Lessons from a Simple Sage
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Lessons from a Simple Sage

How a devotee received two potent teachings from Yogaswami of Sri Lanka: "We know nothing" and "Know thy Self"

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Sometime around 1955 two devout Hindus visited my guru's guru, an illumined master, Satguru Yogaswami of Sri Lanka. In that encounter they received a potent dose of the sage's teachings about the spiritual path. One of them recorded their experience as follows. "It was a cool and peaceful morning, except for the rattling noises owing to the gentle breeze that swayed the tall and graceful palmyra trees. We walked silently through the narrow and dusty roads. The city was still asleep. Yogaswami lived in a tiny hut that had been specially constructed for him in the garden of a home outside the city of Jaffna. The hut had a thatched roof and was on the whole characterized by the simplicity of a peasant dwelling. Yogaswami appeared exactly as I had imagined him to be. At 83 he looked very old and frail. He was of medium height, and his long grey hair fell over his shoulders. When we first saw him, he was sweeping the garden with a long broom. He slowly walked towards us and opened the gates.

"'I am doing a coolie's job,' he said. 'Why have you come to see a coolie?' He chuckled with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes. I noticed that he spoke good English with an impeccable accent. As there is usually an esoteric meaning to all his statements, I interpreted his words to mean this: 'I am a spiritual cleanser of human beings. Why do you want to be cleansed?'

"He gently beckoned us into his hut. Yogaswami sat cross-legged on a slightly elevated neem-wood platform and we sat on the floor facing him. We had not yet spoken a single word. That morning we hardly spoke; he did all the talking.

"Yogaswami closed his eyes and remained motionless for nearly half an hour. He seemed to live in another dimension of his being during that time. One wondered whether the serenity of his facial expression was attributable to the joy of his inner meditation. Was he sleeping or resting? Was he trying to probe into our minds? My friend indicated with a nervous smile that we were really lucky to have been received by him. Yogaswami suddenly opened his eyes. Those luminous eyes brightened the darkness of the entire hut. His eyes were as mellow as they were luminous - the mellowness of compassion.

"I was beginning to feel hungry and tired, and thereupon Yogaswami asked, 'What will you have for breakfast?' At that moment I would have accepted anything that was offered but I thought of idly (steamed rice cakes) and bananas, which were popular food items in Jaffna. In a flash there appeared a stranger in the hut who respectfully bowed and offered us these items of food from a tray. A little later my friend wished for coffee, and before he could express his request in words the same man reappeared on the scene and served us coffee.

"After breakfast, Yogaswami asked us not to throw away the banana skins, which were for the cow. He called loudly to her and she clumsily walked right into the hut. He fed her the banana skins. She licked his hand gratefully and tried to sit on the floor. Holding out to her the last banana skin, Yogaswami ordered, 'Now leave us alone. Don't disturb us, Valli. I'm having some visitors.' The cow nodded her head in obeisance and faithfully carried out his instructions.

"Yogaswami closed his eyes again, seeming once more to be lost in a world of his own. I was indeed curious to know what exactly he did on these occasions. I wondered whether he was meditating. There came an apropos moment to broach the subject, but before I could ask any questions he suddenly started speaking.

"'Look at those trees. The trees are meditating. Meditation is silence. If you realize that you really know nothing, then you would be truly meditating. Such truthfulness is the right soil for silence. Silence is meditation.'

"He bent forward eagerly. 'You must be simple. You must be utterly naked in your consciousness. When you have reduced yourself to nothing - when your self has disappeared, when you have become nothing - then you are yourself God. The man who is nothing knows God, for God is nothing. Nothing is everything. Because I am nothing, you see, because I am a beggar, I own everything. So nothing means everything. Understand?' "

"'Tell us about this state of nothingness,' requested my friend with eager anticipation. 'It means that you genuinely desire nothing. It means that you can honestly say that you know nothing. It also means that you are not interested in doing anything about this state of nothingness.'

"What, I speculated, did he mean by 'know nothing?' The state of 'pure being' in contrast to 'becoming?' He responded to my thought, 'You think you know but, in fact, you are ignorant. When you see that you know nothing about yourself, then you are yourself God.'"

This narrative reveals a vital theme in Yogaswami's teachings: esoteric insights about nothingness and not knowing. In life, the normal emphasis is on acquiring knowledge, or replacing a lack of knowledge on a subject with knowledge. For example, we purchase a new computer. Knowing little about it, we read the manuals, talk to experts and end up acquiring enough information to use the computer. We have replaced a lack of knowledge with knowledge.

Yogaswami's approach, because it deals with spiritual matters, is the opposite. We

start with intellectual knowledge about God and strive to rid ourselves of that knowledge. When we succeed, we end up experiencing God. Why is this? Because the intellect cannot experience God. The experience of God in His personal form and His all-pervasive consciousness lies in the superconscious or intuitive mind. And, even more cryptic, the experience of God as Absolute Reality is beyond even the superconscious mind.

Yogaswami once expressed it to a seeker in this stern phrase: "It's not in books, you fool." Acquiring clear intellectual concepts of the nature of God is good, but these concepts must be eventually transcended to actually experience God.

One of the great sayings of Yogaswami's guru, Chellappaswami, emphasizes the same idea. He said, "Naam ariyom," which translates as, "We do not know." My own guru expressed the same idea in this aphorism: "The intellect strengthened with opinionated knowledge is the only barrier to the superconscious." He went on to explain that "a mystic generally does not talk very much, for his intuition works through reason, but does not use the processes of reason. Any intuitive breakthrough will be quite reasonable, but it does not use the processes of reason. Reason takes time. Superconsciousness acts in the now. All superconscious knowing comes in a flash, out of the nowhere. Intuition is more direct than reason, and far more accurate."

Thus, three gurus of our Kailasa Parampara have each expressed the truth that experience of God is possible only when we transcend the limited faculties of our intellect and the concepts it has about God and dive deeply into our superconscious, intuitive mind and beyond. Said another way, the experience of emptying ourselves of our intellectual concepts about God needs to precede filling ourselves with the experience of God's holy presence within us.

To guide us on the path to this experience, Yogaswami stressed the importance of meditation and formulated a key teaching, or mahavakya, which is: Tannai ari, or "Know thyself." This is a second dominant theme of his teachings. He proclaimed, "You must know the Self by the self. Concentration of mind is required for this... You lack nothing. The only thing you lack is that you do not know who you are... You must know yourself by yourself. There is nothing else to be known."

Markanduswami, a close devotee of Yogaswami, would later tell me, "Yogaswami didn't give us a hundred odd works to do. Only one. Realize the Self yourself, or know thy Self, or find out who you are." What, exactly, does it mean to know thy Self? Yogaswami explains beautifully in one of his published letters: "You are not the body; you are not the mind, nor the intellect, nor the will. You are the atma. The atma is eternal. This is the conclusion at which great souls have arrived from their experience. Let this truth become well impressed on your mind."

Today we are overwhelmed by information. Books, television and the Internet deluge us with vast seas of information never before available. Though information abounds, how much of it is teaching us about spirituality, that we are a divine soul? Unfortunately, only a miniscule amount. Most information in our modern world teaches us to identify with our external nature. Movies and TV teach us that we are our body and emotions, and in school we are taught that we are our intellect. For today's world, we need to amplify Yogaswami's saying to read "It's not in books, television, movies, the Internet or computer games, you fool." Yogaswami knew most people are trepidatious about meditating deeply, diving into their deepest Self, and gave assurance that inner and outer life are compatible by saying, "Leave your relations downstairs, your will, your intellect, your senses. Leave the fellows and go upstairs by yourself and find out who you are. Then you can go downstairs and be with the fellows."

We all, of course, recognize the high spiritual attainments of Hinduism's great yogis and satgurus. However, it is equally important to understand that their attainments are also our potential, the spiritual destiny of each soul, to be reached at some point in this or a future life. The mission of their lives is truly fulfilled if their example inspires you to devote more time and dedication to your own spiritual practices.