

## [A Sainly Minstrel And His Message](#)

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### FEATURE

## A Sainly Minstrel And His Message

Inspired from childhood to sing praises of God, Pujya Shri Ramesh Bhai Oza has become one of India's finest kathakars, head of an exemplary priest training institute and spiritual mentor to thousands

Rajiv Malik, New Delhi

On a warm summer evening in 1967, ten-year-old Ramesh Oza is sitting in a field with a few of his friends near his home in Devka, a village situated in the elitist coastal district of Saurashtra in Gujarat, India. Other children nearby are playing popular Indian games like kabaddi, khokho, cricket and soccer. Ramesh and his companions are not interested. They are busily gathering dry leaves, small wooden sticks and twigs, as Ramesh leads them in singing bhajans. Then they sit in a circle and ceremoniously offer the leaves and twigs, one by one, into a large bowl which represents a sacred fire. Acting as the head priest, Ramesh chants Sanskrit mantras. After each mantra, the boys repeat in unison, "svaha." They continue with great fervor and devotion for forty minutes. Finally, Ramesh opens a small packet of homemade candies and distributes one to each member of his team. Giddy with joy, they conclude their imaginary Vedic fire worship ceremony by singing one final devotional song.

Standing nearby, a quiet witness to this youthful yagna looks on with poised contentment. Mrs. Laxmi Ben Oza, is so very proud of Ramesh, her second son. She has three other boys and two girls, but Ramesh stands out. He is an especially fine young man--never involved in the usual naughtiness or pranks of childhood. Yet, perhaps even she cannot anticipate the world-famous kathavachak that he will grow up to be.

A kathavachak--also referred to as a kathakar--is a person who performs katha. A katha is a dramatic presentation of religious subject matter that combines lecturing, storytelling and singing. Kathakar literally means "one who gives aakar (shape) to the katha." Vachak means "to deliver." So, a kathavachak is someone who delivers katha. If a kathakar or kathavachak is an accomplished singer and a compelling speaker, endowed with natural charisma and well-versed in the subject matter he is presenting, he can become immensely popular. In modern times, kathavachaks have begun to employ teams of musicians to enhance their performances.

Today, Bhaishri is famous not only as a kathakar, he is also respected as the founder of Sandipani Vidyaniketan, one of India's finest priest-training institutes. Certainly, this gifted man has distinguished himself as an important religious leader. We think so. This year, Hinduism Today is proud to honor Bhaishri with the Hindu Renaissance Award as Hindu of the Year, 2006.

Starting in 1990, Hinduism Today has honored one eminent Hindu each year who has most impacted Hinduism 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), Sri T. S. Sambamurthy Sivachariar ('01), Dada Vaswani ('02), Sri Tiruchi Mahaswamigal ('03), Dr. K. Pichai Sivacharya ('04) and Sri Swami Tejomayananda ('05).

In the beginning

It was Ramesh's uncle, Jeevaraj Bhai Oza--a highly respected kathavachak himself--who first noticed a spark of spiritual genius in Bhaishri. Jeevaraj considered it most auspicious that the boy was born and raised according to Vedic traditions and that he had taken a unusually strong interest in his religious studies, even from earliest childhood. It was Jeevaraj who got Ramesh enrolled in his first Sanskrit study program.

Ramesh's father was also a deeply religious man who inculcated in his son the habit

of reciting the Bhagavad Gita daily. This one sadhana (religious practice) had a profound impact on Bhaishri and made the Gita central to his religious life.

Many elders of Devka village fondly remember his first public katha, which he performed with friends at the age of thirteen. He and his companions worked long and hard to organize the event. To meet expenses, they collected one rupee from each home in the community and used the money to erect a simple tent and a temporary stage. They established a management committee, printed personalized invitations by hand and distributed them to the head of each family in the village. Bhaishri still has one of those original invitations.

By all accounts, that debute katha was a grand success. During those famous seven days, he presented the eighteen chapters of the Bhagavad Gita in two sessions per day. On the first day, primarily children attended. With each succeeding day, more adults showed up. Such was the unexpected popularity of Bhaishri's first katha. Everyone was astounded by the boy's oratorical skills and by his natural charm and magnetism.

### His calling flowers

Bhaishri received his initial education at Tatvajyoti, a Sanskrit school located in the small town of Rajola. Eventually, he moved to Mumbai, where he completed his primary education and attended college. He was an excellent and conscientious student--always at the top of his class.

Although Bhaishri pursued his college education with great sincerity, his heart and soul belonged to katha. He began college studying to be a doctor. Later, he shifted to the subject of commerce with the aim of becoming a chartered accountant. By the time he reached his final year of college, however, it was abundantly clear to him that his life was meant for something else. With each passing day of that soul-searching period, the magical samskaras of his childhood blossomed within him, and an overpowering dedication to katha slowly consumed his life.

During those college years, Bhaishri was never far away from kathavachana (the

study and practice of katha). He would often attend his uncle's daily performances at locations around Mumbai, often assisting the elder. Through this real-life exposure, Bhaishri gained considerable performing experience and confidence.

At age of eighteen, he conducted his first professional katha in Central Mumbai at age 18. It was like a homecoming. After that, he performed five or six times a year until his college graduation, at which point he was offered enough performance opportunities to justify making kathavachana his full-time vocation. From then on, there was no looking back. Bhaishri was an instant hit with a wide variety of audiences all over India. His style was simple yet elegant. His rich and melodious voice was beautiful. His wisdom was insightful and pragmatic. All the signs of greatness were there.

Bhaishri continued to mature with dignity and accomplishment. In time, his charismatic stage presence and unique style of oration distinguished him from other kathakars. Yet what appealed to the masses, even more than his natural flare, was the earthy wisdom of his message. He struck at the core causes of human distress with "common sense " advice that not only proved itself out in daily life but also made listeners feel it was obvious knowledge they should have thought of themselves.

For his contribution to the field of kathavachan, Bhaishri has been conferred various titles, including "Bhagwat Acharya, " "Bhagwat Ratna " and "Bhagwat Bhushan." Despite his achievements and fame, Bhaishri is unassuming. He revels in simplicity and is seemingly immune to the trappings of self glorification. It comes as no surprise that he is affectionately referred to--and known to millions of devotees and admirers--simply as Bhaiji or Bhaishri. Bhaishri literally means "respectable brother."

## Scripture

Like many kathakars, Bhaishri performs primarily from three literary works: Srimad Bhagavatam, Ramayana and the Bhagavad Gita. The Bhagavad Gita (one part of the epic Mahabharata) is world famous for its symbolic lessons about dharma, given by Lord Krishna to Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. The Ramanaya is the story of the irreproachably virtuous Lord Rama. Srimad Bhagavatam, written by

Sage Ved Vyasa, is a kathakar's favorite. It contains the essence of a number of important Hindu scriptures, as well as the life stories of the 10 incarnations of Lord Vishnu, and the famous pastimes of Lord Krishna.

In the beginning, Bhaishri focused on delivering kathas on the Srimad Bhagavatam, because of its abundant dramatic possibilities. Through the years, however, he gave more and more performances and discourses on the Ramayana. He felt this particular epic was especially relevant for modern times when there is such a great need to emphasize the importance of the responsibility and good conduct so beautifully highlighted in the Ramayana's glorification of Lord Rama's righteous life.

Bhaishri also performed katha on the Bhagavad Gita, but with more explanation than is generally given. Because the Gita is a dialogue occurring on a battlefield, in which Krishna urges Arujna to fight and kill the enemy, Bhaishri felt that any katha of it should include abundant philosophical elucidation so that its abstract symbology is understood and its violence is not interpreted too literally.

His Srimad Bhagavatam katha was often requested as a private performance in the home of a family who had lost a loved one. The main reasons were to invoke peace for the departed soul, relieve the distress of family and friends and prepare the younger family members to meet the challenge of living without the guiding assistance of the deceased loved one. Bhaishri's kathas on such occasions were filled with narration on death as perceived by the rishis. He felt this was essential, since such talk is too often avoided in home discussion.

## Spiritual Kathas

Bhaishri observed that, while the level of attendance for his presentations was always good, the attention of the family was more focused on socializing and the formalities of the event, rather than the substance and power of the katha itself.

As time when on, he learned that public kathas arranged by individuals and organizations dedicated to worthy causes, such as charities or hospital construction, tended to be more spiritual in nature, and honorable because they earned good

money for good work. Bhaishri found these kathas more satisfying and decided to stop performing privately.

Eventually, even these fund-raising events began to disturb him. He could just not help feeling that, in performing kathas even for good causes, he was being too commercial. The voice of his conscience hounded him to make spirituality, not money, the central focus of his performances. Most importantly, he was concerned that the innate sanctity of the katha be preserved.

Bhaishri had embarked upon this life mission propelled by a conviction that katha was a service capable of making a person godly. At the very least, it should inspire people to achieve coherence and meaning in lives that were otherwise mundane. Ultimately, he decided to perform kathas only as spiritual functions.

Bhaishri' firmly believes that, simply by listening to kathas, one can actually resolve karma at a deep intuitive level before it surfaced into action. This is possible, he feels, because the inspired discourse of the katha, interspersed with its music and empowered by its devotion, has the unique capacity to evoke a deeper intuitive understanding than might be attained under ordinary circumstances.

Thousands of people whose lives were transformed by Bhaishri's kathas have shared their testimonies. Some even confessed they were on the verge of suicide due to dilemmas that seemed insurmountable and unbearable. The kathas turned their lives around.

Yet, Bhaishri is the first to admit that the transformatory power of katha is limited. For instance, it would be too much to expect that such performances might suddenly make a bad man good. "Certainly, the katha has special power, " says Bhaishri, "but that power comes more in the form of an inspiration or a motivation to adopt virtuous ways and curb the instinctive nature. Katha also has a unique capacity to instill a sense of discrimination within the listener--a fresh ability to differentiate between good and bad."

Sandipani Vidyaniketan

Bhaishri is fully dedicated to the preservation of Hindu culture. During the late 1980's, he was casually invited to visit a Sanskrit school in a small village near Porbandar, a town on the coast of Gujarat famous as the birthplace of Mahatma Gandhi. Immediately, he took an interest in becoming personally involved in that school's development. Investing much of his own time, energy and money, he was instrumental not only in expanding the institution but also in making it exemplary and popular. The school's growth escalated at such a rate that its board of trustees was soon compelled to look for another location with more room. Recognizing the unique service the institution was providing, the Gujarat state government allotted 85 acres of land right in Porbandar.

At this point, Bhaishri took full responsibility for running the school and established a new governing body named the Shree Bhartiya Sanskruti Samvardhak Trust. Under his dynamic leadership, the institute became an accredited residential college.

Its campus complex was constructed with housing for 500 resident students and provisions for extensive education in Sanskrit and priestcraft, as well as a full secular curriculum. It was decided that the college would be called Sandipani Vidyaniketan and its teaching system would be in accordance with the ancient Vedic way.

## Vrindavan

During my recent visit to the lush, forest setting of Sandipani Vidyaniketan, I felt as if I had been transported back to a time when great Indian saints taught their pupils deep in the grandeur of untamed nature. Yet the buildings around me were as modern as anywhere in India. The classrooms of the large, centrally located college structure are outfitted with state-of-the-art computers, a vast library, a well-equipped science laboratory and a hi-tech music recording studio.

In this utopian setting, students reside in a place called Vrindavan, an octagonal building, replete with the most modern of facilities. Vrindavan is a masterpiece of architecture. One of its eight wings is reserved for the school's administrative facilities, as well as residence quarters for the acharya in charge of student management.

The second wing includes the dining hall, where meals are served to four hundred students at a time. The facility also provides tea and refreshments for visiting pilgrims.

The other six wings comprise living accommodations for the students. There is also a small, well-equipped, resident hospital.

It was a wonderful experience for me to experience the students' sandhya, morning and evening prayers, performed upon a beautifully designed, octagonal-shaped, golden-domed podium.

## The Rishikul

Bhaishri feels that, in modern times, Hindu society is in need of better educated temple priests, more adequately qualified to conduct temple ritual in a traditional manner. He observes that most practicing priests do not have even minimal education in the Sanskrit language. He hopes that Sandipani Vidyaniketan will help fill this void by producing priests with some or all of the following qualities: a high level of proficiency in Sanskrit and grammar, a consummate knowledge of the Vedas, a selfless attitude of service and a personal commitment to the practice of prayer, sadhana and tapas in a disciplined lifestyle.

Bhaishri's approach to the education of young priests is mystical. "Without translating knowledge into action, it becomes a burden, " he laments. "We have to make the education of our young priests action-oriented. When knowledge is translated into action, it becomes service."

The students, or Rishikumars, of Sandipani follow a well-conceived daily routine, beginning at 6am and ending at 10pm. The medium of instruction is Hindi, and the subjects taught are Sanskrit, basic temple liturgy and a deep knowledge of the Vedas and their Upanishads. In addition to a well-rounded hatha yoga and physical education program, the institute offers basic secular schooling, as well as supplementary training in classical music and art.



Graduates of the Rishikul eight-year course of study are addressed as "shastris, " while those who have completed ten years are referred to as "acharyas." The training of shastris and acharyas is similar except that acharyas receive additional education in Vedic literature and generally develop a greater proficiency in Sanskrit.

All rishikumars are groomed to be punctual, self reliant and independent. They lead a life of strict discipline and willingly perform the daily chores of washing their clothes, making their beds and cleaning their rooms. They also participate in the physical maintenance of the campus.

I will never forget one especially touching quality I observed about the unique lives of these students. Although they are taught to be completely self-reliant, there was never a moment when they were not being observed, usually from a respectful distance, by a quietly transparent house-master, charged with the responsibility for their well-being and development.

In addition to setting up this Rishikul, Bhaishri has established what he calls a Gurukul to impart modern secular education in the English language, as well as a full curriculum of subjects designed to prepare boys for a productive and comfortable life in the world as engineers, doctors and lawyers. As in the Rishikul, students of this Gurukul are taught attitudes of service and humanitarianism with the aim of producing fine young men, as strong in their cultural foundation as they are in their many specialized job skills.

### The importance of Sanskrit grammar

Bhaishri's vision for the education of his Rishikul students is that it be based in accomplished Sanskrit with a lot of emphasis on grammar. He feels strongly that grammar is the foundation of any language and no Hindu priest can be expected to do his job well if he is not taught Sanskrit grammar correctly. Many other priest training institutions of India do not place this kind of emphasis on basic grammar. For this, Bhaishri's approach is considered noteworthy.

When asked about the Rishikul qualifications, Bhaishri states, "Before we admit a child, we try to ascertain how much interest he and his parents have in Sanskrit. This is most important, for this is not a place where parents can send their children simply because they have not done well in their studies elsewhere and education here is free. We are very strict with regard to this matter. We get as many as 450 applications every year for no more than 90 available seats. So the selection process is quite tough."

Today, graduates of Sandipani Vidyaniketan serve as priests in India and abroad. They are also employed as teachers and kathavachaks all around the world.

Although nearly all of the graduates of the Rishikul are brahmins, Bhaishri is quick to assure that the school is not restricted to this caste only.

"We do not perform any sort of screening to keep non-brahmins out of our institution," he says. "I believe that the knowledge of religious scriptures should not be confined to brahmins alone. Still, most of our students are brahmin. Students from other castes generally do not pursue this study, simply because they cannot be sure they will have jobs after they graduate."

The biggest difference between the training provided at Sandipani Vidyaniketan and other institutions is that service and spirituality are a first-priority motive in the former while commercial success is generally the main driving force in the latter.

### Gods of flesh and blood

Bhaishi's focus on spirituality is apparent everywhere in his teaching. "The murtis (temple Deities) in the temple are supposed to be treated like real people of flesh and blood. The whole idea behind the temple ceremony called pran pratishtha (installation of life into the Deities) is that these stone or metal images are being transformed into living Gods. If the priest is not holding this feeling for the Gods that they are alive, the true power of worship is not there. Then it would not be a darshan (holy sight). It would be a pradarshan (exhibition). This bhava (feeling) has to be there in the priest. Out of this feeling, he will be inclined to take care of the

Gods appropriately. Then gradually, the devatva (feeling the presence of the God) will become more apparent. All of this is helpful in developing qualified priests, as well as strong temples."

The supreme importance of bhakti (devotion) is a central theme of Bhaishri's message, not only to his priests but his devotees as well. "Bhakti is the mother, " he says. "Jnana (knowledge) and vairagya (detachment) are her sons. If you practice bhakti, liberation is assured. Through bhakti, attachment to the world becomes attachment to the God. When we are attached to God, we are automatically detached from the world. Then life is wonderful. Seeking moksha through the acquisition of knowledge alone is a tough process and a bit dry. Bhakti is filled with love and life."

## Social services

In addition to training priests, Sandipani Vidyaniketan provides education to the rural people of Porbandar and neighboring areas. In a program called Vaishvik Sanskruti Parivar, devotees of Bhaishri go into jungle villages and conduct classes to educate illiterate adults in the basics of reading and writing. Additionally, they encourage the children in these areas to enroll in public school, even providing them with school books and uniforms.

Vidyaniketan is deeply committed to the restoration and preservation of a healthy ecological environment. Twenty thousand trees have been planted on these hallowed 85 acres over the past 15 years, and today the campus grounds are lush with abundant gardens and nature sanctuaries.

Twenty acres are devoted to growing wheat, vegetables, herbs and fruits, such as chikoo, pomegranate, guava and coconut. The income derived from this agriculture provides money for the growth and maintenance of the institute.

There are elaborate living facilities available for guests and pilgrims on the Sandipani Vidyaniketan campus, including a special guesthouse for holy men invited to the institute for festivals and philosophical discussion.

There is also a gaushala (cowshed) with a capacity to house 100 cows. In Vedic culture, the cow is symbolically perceived as the mother of mothers, and here students are taught to respect this tradition.

Bhaishri's plans for the future include a center for naturopathy where patients may receive herbal and ayurvedic treatment.

### A spiritual message

Bhaishri's general spiritual message is leveled at the modern-day, cosmopolitan Hindu.

"Hindus should follow the basic principles of Hinduism, " he says. "If Hindus living abroad feel that small modifications must be made due to change in time and place, then there is flexibility within Hinduism for this to occur. But our dharma is like our blood. Because our blood is very important to our bodies, we are not inclined to change it out. Even if our very life depends on it, we can only accept blood that is of our blood type. Similarly, once we have determined our dharma, we must follow it. We cannot trade it out for another way of life. If a person is not functioning properly within the framework of this dharma, the problem is not with the dharma, it is with that person. Too often, we seek to find fault with our dharma. If Hindus fully understand their dharma, they won't find fault with it.

"It is also the duty of Hindu parents to take a lead in passing their religion on to their children. A positive religious atmosphere in the home affects children in an extremely important way."

For more information concerning Bhaishri and Sandipani Vidyaniketan please visit <http://www.sandipani.org/main.htm>

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## Bhaishri's Wisdom

Pujya Shri Rameshbhai Oza's extraordinary influence as a fine kathakar, a great teacher and a living example of dharma is surpassed only by his impact as a pragmatic spiritual advisor. His growing assembly of respectful devotees revel in the seemingly endless flow of his divinely inspired "common sense." Here are some examples of his sage council.

How can I conquer the ego? A person with a strong ego is always focused upon himself. He can conquer this state by becoming God-conscious. He can become God-conscious through surrender in worship. He will then be able to ask questions that will lead to answers that will guide him forward on the spiritual path. Through surrender, the ego subsides as a consciousness of God arises.

If I have bad thoughts, can I still do good deeds? You are not bad, even if you have bad thoughts. You are a part of God. Your goodness is just hidden. The very fact that you have asked such a question means that you want to do good. This is of the utmost importance. Bad thoughts arise in all minds. Concentrate on the good you want to do and bad thoughts will automatically subside as the good thoughts become stronger.

Why should I remain so committed to vegetarianism, when so many of my friends are not? It is not logical that vegetarianism is wrong because most people eat meat. It is also not logical that nonvegetarians are bad and vegetarians are good. Look at Mother Nature and all of her animals. You will find that animals that drink water with their lips are vegetarian while those that drink with their tongues are not. Which category do we fall into? Animals follow and act according to their intrinsic nature. Why shouldn't we? Nonvegetarian animals have short intestines and long, sharp teeth so that they can ingest and digest meat. Vegetarian animals are not built like this. They are not designed to eat meat. As a human being, you must ask yourself the question: "What is meat?" It's digested food, is it not? It is the muscle and organs of animals, made by the food they eat. When you eat meat, you are actually eating and digesting already digested food. Does this make sense? This is the cause of a number of illnesses. A disease experienced by an animal may well enter your body when you eat its flesh. Look at Mad Cow Disease. Mother Nature made man's body for vegetarian food. Do you put petrol in a diesel car. No. This body is a temple. Temples built by man with sand and cement are considered sacred without question. What about the temple of the body, built by God? Should we not care for it at least as much as we care for the stone temples we have built?

I lack self confidence. What can I do about this? Man is a bundle of thoughts. What we think, we become. If you think you do not have confidence, you will not have it. Think that you are a confident person and you will become so. Stay in the company of good, confident people. Stop thinking you can't. Think that you can and you will. Talk to yourself in affirmations. Say: "Yes, with the grace of God, I can do this."

How can we overcome the negative aspects of Western influence? The quality of our life is dependent on the decisions that we make. The cultures of both the East and the West have their strengths and weaknesses. Through the use of discretion, we can combine the best aspects of both. Whether a person is born in India or in the West, he or she can choose to live life following the best points of both cultures.

How can we maintain a religious lifestyle in a society so immersed in selfish worldliness? Life is not all bad or good. The world is full of all types of people. Live tactfully and skillfully with others as demanded by the conditions of the moment. It is not wise to expect that all experiences will be favorable, that all people will be helpful or that all of our wishes always will come true.

Is it wrong to strive for wealth and success in the world? If you have the intelligence and the willingness to work hard, there is nothing wrong with being rich or enjoying what wealth brings. Wealth is artha, one of the four legitimate aims of life. However, wealth should be earned and used ethically. And it should be handled with a certain amount of detachment. Always bear in mind that money exists for you. You don't exist for money. Money may be a necessary means in life, but it is not an end in itself. It has been said that, if one tenth of one's wealth is donated, wealth becomes auspicious. It is also generally understood that, if one spends one tenth of one's time in service, one will discover unparalleled bliss.

What is the spiritual duty of a worldly person? If our senses externalize our energies and drive us toward worldly activity, we may as well perform these actions in the spirit of service to others. If such actions are carried out for the well-being of other people, they will not create negative karmas. One of the meanings of dharma is "duty." So the dharma of a worldly person is to help others.

I am doing poorly in school. How can I improve my grades? Understand the importance of your studies, and you will develop a love and respect for them.

Where there is love and respect, there is interest. Where there is interest, concentration is effortless. From concentration comes success. This success brings enjoyment. We are born from ananda, bliss. We live for this bliss. Bliss is to be found where there is enjoyment. Enjoyment follows love. Love comes from understanding the importance of what you are doing. Therefore, understand the importance of your studies.

What can parents do to stimulate their children's interest in religion? Start early. Set examples by doing what you want your children to do. Children copy well. When you worship, ask your children to join in. Don't force the teachings and practices upon them. They are so innocent and open they will automatically follow you in all that you do. Make the environment of your home rich in culture and knowledge. Leave good books lying around. Do not live with the expectation that your children are going to spend as much time as you do in worship and prayer. Their priorities will be different. During their school years, their studies will be their puja (worship). At that time, it is sufficient that they simply bow before God and respect their parents. Be friends with your children and love them. The mother's lap is the world's best university. The mother is the child's first and best teacher.

How can parents and their children keep peace with each other during these fast changing times when a growing generation gap offers so many communication problems? Life is like building a building. You lay one brick on top of another. Should a brick below come loose, the one above it won't last long. If the child within a teenager dies, later life will suffer. If the best of that teenager's past is brought into his future, his life will flourish abundantly. For instance, a person can easily learn to trust God by simply remembering how he trusted his parents when he was young. A generation gap comes into existence if a person de-links himself from his past and forgets the valuable lessons of his youth, as well as the way he felt then: innocent, simple and carefree. It is rightly said that our life ripens with old age, but this is only true if the youth within us is not allowed to die. A problem arises when life is lived in segments. If we forget childhood in youth, and youth in adulthood, the continuity of our life is lost and we feel isolated and unhappy in our old age. If we believe in God, we believe that life is God's gift, and we live it holistically. Ideally, a grandfather should be able to fully identify with the joy of the grandchild that he plays with. If this grandfather is indeed experiencing this youthful zest for life, his grandchildren will enjoy just being in his company. There is no generation gap in a situation like this.

Can you please share some guidelines for raising children? Parents should trust their children. They should not be too lax in their discipline of them, nor should they

be too strict. A balance between these two extremes should always be maintained at all costs. Our scriptures say that once a son reaches the age of 16 he should be treated as a friend. The job of preaching and teaching should be completed by this time. At this point, all matters should be discussed with him in a friendly manner, as if he were an adult.

How do we build up character, and what are its benefits? Character is everything. People with character make good citizens. And a society of good citizens contributes to building a great nation. Your personality is external, but your character is what you intrinsically are. Character has three aspects: action, knowledge and feeling. God is Sachitananda: existence, consciousness and bliss. The three aspects of our character relate to God in the following way. Our action relates to God's existence. Our knowledge relates to God's consciousness. And our devotion relates to God's bliss. If our feelings are right, our thoughts get purified. With the purification of our thoughts, our actions get purified. With the purification of action, thought and feeling, our character gets purified.

Can we change our destiny with prayers and good deeds? Rain itself is inevitable. Prayers are not intended to make rain go away. They are only meant to provide you with an umbrella for protection. This destiny you speak of is a creation of karma. All of your thoughts, words and deeds sow the seeds of your destiny. The results you reap are what you call fate. Good thoughts, words and deeds will always protect you in two ways. They will be your shield today and provide good fortune tomorrow. Yet in your future, there will be more action, creating more karma. The cycle goes on. The bhaktar (a devotional person) is sustained by his faith. Whatever happens, he thinks, "I am God's. God is mine."

If God is in everyone's heart, why are some people good and some bad? The light of God's presence is like a light bulb that is there in each and every one of us. But that light bulb is usually covered with dirt so that, even if it is shining brightly, we cannot see it. We need to constantly keep this light bulb clean and clear. In the presence of light and the absence of ignorance, we are able to earn good karma by making right choices in following the path toward God Realization.

What can we do when we feel consumed in depression? Only wisdom can bring relief. Wise people bear the weight of the world honorably and with dignity, while the unwise bear it begrudgingly. Without wisdom as an aid to rising above misery, we cannot appreciate the joys of life.



When we consider existence in the light of truth, the following principles become obvious: 1. The experience of life is the experience of duality. One minute we are happy; the next minute, we are sad. 2. Life is subject to constant change. Nothing is permanent. This is to say that a painful situation cannot possibly last forever. 3. No single individual can give you happiness or sorrow. We ourselves are the creators of both the joyful and painful circumstances of our life.

What is the meaning of life? Life is love. Where there is love, giving is natural. Hence, spontaneous service arises from love. Love is also the essence of religion. A man without religion is an animal. Life is a gift of God. Accept it wholeheartedly with gratefulness. We got this human birth by God's grace.

Why is it so difficult to concentrate on God while it is so easy to become consumed in worldliness? The mind is like water. Like water, it flows downwards. Just as special effort must be applied to pump water upwards, so must similar effort be exerted to concentrate upon God. Just as a mechanical device like a pump is required to lift water up, so must man use a spiritual device like a mantra to lift the mind up to God. In truth, the world can offer no joy like the joy of becoming one with the Creator. Knowing this, we can easily devote ourselves to God. We can also take heart in knowing that all sins can be washed away by the repetition of God's name and by singing hymns in His praise.

Can a person practice renunciation while remaining active in worldly affairs? Performing one's duties without desire and without a sense of ego purifies one's mind and enables one to attain that state in which all sense of doing something is lost. This state is called *naishkarmya*, which means "not doing anything." Believing that we are not the body, that we use worldly things only for the betterment of others and that we need not be rewarded for serving others helps bring about this state of *naishkarmya*. It also decreases distraction and attraction to the world. Certainly, we may live well in the world, but we should not allow the world to enter our being and take it over. A boat at sea is safe, unless it takes on water and is consumed by the sea. By developing a sense of owning and belonging, we suffer the binds of the world. In reality, we are the God we seek. From the deepest perspective, the world is that which we can never really have, for in truth, it is unattainable. Yet God is that which we can never lose.