

[Youth Camps: DLS-Style in South Africa](#)

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Youth Camps: DLS-Style in South Africa

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While many Hindus complain about today's "non-value-based" secular education, Swami Sahajananda and a band of Swami Sivananda devotees in South Africa are doing something about it. In just eight years they've created a multi-million-dollar youth camp cultural/educational/sports facility where they hold comprehensive monthly programs for youth. It all happens in the serene setting of the Sivananda International Cultural Centre at La Mercy, Kwazulu Natal, South Africa. Hindu youngsters (and some adult participants) assemble each month to learn and practice Hindu dharma at a Yoga Camp of the Divine Life Society (DLS) of South Africa. Nestled into the surrounding rolling hills and lush cane fields, the \$3 million, 50-acre, multi-purpose cultural center is an ideal location.

Support for the camps is extremely strong. Swami Sahajananda, spiritual head of DLS of South Africa and one of the most respected and senior swamis in the nation, is delighted with the enthusiasm the camps have generated. "The 800-900 number of monthly participants remains steady. This indicates that they are committed and are not attending for the novelty of it," Swamiji told Hinduism Today.

The year-round yoga camps started eight years ago. Previously they were held at the Sivananda Ashram in Reservoir Hills, a suburb of Durban, for a week at a time, four times a year during school holidays. For reasons of improved security and

for more space, the DLS moved to its present premises in La Mercy. Camp begins at 6am and ends at about 2pm and attracts many participants from other parts of South Africa who drive hours to attend. Everyone, even the parent volunteers recruited to help, are required to practice personal religious disciplines.

The near-1,000 figure represents extraordinary growth when one considers that in the beginning the sole member of the DLS was only Swami Sahajananda. As disciplined as he is dedicated, he used to perform the whole routine of singing kirtans, reading the Gita and performing arati at the Umgeni Road Temple even when no one attended. When Swami Sivananda--Swami Sahajananda's guru and founder of Divine Life Society--was informed of this, he commented that if one is sincere, many would follow by example. This is certainly confirmed by the widespread following enjoyed by the DLS, as well as by the joyous faces of the participants we saw on a cold, blustery winter morning in July when we visited a Sivananda youth camp in progress.

Swamiji told me the main goal in running the camp is "to teach participants, both children and adults, to practice daily sadhana, how to cope with today's stressful and difficult situations and, importantly, to practically implement the teachings of Gurudev, Swami Sivananda and Hindu dharma."

The camp atmosphere is characterized by strict segregation between boys and girls. Though compliant, not all youth understand why. One older girl confided to me, "Integration between the sexes nowadays is both normal and natural at

schools, universities, the work place and at family gatherings. However, I and everyone else here willingly submit to this segregation because it is decreed by Swamiji, whom we totally revere." Such minor reservations notwithstanding, kids love the camp experience, even Swamiji's disciplinary measures. "Sometimes during weekends," Swamiji related (speaking in the third person), "the little boys come to our printing press facility. Some play pranks behind Swamiji's [my] back. He makes them sit in front of Gurudev's picture and do japa for 10 minutes. When Swami went to get one boy after 15 minutes, he found him motionless, spine erect, eyes closed, lips moving. Swami had to call him several times before he became aware of himself."

All participants are divided into groups according to their educational level. As we roamed through the center, devotees' smiling faces, incense-perfumed-air and life-like pictures of Gurudev and scriptural messages pinned on the pastel-colored walls all impressed us that this was a genuine spiritual retreat, a world away from worldly routine.

We first stopped in a junior-level class and were enthusiastically received. They sang kirtans in a circle and did japa and yoga asanas. These sessions end with the youngsters being allowed to play in the center's recreational parks. Swami Sahajananda commented, "We have play parks for the little ones and a swimming pool. Without giving them these, it will be difficult to get them off their bad habits."

Seven-year-old Asheen views the camps with a practical spirituality: "If I do wrong, I won't be able to see God. The

camp gives me an opportunity to learn good behavior and enjoy the play park with my friends. The teacher allows me to demonstrate asanasto the class."

One of the volunteer teachers, Mrs. Ameetha Silal, told us she found her work at the camp to be "spiritually rewarding and a tremendous benefit to me as a teacher--all in the service to our Gurudev." A teacher by profession and devotee for 12 years, she believes that if all citizens were trained in this manner, the future would be ably served by people espousing morally sound values and habits.

Two important disciplines required of participants are: 1) that children limit their TV viewing to one and a half hours per week and 2) those from 11 years old and older must take the vow of brahmacharya (celibacy). "Our youth have remarked they never knew the importance of brahmacharya until we explained the subject clearly to them at the camp," said Swamiji. "The conservation of the sex power is dealt with in a positive manner." Bhavinesh Patel, 11, commented, "The camp for me is a move towards God. I am able to be with friends who share the same interests. I will continue to attend camps for as long as I can." Commenting on the enforced restrictions on TV watching, he said, "I have no problem with this at all. I have more time to do my homework and engage in spiritual activity."

Each participant is required to keep a diary progress book. There they record their spiritual practices daily, including performance of japa, pranayama breathing exercises, asana yoga poses, writing mantras and remembrance of God. The

diary is presented at each subsequent monthly camp and is reviewed by volunteers who guide the children to regulate and improve their practice. Those who are most consistent are rewarded with multi-colored stamps of deities, birds and flowers. The group that has the best average receives a floating trophy. This program has been an enormous success. Many parents report improved performance of their children at school since joining the camp and the introduction of the spiritual diary program.

Apart from nurturing the religious well-being of its devotees, the camp also tries to imbue its followers with a sense of environmental consciousness. Children are provided coloring books and beautiful pictures of plants and animals. "The idea," explained Swamiji, "is to get children to adorn their rooms with something beautiful and uplifting. We call these the 'Sivananda Nature Reserve' in homes. Sometimes we bring a goat, duck or rabbit to the camp so that the children can pet them and develop a sense of compassion."

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Sidebar: DLS International

The work of the Divine Life Society (DLS) commenced in a tiny kutir on the banks of the holy Ganges, Swarg Ashram. By February, 1934, after moving out of Swarg Ashram, Swami Sivananda was granted the DLS's present ashram site by the Maharaja of Tehri-Garhwal. He also founded a four-roomed kutir on the banks of the Ganges, adjacent to Ram Ashram. It was a dilapidated, unused cowshed. Ever so humbly, the

potent nucleus of Swamiji's international mission had been founded. The Divine Life Trust Society was initiated by Swami Sivananda in 1936 with the purpose of training students in the spiritual path through bhakti, raja yoga, karma yoga and Vedanta and disseminating spiritual knowledge far and wide. Many souls were drawn to the master. By the end of 1936--while there were still hardly a half-dozen disciples around the master--eight branches were started in India as well as two in Europe and one in Sri Lanka. Year after year, these centers grew and new ones sprang up. By 1940, Sri Gurudev's teachings had been translated into German, French, Spanish, Japanese, Russian and Burmese. The unique character, focus and strength of each DLS branch evolved mostly out of the personal inspiration of the swami/disciple in charge. Each is molded more by the teachings of Swami Sivananda than by any "orders" or policy directives from the Rishikesh main ashram which is now under the gentle guidance of Swami Chidananda Saraswati.

With a view to making available Sri Gurudev's work in all Indian languages, the Sivananda Literature Dissemination Committee was formed in 1959 at the Rishikesh headquarters. Today, the institutions created by his initiated swamis are as different and multi-colored as a rainbow. Some are formally associated with DLS, others are not. For example, Swami Satchidananda focused on the universalist, inter-faith aspect of his guru's teachings, established many Integral Yoga centers and constructed the spectacularly beautiful L.O.T.U.S. temple in Virginia, USA, honoring the Light which illumines all faiths. Others, such as Swami Radha and the late Swami Vishnu Devananda, have stressed meditation, hatha yoga or karma yoga, the yoga of humanitarian service. Under the spiritual head of Sri Swami Sahajananda Maharaj, the DLS of South

Africa built up a very impressive, state-of-the-art printing facility in Durban and has published hundreds of thousands of exquisitely crafted reprints of practically all the major works of Swami Sivananda.

Swami Sivananda attained Mahasamadhi in July, 1963, at the age of 76. To this day, the centers he established and the souls he deputed around the world continue to share with seekers the eternal message of yoga and Self-illumination.

Find a quiet retreat for the practice of yoga, sheltered from the wind, level and clean, free from rubbish, smoldering fires and ugliness, and where the sound of waters and the beauty of the place help thought and contemplation. --Rg Veda 6.5.27