

[Swami Chidananda](#)

Category : [December 1999](#)

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HINDU OF THE YEAR

Swami Chidananda

Ascetic president of the Divine Life Society honored

At 83, Swami Chidananda, president of the Divine Life Society, is one of India's spiritual treasures, a sage, a beacon of light and a living example of the simplicity that lies at the heart of Indian spiritual practice. He is the able protégé of the legendary Swami Sivananda, and has guided the DLS since Swami Sivananda's passing in 1963. For his unadorned lifestyle, ripened humility and eloquent preaching of virtue's way, Hinduism Today has selected Swami to receive the 1999 Hindu Renaissance Award as "Hindu of the Year."

Starting in 1990, Hinduism Today has honored one saint 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) and Swami Bua ('98).

Born Sridhar Rao, September 24, 1916, Swami Chidananda was the eldest son of a wealthy landlord in South India. At an

early age a friend of his grandfather impressed upon him the ideals of austerity, sageliness and pursuing a vision of God. He attended college in Chennai, graduating in 1938. While there, he studied the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda and Swami Sivananda, and attended the local Ramakrishna Mission meetings. He was a precocious preacher, guiding friends, relatives and neighbors alike.

In June of 1936 the youth disappeared from home and after some time was found at an ashram near the famed temple town of Tirupati, 70 miles away. With great effort, his family persuaded him to return home--it would not do for the eldest son of a landed man to renounce the world. But it had already happened, and for the next seven years Sridhar rejected worldly comforts and embarked upon a life of austerity. In 1943, he left home for good to join Swami Sivananda in Rishikesh. From his first days at the ashram, Chidananda was known for his healing ability and compassion for the ill, be they human or animal. Many stories are told of his caring for injured birds, squirrels and insects which came to his attention.

On Guru Purnima Day, July 10, 1949, he was initiated into sannyas by Swami Sivananda and given the name Swami Chidananda, "One who is in the highest consciousness and bliss." By 1948 he was made DLS General Secretary, the highest administrative post. After the Mahasamadhi of Swami Sivananda in 1963, he was elected president. Swami has often repeated that he is not a guru, and when he has to give an initiation, he demures, "I do it in the name of my Master. Now Sivananda is your Master." Practically speaking, those initiated by him consider him their guru. He is an eloquent and eager orator who prefaces talks with the jocose admission that some

consider him a "chatterbox."

Swami has been an unusually peripatetic DLS leader, on the move most of his life. The great woman saint Anandamayi Ma nicknamed him "Airplane Baba." In 1993, Swami attended the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago as one of three principal representatives--"presidents"--of Hinduism. Just this year he has traveled to Malaysia and Europe. It is for his purity and unflagging efforts to spread far and wide the deepest wisdom of Sanatana Dharma that Swami Chidanandaji is proudly declared Hindu of the Year for 1999.

Swami Chidananda, Divine Life Society, P.O. Shivanandanagar,
District Tehri-Garhwal, UP, 249192 India.

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