bodies look quite solid and we look very separate from each other, but actually we are One. Spirituality tells us, "No, you're not the body, you're spirit, you're soul." Science shows us that if you stick any of us under an electron microscope, what you'll see is energy not matter. What you see is whirling movement, not lines or borders. There is no place scientifically or spirituality that I end and you begin, that any of us ends and the world begins. That illusion of separation, disproved by both science and spirituality, is what causes our suffering. So by dissolving that illusion, we actually alleviate our own suffering and simultaneously the world's suffering. That's the *dharma* in relationships.

What should a conscious person look for in a relationship? What should we do if we feel our partner in our relationship is not a conscious person, or is not on a spiritual path?

Ideally, if the world were your shopping mall or your own online catalogue, you would look for another conscious person.. You don't need your partner to be conscious and awake spiritually, but it makes it a lot easier. Ultimately though what you should look is an opportunity to expand your own consciousness through the relationship.

So frequently I hear questions from people who are in relationships with someone who is not on a spiritual path and it's certainly still doable, but it's more difficult, more challenging.

A relationship in and of itself is challenging. If you take two people who come from the same background, same culture, same everything, and it's still a challenge. If they are from two different cultures, two different ways of life, two different sets of beliefs, you've just added an extra layer of challenges. Again, not undoable by any means, but just another layer. So if I am someone I consider to be conscious and if I'm committed to a path of consciousness, than to be in a relationship with someone who is not equally committed is challenging – I want to focus on meditation, I want to focus on *seva*, I want to talk about things that are spiritual connected, but my partner would rather watch TV in the room where I'm meditating, would rather listen to the radio than have a spiritual conversation, would rather watch TV with our meals rather than discuss aspects of who we are. So in an ideal situation, if we get to choose our relationships, we would look for someone who was also on a path of consciousness.

Yet, in so many cases, we already have our relationships, whether it's our parents, children, in-laws, or spouses that are already a part of our life. You don't need to feel doomed if the person you're in a relationship with is not someone you feel to be on a path of consciousness, because whenever we wake up, as Pujya Swamiji always say, it's morning. Just because they weren't on a path of consciousness yesterday doesn't mean that they won't wake up today. One of the pitfalls of being on a spiritual path is that we tend to develop this spiritual arrogance. "I am on a spiritual path, I am on a path of consciousness, I am on a path to my own awakening," and then we have judgment towards those who aren't, which of course as we know is the antithesis to a spiritual path. If we're moving on a spiritual path, the goal is not to judge. So when we talk about our partner not being conscious, we have to be really sure that we're not just engaging in spiritual arrogance. Just because they're not spiritual in the way that we're spiritual, just because they're not conscious the way that we consider ourselves conscious, doesn't mean that they're not spiritual. For some people sitting in meditation is the path. For others, doing service is the path. For some, it's a mix of both. I've known doctors for whom surgery is their meditation. Pull them out of the OT and tell them to sit down and cross their legs, they're going to be restless. But in that OT, working, in so many cases for free just to help people, doing free medical camps, saving people's lives, that's the time, when you actually listen to them talk about

it, that they actually feel closest to God. No problem! God doesn't say, "Thou shalt only be close to me in a dark room with your legs crossed. I don't exist in OTs, gardens, or schools, or in the light. The only light can be a little candle or oil lamp." God never said that. So, it's important for us when we are on a spiritual path not to allow that spiritual arrogance to come in, not to pass judgment on someone else and what their path is, because we never know what's going to lead to their awakening and their opening.

Raising Spiritual Children

How do you raise spiritual children? How do I support my spiritual child?

By nature children are spiritual. We have to teach them to be materialistic.

Look at what makes children happy. What's the greatest joy that children have? Their own mother's arms, lying on their back and playing with their own toes, having someone stare lovingly into their eyes, connection. When you give them expensive gifts, you can see that they are usually more excited about the box than the toy that came in, or the wrapping paper or ribbon that was on the package! We have to tell them, "No no no, that's not the present! That's just the box!" We push the box away and thrust the shiny present in their hands. We have to teach them to be materialistic. We have to teach them that their toes are not supposed to be a source of greater joy than the shiny new truck.

So, if you're a parent and you have a child who is still holding that spirituality, fortunately you don't have to do much. All you have to do is not squeeze it out of them. Children come into this world so deeply connected, connected to the Universe. No child ever said, "You're black, I'm white; you're poor, I'm rich; I won't play with you. You're Christian, I'm Hindu; we can't play together. You're ugly, I'm pretty. You can't use my toys." No child ever said that. We're the ones who say, "No, don't play with him, you can't go to her house; they are different." We're the ones who squeeze that spirituality out of our children. So the way to raise spiritual children is to help them stay connected to what they've come into this world with, which is the awareness that we're all One. Let them stay grounded in the love they feel for all people who smile at them, love for nature, love for the ant, love for the caterpillar.

We had a beautiful launch of our 11-volume Encyclopedia of Hinduism with His Holiness the Dalai Lama several years ago. I was sitting just behind him, and I noticed that every few minutes he kept bending down to do something, over and over again. I couldn't see what he was doing but he kept bending over and bending over from his couch. I found out later that he was bending down to pick up little caterpillars one by one from the floor of the stage and hand them to his security guard who was standing nearby. He was worried that someone would step on the caterpillars on the stage. One of the things that's so beautiful about His Holiness is that child-like connection. Children pick up caterpillars and save them, and adults tell them, "No, no, put it down, now go wash your hands."

So to raise spiritual children just help them stay connected with what Pujya Swamiji calls our inner GPS. For children, their inner GPS really guides them in a much deeper way than the rules of socialization, really connects them to the Earth and to each other. You'll find that raising spiritual children, is actually very easy unless you have your own agenda that they should become materialistic in order to fit in better with society, and if you are able to refrain from squeezing their internal wisdom out of them in favor of socialization.

Also, as they grow, as they're more and more in school, as they're more and more with friends, with the external culture, you're going to have to give them a little bit of re-anchoring at home. The home is the first school. The home is where we really get the foundation for our life. But as children grow, as they get a little bit more indoctrinated by society, by their friends, by TV commercials, by the jingles, we have to re-anchor them.

What anchors them is how we behave. You cannot raise spiritual children if you are a materialist. We cannot complain that our children are not spiritual when we are the ones, saying, "Oh my God, did you see what she was wearing? My God, he got fat! What is she doing with that haircut, what is she thinking? My God, she wore that same sari last week, does she not have any other clothes?" We have these types of conversations at home and in the car, in front of our children; we engage in this type of superficial gossip, and then we wonder what's gone wrong with our children. So, it's very important: for us to raise spiritual children, we have to raise our spiritual selves.

I have a friend who's deeply spiritual and a very committed Yogi and meditator, and when her daughter was about five or six, one day her mom

walked in and the daughter was sitting in her mom's temple area. Her mom said something to her, and the girl turned around and said, "Shhh mom! Can't you see I'm meditating?" She only knew that because she had seen mom meditating and heard mom say, "Shhh. I'm meditating."

Children pick up how we are and what we do, so the best way to raise a child who's spiritual is be spiritual, the same way that the best way to raise a child who's honest is be honest, to raise a child with integrity is to have integrity. So, to raise them, we raise ourselves.

How to show the path of spirituality to the young, especially if they don't seem inclined?

When I was in school, if our teacher asked a question, simply giving the right answer wasn't enough. The teacher would persist, "And why do you say so? How do you know?" You not only had to give the right answer, you also had to defend your entire thought process.

I share this because that form of education is now more and more popular. Good education is becoming less and less about simply memorizing facts and figures and more about learning to actually think creatively. So, what children learn in school, they bring home. If you tell them to do something, for example to say their prayers or be a vegetarian, they will ask, "Why?" Because most of you didn't ask your parents why, you don't always have the answers. Or, the answers you may know are ones that don't pass muster with the new generation. "Because this is our culture." "Because I said so." "Because it's the right thing to do." These are no longer answers that they will accept.

The tragedy is that we do have answers to these questions. There really are very specific clear reasons why we do all these cultural and spiritual things. It's not that good answers don't exist. It's not that sitting in puja and performing yagna are somehow outdated or are done without any real reason. It's just that because you never asked your parents, because that wasn't the culture a generation or two ago, you may not know the actual answers.

This is actually why Pujya Swamiji originally conceived of bringing out the *Encyclopedia of Hinduism* – to put all of those answers in one place, so that when our children ask the question, instead of giving them an answer that isn't the most satisfying to them, we can actually pull out the Encyclopedia and give an answer.

Frequently children will make excuses and say they don't have time to pray or meditate or read spiritual texts. Not having time is just an excuse. It's the same excuse adults use! There's plenty of time to be on Facebook, to watch TV, to be on Snapchat, and post selfies, so it's not a matter of not having time, it's a matter of making choices.

When I'm visiting America if a friend of mine says to me, "Let's go to the movies," I'm going to say I don't have time. It's true. In my mind-world, I don't have three hours to go to the movies. But if I say to her, "Come let's sit, let's meditate, let's go to *satsang*, let's sing *kirtan*, let's work out a proposal for a project for how we can get toilets along the banks of Ganga," she'll say, "Oh, I'd love to, but I don't have time." She's got three hours to go to the movies, I've got three hours to go to *satsang* or *kirtan* or work, so it's not that we don't have time. Everybody has the same 24 hours a day. It's just a matter of how we choose to spend it.

The issue with our children is not just a matter of finding the quickest way to throw some spirituality into their lunch bag as they rush out the door, but how can we make it something that they're prepared to spend time on? That's the challenge for us. We know it's valuable, but how can we put that in words that mean something in the world they live in?

I have found, working with the younger generation, that they may say they don't believe in rituals, and that's fine. Don't worry, don't force them. It's actually because of us. We haven't been able to properly explain it. But, don't blame yourselves either. Just say, "OK, God is not attached to your rituals, but that same Divine whom we worship in the ritual exists in everyone." This is something that actually our younger generation can grasp, and does grasp. They are the ones who come home yelling about discrimination, they're frequently the ones saying, "How dare you treat the staff like that!!" They're the ones frequently wanting to work in the world, hurt by the lack of equality that they see, wondering why they have to marry someone of their own caste, why does it matter? We're all the same, we're all one, we're all Divine, right? This is what the younger generation is saying. So, to give them spirituality is simply to say to them, "Look, no problem, you don't have to worship God through *puja*. Worship God through everyone you meet. Wherever you go, whether it's the guy filling your car with gas, a coworker, a friend, a subordinate, an employer, whoever it is, worship them all, treat them all as God." What you'll find, and what I have found, is they're not only prepared to do that, but they're excited to do that. That's a language that they can speak.

Also, we need to let our children know that our spirituality is one which says *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* – the world is a family. This is why we live in such a way that all of our brothers and sisters around the world don't suffer and die. We can explain that this is why we don't eat meat, because the meat industry is the greatest contributor to climate change, world hunger, and water shortages. Every time we eat meat, we're pulling grain out of the mouths of people who are starving. If we eat grain -- rice, wheat, soy, or corn -- as grain, there's enough to feed everyone on earth. When we take that and we feed it to animals who we later kill for their meat, there's not enough to go around. Our children may not want to be vegetarian because they don't think the cow is holy. Fine. They may not want to be vegetarians because they don't believe the whole religious aspect, they don't worship Kamadhenu. No problem. Let them be vegetarians because their sisters and brothers who are equally Divine deserve food to eat. Then don't worry. They still may never do what we call *puja*, but they will choose careers that are *puja*. They will live their lives as *puja*. And ultimately, that's what it's about.

How do we help kids “be” rather than “do,” when there are chores and responsibilities?

We've gotten into this very unhealthy pendulum swing of shifting from “doing” to just “being.” This is not actually the goal or the point.

First, our doing has taken a shift. Instead of the “doing” being only the daily tasks of cooking dinner, going to work, making money, cleaning the house, etc., now even our spiritual growth has become something we have to “do.” We must do our yoga asanas, our meditation, our chanting, etc. It's still doing; we've just substituted “spiritual doing” in place of what seemed perhaps like “less spiritual doing,” but we all still have to-do lists. In fact they are even longer now! It's great, it's wonderful that we're remembering to do these things. There is nothing wrong with a to-do list but we simply have to realize we're still way over on the “doing” side of the pendulum.

Then when we decide that “doing is bad,” or we hear someone say “You're not a human doing, you're a human being,” we fly all the way to the other side of the pendulum and decide that we absolutely must just STOP DOING. The problem with that is that we're actually still doing. It's just much subtler. Doing does not only mean doing with our hands or legs. We're always doing something.

So, the answer to the doing/being dilemma is not “do less.” The answer is to be while doing. In the Bhagavad Gita, there’s a very deep and beautiful teaching on how we can stop accruing karma, the fruits of our actions. Lord Krishna emphasizes that we can’t not do. You can sit down, close your eyes, sit on your hands, plug your ears. But you’re still doing. The mind is doing. Also, you’ve been sent here with responsibilities, with duties and *dharma*. Human birth is not just a joy ride where we’re only supposed to enjoy as much as we can. We have duties. We have to fulfill our *dharma*. By sitting down and “not-doing,” what you are doing is not doing your duty. You are still doing; you are neglecting your duty. You are abdicating your responsibilities. That is definitely still “doing” something.

So, we’re always doing. The key is to be *while* doing, and that’s what we need to teach our kids. They need to learn to stay present, grounded and connected to themselves while they’re doing and not identify as the doer. The easiest way with children to do this as parents is when they come home from school with a report card or exam results. – Do we respond to them as the taker of the exam, or do we respond to them as the Soul? When they come home with a low grade are we angry and disappointed, do they see that the love on our face has been withdrawn? If so, then what they learn is “I am the taker of the exam.” When I do well, I get love; when I don’t do well, I don’t. My worthiness as a being, my worthiness to be in mom’s lap, to receive mom’s hugs and kisses and smiles, to be dad’s big boy, is entirely contingent on what this piece of paper says. That’s the fastest way to make sure they identify as the doer.

We do it in sports also. If our child happens to be a great athlete, and wins the game, we say, “You’re the best!” and we reward that. It’s great to support your kids, of course. But remember that what you really should support is who they are, not how good of a test-taker or soccer player they are. Otherwise, they will grow up feeling that the love and adoration is due not to them as people but to the success of their actions.

Instead of always celebrating what they have done, why not spontaneously take them out for ice cream to celebrate who they are? Allow there to be a balance between rewarding what they do and rewarding who they are. Remember also to do the same with yourself. If your self-talk is always, “Oh my God, I’m so irresponsible, I’m this, I’m that,” that’s what they learn. Kids learn what we do, they absorb it. It doesn’t matter how much we try to use our words to teach them otherwise, what they absorb is how we live. So, you need to start living not as the doer, not as a failure when

you don't tick anything off your to-do list, and not as a success when you tick everything off your list. Let there be patterns of just celebrating who we are, not only on Mother's Day, Father's Day, and birthdays. Bring patterns into your family of celebrate-each-other days, just for who they are. Then they'll learn the beautiful value of who they really are which isn't contingent upon their actions.

How do we let go of control over our children as they get older, like when they are moving off to college?

This is one of the greatest challenges of parenthood, and is something almost everyone struggles with, whether letting go of a child as they go off to college, or letting go of a parent as they pass on, or letting go of our identity that we have always held. Letting go is always difficult. Letting go is always, always a challenge. The only way to do it, especially when the child is leaving, is to recognize that you're always with them and you're always there. You may not be physically there, but that which you've given them is there inside them.

You must also recognize that your child is being guided and led. There's a beautiful poem by Kahlil Gibran entitled "On Children" which speaks so beautifully about how your children have come through you but not of you. We tend to think of them as extensions of ourselves. . The poem reminds us that they've come through you but they're not of you, and he emphasizes that time moves always forward. The youth, the children, they are the ones who are pulling time forward. He ends the poem by telling us not to worry, because God loves the bow from which the arrow comes as much as God loves the arrow that's flying through the sky. It's a beautiful metaphor. We've been given this sacred opportunity to have them come through us; they're not of us. They never were ours, but we were given this beautiful opportunity to mold them, to have them, to be with them. Now, like the arrow that comes from the bow, our child is going off into the world. Further, remember that where that arrow goes is in large part based on the bow. You are the bow they've been strung upon, and the direction that they're going to go now is the direction that you've given them. Have faith in knowing that you've given them this direction.

We also have to remember that everyone comes into this world with their own karmic package. If you've got an apple seed, you may plant it in the most fertile ground, you may water it in the best way and shine the best sunlight on it, but if you were hoping for peaches, you're never going to

get peaches out of that apple seed. The best you're going to get is an apple tree.

So, hold both of those aspects in your mind:. 1) The awareness that you are the bow that has strung up the arrow (your children), that has sent your children on their way. You know the direction, you know where it's going, because it's based on you, but 2), your children are also seeds that have come into this world with their own karmic package, their own dharma. It's only about letting go of the control, letting go of that constant knowing of exactly where they are. Let go with faith and knowing of who that seed is.

I'll tell you a personal story. When I first decided to move to India, I was 25. I had graduated from Stanford and was in the midst of a PhD program when I came traveling to India traveling, had this incredible experience, stayed for a few months, but then Swamiji made me go back for a while. But, I knew I needed to be here. Everybody told me, "You're making the worst mistake, you shouldn't go," but I knew what was right.

I knew I needed to be in India.

Finally, I asked my dad how he felt. He is always very calm, and he hadn't said much. I wanted to really know how he felt about this, as I have always trusted him deeply. He said, "In 25 years, you've never made a decision that I think was the wrong decision. I don't understand this decision, but just because I don't understand it, who am I to assume that suddenly you started making wrong decisions?"

This is amazing for the father of a 25-year-old, who has just announced that she's leaving her PhD and she's moving to an ashram in India. I share the story because for me that's really the most incredible, perfect ideal of parenting. "I know you, and I trust you." It's not about micromanaging every decision. It's not about asking every day who you are going out with, where you are going, what time you're going to be home, is your homework done? It's: "I know you, you're my son, you're my daughter, I trust you, which means that the decisions that you make are going to be right for you."

Lastly, this is really the time to shift from being father or mother to being friend. Your child should feel free and open to tell you anything, especially because they are far away. You should have a relationship with them in which they're not worried, "Oh my God, mom/dad is going to be

so angry!” because if they fear sharing a concern or a question with you because = they know you’re not going to like it, they’re be afraid to tell you so they’ll keep quiet. That’s what you don’t want. You want your child to know that they can tell you anything and that you’re not going to be mad, you’re going to always love and support them, so that they can feel free to talk to you, so that they don’t wind up in the University Counseling Services to get advice from someone who doesn’t even know them because they’re afraid to talk to you. So, before they go, sit them down and tell them you’ve done your best to support them through their childhood, and now you want to be close to them as friends, the doors are open to share with you. Then, really, just keep those doors as open as you can.

The truth is, it’s not even that much of a letting go, because these days with the communication abilities, we’re in touch constantly. So, just keep coming back to your faith, that faith of knowing what you’ve given them, and then open the channels in such a way that the relationship, now in its new way, just blossoms, blossoms and blossoms.

Parents

Our expectations are the causes of our worries and our problems. I know Pujya Swamiji always says that expectation is the mother of frustration. But what about with our siblings or our parents? Aren't we allowed to expect something from them?

The first thing is, expectations themselves are not bad or wrong. We expect justice, we expect that the roof of our house will not fall on us as we sleep, we expect that the Sun will rise in the morning, we expect that when we treat someone with love, they will treat us with love. There's nothing wrong with that. If we didn't have an expectation that when we wake up in the morning our family will still be there, or our house would still be there, it would be very difficult to go to sleep. If we had no expectation that when we come home from school or work that our family and house will be there, how could we ever leave? We have to have some level of expectation. I expect that the pilot in my plane knows what he's doing. When I drive my car through a green light, I expect that the other car will stop on his red light and not hit me. If I can't expect that he will stop on his red light, I would be too afraid to even drive on my green light. So the only way to move through the world is with some level of expectation.

It is similar with our family. We, of course, have an expectation that they will love us, will love each other, and will treat us and each other with respect and care. There is nothing wrong with that. The only problem comes when our expectation is not fulfilled – how do we respond? All that's in our hands is our own reaction. Whether it's our parents, our siblings, God, our elected officials, or the justices in our courts, we expect that they will do the right thing, we expect that there will be justice. In our home, we expect that there will be love, respect, honesty, caring, and protection. But, we do so with the awareness that our family is made up of other human beings,

and because they're human beings, they have their own karmic package, they have their own strengths, weaknesses, fears, unfulfilled expectations, and frustrations. They have their own *sanskaras*. Sometimes, those lead them to act in ways that are not what we expect or hope.

All we have control over is our reactions. We have no control over their action. When family members and loved ones hurt us, when they betray us, it is due to their lack of mindfulness and consciousness, their lack of presence and connection in that moment.

Sometimes we expect people to read our minds: "You should've known I wanted that, how did you not know?" *Especially* from our loved ones, we frequently expect that! They should know! They may ask what's wrong, and we say, "Nothing." Then we get offended when they move on: "You should have asked again! You should have kept pushing!" This is ridiculous because they did ask and we said "nothing." We told them to shut up go away, but we expect that they should have known that what we *meant* was to keep asking! So our hurt is not always based on them, but it's based sometimes on lack of a proper communication channel, either verbal or non-verbal. Inadvertently we get hurt, the person in front of us has no idea, we say nothing is wrong, they move on and then we're more hurt.

Since we can only control ourselves the question becomes: how can I be in peace, in love, when my family members are hurting me? How can I know that they love me, how can I know that they didn't do this on purpose, how can I know that they didn't mean to?

Everyone goes through the world with a toolbox, and our toolboxes are filled with tools for dealing with the world based on what we've learned and we've experienced. Not all of us have compassion, forgiveness, and patience in our toolboxes. If we've never learned these virtues or been inculcated with them in our youth, we never develop those tools for our lives. We expect that everyone should have these virtues, but sometimes we interact with people whose toolbox just doesn't have patience, or whose toolbox just doesn't have compassion. How can they give it to us if they don't have it inside?

So, our biggest expectation should be of ourselves: I will stay connected, I will stay grounded. As Pujya Swamiji always says, others may go up and down but I don't have to go up and down. I'm not a puppet. Just because

someone is my family member, I don't have to let them pull my strings and make me dance. I'll stay connected and grounded, I'll pull my own strings. Then in the family you become a nexus of love, an energy center of love and peace, and it changes not only you but it changes the whole family.

How can we resolve conflict between our parents?

Everyone comes into this world with their own karmic package, whether they're your parents or your children, your spouse or your friends. We are not here to change other people's karmic package, or to judge it as "good" or "bad." As children whose parents are fighting, it's most important to remember that our parents came into this world and into this marriage with very specific karma they had to work out, lessons they needed to learn, and experiences they needed to have. Now, we find ourselves stuck in the middle.

It's most important for children to remember to love them both, not to let one or the other parent use you against the other. This is where, as in every circumstance, our own internal grounding is so important. Pujya Swamiji says if you are peace, you will spread peace, but if you are in pieces, you will only spread pieces. If you can experience love, you will manifest love. So if you can experience love and peace with your mom, you'll bring her that. If you can experience love and peace with your dad, you'll bring him that. But never think that you will be able to solve their conflict or that you are the cause of it. You're neither cause nor the solution. Never. What you are is just someone who ended up in this situation, due to your own karmic package, and your lesson is in how you can know that they both love you so much, and you love them both so much, even though they don't always get along, and that that's okay. It's neither good nor bad, nor right nor wrong. It's just what is. But none of it is your fault, and none of it is yours to solve.

Lastly, make sure that you do not internalize conflict between your parents as a pattern and recreate it in your life. Do not bring their conflict into your own marriage as a pattern you've learned. We don't have to recreate patterns. When we see them, learn from them, and move through them peacefully. Then you don't recreate them.

Living Through the Golden Years

When we are seniors in our “golden years,” what’s the best way to live in that phase of life?

In the Indian tradition, we have different phases of life, and the final phase is the phase that’s called *sannyas*. The phase of *sannyas* is a time in which we pull away from things of the world. First, we have our youth, then we complete our education, get ourselves set in a career path, then we have a family. After that, we retire, we start to pull away. Then, ultimately, in our golden years is the phase of *sannyas* when we’re supposed to pull away fully from things of the material world and, in preparation for leaving our bodies, connect deeply to the Divine, to our soul, to that which is eternal and immortal.

However, that doesn’t necessarily mean we must pull away on a physical level. The detachment from the material world and re-attachment to the spiritual world is most important to happen on the level of our mind, our intentions and our focus. Many times we may pull away physically but that’s not the highest goal or purpose. We may leave the family and come and live in an ashram. But if our minds are still there with the family, if our attachment is still there, our emotional involvement is still there, then for all practical purposes we are still there, even if our bodies have moved to an ashram or a mountain cave.

Pujya Swamiji always says just because someone is meditating in a cave doesn’t necessarily mean that they’re free from all of that which binds us. There are many people living in families in the world who are actually much more spiritual, much more detached on a spiritual level, than some of the “spiritual” people living in caves. So, it’s not necessarily a matter of where you are physically, as where your attention is. By our golden years, we’ve

done our worldly duties. We've gotten our education, we've accumulated money, we've had our family, we've raised our children, we've educated them, we've given them careers, we've gotten them married...then is the time to turn to our *sannyas* phase of life, the phase of dedicating our attention and focus to God. Otherwise, the cycle of attachment never ends.

There's a great story of a young disciple living in an ashram with his Guru, and he says to the Guru, "You know, I'm living here, but my mind is really on the outer world. I want to know what's it like, what it would be like to have a family and live in that world, so I think Guruji, maybe I should go. I just want to experience it once, and then I'm going to come right back. I want my mind to at least know what it's like, otherwise maybe I'll have regrets my whole life."

So, the Guru says, "*Chalo*, OK, take ten years, go out, get yourself married, have your family, do your thing, but in ten years come back."

The boy promises to return and leaves the ashram for the material world. Ten years later, of course he doesn't come back. Then one day, there's a knock on the door of his house, and his wife answers the door and there's an old man asking for her husband. The husband comes and immediately recognizes his Guru and falls at his Guru's feet. The Guru says, "OK, now come with me. Your ten years are over."

But the man says, "No, I can't because you see, my children – they're very young. My poor wife would be all alone. What is she going to do? There are three mouths to feed, the kids are just starting school. . We just got our house. I need just another five years, just to get them settled. Let the kids grow a little more, and then I'll leave my wife some money in the bank."

So, the Guru goes away. He gives him not five years, but fifteen years. After these fifteen years, the Guru comes back and says to the man, "OK, now what?" And the man says, "Oh Guruji, I'd love to come but now we've got grandkids and they're babies. They really need me because my son is out working and he's out all day long, they really need someone to take care of the grandkids...just give me a few more years."

Five years later, the Guru comes back again and immediately sees that the man is not there, but there's this dog in front of the house. He recognizes that the is his disciple, and he says to the dog, "Now what?" And the dog-disciple says, "Yes, I know. I died. I've been reincarnated as this dog to protect them, but I have to stay here just another couple years because now

they're doing very well, but they have so many enemies! Everyone's out to get them, and that's why I'm here as this dog to protect them. Gurujī, just another couple of years."

So the Guru goes and comes back again a few years later. He knocks on the door and two young children come and answer the door. The Guru tells them, "Go upstairs near the family safe. In the wall next to the safe, you will find a hole in the wall. In the hole is a snake – bring me that snake. Do not kill it, but just break its back so it doesn't hurt you, and then bring me that snake."

The children, of course, are very surprised, but they do as this old saint tells them to do. They go in, find the snake in the hole in the wall as the old man had said. They break its back and bring it to the Guru, "But how did you know? You've never been in our house before, how did you know there was a snake in a hole in the wall?"

The Guru replies, "Do not worry, just go back inside." He takes the snake, slings it over his back, and he walks away. As he walks away he speaks to his disciple now in the form of the snake, saying, "See, there's no end. You came back as a snake to protect the wealth. First it was the wife and the kids, then the grandkids, then you needed to come back as the dog to take protect them, now you're a snake to protect the wealth, to be near the safe...there's no end. There's no such thing as just one more time, as just another year. You have to draw that line, because attachment doesn't stop."

The same is true in most people's lives. So, when we reach this phase of *sannyas* in life, the teaching is to renounce. But it doesn't mean you abandon them. This is a really important distinction. It doesn't mean, "I don't see you, I don't talk to you, I don't care about you, I forget your birthdays." It doesn't mean that.

What the *sannyas* phase of life means is that inside me, I am not stuck. I am not sitting in my meditation unable to meditate because I'm wondering how my grandson is doing on his math exam today. It's much more an inner state of renunciation. If you can come and live in an ashram, that's great. There's nothing like it; that's the ideal situation. You can come and live out the golden years in *sadhana*, in *seva*. You've spent your whole life working for yourself and for your family, and now you give your energy, experience and expertise for the world. Your family expands. When we

talk about *sannyas* being a renunciation of family, it doesn't literally mean that we have no family. It means that the world is our family. You've gone from having a family of two or four to having a family of all of creation, Seven billion humans, as many animals, as many plants there are on this Earth. *Sannyas* doesn't mean that I don't care about anything, it means I care about everyone. The scriptures say, "*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*:" the world is a family.

Up until the *sannyas* phase, your blood family is your family. When you take *sannyas*, the world becomes your family. This is why the tradition says you come to an ashram, you do your *sadhana* and *seva*, you serve the world, and the family will take care of itself.

Sannyas is a time for a very beautiful and a very natural stage of preparation for departure from the planet. Otherwise, when our physical body departs, if we're still attached, if we haven't let go of the minute-to-minute, moment-to-moment attachment to form, then we're not able to let go when death comes. This is what literally creates the bondage of the soul. When they talk about the soul being stuck, not being really able to go, to attain that union with God, to go on that journey, it happens when we're too stuck here. So, the phase of *sannyas* is a preparatory phase of, "God, whether I have two years left or twenty years left, these are my golden years. At some point, I'm going to return to You, my form will change again, it's changed from young boy to young man to old man, then it's going to change to ashes, and I need to prepare myself for that." That's what this phase of *sannyas* does.

Sannyas in the golden years becomes a benefit to your own spiritual growth and to your preparation for that final transformation, and you're able to be a benefit to the whole world. You've been a benefit to your family; now you're able to be a benefit to the global family. So many youth say, "I don't need my parents' money, I want to make it on my own." This is the youth of today. So, they're set in so many ways, and now it's time for you to shift that focus onto your spiritual growth and onto service of the whole world.

This is actually something that applies to all phases of our life. There is no phase of life where you should be attached to the things of this world. Even doing your duty in the workplace in the householder phase of life, you work for them but don't get attached to them, whatever phase we're in. Ultimately, if we haven't learned it before, we learn it in *sannyas*, but ideally we learn it even in the earlier phases, ideally even in the householder stage

when we are working, serving, having a family, and doing our duty. We do these things without being attached in a way that it ends up thwarting the actual purpose of what we came here for, which is our own awakening. Our love, our relationships, our duty, and our karma can be a way of expanding our consciousness and a great path to awakening. But if we get stuck, then it actually thwarts our progress. So all of this is actually for the other phases as well.

FESTIVALS & HOLIDAYS



The Kumbh Mela

What is the Kumbh Mela, and what lessons can we learn from it?

The message that we get from the Kumbh Mela pertains to all of us, whether physically our bodies are able to go to the Mela or not.

When talking about the Kumbh, I think the best place to start is the story about what it is. Why do we go, why does it take place, and why is it important? There are many different stories and aspects of the Indian spiritual-cultural tradition that talk about the Kumbh, but I'm going to give you the simplest story which is full of the messages of the Kumbh. It's not just about whatever happened thousands or tens of thousands of years ago, but about that which pertains to our lives today.

It is said that there was time in history long ago in which the forces of good and the forces of evil were always fighting, much like they still are today. At that time, the forces of evil were always conquering and beating the forces of good. They also outnumbered the forces of good, and they were prepared to use all sorts of cunning methods to win. In this constant battle between goodness and evil, the forces of goodness were losing. So, the forces of goodness went to the Divine and said, "This battle is going on all the time, and these forces of evil, adharma, and unrighteousness are killing us, vanquishing us, conquering us! We need someone. If they keep winning, then slowly there won't be any forces of good left!" So the Divine said to them, "Look, here's what you do: churn the ocean. Deep within the ocean, a pot of the nectar of immortality is there. The pot will appear after you churn the ocean, and when you drink that pot of the nectar of immortality, you will become immortal. Then, whatever they do, however cunning their methods may be, however strong they may be, however much they outnumber you, you'll be immortal and they won't be able to conquer or vanquish you."

The forces of good thought, "That's wonderful! If we can become immortal, then there's nothing to worry about. We can't lose!" But the Divine answered back, "However, in order to churn this ocean, you can't do it alone. You actually need to employ the help of the forces of evil, so you need to bring them into this churning and churn the ocean together."

I'm going to stop here rather than give the whole story, because there are messages as we go along. For so many of us on the spiritual path, it becomes a path just of goodness, as it should be in theory. Of course, where we want to go in life is towards goodness, towards *dharma*, towards the light, towards peace. And yet, we can't get there until we first really deal with the forces of evil. You're not going to get to the light within yourself or in the world by ignoring the darkness and the evil. In order to really get that deep nectar of immortality, you've got to bring those forces in as well and make that part of the process. It can't be done by denying, suppressing, repressing, or avoiding the forces of evil. On our path, it's so important for us always to keep our eyes open towards where we are avoiding, where we are leaning away, where we are keeping ourselves too busy, where we are not looking and not introspecting, and what we are not aware of.

Like the forces of good, we really are looking for something very deep. We're not looking for just superficial level, goody-goody happiness. We're looking for something deep. That's what this union of yoga means. In order to find that, we need to bring in all the forces and all the energy, particularly that which is within ourselves.

So, the forces of goodness bring in their brothers, the forces of evil, and they start churning the ocean. As they churn, lots of different things start to come up before the nectar.

One of the most beautiful messages that Pujya Swamiji gives about this is that in our lives, when we are looking for nectar, light, divinity, goodness, and *dharma*, so frequently other junk comes up first. In this churning, one of the things that came up was poison. Not just junk but actual poison, deadly poison. We find that in our lives. We turn ourselves towards a path, a path of yoga, spirituality, goodness, and *dharma*, and what do we find along the way? Poison. Poison in the form of people we are working with or living with, or poison in the form of just feeling like the Universe is conspiring against us despite having taken on all of these noble goals. But Pujya Swamiji says that that's what always happens – the poison always

comes first.

When the poison came, the forces couldn't continue the churning until someone dealt with the poison. It couldn't be ignored, abandoned, or denied – somebody had to deal with that poison. The problem is, if the poison were swallowed by anyone, it would wreak havoc inside.

In our lives, if we swallow what happens to us – what other people say or do, other people's issues, other people's poison – it festers within us, it turns into all kinds of diseases within us, it turns into depression and anxiety and frustration and physical illnesses. Yet, if we spit it out, it injures the world around us.

So, they didn't know what to do with this poison. This is where Lord Shiva came forward. Lord Shiva took that poison and he held it in his throat.

This is where the name "Neelkanth," a term used to describe Shiva, comes from – it means "blue throat." There's a temple near Rishikesh called the Neelkanth Mahadev Temple. "Mahadev" means the truly great one of the Divine. What made him in this moment stand out so differently from the other deities was He was the one that came forward and said, "No problem, I'll take it. For the sake of this continuing the churning, for the sake of the *dharma*, I'll take the poison."

Pujya Swamiji always asks us how in our lives we can become like Lord Shiva. Can we be the ones to say "OK, I'll take this poison?" Not, "I'll swallow it inside and let it fester and turn into tumors and sadness," or, "I'm going to spit it out," but hold it like Lord Shiva did?

So after He held the poison in His throat, He came to this temple and He meditated.

In our lives, when poison comes, the message is don't swallow it, don't spit it out, don't ignore it, don't run away from it, because if you do you'll never get the nectar. In order to get the real nectar of life, we have to stay with the churning. And yet, that's where the practice of meditation comes. That's what Shiva did. It's not that He held it in His throat and then went for shopping therapy or went to a bar or saw a movie. No. He held it in His throat and then sat to meditate. That's the message for us. When that poison comes up in our life – in our internal practice, in our families, in our workplaces – we acknowledge it, we hold it, and we meditate.

Finally, after all of this, the nectar emerged. When the nectar emerged, the forces

of good became very nervous again because they thought the forces of evil might grab this nectar. Then, not only would the forces of evil outnumber the forces of goodness, not only would they be stronger, more cunning, more clever, and more mischievous, but they would have this nectar of immortality so they wouldn't even be able to be killed. So, one of the forces of good, took this pot of nectar and ran away with it to prevent the forces of evil from getting it. It is said that as he ran through the heavens and universe, four drops of this nectar fell on the earth, and the four places on which the nectar fell are the places we celebrate the Kumbh Mela.

These places are Haridwar, Allahabad, Ujjain and Nasik. In general, the Allahabad and Haridwar Kumbhs tend to be the biggest. The one in Allahabad is the one to which most people come – about 100 million people attend.

In Allahabad, the land that the Kumbh takes place on for most of the year is actually underwater. This is what's so phenomenal. It's not the banks that people camp on, it's the actual riverbed. The Ganga and the Yamuna flow and rise, much of the land is covered with water, the water recedes in October through November, and then the Kumbh gets erected on this dry riverbed. So, you're actually living in the bed of these sacred rivers.

People come from all over the world to have a bath in that confluence. The timing of the Kumbh is determined astrologically, so that the stars are in the same alignment as how they were back then, and the energy is recharged.

But, here's an important part – when we think about immortality, what most of us identify as immortality is "I don't die." That's what happened in the story. Yet, no one comes to the Kumbh really believing that if they have a bath in the waters, the cells of their body aren't going to slough off and regenerate, that at some point the body won't turn back to earth. We all know that those who were born will die. We all know that we come from the earth and will go back to it. We come from ash and we return to ash. So, when we talk about immortality at the Kumbh and we talk about this festival of the nectar of immortality, what does it mean? What is drawing people over and over again to this area?

In that sacred place, in this holy land, at this auspicious time, in the presence of the revered saints, we get a touch, a taste, a glimpse, a blink of that part within ourselves which is immortal.

All of the saints, sages, *rishi*-s, gurus, and masters tell us over and over

again, “You are not this body.” When I first met Pujya Swamiji, I had been here only two or three weeks and I was sitting with Him, and He held up a pen. He said to me, “You are not this pen.” I laughed and thought, “Of course I’m not this pen!” But He was very silent and He was very serious. He looked at me and He said, “There will come a time when you laugh in the same way when I tell you that you are not this body. Today, you’re able to accept the fact that you are not this pen, but you still think that you are this body, you are your history, your emotions, and your identifications. But, there will come in a time when it’s just as absurd to identify with the body, identities, and emotions as it would be for you to identify with being this pen.”

When we talk about the nectar of immortality, it gives us an experiential glimpse – not a book, not a lecture, but an actual experience – by the grace of the Kumbh, of realizing that within ourselves which is immortal, that within ourselves which didn’t take birth, isn’t getting old, will never die, that part of us that is one with the Universe, that part of us which is in union with the Divine. It’s not union with something separate, but it’s a union with that which already is. It’s an awareness, an awakening. That’s the nectar of immortality which the Kumbh offers us – a glimpse of that place within yourself which isn’t this body, these emotions, or these identities.

For those of us who have been there, what is most phenomenal about it is the way that it gives you that glimpse. It’s not that you sit down in meditation and from the sky some hand comes on your head and blesses you with this glimpse. The Kumbh is like a crystallization or distillation of India, which means it throws up in your face from deep within your being the very best of who you are – that Divine, eternal, pure, perfect, complete center – AND the worst of who you are – that which is the most identified with the body, emotions, attachments, and expectations. The Kumbh throws these two things up in your face in such a way that that ocean which the forces of evil and the forces of good were churning starts taking place within you. That churning of the ocean actually is what happens to all of us when we go to the Kumbh. We get churned inside, and from that churning, eventually, with grace, that nectar emerges.

In conclusion, the beautiful aspect about every part of Indian spiritual tradition is that it’s all available in every moment. Pujya Swamiji always tells people, “Wherever you are, whatever river is there, if you evoke Ganga, if you pray to Ganga, you are there.” The Divine tells us over and over again, “In whatever form the devotee worships me, I appear to the

devotee in that form.” So, whether you are able to actually be physically present in the sacred riverbed during a Kumbh Mela or not, don’t worry. Allow the Kumbh to take place within you. That’s available everywhere. When you notice the churning within you, know that that’s your key, that’s your path to the nectar of immortality. Don’t run from this churning, don’t repress or suppress it, don’t sit back and analyze it. Allow that churning to take place, because it is from that inner churning that the nectar emerges. When that nectar emerges, that’s where you really get the glimpse of what yoga is really about – that glimpse, that taste of that union, that oneness, that which is immortal. It’s within us.

Navratri

What is Navratri? We know it's nine nights, we know it's worship of the Goddess, but what is it? What does it mean?

First of all, it is so beautiful to me, coming from the West into India, to actually have nine days and nights dedicated to the worship of the Divine Feminine. To actually have a system in which the Divine Feminine is so important that nine full days are dedicated to Her worship is so beautiful.

During Navratri, we may perform *puja*, sit in front of a *murti* or an image of the Divine Feminine, chant prayers and mantras, and do all sorts of different rituals depending on our own religion and way of life, but what does it mean? What does it mean for us, for the rest of the year, for the rest of the days, other than the days where we're performing this *puja* and worshipping the Mother? What is it that we can actually take home?

First, even though it's all the Divine Mother or the Sacred Feminine all nine days, there are actually three different aspects of the Divine Feminine celebrated and worshipped throughout the nine days. The first three days are to Durga or Maha Kali, the next three days are to Maha Lakshmi, and the last three days are dedicated to the Goddess Saraswati. When this energy, this incredible *Shakti*, comes into our life, what does it mean? What are we really praying for when we pray to Durga or we pray to Kali or we pray to Lakshmi or Saraswati?

Let's look first at Saraswati. The first three days are actually dedicated to the fiercer elements of Durga or Kali, but I'm going to come to that at the end. Let's begin with Saraswati, the goddess of wisdom. I begin here because without wisdom, we don't know where to go. There's a great saying that says, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't

make it drink.” If we don’t have wisdom, if we don’t have knowledge or understanding, we don’t know where to go or what to do.

I know this from my own life, having gotten what the West considers an excellent education. Those of us who have been over-educated and over-indoctrinated in so many of those ways tend to really start thinking that we know something! We start to think that we’re smart and that we’ve got knowledge. The problem becomes that we don’t know how to live. All of the knowledge and all of the books don’t help us in our lives.

There’s a beautiful story of a boat in the middle of the ocean. On the boat there’s a mathematician, a scientist, and a philosopher, and the boatman of course. They’re on the boat going out on the ocean, and the mathematician says to the boatman, “So tell me Mr. Boatman, you must know some mathematics, you must know at least trigonometry or geometry.” The boatman says, “No, I’m not educated in that way. I only know how to take the name of the Divine in the morning and at night before I sleep and during the day as much as I can.” So the mathematician replies, “Then at least 30% of your life has gone in vain.”

Next, the scientist says, “Well, you must at least know science. You must know Newton’s laws of physics.” The boatman says, “No, I’m not educated in that way. I only know how to give more than I receive, I only know how to try to see the Divine in everyone I’m with.” So the scientist replies, “Then at least 40% of your life has gone in vain.”

Lastly the philosopher says, “Well alright, maybe you’re not a math and science guy, but you must know philosophy. Plato, Aristotle, Vedanta – you must know some philosophy.” The boatman just closes his eyes and he enters this beautiful meditative trance and says, “No, I’m not educated in that way.” So the philosopher replies, “Well, then at least 50% of your life as gone in vain.”

At this moment, a huge wave comes, the ocean starts to get very stormy, and the boatman realizes that the boat is going to capsize. He yells out to his passengers, “Do you know how to swim?” “NO!” they all cry. The boat then crashes upside down, and the boatman watches very sadly as all of his passengers drown, and he says, “I think 100% of your lives have gone in vain.”

I share this story when we’re talking about Saraswati, the goddess of wisdom, because wisdom is not that which we get in books. The math,

the philosophy, the science – it’s all great stuff, and it is important. We wouldn’t have cures for diseases, we wouldn’t be able to go out into outer space, we wouldn’t be able to have air conditioners or fans or buildings or microphones, if we didn’t know science or math. We wouldn’t be able to inspire ourselves and deeply understand ways of looking at the world if we didn’t have philosophy. But it’s knowledge, it’s facts, it’s stuff someone else discovered. It’s not wisdom. It’s not what helps us when metaphorically the boat in our life capsizes. It’s not what helps us when in our life the ocean is full of waves. That wisdom, that knowing how to swim, is what Goddess Saraswati is about.

In order to know how to swim, how to live, we have to know who we are. Pujya Swamiji always talks about how donkeys don’t have to go to college to become donkeys and monkeys don’t have to go to college to become monkeys, but we people, despite having had the best education accumulating so many degrees, are miserable, are alcoholics, are drug addicts, are violent, and are on our fifth marriage. We beat our children, we need a pill to fall asleep, and an anti-depressant to wake up. Real wisdom though shows us who we are, which is love, consciousness, divinity, spirit, energy. On the highest level, that’s who we are.

We also have what we call individual *dharma* to play. We’re not all put here to be a doctor or to be an engineer or a fireman or a teacher. The world needs all of it. We need some doctors, some engineers, some firemen, some teachers. We have to know though who we are before we can know what to do. One of the questions that comes up in *satsang* all the time is, “I don’t know what path to take,” and we always say that you won’t know what path to take until you know who you are. Once you know who you are, you’re going to know how to walk.

Goddess Saraswati brings us that wisdom of the Self. But along with the knowledge of the Self is the knowledge of the other people in the world with whom I live and how other people are. So frequently we expect and want the people in the world, the Universe, and Nature to behave exactly as we want them to. But, it doesn’t happen like that. We give love, we care, and we’re generous, and we get back in so many cases violence, pain, animosity, and criticism. We all experience this in our families, in our workplaces, at the grocery store, on the freeway. The world is not a vending machine. With a vending machine, you put in your dollar bill and push a button and whatever you wanted comes out. The world isn’t like that, but so many of us expect it to be. We say, “I buy my wife chocolates

and flowers and everything, and I don't know why she still doesn't love me. I do this for my husband, and I don't know why he's still so cranky. I do everything for my children, and they're never grateful. I do everything my boss wants, yet still she's fired me." The world is not this vending machine, it's not as simple as putting in a dollar, pushing the button, and your metaphorical chocolate will come out.

The rest of the world has its own karmic package, its own *dharma*. You can stand over a rose bush as long as you want screaming at it to become a jasmine, singing songs of jasmine, chanting jasmine mantras, envisioning jasmine, meditating on jasmine, but no matter what you do, that rose bush is *never* going to become a jasmine. If you have an apple seed, all you're going to get are apples, never peaches. Wisdom is what helps us understand that there is a nature to Nature. You may love oranges, but unless you live in California or Florida, you're not going to get them all the time. The Earth just doesn't produce them like that. The same is true in our lives, the same is true in the lives of the people around us. We may want someone to act in a certain way or to be something, but if it's not the karmic package they've come into this world with it's not going to happen.

Real wisdom is like the beautiful serenity prayer: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." That's the wisdom that Ma Saraswati gives us.

The middle three days of Navratri are dedicated to Maha Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity. Now, prosperity of course is relative. I say this coming from a world of people who were fabulously wealthy and yet always felt that there was one thing more they still needed.

Close your eyes for a moment and think of the one thing – you may have more than one – that stands between you and total happiness and peace. We all have one. *This one thing is what keeps us a beggar.* It doesn't matter how much there is in our bank account, it doesn't matter if we're a CEO in a billion-dollar company, it doesn't matter how many homes we own, as long as there is something that is still between me and happiness, I'm living in an experience of scarcity. I'm living in an awareness of scarcity, that there's not enough. Whether it's there's not enough money, whether there's not enough time every day, whether I don't get enough sleep, whether my husband doesn't tell me he loves me enough times, whether I'm not beautiful enough, I'm not popular enough, I don't have enough

friends, whatever it is, if there's something that I don't have enough of, *I'm living in an experience of scarcity, not prosperity.*

What Maha Lakshmi gives us, what we pray to Maha Lakshmi for, is not to fill our bank account, not to make us CEO or give us the corner office, but to give us the experience of having enough, the experience of knowing that right here in this moment, we have enough and we are enough. It doesn't mean we don't have goals. Goals are wonderful. It's wonderful to use the skills and abilities that we have to help the world. As long as there's suffering in the world, anyone goes to sleep hungry, any woman is dying in childbirth, and our rivers are drying up, there's work to be done. But, we don't pray to Maha Lakshmi so that we can be filled; it's not because there's something lacking in us that we need to do this to become enough.

So, we pray to Maha Lakshmi for the experience and the knowledge that we are enough, otherwise we spend our lives running after things. Today you've closed your eyes, you've thought of the ONE thing, but I can almost guarantee you that if I had asked you to do this one year ago, it would've been something else. Five years ago, it would have been something else. Five years from now, it will be something else. That's the epidemic that almost all of us live with, and it goes on and on and on.

The real prosperity is living with the experience of enough. The way that you know you are living in an experience of enough-ness is when you share. If your instinct is to hoard and to grab, whether it's money, people's attention and affection, items, material goods, food, drugs, alcohol, sex, or whatever it is, if your instinct is to hoard more and more, grab more and more, then you're living as a beggar. And yet, going back to the first part, what are we? We're infinite, we're Divine, we've been created not just by the Creator but of the Creator. *That's the prosperity.*

Lastly, the first three nights of Navratri are dedicated to the fiercer aspects of Shakti (Durga or Kali), and that Shakti aspect comes in and clears from us all of that which is preventing us from having the wisdom and the prosperity. This is the energy that comes in and removes whatever it is that's blocking the Truth of ourselves from ourselves and blocking us from living in peace and joy.

I'm going to tell you a secret. The answer of what's blocking us is: us. We are the ones. It's very easy to blame the outside. We all can come up with at least one thing if not a hundred things that would make our lives

better “if only” – the people, the traffic, interest rates, our elected officials, ISIS. We can come up with so many things, but that which blocks us from actually experiencing real joy and peace is ourselves.

That of course though is not saying that everything’s great. Everything is *not* great. All you have to do is walk out into the street to know that. People are hungry, people are suffering, people are killing each other, our environment is being destroyed. So, when we talk about peace and joy, it’s not that I’ve cut myself off from the reality of the world. It’s not a catatonic bliss. It’s the ability to rest within the Truth of our own being, which is joy and bliss and peace, despite what is going on around us, then to be able to use what we have to help the world. If I push it away and say, “It’s all fine, it doesn’t matter, the guy who fell in front of me did so because that was just his *karma*” – this is not enlightenment. This is not spirituality. This is disconnection. When we talk about joy and peace, it’s not that which we get from disconnecting. It’s that which we get from deeply connecting within ourselves to the Source, to that Divinity, that creative aspect within ourselves of joy, peace, and love, that isn’t dependent upon the world.

If you actually want to do something for the world, you have to be peaceful and calm. If you’re angry or you’re wrapped up in your own ego, or if you’re distracted and frustrated and stressed out, you’re not actually going to be very effective for the world. That ability to connect within ourselves is not only the best thing for us, but it’s actually the best thing for the world. So those three days dedicated to Maha Kali are days in which we literally pray, “Oh Ma, remove from me that which blocks me from my own source, that blocks me from being directly connected to You, from replenishing my self with You, from knowing that it’s all One. Remove all of that, so that I can have room for real wisdom, so I can have room for the experience of real prosperity.”

There may only be nine nights, but the beautiful thing about this type of experience is that it can happen in an instant. The room may have been pitch black before someone came in and flipped on the lights, but the minute the light goes on, the darkness is over. It doesn’t have to happen slowly. The minute the light is really there, the darkness dissipates. That doesn’t mean we don’t still have work to do, but that’s what we have our lives for. But, that light can come in an instant, and all we have to do is open ourselves to that possibility and allow that which is blocking it from us to be removed – our egos, attachment, grudges, vision of how things should be, all of that which is making us miserable.

Take some time and just allow that beautiful, Divine, fiery energy to come in and wash through you. Then allow the real wisdom and the real prosperity to come in, in the place of that which was keeping you stuck.

Dussehra

What is the significance of Dussehra?

Dussehra is the day that represents this victory of good over evil, the victory of Lord Rama – God – over the demon Ravana. That's great! We go out and we burn a Ravana effigy, have a party, dance, and it's a great celebration, but then what? What's the point?

As Pujya Swamiji always says, in order for our holidays to really be holy days, there has to be a message that we can take home. Are we only celebrating an event that took place thousands and thousands of years ago? No. The reason that we're celebrating is for us to be able to have something to celebrate, for us to take that teaching and actually change our lives.

On Dussehra, we have to ask ourselves: what is it that's causing the war in us? We won't go into the whole story of the *Ramayana*, but it was a big, big war. What is it that's causing the war in our lives? It's actually the exact same qualities that these ten heads of Ravana were. Each of us has a different mix of them. This sacred time is about finding how to really remove them in our lives.

We pray to Ma Saraswati for wisdom and Ma Lakshmi for real prosperity, and when that happens we learn who we are. That is the core of true wisdom – not knowing about something but knowing *ourselves*, knowing the nature of ourselves. All of these ten vices – ego, cruelty, injustice, lust, greed, anger, pride, jealousy, attachment, and selfishness – are in each of our lives, in various combinations, and that's what's killing us.

But, we don't actually want to fight a battle with ourselves. This is the

key of this holiday. It's not about waging war on your ego, or waging war on your greed, or waging war on your anger. Most of us try to do that. Most of us, when we try to overcome vices or *vasanas*, we think about it as a war. The problem with that analogy is that at the end of the war, you're going to sleep with the loser. They're all part of us. Our ego, anger, and greed are part of us. They're there for a reason. They're there because something is going on in our lives, because there's a pattern, because there's a yearning, because there's a lack, because there's an ignorance. It doesn't matter how much money you have in the bank, how big your houses are, or what company you're the CEO of, if there's something that is keeping you from being happy, you're living in an experience of scarcity instead of abundance.

These "vices" are due to ignorance within the self. That's all they are. We can think about these vices and berate ourselves even more, feeling like, "OK, I'm bad at my job, I can't sing, I can't dance, my kid's a drug addict, I'm a bad mother, and now I go to spirituality and I find out that I also have these ten vices, so not only am I bad at doing things, but I'm a bad person." That doesn't get us very far. If the ultimate goal is guilt, sure, it works. But if the ultimate goal is actually awakening, if the ultimate goal is actually having an experience of real joy and real peace and connection with who you are, the only way about it is to cease the fighting.

We all know that we need to cease the fighting outside. We know that outside we need peace not war, we need love not war, we need to be together, we need to embrace, we need to be connected. So then why is it that even the most spiritual of us, those of us on a path of yoga, of spirituality, of meditation, create such violence within our own selves? We become vegans, we don't wear leather, we do all of the right things, and then we turn around, we turn inward and we berate ourselves: "You're stupid, mean, jealous, and angry. You can't even meditate. You're full of pride. Look at you, you're full of lust, you can't even overcome greed." The way to really overcome these things is not to do battle with them, but to recognize them as a part of yourself. It doesn't mean you have to let it be the master, it doesn't mean you have to act accordingly. Just because I feel angry doesn't mean I have to hit someone or punch a hole through a wall or throw a temper tantrum. Just because I experience greed and I think, "Oh God, I wish I had a purse that nice," it doesn't mean I have to go steal it.

There's a distinction between the experience of ego, arrogance, anger,

lust, and greed and *acting* on them. Acting on them of course creates *karma*, of which we have to eat the fruits. This is why people say don't act accordingly. But, if we try to fight them within us, to literally do battle with them within us, we've created a war inside ourselves. That becomes the path of too many of us on a path of spirituality and yoga. It's like we used to fight with our bosses/spouses/children/in-laws, but now we fight with ourselves. We're still fighting! We haven't actually brought more peace. We've just turned it from outside to inside.

We have to expand our awareness of our self to be something that's big enough to actually include those. Anyone who has ever parented a young child or teenager, or even just had a pet, knows that when they're acting in a way that you don't want them to, when you try to fight them or ignore them or push them away, what does it do? What does a child do when they're throwing a temper tantrum and you decide to fight it? You may get very temporary behavior modification. The child may learn, "OK, when I start to cry, mom turns away. Love gets withdrawn, so I don't throw temper tantrums anymore." The anger hasn't actually gone anywhere; the pain hasn't gone anywhere. Nothing that is real goes anywhere by us trying to fight it or push it away. The only way that it actually changes form and dissipates is through us expanding our awareness of who we are. Can we have a greater, broader sense of who we are to also accept our ego, accept our greed, even accept our cruelty? It doesn't mean we should act on it, but yes, accept that there are even moments where we think, "God, I wish that guy would just keel over!" We've also got injustice. Have none of us ever looked at a pizza or a chocolate cake and hoped that we got the big piece? We may be anti-death penalty until we're blue in the face, until someone harms one of our loved ones. Then suddenly it's, "The electric chair is too good for him! Skin him, quarter him, poke out his eyes!" We all have feelings like this. It's OK, we're human, it's part of our karmic package of being here as humans. The path is not about pretending we don't have them or fighting them. Anger comes, and now if I'm going to try to get angry at my anger, or fight my anger, what have I done? When someone yells at you, and you yell back or fight back, it just creates a bigger fight.

So really the message is that none of these is wrong, but when they run our lives, we suffer defeat. We end up being a slave to them. We end up literally being, as Pujya Swamiji calls it, the light that people just flip on and off and we go on and off. We're angry so we hit. We're greedy so we steal.

The spiritual experience is about knowing who you are and yes, it includes all sorts of urges and experiences that come up – from our past in this birth, our past in past lives. Can we open up and have the same love and compassion for ourselves that we have for those around us? If your child or friend came to you and said, “I’m feeling really angry,” or, “I’m feeling really greedy,” you’d say, “It’s OK, you’re human, don’t worry, I love you anyway, you’re bigger than this...” You’d say a hundred different things. Can we extend this same compassion for ourselves?

Then, to actually take us beyond them, can we get out of the illusion of who we think we are? That’s what they’re all born out of. I only crave that purse if 1) I identify who I am by what type of bag I’ve got on my shoulder, and 2) as long as I experience a separateness between us – it’s over there with her, not over here with me. We get angry because we see people in the world as objects who at that time are hurdles on our path – they’re doing or not doing something, they’re not behaving in a certain way, etc. But if I understand that who I am is not just this physical being, who I am is not hooked into what that person says or does, what karmic package that manifestation of the Divine came in with and how it’s reacting, if I’m able to experience a connection rather than a separation, then the vast majority of these vices dissipate in and of themselves.

All of these vices have to do with us in relation to the world. We are greedy for an object, we are lustful for an object, we are angry at an object, so we’re attached to an object. If we’re able to understand that everybody in the world is just doing the best that they can with the karmic package that they’ve got and the toolbox that they’ve got, it helps us not react in that moment. Everybody with whom we’re interacting is doing the very best they can. If all they’ve got in their toolbox is anger and impatience and fear and grabbing, that’s what they’re going to react to situations with, that’s what they’re going to present with. So, when they grab, when they hurt, when they injure or hurt us, we understand that it’s because that’s all they’ve got in their toolbox. It’s not about us.

Take a few minutes and ask yourself which of these “vices” are really causing your defeat in life? I actually don’t even like to call them “vices” because that implies a horribleness about them, but they’re not horrible, they’re just aspects of us. They only become horrible when we let them run the show and convince ourselves that we are them. Otherwise, they’re just there. They exist because of our human condition, because of the past, because of so many things. But ask yourself, which of these are keeping

me from experiencing the joy, peace, and Truth of who I am? How can I not wage a war against them, not fight them and do battle and conquer them, but understand that they're part of me?

It's like the Wizard of Oz, which is my favorite example. In the Wizard of Oz, the Wizard is only a tyrant when he's behind his screen. He's only able to terrorize people until that curtain gets pulled back, and then what do we see? This tiny, little man with a projector, terrifying only when we don't look at him. This is what all of the stuff which plagues us inside and makes us feel dark really is. It's like the Wizard – it's this tiny little thing, but it's got this projector onto our whole awareness. We have to have the courage to pull back the screen and look at it. Otherwise, it's going to tyrannize us forever.

That's for us what Dussehra is about. Can you pull back the screen on whichever of these is tyrannizing you, and not cut its head off but recognize it's just this tiny little thing with a projector? My arms are big enough, my heart is big enough, and my being is big enough to embrace that also. Then, what you find is the tyranny dissipates.

Ravana himself isn't only those ten things. Those are his ten heads, but an important point to remember is that Ravana was an incredible scholar and a brilliant Vedic expert. He was a demon only because of these ten heads.

Rama represents the opposite. Rama is seen as the real epitome of the righteous and the dharmic, whether as a king, as a son, as a brother, etc. How did the Ramayana begin? Rama was about to be coronated as king, when he was commanded to go and spend fourteen years in the forest because of his jealous, evil stepmother. Most of us would respond to that with something other than, "You're wish is my command." Most of us would experience some level of "WHAAAATTTT?? But I'm the good one, I'm the one about to become king! She's the evil jealous one! Banish her! Why me??" This is how most of our lives work, but Rama didn't do that. Rama went to the forest, and he went full of love for his father who did this.

What do you need to defeat Ravana? What do you need to defeat those ten heads inside you? It's not strength, it's not about chopping their heads off. It's that same love. Instead of it being though the love for my kingdom or my father, it's the love of the Truth of who you are, love for God, love for that Divinity that lives within you. If you really love that, then you don't

let yourself get run over by these things. If you really love God, not just outside but you love God inside you, inside all of those around you, that love itself is the cure to all of this.

Can you be angry and in love at the same time at the same person? You can be in love theoretically, but in the moment that you are furious, the love has been kind of pushed away. You know it's there, you know in theory that you love them, but in this moment what you're experiencing is fury.

If I really love the person in front of me unconditionally, chances are I'm never going to shout at them. But, that's a lot harder because we've actually got all these expectations of other people, and our love tends to not necessarily be quite so unconditional.

Can you have love for the Divine in the form of everyone? If you do, then people are no longer objects. If I'm loving God in you, then you're not an object whose purse I have to steal because I want it, you're not an object for over whom I lust and want to fulfill my sensual pleasures with, you're not an object standing in my path that I need to remove out of the way.

So, love is the answer. Surprise, it always is! When we see these qualities in us with love, they dissipate.

Diwali

What is the significance of Diwali?

Diwali is the festival and celebration of light. It's about an inner light, about opening our eyes and our hearts. It sounds so simple and so purposeful, but why is it that we keep living in the dark if the light is there? Why is it so hard for us to see that light?

These days, something that so many people are afraid of or complain about are things that are going on in the world. So many people come and say, "But what about what's happening here? What about what's happening there? What do we do about this darkness in our world?" The truth is that, as we always say, it doesn't matter how long it's been dark or how dark it is, the minute that there is even a small light, it automatically dispels that darkness. It's sadly ourselves who have gotten so accustomed to living in the darkness that we've mistaken our dreams for the reality of the light, we've mistaken the ignorance for the Truth, we've mistaken the illusion for the Truth, we've mistaken the stuff that is born out of darkness – the ego, anger, frustration, competition, jealousy – for the real Truth.

It's like, if you stay asleep for too long, you start to think your dreams are the reality. This is relevant on Diwali because when we talk about light, it's really the light of the Divine Presence which brings Truth, but we have to open our eyes for that, just as when you shift from dream into reality, from one dream into this world, you have to actually open your eyes in order to be able to see the truth. It doesn't matter how scary it is in the dream, it doesn't matter how attached we are to the outcome in the dream, it doesn't matter how emotional the dream is. The minute we open our eyes, we're able to see the truth. That's the light, and in our lives the same things happen. If we don't really commit ourselves to a spiritual path, all

of the stuff that fills our lives – the superficial layer stuff that we are going to call the stuff of the dream world, the stuff that relates to the waves on the ocean, the ups and the downs, the stuff about this particular identity, the stuff that separates me from you – makes us fall under the illusion that it is what's true. That's the ignorance. That's why when we pray to God for light, it's not just the light of a florescent bulb, it's the light of Truth and the light of knowledge with which we really can see.

So on Diwali when we light the lamp, it's not just that we light these lamps outside and they burn for a few hours and we say "oh it's so pretty," but we really ask ourselves: what in my life is still covered in darkness? Remember, when we say darkness, we don't mean "bad" or "sinful." It's not a concept of darkness that says *you* are dark, *you* are bad, *you* are horrible. No. It's just the darkness of ignorance, the darkness that prevents us from actually seeing who we are and what life is about. The darkness that says, "I'm over here, I'm this physical body. You're over there, so we've got to fight for resources, we have to fight for who will be CEO of this company or who gets the house that we both want, the land we both want, etc."

Pujya Swamiji speaks so beautifully about the light of peace, and how it is darkness which makes us fight, whether it's fighting within ourselves, in a family, in a community, or fighting between nations. It's the darkness that prevents us from seeing that we're actually one. All of the feelings of separateness or the need to hoard – whether it's money, land, possessions, people, love, acclaim – stem out of living in this darkness of separation and of scarcity.

On Diwali when we pray to Maha Lakshmi, the Goddess of wealth, we are praying for the *real* prosperity. People mistakenly think that we pray to her to get a raise, or to make interest rates go up, or to make my son get a good job, or to win the lottery. That's not the real prosperity. As long as I feel that there is something my life is lacking, I am living in a state of poverty. As long as I feel like what I have is less than what someone else has, I'm living in a state of poverty. As long as I feel that there is something between me and fulfillment and happiness and joy, whether it's something I have yet to achieve, a person standing in my path, an obstacle, a time frame, whatever it is, if right here in the moment I'm not able to know that there is abundance already, that what I have and who I am is abundant, then I'm living in a state of poverty. That is what we pray to Maha Lakshmi for. Rather than praying for material wealth or a promotion or raise, pray:

“Oh Maha Lakshmi, give me the light to know that my cup runneth over, give me the light to know that I am living in a state of abundance, that I have so much, that rather than hoarding I want to share.”

Whether it's physical wealth, material possessions, my time, my energy, or my love, we grab and we hoard when we're living in a state of scarcity. It doesn't matter how many zeros there are in our bank account, how many floors in our house, or how many cars in our driveway, if I'm hoarding, if I'm grabbing, I'm living in a state of scarcity.

During Diwali when we do Lakshmi Pooja and we pray to Maha Lakshmi, it's a beautiful opportunity for all of us to get the blessings from the Divine Mother Goddess to know that we already are abundant. The fact that we are here, the fact that we've incarnated in human form, the fact that we're even just able to take in a breath, that we have consciousness, is more than enough. The real prosperity is realizing how I can shift from feeling poor to feeling abundant. That's what the prayers are for – to be bestowed with such spiritual connection, such grounded-ness.

Diwali celebrates the return of the Divine, the return of Lord Rama to Ayodhya, and it's an interesting metaphor because of course God never goes anywhere, so when we think about it really, it's that we've gone somewhere. God doesn't go and return, *we* go and return. Our focus, our awareness, our consciousness goes and returns. So, Diwali is a time when we come back, we re-root ourselves, re-ground ourselves, let the light in and make a pledge for the New Year, whatever it is, but something that this time next year, 365 days later, is going to bring us full – full of light, full of real prosperity, and with roots that are nourished and nurtured in who we really are, in that Truth, in that Divinity. Diwali is a very auspicious day to begin.

Krishna Janmashtami

What is the significance of Janmashtami?

Krishna Janmashtami is such a beautiful and special day. Krishna Janmashtami is the day that we celebrate Lord Krishna coming on Earth in human form. We use the word “born” or “birthday” just colloquially, because it’s actually much more of a conscious, graceful, compassionate appearance here on Earth in the form of a physical being.

We celebrate that day – and this is what’s so beautiful – not just like everything else. Yes, there’s singing, there’s dancing, there’s joy and festivity, but ultimately, it’s a day to really worship the Divine – the Divine in the form of Krishna, or the Divine in whatever form we connect with God, however we envision the Divine. With form, without form, with name, without name, it doesn’t matter. In fact, Lord Krishna says so beautifully in the Gita, “By whatever name, in whatever form the devotee worships me, I appear to the devotee in that form.” This means that God is one, God is infinite, God is everything, it doesn’t matter what name or form or religion. It’s a day that we celebrate that presence of God in our life, and we recommit ourselves to connection.

There are so many lessons that we can take from the life of Lord Krishna here on Earth. His entire life, although He was literally a manifestation of God on Earth, was plagued with numerous obstacles, yet He never lost His joy and He never lost His peace.

Without going into all the details of Lord Krishna’s life, let’s look just at the beginning of His life. Before Krishna was born, his mother Devaki was married to Vasudeva. On the day of the marriage, Devaki’s brother Kamsa, the ruler of Mathura, heard a prophesy that Devaki’s eighth son

will destroy him. Thus, being an evil man, Kamsa indefinitely imprisons Devaki and Vasudeva and literally murders every one of their offspring. Finally, Krishna is born, the eighth child of Devaki and Vasudeva. So, the first obstacle of Krishna's life is that He literally took birth in the jail, and they think He is fated to be murdered by Kamsa. And yet, the minute He was born, what happened? The doors opened, the guards fell asleep, the chains suddenly came unchained, and His father carried Him out and escaped across the high-flowing, rambunctious Yamuna river, which become calm and receded in order for them to have a safe passage. All of the obstacles dissipated.

That is a very beautiful message. When you take that combined with all of the other experiences that happened to Lord Krishna during his life, you could look at His life and say that it looks like a lot of trouble. They tried to kill Him so many times when He was a baby. As He got older, it was one difficult situation after another, ultimately finding Himself in the middle of the battle of the *Mahabharata* where He had to give the Bhagavad Gita. And yet, in the midst of it, He never lost the Divine purpose that He was put on earth for. There never came a time when He said, "Forget it! It wasn't supposed to be like this! This wasn't how I planned it! These people aren't supposed to be so mean! Why are they trying to kill me, I'm just a baby, a Divine baby!" He never said that. Rather, He took each situation and overcame it.

In many of our lives, we feel like somehow if we're on a spiritual path, if we're connected spiritually, if God is there, if we chant the right mantra, if we go to the right mandir/church/gurdwara, have the right Guru, do the right program, get the right certificate, then we won't have any more problems in life and everything will flow very smoothly. People won't be against us. Nobody will try to kill us or harm us or poison us like what happened to Krishna. But His life gives us the message: spirituality is not an inoculation against hardship. Remember, this is God we are talking about, He did plan it all! Every bit of His life is the message.

God's presence in your life is not an inoculation against people being against you. It doesn't mean the whole world is going to say, "Oh, that's the Divine one." When the situations arose, He didn't run away. After all, He is God, He has all kinds of magical powers, no one could kill Him anyway. He could've just let it all happen, turned on His magic power, not let the poison affect Him, not let the attacks kill Him, but He didn't. He faced every situation with strength, with courage, and with a commitment

to bring righteousness back to unrighteousness, to bring good back to evil. He didn't just go and sit and meditate, He faced the obstacles. How He faced them is the message of how we're supposed to face things in our lives. We don't let them ruin us, but we address them, we take care of it, we bring righteousness back to unrighteousness, and good back to evil. We commit that wherever we go, whatever we can do to bring back good to the evil, to bring back light to the darkness, by using whatever strength we have, by being courageous with an open heart, we will do it, we will bring back right-ness to all of the problems.

Another real root message, which is a favorite of mine, that Lord Krishna gives us in the Gita is the message of fearlessness. Young Arjuna was afraid – afraid of death, but also deeper than death. He was afraid of making a mistake, doing the wrong thing, doing *adharma*. This was his family on the other side of the war also, so he was afraid of being in this situation. The message that Krishna gives him is be fearless. Not that he should be blind in fearlessness, like a raging bull who goes into the war and just kills everything in sight, but be fearless because Krishna was his charioteer, God was driving his chariot. Just as when Krishna was born in the jail, all of the typical things that happen in jail miraculously dissipated – the doors opened, the chains opened, the guards slept – in the same way, the impossible became possible in the battle. An army of five vanquishes an army of hundreds. The underdog representing good wins. But, they win through doing their *dharma*, and that's the crux of Krishna's message. His message is: be fearless because this is your *dharma*. These may be family on the other side, but at the moment what they are is representatives of evil, of *adharma*.

The Pandavas did not storm Kurukshetra and try to kill everyone. It was a war that they found themselves in because their family members had, over and over again, tortured them in so many ways – sending them off into the forest, giving them nothing, cheating them, trying to kill them, doing everything against them, then at the end of the day, refusing to even let them live. Arjuna had gotten to the point where he had said, "Fine, forget it! Just give us a place for our little houses, that's enough! Forget the kingdom, forget everything, just a little place that we can live," and Duryodhana had said, "No, I won't give you anything." So, this was a war that they had been brought into by representatives of evil, of unrighteousness, of *adharma*. The fact that they happened to come in the form of family members was not the point, as Krishna reminded Arjuna over and over again. Krishna reminds Arjuna, "In this life at this moment,

yes, at this intersection of time and space Duryodhana is your cousin, but at the essence, in the depth, what you're staring at is *adharma* and evil, and if you do not remove it, it's going to create more and more evil, more and more violence, more and more harm. You must be courageous."

That to me is one of the deepest and most important messages, because as has been said by all of the great philosophers and great commentators on the Gita and on the *Mahabharata*, our lives are a battlefield. We can look at our own internal world – our mind, our heart, our logic, our reason, our emotions. We can look at our external world. We can look at aspects of our family. You could pretty much superimpose the idea of this war of Kurukshetra onto so many different aspects of our lives, and the message for our lives is be fearless. Yes, life is a battle in so many ways. It's a battle of light over darkness, of goodness over badness, whether it's our own internal pulls – our own compassion over our own anger, our own love over our own hate – or whether it's battles in the world around us. But our duty is to be courageous, which means our heart is opened, and we are in tune and in touch with what our *dharma* is and what role we have to play. Our duty is not to run away but to use what we have. In this case, the message for all of us is you've got God on your side. Lord Krishna was Arjuna's charioteer, He was the driver of the chariot. God is with you, God is running the show. Be courageous enough to remember who you are, remember what you were put here to do. Lord Krishna tells Arjuna, "You were not put here to sit in the jungle. You're a warrior, that's your *dharma*. Be courageous, and remember I'm driving your chariot."

For our lives, when we find ourselves in our own personal battles, find ourselves so scared, tense, stressed, and worried, we have to remember what our *dharma* is in all of this. What's the role that I have been blessed enough to be able to play? What are the abilities that I have, the skills I have, right here in this moment where I've been put, to bring light back, to bring goodness back to evil, to bring *dharma* back to *adharma*, and to stay connected to my own *dharma*? To remember that God's there, God's running the show, He's my charioteer, and that it's not up to me? All we have to do is have the courage to connect with God so we can hear His message.

Lastly, there's a beautiful moment at the very end of the Gita, after Krishna has told Arjuna everything. Krishna has even shown Arjuna His actual form as God, His form as the Universe. He's given Arjuna everything. He's taught him about life and *dharma* and every possible angle. He's

given him, as Pujya Swamiji always says, the teaching and the touch. But then He says to Arjuna, “But now it’s up to you. Now you do whatever you want. I’ve explained, I’ve told you, I’ve given it you from every angle, but I’ve also given you free will. It’s up to you.” And Arjuna says, “I will do whatever You say.”

In our lives, we get messages from God, we get messages from our inner voice, but out of fear, out of ego, out of so many reasons, we don’t listen to them. The very last message is, “I will do whatever you say.” When that becomes the real mantra in our life, that’s when the wars – the internal wars, the external wars – end, and that’s when, through each of our roles, light comes back to darkness, *dharma* comes back to *adharma*.

However you connect with God, just reconnect and reassert the faith that, “OK God, You’re driving my life, I’m in Your chariot, You are the charioteer. It looks scary or like a situation that I don’t know what to do with, but You guide me, and I will do whatever You say.”

Buddha Purnima

What is the significance of Buddha Purnima?

Buddha Purnima is worshipped as the day in which Lord Buddha took birth here on Earth. It is celebrated with the Purnima (the full moon) because the message of the life and teachings of the Buddha for us is that the light and enlightenment is within us.

The Buddha went out into the forest, sat under a tree, and did His meditation until He attained the state of enlightenment. But then, after His state of enlightenment, He didn't stay there under the trees. He didn't go further into the denser forests. Rather, He came back to the villages, back to the town, back to the people to share that message, to share that light to all, and to awaken people not only then but now thousands of years later. How many people's lives have been touched and illumined by that light of the Buddha? His teaching is that the light is within each of you, and that every single one of us, regardless of color, caste, creed, country, or culture, has within us that light. Every one of us has within us the Buddha.

That is the teaching for all of us at the time of Buddha Purnima. It's not just about how we can worship Lord Buddha, but rather how we can take the message and teachings of His life, so that each of us awakens that inner Buddha. The Buddha nature is available to every one of us. Let us use that light to look within and find the Buddha nature within us.

What is that Buddha nature? It's the nature of compassion, the nature of love. The Buddha said so beautifully not to worry about running out and extinguishing all of the fires in the world – the fires of people's hatred, the fires of violence – but rather that we should become a river of compassion and a river of love, so that whenever anyone comes into our presence, it's

automatically extinguished. So many of us spend our time worried about what to do about this one or that one, how to fix this one or fix that one, change this one or change that one, but the Buddha gave the message: just become a river of love and compassion, and then whatever fire there may be, when it comes near it will automatically get extinguished in the water of your love and compassion.

Lastly, I want to share a beautiful teaching of the Buddha that actually came after He had left His body, but you could call it even maybe the core teaching of the Buddha's life. It was the teaching of service, the teaching of giving, and the teaching of helping others. After the Buddha had left His body, His disciples gathered to put together a book on the teachings of the Buddha, because they knew that so many people would benefit for generations and generations to come. So, they got together the teachings, then they raised all of the money needed to publish this book. Yet, after great hardship in raising the money to publish the book, an earthquake struck. In the earthquake, so many people lost their lives, lost their homes, lost everything. So, the disciples of the Buddha took all the money that they had raised to publish this book and they used it to help the victims of the earthquake. Then again, afterwards, they went out and started to raise the money again. Again with great hardship they got the money together, but then there was a flood. In the flood, so many people lost their lives, lost their possessions, lost their homes, lost everything. So again, the disciples of the Buddha took all the money they had raised and they used it to help the victims of this flood. Then again, afterwards, they went out and started to raise the money a third time. They had even greater hardship because of course people didn't want to keep giving them money. However, they finally published this book on the teachings of the Buddha, and when it was published, it was published as "The Teachings of the Buddha: Third Edition."

The first edition was helping the earthquake victims, the second edition was helping the flood victims, and the book was only the third edition. *Those* were the teachings of the Buddha.

Use the light of the full moon to go within, to find and then become that Buddha nature. Then, use it to go out and serve and help all of those in the towns, in the villages, and in the cities, remembering that *that* is the Buddha nature in action and in movement.





ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sadhvi Bhagawati Saraswatiji, Ph.D was raised in an American family in Hollywood, California and graduated from Stanford University. She was completing her Ph.D. when she left America in 1996 to come and live permanently at Parmarth Niketan Ashram in Rishikesh, India. She has been living there for over twenty years, engaged in spiritual practice and dedicated service.

She was officially initiated into the order of Sanyas (monastic renunciation) in the year 2000, by her Guru, His Holiness Swami Chidanand Saraswatiji.

Sadhviji is a renowned speaker who gives keynote addresses at large forums, on a wide variety of topics ranging from conscious business to science and spirituality to sustainable development to the keys of happiness and peace in life to all aspects of yoga. She has also been a speaker at the United Nations, Parliament of World Religions and many international conferences and summits. Her talks blend the knowledge and logic of the West with the insights, spirituality and wisdom of the East, and she is renowned as a spiritual bridge between the two cultures.

At Parmarth Niketan, Rishikesh, where she lives most of the year, she gives spiritual discourses and daily satsang, teaches meditation, provides counseling and oversees myriad charitable and humanitarian projects and activities. Sadhviji is:

- Secretary-General of the Global Interfaith WASH Alliance, an international interfaith organization dedicated to bringing clean water, sanitation & hygiene to the children of the world.
- President of Divine Shakti Foundation, a foundation dedicated

to bringing education and empowerment to women and children which runs free schools, vocational training programs and empowerment programs.

- Director of the annual world-famous International Yoga Festival at Parmarth which has been covered in Time Magazine, CNN, New York Times, Le Monde and other prestigious publications.

Sadhviji has a Ph.D in Psychology and was the Managing Editor for the monumental project of the 11-volume Encyclopedia of Hinduism.

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PARMARTH NIKETAN ASHRAM RISHIKESH (HIMALAYAS), INDIA



Parmarth Niketan Ashram in Rishikesh, India is a true, spiritual haven, lying on the holy banks of Mother Ganga, in the lap of the lush Himalayas.

Parmarth Niketan is the largest ashram in Rishikesh. It provides its thousands of pilgrims – who come from all corners of the Earth – with a clean, pure and sacred atmosphere as well as abundant, beautiful gardens. With over 1,000 rooms, the facilities are a perfect blend of modern amenities and traditional, spiritual simplicity.

The daily activities at Parmarth Niketan include morning universal prayers, daily *yoga* and meditation classes, daily *satsang* and lecture programs, *kir-tan*, as well as full Nature Cure, and Ayurvedic treatment available on the premises.

The world-renowned Ganga Aarti held every night at Parmarth Niketan, Rishikesh draws people of all faiths from across the world to enjoy a serene

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sunset ceremony of song, inspiration and lights.

Additionally, there are frequently special cultural and spiritual programs given by visiting revered saints, acclaimed musicians, spiritual and social leaders and others.

Further, there are frequent camps in which pilgrims come from across the world to partake in intensive courses on *yoga*, meditation, *pranayama*, stress management, acupressure, Reiki and other ancient Indian sciences. Parmarth Niketan hosts the annual International Yoga Festival from the 1st-7th of March every year. (www.InternationalYogaFestival.org)

Parmarth Niketan's charitable activities and services make no distinctions on the basis of caste, color, gender, creed or nationality. Instead they emphasize unity, harmony, peace, global integrity, health, and the holistic connection between the body, mind and spirit.

**True to its name, Parmarth Niketan is dedicated to the welfare of all.
Everything is open and free to all.**

www.Parmarth.org
 /ParmarthNiketan



INTERNATIONAL YOGA FESTIVAL



Sadhvi Bhagawatiji is the Director of the world-famous International Yoga Festival at Parmarth Niketan, a beautiful time of seeing the world come together in the name of yoga, or union, on the holy banks of Mother Ganga.

In 2018, over 2000 people from 100 countries came to learn asana, pranayama, kriyas and meditation from over 80 presenters from 20 different nations.

Each year, International Yoga Festival provides participants with darshan, satsang and inspiring discourses by revered saints and yogis, who fill the atmosphere with *bhakti yoga* (devotion) and *gyan yoga* (wisdom).



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*To learn more about International Yoga Festival,
please visit www.InternationalYogaFestival.org.*



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GLOBAL INTERFAITH WASH ALLIANCE



Since the dawn of history, faith has provided a foundation from which social norms develop. It is to faith leaders that billions are drawn to in times of joy and sorrow, as well as in the search for inner meaning. As teachers to the masses, the words of faith leaders motivate, persuade and enable. Through their speech and actions, they can bring about change in ways that others, quite simply, cannot.

An estimated 5 billion people across the world are members of religious communities, underscoring the crucial role religious leaders can play in addressing seemingly intractable problems – such as access to safe water and sanitation.

The Global Interfaith WASH Alliance (WASH) is the world's first initiative that is engaging the planet's many faiths as allies in efforts to create a world where every human being has access to safe drinking water, improved sanitation and proper hygiene.

Launched at UNICEF World Headquarters in New York during the United Nations General Assembly Meetings, under sponsorship of USAID and the Government of the Netherlands, GIWA was Co-Founded by interfaith

leader, Pujya Swami Chidanand Saraswatiji, the Founder of Ganga Action Parivar, Divine Shakti Foundation and India Heritage Research Foundation, and President of Parmarth Niketan, Rishikesh.

GIWA's many programs include:

The Swachhta Kranti:

GIWA feels that nothing short of a behaviour change revolution is required in order to ensure healthy, sustainable WASH for nearly half of India's population. Our compelling faith-based *Swachhta Kranti* (Clean Revolution) campaign has been designed to do just that. Through the inspirational words of beloved faith leaders, populations that had never dreamed of building and using toilets are being



motivated to embrace improved sanitation and more. As they do so, they join GIWA in expanding the Swachhta Kranti campaign amongst their friends, neighbours and others through their own endeavours and by participating in GIWA's grand processions, mass pledges, Sanitation & Hygiene Rallies and more.

World Toilet College:

GIWA's World Toilet College offers classroom and outreach trainings that cover the entire range of sanitation topics. So far, our World Toilet College provided more than



3000 people with knowledge and skills to directly address India's most pressing sanitation needs. Courses offered included Toilet Building, Sanitation Ambassador Training Programme, Hygiene in Schools, Student Led Total Sanitation, Healthy Homes and Families, Professional Toilet Cleaning, and various capacity building programmes on WASH for key stakeholders such as SHG members, grassroots-level volunteers and natural leaders of communities.

WASH on Wheels and Swachh Bharat Yatras:

Dedicated social workers, volunteers and performers are providing outreach in festivals, events, streets, slums and villages through GIWA's unique WASH on Wheels programme and Swachh Bharat Yatras. WASH on Wheels is an inspired mobile educational platform which features videos of foremost faith leaders promoting the use of toilets, as well as street theatre, puppet shows, sanitation walks and more. With two trucks in constant use, a full-fledged outreach team motivates people of all ages through interactive activities geared towards promoting lasting change.



WaterSchool: Providing classes within two schools a day, 6 days a week, GIWA's WaterSchool programme trains and motivates teachers and students to learn the principles of sustainable water, sanitation and hygiene for becoming social change agents. WaterSchool also offers teacher's workshops, large-scale student programmes, and the provision of WASH needs including toilets, hand-washing stations, clean






water and more. So far, thousands of teachers and students have been sensitized through our classroom programmes, workshops and practical demonstrations.


Women for WASH: GIWA's Women for WASH Initiative is enabling women from villages and slums to become WASH entrepreneurs. Together, they are assembling to wage their own local Revolution against pollution, hardship and disease by helping to ensure their neighbours embrace, and have access to toilets, clean water, and more.



To enable disadvantaged women to become WASH entrepreneurs, GIWA officially launched special toilet building classes under its Women for WASH Initiative. This was accompanied by other capacity building trainings to enable these women to become more involved in making their communities Open Defecation Free.

www.WashAlliance.org

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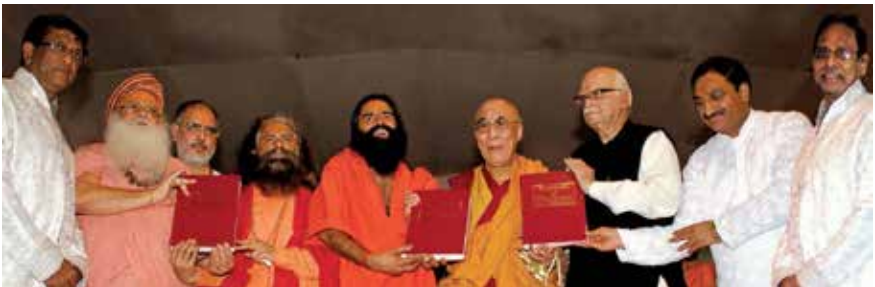
ENCYCLOPEDIA OF HINDUISM



Pujya Swami Chidanand Saraswatiji conceived of the idea for an Encyclopedia of Hinduism in 1987 when He was in Pittsburgh, USA, after establishing the Hindu-Jain Temple there. In order to bring the vision to fruition, He founded and chaired the India Heritage Research Foundation (IHRF). Over the next 25 years, IHRF, with more than 1000 scholars from around the world, led by Dr. K.L.

Seshagiri Rao, Late Dr. Pandit Vidya Niwas Mishra and Dr. Kapil Kapoor, compiled the first Encyclopedia of Hinduism in history. Sadhvi Bhagawatiji served as Managing Editor of the Encyclopedia.

Eleven gorgeous volumes, approximately 7000 entries and thousands of illustrations, comprise the recently-completed and launched encyclopedia. The *Encyclopedia* marks the first time that the urgent need was met for an authentic, objective and insightful well of information, capturing both the staples and the spices of Indian tradition and culture. It is a significant landmark, encompassing the entire spectrum of the land called Bharat.



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The Encyclopedia was previewed and blessed in India by HH the Dalai Lama and many revered saints during the Maha Kumbh Mela in Haridwar in 2010. The academic launch of the international edition, published by Mandala Earth Publications of California, USA, was hosted by the University of South Carolina, Columbia, USA in the summer of 2013 in the presence of the Governor of South Carolina, Nikki Haley, and many other dignitaries and internationally-esteemed scholars. The first set in India was presented to the Hon'ble President of India in a grand function in June 2014 in the presence of revered faith leaders, national leaders, social leaders and celebrities.

The Encyclopedia was presented to the Hon'ble President of India HE Pranab Mukherjee at a glorious function in June 2014 by revered interfaith religious leaders, distinguished cabinet ministers, and dignitaries.

In October 2014, the Encyclopedia was officially launched in India by the hands of the Hon'ble Vice President of India Dr. Hamid Ansari & Mananiya Dr. Mohan Bhagwat with renowned religious leaders and dignitaries. On the 27 October 2014, the Encyclopedia was launched in London by the Hon'ble Prime Minister of England Mr. David Cameron.

For more information, visit www.theencyclopediaofhinduism.com.



DIVINE SHAKTI FOUNDATION

*"Do Divine! Be Divine! It is not enough to just BE divine,
one must also DO divine!"*

*"We must all spread the message that women and girls
are divine and worthy of worship."*

- Pujya Swami Chidanand Saraswatiji, founder of
Divine Shakti Foundation

The Divine Shakti Foundation is dedicated to the holistic well being of women, their children, and orphaned/abandoned children, and to all of Mother Nature and Mother Earth. Our programs include free schools for children, women's vocational training programs, women's empowerment programs and international events bringing women (and men) together to discover and nurture their oneness with the Divine Feminine.

Schools, vocational training and empowerment programs: poverty, illiteracy and lack of training are tragically common in India. With



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increasing population, basic education and marketable skills have become absolute necessities in order to subsist in even the smallest communities. Hence, those who lack this education and training go to sleep hungry each night. DSF is dedicated to providing them with the best chance possible to live a life free from destitution. The Divine Shakti Foundation's programs encompass children's schools for both girls and boys as well as computer centers where they learn practice and theory, as well as specialized vocational training and empowerment centers for girls and young women.





Animal Seva


Recognizing that the Divine does not just lie within our temples and our other holy places, but also in the Creation itself, Divine Shakti Foundation dedicated is to providing care and shelter to all of Mother Nature.



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Cow Care: Plans are on to build *gaushalas* to provide proper veterinary care, shelter and food to the stray cows who currently roam the streets of India.

Street Dogs: Divine Shakti Foundation teamed with Karma Animal Trust of Siberia to bring healthcare to the street dogs of Rishikesh. For several months of the year, veterinarians and technicians offered their time, talent and technical expertise to sterilize primarily male dogs, vaccinate and treat street dogs and cats. As most street puppies and kittens die from significant diseases, motorbike accidents or hunger, it is very important to control the population so that they are healthy and happy.

www.DivineShaktiFoundation.org
 /DivineShaktiFoundation



GANGA ACTION PARIVAR

The holy, life-giving Ganga is one of the most at-risk rivers in the world. Every day, it is polluted by some three billion liters of sewage and chemical waste, threatening the health and lives of millions. Its ecology, containing some of the world's rarest plants and wildlife, is under similar threat.

On April 4th, 2010 by the hands of H.H. the Dalai Lama, H.H. Pujya Swami Chidanand Saraswati, former Deputy Prime Minister Hon'ble Shri L.K. Advani, former Chief Minister of Uttarakhand



Shri Ramesh Pokhriyal Nishank, former Chief Minister of Uttarakhand Major General B.C. Khanduri and many revered saints and dignitaries, Ganga Action Parivar was officially launched at Parmarth Niketan Ashram in Rishikesh at a special "Sparsh Ganga" ("Divine Touch of Ganga") function, an event to raise awareness about the need for collective and holistic, solution-based action to address the crucial issues facing the holy river. Since then, hundreds of supporters and family members have been mobilized, coming together to find solutions to the problems facing Ganga tributaries.



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Activities of Ganga Action Parivar range from working with top government leaders and institutions to create and implement sustainable, environmentally-friendly solutions for the various, complex problems facing Ganga, to working at the grassroots levels.

GAP's 6T's Program

When Puja Swamiji, Founder of Ganga Action Parivar, completed 60 years of life, everyone wanted to give Him birthday presents. He however declared that there is nothing He wants, nothing He needs, but only the gift of people committing themselves to the “6Ts” program, which signifies six-ty years of life.

Ganga Action Parivar's Six Ts program provides a foundation for a cleaner, greener, more sustainable Ganga River Basin. Through its comprehensive, interlinked initiatives, the people, animals and ecology of the watershed are enabled to not only survive, but thrive.

In so doing, GAP has identified six categories of outreach that are designed to complement each other: Toilets, Trash, Trees, Taps, Tracks and Tigers.

Toilets

Over 500 million people live near the Ganga River and its tributaries. Many have no access to sanitary facilities. Populations are forced to use the Ganga as a toilet out of necessity, fouling its waters and potentially spreading disease. Our work includes both provision of toilets as well as wide scale awareness raising campaigns.

Trees

Trees are crucial to life. Yet, to meet the needs of rapidly-expanding populations, far too many trees have been cut down, robbing the Ganga River Basin of its key benefactor. GAP is planting and maintaining thousands of trees as a direct response.



Tigers

Under the Six T's program, "Tigers" represents all endangered animals inhabiting the Ganga River Basin. Working side-by-side with conservation groups, GAP provides education and awareness programs, enabling populations and visitors to become protectors of their own environments, enabling nature's creatures to flourish as they should.

Taps

Access to clean and safe drinking water is a basic human right. Yet, every year in India alone, 400,000 children die, and many more are sickened, by water-borne diseases such as typhoid, dysentery and cholera. Adding to the problem are contaminated and shrinking ground water tables alongside untamed pollution in the Ganga. GAP works to provide taps to the rural poor, as well as water filtration systems, while also teaching skills in proper water use management.

Trash



In the Ganga River Basin, trash is often disposed of directly into or near the river, endangering wildlife, plants, and populations, while also spoiling the appearance of what should be pristine waters. GAP works with local populations, municipalities, and administrators to ensure proper trash disposal, including rubbish bins and recycling. Additionally, GAP provides mass awareness campaigns, aimed at motivating populations and visitors as to how to properly dispose of their waste before it reaches the Ganga.



Tracks

The Indian train network is one of the most impressive in the world and also one of the dirtiest. GAP is providing the Ministry of Railways with concepts and ideas for new initiatives for cleaning and greening the land alongside the rail tracks. GAP also helps to advise regarding the improvement of sanitary facilities within India's trains and train stations.

www.GangaAction.org

  /GangaAction

MOUNT KAILASH/MANSAROVAR TIBET ASHRAMS

Under the guidance, inspiration and vision of Pujya Swami Chidanand Saraswatiji, IHRF has built three ashrams and a medical clinic in the holy land of Lake Mansarovar and Mt. Kailash in Tibet.

Prior to this project, there were no indoor lodging facilities nor medical facilities for hundreds of kilometers. People frequently suffered from basic, treatable ailments due to lack of medical attention. Therefore, after undertaking a *yatra* to the sacred land in 1998, Pujya Swamiji took a vow that – by the grace of God – He would do something for the local people (who didn't even have running water) and for all the pilgrims who travel there.

In July 2003, we inaugurated the Parmarth Kailash-Mansarovar Ashram on the banks of Lake Mansarovar, the first ashram ever in this holy land. There are 20 rooms with 5-8 beds each. Additionally there are two large halls for katha, meditation and satsang, which can also serve as additional dormitories. In 2004, a team of nearly 40 doctors and medical assistants traveled from USA in the first free medical camp in Mansarovar and Mt. Kailash.

There are now three Parmarth Kailash-Mansarovar ashrams, on the banks of Lake Mansarovar, in



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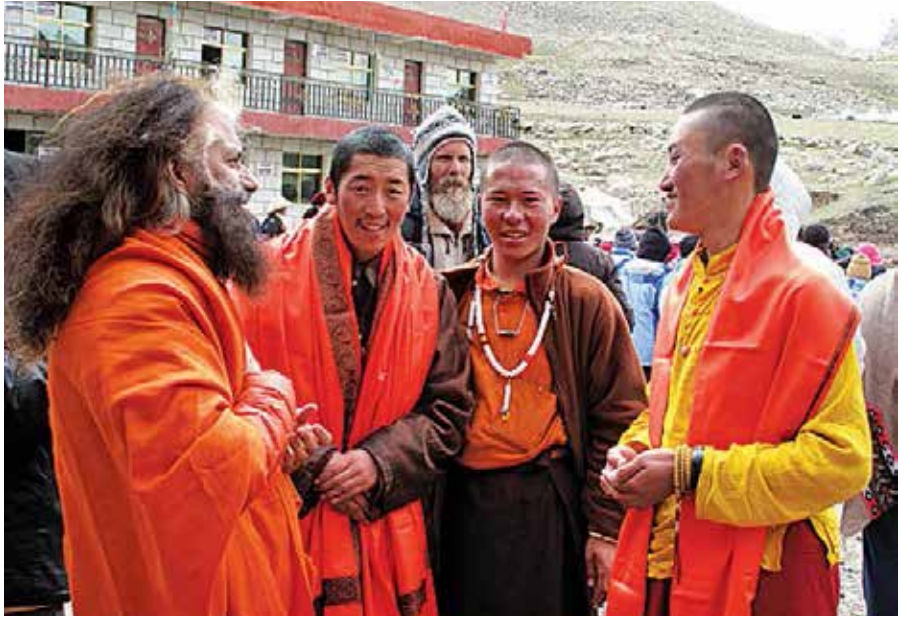


Paryang, Tibet and in Dirapuk at a height of nearly 17,000 feet, on the sacred Mt. Kailash parikrama route. Dirapuk is the place where all yatris who are undertaking the parikrama spend their first night, 20 km beyond the starting point. It is the location from which the darshan of Kailash is the closest, clearest and most

spectacular. The ashram is double-storied with nearly 50 rooms, as well as a hall and dining facilities. All rooms face Mt. Kailash.

In September 2009, Pujya Swamiji officially inaugurated the Dirapuk ashram, with over 150 yatris from around the world, as well as local Buddhist monks and dignitaries & officials of the Tibet Autonomous Region. The ashram is already a great boon for the town, as we hired local people for the construction and trained them in masonry, carpentry and painting. The ashram is run and maintained by local Tibetans, and proceeds from the ashram go back into the community for education, health care and other projects.

Previously, in 2006, we inaugurated the Parmarth Mansarovar Ashram in Paryang, Tibet, the place where all yatris stay the night before reaching Lake Mansarovar. The ashram has more than 20 rooms -- singles, doubles & triples, and also two large halls for satsang, meditation or for use as dormitories.



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INTERFAITH HUMANITARIAN NETWORK

Founded under the vision and leadership of HH Pujya Swami Chidanand Saraswatiji, the Interfaith Humanitarian Network is a Trust to reduce the impact of natural disaster, build bridges to prevent conflicts, and respond in times of crisis.

IHN's work began as Project Hope, a project of the India Heritage Research Foundation, which was founded by Pujya Swamiji in 2004. Later, Project Hope combined forces with the Global Interfaith WASH Alliance, giving rise to the Interfaith Humanitarian Network.

In light of the growing threat of disaster, the mission of IHN is turning to prevention-based capacity development, advocacy, and community building, so that local communities may be better enabled to prevent crises. When unfortunate circumstances do occur, our teams may be found on the scene to provide immediate- and long-term relief interventions.

Major interventions have included:

The Mass Himalayan Flood Disaster in Uttarakhand, India (2013):

- **Immediate Interventions:** through evacuation assistance via our convoys of 20 large buses at a time; mass distribution of relief supplies; multiple relief camps within disaster zones and IDP transit points; the region's only comprehensive,



computer-based family reunification services; the provision of clean water; medical assistance for 60,000 people; facilitation of dignified final rights for thousands of the deceased; and continual fact-giving consultations with governmental officials.



- **Medium-Term Interventions:** included the provision of food and supplies to 50 villages for three months; mobile medical assistance; and policy consultations for the sustainable redevelopment of the region, including a large policy conference with the region's foremost leaders and experts.
- **Long-Term Interventions:** included the rebuilding of schools and community facilities; the provision of vocational training and vocational centres for widows and disadvantaged women in particular; installation of clean water systems and eco-friendly toilets within

schools and pilgrimage centres; mass tree plantations to protect water resources while preventing soil erosion and landslides; regular medical camps and services, including for prosthetic limbs and physical rehabilitation; WASH training; policy consultations, and more.

The Nepal Earthquake (2015):

- **Immediate Interventions:** through medical teams, relief supply trucks, the provision of clean water, and other humanitarian measures.
- **Long-Term Interventions:** included direct rebuilding assistance; WASH consultations and education; women's and children's vocational training assistance; the provision of medical services; and the complete rebuilding of a temple.



Tsunami in South India (2004)

- **Short and Medium-Term Interventions Included:** the provision of direct humanitarian aid and medical assistance immediately after the crisis.
- **Long-Term Interventions Included:** construction of an orphanage, school, medical clinic, women's vocational training centre, the complete construction of 100 homes, and the renovation of a residential centre for widows and disadvantaged women in Tamil Nadu.





The Muzaffarnagar Riots (2013):

- **Interventions Included:** a targeted Interfaith Unity March and Peace Programme at the peak of the riots, in the heart of the riot area, with participants including foremost Muslim, Hindu and Jain leaders; as well as the provision of humanitarian assistance.



Other Major Relief Interventions Included: the Gujarat, India Earthquake (2001), the Orissa, India Super-Cyclone Disaster (1999), the Chamoli, India Earthquake (1999) and the Uttarakashi, India Earthquake Disaster (1991), and more.

To learn more about all of Interfaith Humanitarian Network's projects, please visit www.interfaithhumanitariannetwork.org.

GURUKULS & ORPHANAGES

Simple shelters with food, beds and babysitters are not sufficient for the impoverished, orphaned and disadvantaged children of rural and mountainous India. All children need not only to be fed and sheltered -- they need to be educated and trained so they can be productive members of society. They need to be inculcated with values, ethics and spirituality which will make them torchbearers of Indian culture.

Our education initiative includes the following essential components: (1) a full, standard academic education, (2) training in the ancient Vedic knowledge and traditions, (3) a moral and value-based education which is crucially needed in modern society.



In the “Dust to Diamonds” program, our gurukuls/orphanages provide approximately 500 young, impoverished, disadvantaged boys with a basic academic education, as well as intensive Sanskrit and ancient Vedic texts. Their days are filled with yoga, meditation, Vedic chanting, reading of scriptures, mathematics,



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seva and special programs designed to infuse their lives with essential values and ethics. They are not only getting a full academic education, but they are also being trained to be cultural

ambassadors, carrying with them -- wherever they go -- the deep values and culture of honesty, integrity, purity, piety, dedication and selflessness.



Once a child comes to the orphanage/gurukul, a rapid, divine transformation takes place. Looks of hopelessness become looks of great optimism

and hope. Lightless eyes become bright shining eyes. Feelings of destitution and despair become feelings of pride, of faith and of enthusiasm.

The rishikumars travel on yatra to the Himalayas, perform yoga, yagna and prayers on the banks of Mother Ganga, study academics and computers as well as the scriptures, perform dramas based on Indian spiritual history and -- of course -- have time to run and play!



RURAL DEVELOPMENT FOR GREEN & SERENE LIVES

In different rural areas on the banks of Ganga and in the nearby hilly areas is our special Rural Development Program to enable eco-fiendly, self-sufficient lives.



The Rural Development Program's components include:

- Solid waste management
- Sewage control and sanitation programs through laying of sewage lines in the village and construction of toilets for the villagers, so that no pollution goes into Ganga.
- Tree plantation program

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- Construction of a proper road in the village
- Organic gardening program. We have brought in trained organic farmers and scientists to teach the local farmers alternative, chemical-free methods of farming. Further, we have our own organic farm.
- Spirituality and Culture – we have started an evening devotional ceremony at Veerpur on the banks of the Ganga, called Aarti. It is a way for the villagers to come together in a spirit of peace, culture and piety.
- Girl's Orphanage - Plans are underway to open an orphanage for abandoned young girls and babies in the beautiful, natural surroundings of Veerpur.



PROJECT GIVE BACK

We are committed to providing health care to those who would otherwise go untreated. To this end, we sponsor and support numerous health care programs and runs several annual free health care camps in Rishikesh as well as in other rural areas ranging from Mansarovar and Kailash to the Himalayan region, a project of the Divine Shakti Foundation.



Each year, there are numerous free medical health care camps, ranging from urology camps to eye camps (including free cataract surgeries), and including nearly every discipline.

Hundreds of patients receive free testing, diagnoses, medicines and treatment for ailments that otherwise would go undiagnosed and untreated.



Every week, our caring volunteers travel to some of the most remote of the Himalayan villages, disaster zones and other areas to provide compassionate medical care. Many of the men, women, and children treated by our team of medical professionals and



sevaks have few to no opportunities to see doctors, and are thus overjoyed when our “Free Medical Camp” banner rises for all to see.

Beautiful medical camps are also held at Parmarth Niketan throughout the year, offering specialty services, including prosthetic limbs, eye care, physiotherapy and much, much more.

*To learn more about our medical
services,
please visit
www.divineshaktifoundation.org.*



THE NATIONAL GANGA RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Founded by Pujya Swamiji, the National Ganga River Rights movement is a coalition of concerned citizens and organizations that are taking a stand on behalf of the Ganga River and its tributaries—while there is still time.

For far too long, people have said there is nothing that can be done. But all the while, the water that nourishes us has become so polluted that it has become a hot-spot for cancers and other deadly diseases, such as typhoid and cholera. The beautiful river that has inspired poets and sages has sadly become one of the most endangered rivers in the world.

As a coalition, we bring a new and strong voice, backed by the successes in nations such as Ecuador, New Zealand and the United States. But we need you to help us make the change.

Sign the petition for Ganga's rights at www.gangarights.org.



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THE GREEN KUMBH INITIATIVE

Kumbh Mela is one of the most ancient, and yet still living, traditions of India's glorious past. The festival dates back to the pre-Vedic period, as even in the Vedas Kumbh Mela is described as a tradition that was already well established. The popularity of Kumbh Mela has only increased over the millennia, gathering millions together every twelve years at each of the four holy places, Prayag Raj- Allahabad, Haridwar, Ujjain and Nasik, in which the auspicious event occurs and making it the world's largest gathering of people on Earth.

At every Kumbha Mela, you can likely find us rallying with beloved faith leaders and the masses for great and lasting change. From grand rallies to processions to mass events to live shows and community interactions through our WASH on Wheels and Education Stations, you will find us working to ensure Kumbha Melas result in a cleaner, greener and more sustainable world.



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GREEN KATHAS FOR A CLEAN, GREEN & SERENE WORLD

Pujya Swamiji has inspired “Kathakar Social Responsibility” (KSR), like Corporate Social Responsibility, to utilize the immense power that Kathakars have in reaching their communities through their commentaries on religious scriptures to create positive change and green action amongst the masses.

He urges that the time has come that our festivals, our kathas and our holidays must be green and sustainable. He says, “through our respected Kathakars and their Kathakar Social Responsibility, we can be inspired and charged to make every moment and minute of our lives more green and more sustainable.”





Sadhvi Bhagawati Saraswati, PhD grew up in Los Angeles, California and graduated from Stanford University. She was in the midst of her PhD when she left America in 1996 to come and live permanently at Parmarth Niketan Ashram, Rishikesh, India. She was officially ordained into the order of Sanyas (monastic vows) by her guru His Holiness Pujya Swami Chidanand Saraswati in the year 2000.

Sadhviji is the President of the Divine Shakti Foundation, a charitable organization bringing education, vocational training, upliftment and empowerment programs to women and children in India. She is the Secretary-General of the Global Interfaith WASH Alliance, the world's first alliance of international faith leaders working for water, sanitation and hygiene. She is also the Director of the annual International Yoga Festival, a world-famous event which draws people from more than 100 countries to the banks of the Ganges. Sadhviji is also Managing Editor of the recently completed historic 11-volume *Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, compiled by India Heritage Research Foundation.

Sadhviji is a renowned speaker who gives keynote addresses at large forums, on a wide variety of topics ranging from conscious business to science and spirituality to sustainable development to yoga. She has been a featured speaker at the United Nations, Parliament of World Religions and many international conferences and summits. Her talks blend the knowledge and logic of the West with the insights, spirituality and wisdom of the East, and she is renowned as a spiritual bridge between the two cultures.

At Parmarth Niketan, Rishikesh, where she lives, she teaches meditation, gives spiritual discourses, provides counseling and oversees myriad charitable and humanitarian projects and activities.