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SWAMI

The Renaissance Man

Swami Chinmayananda's legendary mission began with a bold and brilliant lecture invoking change

Only 18 people attended Swami Chinmayananda's first lecture, in Pune, India, on December 23, 1951. Though the organizers of the event thought it was a flop, the 32-year-old swami knew it was not. The talk, which we share below, was entitled "Let Us Be Hindus." It called for a Hindu Renaissance. That Renaissance became the theme and substance of the swami's work for the following 42 years.

It has become a new fashion with the educated Hindu to turn up his nose and sneer at the very mention of his religion. I, too, have been among these critics. But when it is proclaimed that we would benefit socially and nationally by running away from Hinduism, I pause to reconsider my stand.

However decadent our religion may have become, it is far better than no religion at all. My proposal is that we

bring about a renaissance of Hinduism so that within its greatness which has been proven through many centuries we may reattain the past culture and civilization that we have lost.

To some, no doubt, Hinduism in India has come to be nothing more than a bundle of superstitions or a certain way of dressing, cooking, eating, talking and so on. Our Gods have fallen to the mortal level of administration officers at whose altars we pray for special permissions and get them if the required fees are paid to the priests!

This degradation is not the product of any accidental or sudden historical upheaval. For two hundred years, Hinduism has been catering to the rich. Once upon a time long ago, the learned philosophers, known as brahmins, wisely advised the rulers, called kshatriyas. But through time, the brahmins and the kshatriyas became indulgent, and the purity of their lifestyle deteriorated. Today, the cry of the educated class is really against this un-religion. Only the thoughtless would call this Hinduism.

Certainly, if Hinduism can breed for us only heartless and corrupt businessmen, cowardly

workers, loveless masters and faithless servants; if Hinduism can give us only a state of social living in which each man is set against his brother; if Hinduism can give us only starvation and destitution; if Hinduism can encourage us only to plunder, to loot and to steal; if Hinduism can preach to us only intolerance, fanaticism, hardheartedness and cruelty; then I too cry, "Down! Down with Hinduism!"

The true Hinduism is a science of perfection. There is, in this true Hinduism, a solution to every individual, social, national and international problem. True Hinduism is the sanatana dharma (eternal truth) of the Upanishads.

The Upanishads proclaim in unmistakable terms that, in reality, man is God. Man is therefore advised to live his day-to-day life in such a systematic way that, hour by hour, he is consciously cleansing himself of all those imperfections that have gathered to conceal the beauty and divinity of his true, eternal nature. The methods by which an individual may consciously evolve by his own self-effort comprise the content

of Hinduism. The vast amphitheater of Hinduism is preserved, yet hidden, deep within the camouflage of its heavy descriptions, which are contained in the scriptures and their many, many commentaries. This overgrowth has so effectively come to conceal that true grandeur of this Temple of Truth that, today, that temple is all but lost amidst its own festoons.

Religion becomes ineffective if the seekers are not ready to live its ideals. For that matter, is there any philosophy political, social or cultural that can take anyone anywhere if its followers don't obey certain principles in daily life?

However great our culture might have been in the past, that history alone cannot help us in our present trails. We must learn, then live, the Hindu life. Knowledge alone will not suffice. A study of a cookbook, however thorough it may be, cannot satisfy our hunger. No matter how long we meditate upon and repeat the name of a medicine, we cannot obtain its cure unless we actually ingest it. Similarly, the blessings of religion can be ours only when we are ready to

live its recommended values.

Renunciation is also required. Without renunciation, no progress is possible. We must renounce the thrills of our childhood games so that we might grow to be men of noble action. Unless we are ready to renounce the low, animalistic values of material life and replace them with the noble values of a truly religious life, we cannot hope to gain the blessings of religion.

In conclusion, let us first know what Hinduism is. Then, let us take an honest oath not only for our sake, but for the sake of the whole world—that we shall, when once we are convinced of the validity of this Eternal Truth, try honestly and consistently to live its values. Aum Aum Aum.

Reviving Hindu Dignity

A skeptic is transformed into a dynamic spiritual leader

Sometime early in 1948, a brash, 32-year-old journalist named Balakrishna strutted into Rishikesh looking for trouble. He was, as he put it, out to "expose how those holy men are keeping up the bluff." At that time, the little village of Rishikesh, nestled in the foothills of the Himalayas, was still a wild and scary place where lions and tigers

roamed, and a roaring river called the Ganges not yet crossed by a bridge, either up or downstream could sweep a man to his death before he could think his name. Yet, there were a few huts and ashrams and yes, there were some holy men. One of these saintly souls in fact, the first rishi of Rishikesh that Balakrishna met was Swami Sivananda. Within a day or two, Balakrishna had forgotten his intended purpose. Swami Sivananda's

unworldly calm had completely overwhelmed him. Almost instantly, the proud skeptic was transformed.

On February 25, 1949, along with five other students, Balakrishna received sannyas initiation from Swami Sivananda and was named Chinmayananda. Sivananda immediately sent him to the village of Uttarkashi, 100 miles north of Rishikesh, to train intensively with a

famous Vedic scholar named Swami Tapovanam. Nearly three years after this, Swami Chinmayananda began giving lectures called "Jnana Yajnas" (wisdom offerings), "elucidating Advaita Vedanta for the common man of the marketplace." During the 42 years that followed, he gave hundreds of Jnana Yajnas.

In 1962, Swami Chinmayananda was instrumental in establishing

the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), but after 1964 remained on its board of directors only as spiritual advisor. At that time, Christians in India were converting Hindus through enticement and coercion, and Swami was deeply concerned. One of the VHP's first ambitions was to attempt converting these Hindus back into Hinduism. This has remained a VHP priority to the present day.

Even after two major heart attacks near the end of his life, Swami kept traveling and lecturing. By the time he passed away in August of 1993, he had conducted 576 Jnana Yajnas. He had also established twelve major Chinmaya Centers, 72 schools, six colleges, 30 temples, a hospital and an orphanage— as well as numerous vocational training centers and senior citizen's homes. "If I rest, I rust," Swami was fond of saying.

It is hard to imagine none of this grand story happening, but actually that might have been the case, had it not been for one anonymous woman. Before taking sannyas, young Balakrishna was inspired by the freedom movement of India and became a "freedom fighter." While distributing controversial literature, he was arrested and thrown into a New Delhi prison. There, where the cells were unhygienic and prisoners were dying by the dozens from

deadly diseases, the frail young man also fell deathly ill. When prison guards threw him out in the streets to die, a passing woman took pity upon him, called a doctor and arranged for him to be nursed back to health. Had this lady not shown compassion, the man known as Swami Chinmayananda might never become been the legend that was.