Hindu of the Year
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HINDU RENAISSANCE AWARD

Hindu of the Year

Sri Swami Tejomayananda, worthy successor to Swami Chinmayananda

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Seven hundred devotees jumped to their feet and applauded enthusiastically as Swami Tejomayananda was honored as "Hindu of the Year " by Hinduism Today magazine. I presented the award to Sri Swamiji as part of the opening of the new Chinamaya Mission Mithila Center in Tustin, California, on June 11, 2005. He had just flown in from France for the inauguration of the center. Swamiji was pleased to receive the award,while the audience responded with waves of joy and admiration and a prolonged standing ovation.

Starting in 1990, Hinduism Today has honored one eminent Hindu each year who has most impacted the faith and spread its values, compassion and profundity across the globe. Past renaissance winners are: Swami Paramananda Bharati ('90), Swami Chidananda Saraswati, "Muniji " of Parmath Niketan ('91), Swami Chinmayananda ('92), Mata Amritanandamayi Ma ('93), Swami Satchidananda ('94), Pramukhswami Maharaj ('95), Sri Satya Sai Baba ('96), Sri Chinmoy ('97), Swami Bua ('98), Swami Chidananda Saraswati of Divine Life Society ('99), Ma Yoga Shakti ('00), priest Sri T. S. Sambamurthy Sivachariar ('01) and Dada Vaswani ('02), Sri Tiruchi Mahaswamigal ('03) and priest Pichai Sivacharya ('04).

The plaque's inscription reads, "Presented by Hinduism Today to Hindu of the Year, 2005, Sri Sri Swami Tejomayananda, spiritual leader of Chinmaya Mission Worldwide, for fulfilling the vision of his guru, Swami Chinmayananda, guiding the Chinmaya Mission's exemplary teaching programs, inspiring the dynamic expansion of the monastic order (including new swamis from the diaspora) and teaching

hundreds of thousands to be better Hindus."

The Mithila Center is itself a product of the Mission's success. It is the second center to open in Orange County. The first one, Kasi, abode of a white marble murthi of God Siva, opened just nine years ago in nearby Anaheim, is less than 20 miles away. The new Mithila has a temple with Lord Rama, Sita, Lakshman and Hanuman. The facility will conduct Vedanta and meditation classes as well as educational activities that keep the Chinmaya Mission centers everywhere buzzing with enthusiastic youngsters and adults throughout the year. About 640 youngsters, in the age group of 5 to 18, regularly attend the Sunday Balvihars in the 10 Chinmaya centers in Southern California. While the kids attend the classes, their parents listen to talks on scriptures given by the swamis. Visit their website at www.chinmayamission.orgfor an overview.

"I am not in Swami Chinmayananda's shoes, I am at his feet, " Tejomayananda had been reported to have said many times. Swami Chinmayananda (1916-1993) founded the Mission in 1951. He stated its purpose as, "The inner transformation of individuals through knowledge of Vedanta, spiritual practices and service to society resulting in a happy world around them."

Born Sudhakar Kaitwade in Khandesh in a Maharashtrian family, Swami Tejomayananda was a physics student when he met Swami Chinmayananda at the age of 20. Influenced by his work, the young man went to Mumbai to study Vedanta in 1981. He was initiated into sannyasa in 1983 and became spiritual head of the Mission ten years later upon the Mahasamadhi of Swami Chinmayananda.

A tireless worker, he constantly travels the globe conducting lectures and guiding the administration of the centers. He is assisted by the Mission's monastic community of 240 people, including 49 ordained swamis and 26 ordained swaminis.

"Swami Tejomayananda is a man of many talents. He sings well, writes poetry in Sanskrit, composes music and plays harmonium. He is even a great cook, " said Swami Ishwarananda, head of Mithila Center. In the past 15 years he has written Sanskrit works like Dhyanaswaroopam, Manahshodhanam, Jnanasaram and Bhakti Sudha. Inspired by the Ramacharitamanas of Sant Tulsidas, he has written Manas Bhaktisutras. He has written books based on his talks, such as Peace in the Restless

World, Right Thinking, Parenting, The Game of Life, The Hindu Culture, The Vision of Geeta and Meditation. One of his key contributions is Hindu Culture: an Introduction which is a text in some American high schools.

Swami Tejomayananda's administrative style is such that swamis and devotees alike feel at home with him. "He does not preach, but teaches by example. He gives a lot of freedom to the swamis in their work and is very forgiving, " Swami Ishwarananda said.

Asked his guidelines in running the Mission, Swami Tejomayananda said, "Without losing sight of the vision given by our Revered Gurudev, Swami Chinmayanandaji Maharaj, we remain steadfast in doing our work in a team spirit invoking God's grace and Sri Gurudev's blessings. Our teaching programs in the West have become successful and popular because that is the need of the hour fulfilled by our mission's sevaks and sevikas (volunteer teachers and workers) in an interesting and appealing manner with utmost devotion. All credit goes to them. Moreover, we have made it a family program where children and parents learn simultaneously, attending their respective classes."

Swami Tejomayananda, now age 55, is currently spearheading the Chinmaya Vibhooti Spiritual Complex on 55 acres of land in Kolwan, among the Sahyadri mountains near Pune, a project that will be built in three phases at the cost of about us$1.6 million. The project itself will be a grateful tribute to Swami Chinmayananda by all his disciples and devotees.

What is the secret of the expansion of Chinmaya Mission Centers? They now have 243 centers in more than 70 countries of the world, with 30 in the US. "It is simple, " Swami Ishwarananda explained, "Our area of work is very specific. We want to get the whole family involved. When we do it sincerely, the whole society gets involved in our Jnana Yajnas (spiritual lectures), Bal Vihars (children's classes) and Yuva Kendras (youth programs)." Ishwarananda added, "Our main focus is on Vedantic knowledge. Although we teach the epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata, and some Puranas, our concentration is on Vedanta as elaborated in the Upanishads."

The whole family treats the center as their spiritual home, and gathers there not

only for the Sunday classes and evening seminars, but for religious observances and festivals, including Sivaratri, Ram Navami, Krishna Janmashtami, Navaratri and Diwali.

The efforts are supported by the superb training and unwavering dedication of their brahmacharis (celibate lay monks and nuns in training) and ordained swamis. For example, as Swami Ishwarananda, 40, takes the helm at new Mithila, Brahmachari Girish Chaitanya, in his late 30s, has become the spiritual head of Kasi. During his few months here, he has already earned respect and admiration for his brilliance, knowledge and winning ways with the youth. The India-born, California-raised, Girishji worked as a successful electrical engineer for 10 years, and then, following his inner voice and spiritual inclinations inculcated since childhood by his pious mother, joined the Vedanta gurukul or school conducted at Sandeepani Sadhanalaya in Mumbai in 2002, and graduated from it in 2004, before his appointment at Kasi as the brahmachari acharya (teacher).

Swami Ishwarananda conducted the 2002-2004 class. He said, "The two-and-a-half-year long Vedanta courses are offered at our Mumbai and Siddhabari (in Himachal Pradesh) centers. We advertise the course in major publications, then select 60 to 80 students, who must be under 30 years of age and bachelors, from the hundreds of applicants.

During their study, they are provided free accommodation, food, white clothing, instruction and all educational material. Neither the male nor female students are allowed to leave the premises for the duration of the entire course. They go through a rigorous discipline of starting their day at 5.30 a.m. with Vedic chanting and meditation. Their day comprises Vedanta classes, Sanskrit language classes and activities like yoga, gardening and prayers. The students also get practical experience conducting classes for youth. About 65 started the intensive course, out of which 43 graduated and became acharya teachers. Upon becoming an acharya, a brahmachari is appointed to a center to assist a swami. A brahmachari becomes a swami in about seven to ten years, Ishwarananda explained.

"Vision Plus Action Equals True Transformation. Our beloved Swami Chinmayananda used to say that ideas will become reality when you supply hands and legs, " Swami Tejomayananda had said in his June 11, 2005 address at Mithila. Truly, his vision illuminates the path for families and individuals alike who seek enlightenment the Vedic way to enrich their lives.