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INTERVIEW

Chidananda Reminisces

Now 85, the Divine Life Society president explains his views on sannyas and DLS's mission

Swami Chidananda Saraswati, president of the Divine Life Society, was honored by HINDUISMTODAY with the "Hindu Renaissance Award" as Hindu of the Year for 2000. It took a year for us to catch up with the alternatively reclusive and peripatetic swami, but in late December, 2000, our Delhi correspondent, Rajiv Malik, met Swamiji in Rishikesh. There, after personally presenting the award plaque, Rajiv interviewed Swami on a range of subjects.

On his recently initiated sannyasins

I am glad you are asking me this question. The very important detail is that all these new sannyasins are

already renunciates. They have decided to choose the life of renunciation, solitude, seclusion and God Realization. They have chosen the quest for God Realization in this very life. They are all young people. All of them have already renounced their home and family and left their jobs and whatever they were doing, cut off all connections and come and joined the ashram. It is a wrong impression that I have initiated a large number of sannyasins. It is my guru, Swami Sivananda, who has initiated these thousands of sannyasins, not I. Sannyas is given only when I am sure. I first ascertain the details about them, and assure myself that they are fit to receive it and will sincerely maintain the traditions of sannyas. They are mostly from student life or early employment stage. About ninety-five percent of them are unmarried. Many of them are from Orissa, Uttar Pradesh, some from Gujarat and others from Andhra Pradesh. They are people who have taken sannyas with real aspiration and with the real desire that, after taking sannyas, they will go deeper into spiritual life. And at the same time they can then carry on the service, because that is my guru's task. I am quite satisfied. They will justify their sannyas. They are sound.

His thinking on sannyas

After my guru's passing, I initiated disciples according to their yogyata (capability or talent). Then about three years ago, around 1998, I made up my mind that hence onwards I would not give sannyas to anyone below fifty years of age. I thought that it was against the varnashrama system, the four stages of life: studentship, family life, retirement and sannyas, taken at age 75, after leaving one's wife in the care of one's son. Then one can go to the forest or go for solitude. He ends up his life in God-centered living. So, I thought that I must observe this tradition. I should not go on initiating people who are young. They do not even know themselves. They may even fall off the path, and then people will blame them, and they will blame me also.

His last group of initiates

Because I made up my mind that henceforth I would not give sannyas, I also would not give naishtik brahmacharya diksha, the life-long vow of celibacy. Previously, I used to initiate them into brahmacharya diksha by giving them a yellow cloth. After some years, I would give them sannyas. This is a tradition followed in the Ramakrishna Math and Mission. Then all the brahmacharis of our ashram who have been living for

various periods, some six months, some eight or ten years, came in a delegation to me and said, "Swamiji, what have you done to us? We have come here with the sole intention of being permanent inmates of Sivananda Ashram. Therefore we asked and you permitted us to take up naishtik brahmacharya in preparation for sannyas, and now suddenly you are saying you are not going to give sannyas. What will happen to us ? We are your disciples." So I told them, "Look here, because I have already put you into this predicament, I do not want to leave you." So on Sivaratri, 1999, I gave sannyas to 21 men. This year another group of 25 came, but I said, "No, I cannot give, please go to one of the other senior swamis of the ashram and request sannyas from them." And those swamis did give sannyas to a number of people.

On his successor as president

Swami Sivananda founded the Divine Life Society

as a trust, and he was the founder-president. When he passed away, there was no question of his spiritual succession. Rather, the trust had to meet together and elect a person to fill the vacancy caused by the passing away of the previous trust president. I joined in May 19, 1943, and all the other trustees came after me, so I was elected to fill the vacancy. So I am here elected president by the trustees and not as a successor because this is not a math [monastery] or a gaddi [literally, "seat," meaning a lineage of gurus]. There they prepare someone to succeed them and give them importance while they are living. Everyone knows who will be the successor. So, when the guru passes away, on the 16th day all the sadhus of that math would gather at one place, put the successor in the seat of the previous guru and cover him with numerous chadar, shawls presented in token of respect and acknowledgement of his position. When Swami Sivananda died, everybody thought that something similar would take place. But they were told that it was a trust and not a gaddi, and that the trust would hold a meeting and appoint a new president. I have recommended to the present board of trustees that they at least draw up a list of successor trustees, as both I and my colleague

Swami Krishnanand, the Trust's secretary, are getting on in age. But to date, nothing has been done.

On his dharmic mission

I have never thought of any mission for myself in life. I am just an instrument in the hands of God. He has to get some work done out of me. When I first came to the ashram, my guru took me to the dispensary, and I used to work with the doctors who would come and stay from time to time. Gurudeva used to say that I had a healing touch, and more compassion than a woman or mother. The sadhus used to say, "Swamiji, you give us whatever you can. We will not go to any other hospital. Give us anything, and we will get relief by consuming one dose. This is our experience." Later, I made notes on Gurudeva's lectures, and began contributing to the ashram journal. I was now a writer of sorts. Then Gurudeva found that I could talk extemporaneously, without preparing

any notes. On a moment's notice, he would tell me, "Come, some visitors are coming. Speak before them." Later on he sent me traveling all over the world. Since 1959, I have been traveling to South America, Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Europe, U.K., Canada and America. In 1960, I visited San Francisco and met some of Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami's disciples. These were white American disciples.

The Divine Life Society's future

We set up a Divine Decade Committee, to observe 1991 to 2000 as a divine decade. There was to be a new orientation to our work. I said that up until now we followed the aim for which Gurudeva founded this Society, which was to disseminate spiritual knowledge, to propagate the dharma and spirituality. Initially, it was to be done only in India, but later it was decided it should be done worldwide, as all humanity needs awakening. We propagated seva, selfless service; bhakti,

devotion; and dhyana, Vedanta philosophy. Our efforts have been centered around urban areas, that is, cities and large towns. Gurudeva wrote in English, so his books could be read only by English-knowing people, literate people. Our illiterate folks, who depend on giving their thumb impression in place of their signature, we wanted to do something for them. That was the number-one change. This has been implemented. What we did was to have a rural orientation. First and foremost, the rural people were suffering from diseases. We told all branches to go to the nearest villages and provide medical aid. Next, lack of sanitation was addressed. Then volunteers raised money to put in motorable roads, so that ambulances could reach all these places. Then came education, making the illiterates literate. I told my people to take a screen and projector and teach about the various aspects of human life. Then, because there have been wars in the past, we also said that we must work on a global platform. This mentality of destruction and violence belongs to the stone age. Move from stone-age savagery to the 21st century, that is the action plan. Everywhere we want to spread the message of peace, the message of Buddha, the message of Gandhi. Peace to everyone.

Bringing peace in the hearts of people. If the peace is there inside the hearts and minds of people, then even in their outer lives, peace would be there. We have to do this job and make the whole humanity into one great global family, whose father and mother is the same God.

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