Chinmayananda: 1916-1993
Category : October 1993
Published by Anonymous on Oct. 01, 1993

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"Two months ago I met him in India," Sant Keshavadas told Hinduism Today. "I asked, 'How are you, Swami?'" "Physically, I am not well," came the reply from 76-year-old Swami Chinmayananda, "But I have attained shanti [peace]. Only one vessel within my heart is working. Until it stops, I will preach Bhagavat Gita." That heart which so many had relied upon for spiritual upliftment beat its last in early August in San Diego, California, nearly 40 years to the day from the founding of Chinmaya Mission.

A week earlier Swami Chinmayananda had arrived in the southern California city from Washington, D.C. as part of his nationwide program of adult and youth camps. On July 26th, he suffered chest pains and had difficulty breathing. Doctors diagnosed a heart attack--an ominous sign in light of Swami's 1980 quadruple heart-bypass surgery. Dr. Appa Rao Mukkamala, President of Chinmaya Mission West, and a long-time devotee, flew to San Diego the same day. He reports, "After a sudden drop in blood pressure on Tuesday night, Swami was put on a breathing machine in deep sedation. Quintuple bypass surgery on July 29th evening was successful, but the heart never recovered. The blood ejection factor was 10% [of normal]. A person can't live on that." Devotee and physician Dr. Shobha Chidambaram, who was also in San Diego, said, "With the bypass, he had a 10% chance of living; without it, none at all." While still on the respirator, Swami's heart stopped on Tuesday, August 3rd, at 5:45pm.

The body was taken to a funeral home where abhishekam was done by Pundit Ravichandran. Swami was embalmed in lotus position, and pada puja performed. Swami Dheerananda, of Chinmaya Mission in Washington, D.C., said, "The experience of everyone of us who saw him in San Diego was that he has not passed away. It was as though he was sitting for his pada puja. Everyone had the same experience. His body, mind and intellect has merged with the heart of every devotee."

Swami's body, accompanied by a dozen devotees, arrived by plane on August 7th in New Delhi. It was immediately transported with full police and military honor escort to the Chinmaya Estates on Lodhi Road. Thousands of people including diplomats and politicians of all parties paid their respects. Hundreds of people then joined the caravan to take Swami's body to Sandeepany Himalayas, his head ashram, located 300 miles north of Delhi in Himachal Pradesh. Following traditional Hindu custom, Swami was entombed in a specially prepared sepulcher at the ashram. Great yogis are interred not in a casket but seated in the lotus posture. Salt, camphor and sandlewood powder fill the cavity. The samadhi shrine is behind his simple living quarters and faces the majestic Himalayas.

Swami Tejomayananda, 43, has been selected--following the earlier recommendtaion of Swami Chinmayananda--by the three senior acharya swamis of Chinmaya Mission as the spiritual head and chairman of Central Chinmaya Mission Trust. He is now responsible for the mission's worldwide activities. The selection was approved by CCMT's seven member grihasta board

Born in 1916 in Kerala, India, Swami Chinmayananda was a world-renowned authority on the scriptures of India, especially the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads. The year 1993 marked 42 years of his work as a teacher of Vedanta, the essence of the Vedas. Since 1951 his talk series, called jnana yajnas ["homage to knowledge"] have been heard in India and, since the 60s, worldwide. He has lectured across the breadth of the globe, making regular stops in the USA, Canada, Europe, the Middle East, the Far East, Australia and Africa. Honors were abundantly coming his way in '93--Hinduism Today's "Hindu of the Year 1993;" a Lifetime Service award at the Global Vision 2000 conference.

Born Balakrishna Menon, Swami was the eldest son of a prominent judge. He completed schooling through postgraduate degrees in literature and law. He chose journalism rather than law and became involved in India's independence movement. His writings shortly landed him in jail, where he became ill. During a hospital stay, he chanced upon articles by Swami Sivananda, and after his release, sought him out. "I went not to gain knowledge, but to find out how the swamis were keeping up the bluff among the masses," said Swami. The young skeptic became an enthusiastic renunciate, accepting sannyas initiation from Swami Sivananda. Shortly thereafter he sought out one of the greatest Vedantic masters of his time, Swami Tapovanam of Uttarkashi, whom he took as his guru. A few years later he began lecturing on Bhagavad Gita and Upanishads, which he continued up to the end of his life.

The Vishwa Hindu Parishad was founded at Swami Chinmayananda's ashram in 1962, with Swami as the founder-chairman. In that year the pope was visiting India; Catholics had vowed to convert 108 Hindus to Christianity in each city the pope visited. Incensed at this predatory practice, Swami announced he would bring 1,008 back into the Hindu fold in each of the same cities. Reconversion of those who converted through enticement or coercion remains a central VHP goal.

From 1964, Swami had no formal post with the VHP, but served as spiritual guide. According to Ashok Singhal, general-secretary of the VHP, Swami was responsible for the concept of the Hindu vote bank. Swami observed in 1988, "Strength in a democracy flows out of the power to vote, not just through physical strength."

Swami was not exempt from controversy. In fact, at times he invited it. He opened one meeting by saying emphatically, "I think that is not sufficient that I congratulate you all, but show you a mirror of what you have not been doing which is absolutely necessary. I know many of you may curse me in the end, but if a swami cannot take curses, who else can take them?" He raised hackles in the USA in 1979 with his pointed criticism of the failure of many Indian immigrants in the USA to infuse Hindu culture in their children and with the formation of temple societies among only family people without a guiding guru. He demanded--and personally set through extensive adult and youth camps--a higher standard of Hindu culture in the West. He leaves dozens of ashrams and centers around the world.

Sidebar: What He Taught

Pure mind is Brahman; and pure mind is absolutely pure. Oscillations of the mind are its impurities. When mind is absolutely pure, it is no more mind. It merges to be the Self. The delusion is ended. Enlightenment has come. This realization is not the vision of something different, but it is seeing everything differently.

Hinduism asks you to adjust your mind to the real situation in life and make life a sport rather than a worry. The past is gone, dead gone. The future is not yet born, therefore refuse to worry. When these two are gone, you are in that stage which the rishis call: Blissful, Satchidanand. You will then immediately understand all Hinduism, philosophy and practices.

The Gita offers a solution to all problems of humanity. Let us try to experiment upon these unfailing values in our own daily life, and to find out for ourselves their truth, so that we, as individuals, may bring about, if possible, a greater stability of mind, a greater harmony in our own personal and social life.

We must detect smartly the rise of false thoughts, careless words, and inglorious actions. Our alertness gives us the poise to know when we go wrong and the calm courage to correct ourselves.

Before any of the great cultures existed, Hinduism was there. We attended to the birth of the Egyptians, the Romans, the Greeks; we watched them rise to maturity and applauded their achievements; and when they died, we performed their funeral rites.

Through prayer and meditation, let us come to feel our oneness with the infinite Lord. Let us recognize and feel the inexhaustible power in the Self. Thereafter, let us apply it entirely, with patience and enthusiasm, to our work.

How have we, the Hindus, been able to survive when all the other great cultures have risen and fallen? It was the wisdom of our rishis, their adaptability. Hinduism is like the bark of a tree; as the tree grows, the bark expands along with it. Only the non-essentials changed. The essentials, the Sanatana Dharma--the Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram ("truthful, benevolent, beautiful")--always remained intact. Other cultures were like wires wound around the trunk; as the tree grew, the wire got absorbed into it and disappeared.

Don't believe what I say! This is not Christianity or Mohammedism that I am talking! This is Hinduism! Do not believe what I say! Find it yourself! Realize it! Discover it through your own mental processes! Then live it! Put it to work in your lives!

From the teachings of

Swami Chinmayananda

Sidebar:

Comments on Swami Chinmayananda from those attending the Global Vision 2000 meeting in Washington, D.C., August 6th to 8th.

He has done a tremendous work of spreading our Sanatana Dharma, through the Gita and Upanishads. The message has gone into every nook and corner of the world. He could go to the level of the people. He could teach those who had no knowledge of Sanskrit or the scriptures. He made it easy for even the layman to understand.

Swami Jyotirmayananda

Madras, India

In him we have lost one of the greatest guides of the VHP. Through the guidance given by him a great deal of change has occurred in our country, not only political but also social. It prevails throughout Bharat. Now people have to think before they do anything against Hindus. Before there were no protests. Now there are protests.

Ashok Singhal

Secretary-General, VHP India

One of my friends had a feeling. He remarked, "Doesn't Swami look like a lamp which during its last minutes becomes larger and brighter?" Gurudev worked so hard to get the last message to his people.

Raja Chidambaram

USA

He was the inspiration behind the VHP. We should not forget what he said, but try to do what he expected from us. We should not mourn. It is not death. He just left the body.

Uma Bharti

Member of Parliament, India

Swamiji has been one of the most important figures in the Hindu renaissance not only for his Vedantic teachings but also his concern for the state of modern India and for the stand he has been willing to take on social issues.

David Frawley

American Institute of Vedic Studies

Whether one or none, he would be there without waiting for anybody. He would close his eyes and begin his Bhagavat Gita lectures. People would have to be there early because of the the discipline he showed.

Sant Keshavadas

Sanatana Vishwa Dharma

Oh God! This is a great soul! I can feel the vibrations in this room. I wish I could stay just staring at this great soul.

Trauma surgeon at Sharp Memorial Hospital, who happened to see Swami for a few minutes in the operating room.

He was the Vivekananda of this century who has spread the

Yogic message from East to West. Swami Brahmavidyananda