



SPIRITUAL TEACHER, COMMUNITY BUILDER, WRITER, MUSICIAN AND COMPOSER, SWAMI KRIYANANDA IS AN OUTSTANDING TESTIMONY OF THE PROTEAN NATURE OF THE SPIRITUALLY EVOLVED

by Ajay Kalra

While organisations play an important role, the search for God is ultimately a personal and solitary journey.” The sentence evoked a silent nod from me. It also made me more attentive to the person saying it on television. It was a swami with a gentle voice and twinkling deep blue eyes. He was not Indian, even though his ochre robes made him seem far more Indian than I. Swami Kriyananda is a direct disciple of Paramhansa Yogananda, the great Indian guru, and author of the spiritual classic, Autobiography of a Yogi. He is the founder of Ananda Sangha, a worldwide organisation for the dissemination of Yogananda’s teachings. Swamiji’s passion for creating spiritual communities has resulted in seven communities in the United States and Europe. His other outstanding quality is his indefatigable creative energy. He has written 86 books which have been translated into 28 languages, and has composed over 400 pieces of music, several of which have won international awards. His most recent book of 600 pages, The Essence of the Bhagavad Gita, which was written in just two months, speaks of the concentrated pace of his creativity. Born in Romania of American parents, he speaks eight languages and has lectured for nearly 60 years on Yogananda’s practical expression of sanatan dharma.

Swami Kriyananda moved to Delhi in November 2003, bringing with him a group of committed Ananda teachers, to fulfil his guru’s dream of bringing these teachings back to the land of his birth.

You have a passion for setting up spiritual communities. How did that come about?

From the age of 15, I wanted to start communities; I saw it as the answer to many modern ills. When I met my guru at the age of 22 in 1948, I learned that this was his great interest too. Many times I heard him speak with great fervour about it. And because I had merged all my interests into his, I vowed I would do my best to create communities in his name. In 1968, I founded the first community in Nevada City, California. Now we have seven communities in the West with about a thousand people living in them. Our main community in Nevada City is the largest, comprising about 1000 acres.

What is the purpose of communities?

They provide a wonderfully supportive environment for spiritual growth and sadhana. If you are a spiritual seeker working in an office, the chances of others in that office also being spiritual seekers are very small. Krishna says that out of a thousand, one seeks me. Given that percentage, you don't often find more than one or two persons in any work environment who are spiritually inclined. Most of those who work there are egotistically inclined, self-centered, and competitive, and this is not a spiritually supportive environment. Rather, if one is spiritually minded, he must do what he can to safeguard his spirituality from constant efforts to pull him into worldly consciousness. By living in a community of people who all are seeking God, one finds safeguards for his spiritual growth. Others encourage and facilitate his efforts. In a worldly environment, if one doesn't encounter opposition, he at least is surrounded by constant diluting efforts.

Social upliftment is something greatly to be desired, but society is a big thing! The best approach even to general upliftment is to try to inspire a few people to uplift themselves by willing cooperation with the high ideals you offer

them. When others see that people can indeed live by high ideals, in mutual harmony, friendship, and mutual support, those who are susceptible gain hope. The only way to uplift society is by inspiration. In Ananda communities, people live together in harmony and a spirit of friendship. You hardly ever see arguments.

Communal living is also the best possible insurance plan, for when people see their friends in real need, they all pitch in and help them, giving help where it's needed. On the other hand, they try to help any free loaders to help themselves. It's not an impersonal, government-imposed system of welfare. It's a way of life that makes for true happiness in all.

Is it necessary for people in communities to follow a similar spiritual path?

We've found it to be so, even though we believe in, and, in fact, stress the basic oneness of all religions. In the beginning years we weren't insistent on this point, but we learned from experience that it isn't possible to live closely together with people who believe differently from oneself. For example, I myself believe in reincarnation. If another Ananda member were to reject this teaching, I'd have to be very tactful in his presence not to talk about it, out of a desire not to offend him. In my own living room, so to speak, it is nice to be able to relax my vigilance of basic matters like this when chatting with my friends. So we have learned from experience that it is better if all actual members – as distinct from visitors – share the same basic beliefs. Hence our rule that members must all follow the same path, which is one of discipleship to our line of gurus, the last of whom was Paramhansa Yogananda. I myself am not the guru. I'm the teacher, leader, spiritual director, or whatever you may call it, but everything I've done has been in the name of my guru.

Do you think this practice makes people sectarian?

It might, but it doesn't because our teaching itself is non-sectarian. Any service we

render is to people of all sects. We are willing to share our beliefs with everybody, but we never *impose* those beliefs.

In a community could individuality be compromised by organisational goals?

Fortunately – up to now, at least – that has not been the case. A key guiding principle of ours is, in fact: "People are more important than things." This principle is specifically geared toward protecting the rights of individuals over the needs of the organisation. If, for example, there's a need for someone to fill a particular position, but no one can be found who would be spiritually helped by doing that job, our practice has been to sacrifice the position rather than the person. The rights and needs of the individual are our priority. One basic thing that we've done to help safeguard that principle is give autonomy to each of our communities. There is no central office to tell people what to do.

Another guiding principle of our communities is 'Yato dharma, tato jaya.' Even when threatened with bankruptcy, after a fire (started by a county vehicle) burned hundreds of our acres and destroyed most of our homes, we adhered to dharma, and did not sue for compensation. We have always adhered very strictly to dharma.

What if one can't move into a spiritual community?

Wherever you are, if you call to God sincerely, He has to come to you there. This is a very important teaching in the Gita. Krishna teaches that, more important than sanyas, is acting for God. You have to fulfil your duty, free of ego motivation. The supreme teaching of the Gita is nishkam karma – action without desire for the fruits. Krishna talks of sanyasis and tyagis. A tyagi gives his life to God, does his best at whatever he has to do, and does it for God. This is the path to freedom.

There is a story of Cellini, a famous Italian sculptor. The Pope had hired him to do many sculptures, but wasn't reg-

ular about paying him. A point came when Cellini wouldn't do any more. He needed to be paid. The Pope, accusing him of disobedience, put him in prison. In that dungeon cell he slept on a damp mattress; rats ran about the floor; he was given only bread and water for sustenance; there was only light enough, coming through a high window, for him to read scripture one hour a day. He had no occupation but to read scripture for that one hour, and for the rest of the time to pray to God. After his release – still recalcitrant! – he told others that if they wanted to know what real happiness was, they should arrange to be put into a dungeon and spend all their time praying to God.

Some people might feel imprisoned living in a family. But you can still love God. Don't be caught up in other people's emotions. Patanjali's definition of yoga was, *yoga chitta vritti nirodh*. Calm the feelings in your heart. *The biggest ill of mankind is emotionalism*. Try to develop dispassion in yourself.

What would be your advice to someone spiritually inclined, living in a family where others are not so inclined?

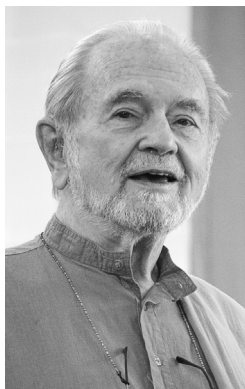
The shastras give advice on that. If your spouse is foolish, or worldly, or tries to pull you away from God, and you are a devotee, then you have a dharmic duty to leave him or her. The teaching is, when a lower duty conflicts with a higher duty, the former ceases to be a duty. This is an important principle. There's no point in wasting one more – out of how many thousands! — incarnation just because your wife or husband, your mother or father, doesn't agree with you. Your higher duty is not to stay with such people. Is this easy advice to give, or to take? It is up to each individual. Each one must work out his or her own karma.

Being married is not itself either good or bad. What matters is what one does with it. Marriage can be an advantage in many ways. Everyone needs to think of other people, and to help them. Remember, though, help should be offered always in

God's name, not in self-glorification. If the people you live with don't actively try to take you from God, then you can live in their midst and still find God.

Is the practice of brahmacharya essential for spiritual growth? If so, how can a married person practise it?

There are different levels of brahmacharya even within marriage. Sex is not an easy thing to dismiss from the mind so long as the energy remains centered in the lower chakras (energy centers). It ceases to be a temptation, however, when one's energy becomes centered higher up in the spine. Sex instinct can certainly be transmuted, but this never happens by sup-



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pression. Neither is indulgence something to occasion guilty feelings. The way to transcend sexual desire is by calm dispassion, not by violent rejection.

Brahmacharya literally means, 'flowing with Brahma.' Just as a surfer must learn the proper muscle control for flowing with the wave, so a human being must learn self-control, morally, emotionally and intellectually – before he can attune himself to and 'flow' with the truth.

Sometimes people don't know what is

best for them. What does one do in such a situation?

We have to have some guideline. If you're fortunate enough to have a guru, he may or may not tell you, depending on your needs, and on how you approach him.

The most important moral guideline is, "What will make you feel free in your heart?" Freedom has to be understood. When people give in to a desire, then feel free of that desire, they may think they feel free, but true freedom is calm and inwardly expansive. Anything you do that brings you towards inner freedom is a good thing. It's not infallible, but it's a guideline. Any guidance is good, in fact, that will help you to grow in understanding, in empathy with other people, and toward lasting happiness.

Shankaracharya gave us the best guideline: *satchidananda*. Bliss is the goal of all life. Many people think happiness exists only in pleasure. It takes time for them to realise that pleasure always carries with it an aftereffect: a hangover, or a loss of energy. Gradually you come to understand that what you're looking for is not pleasure, but happiness. Happiness is longer range, yet even it carries the potential to become tiresome and boring. The bliss of the soul, ultimately, is what people should take as their guideline.

How does one recognise a true guru?

In the Gita, Arjuna asks Krishna, "How can you tell if someone is a saint? How does he sit, how does he walk, how does he talk?" Indeed, you can tell partly from a person's outward behavior. A guru cannot be somebody who is susceptible to anger, sense passion, selfishness, or who thinks first of his own needs. His eyes are always calm. There's a deep quality in them, and in his presence, that makes you feel that he isn't motivated by ego-consciousness. A true guru does things because they are to be done, not because he wants to do them.

Another way of judging is to see what his followers are like. They're with him often. If they're not uplifting people, it may

well be because he hasn't the power to uplift. In this case, he will not be a true guru. If they're all peaceful and happy, if they love God and one another, then it is fairly safe to say that they're getting it from a good source. False gurus attract false disciples; true gurus attract true disciples.

Is it wrong for a guru to get angry?

There are two kinds of anger. One kind, righteous anger, can be in response to unrighteousness, or perhaps an act put on to impress a disciple of the need to change. Otherwise anger, Krishna says in the Gita, is the result of frustrated desire. Anybody who gets angry in an emotional way cannot be truly enlightened. He still has at least that kink in his armour. You can't get angry if you're at peace with yourself and are without ego motive. Anger is simply the result of desire.

You have an immense body of creative work to your credit. Can you speak about how creative inspiration comes to you?

Superconsciousness is imperative to all true creativity. Being able to tune into this state is most easily done through meditation. I've created a course for superconscious living, which gives practical ways to lift one's consciousness up to the third eye, the seat of superconsciousness. In any field of endeavour, instead of dwelling on limitations and problems and thinking "I can't," one should make a conscious effort to raise his energy with the affirmation, "I can!"

Through my work I've tried to show people not what I myself can do, but what everybody can do if it is done in the right way. That's been my goal in the variety of things I've done.

Is there anything about *The Essence of the Bhagavad Gita* that you'd like to highlight?

The beautiful thing about the Bhagavad Gita is that it relates to every level of life, including that stage which is higher than any level: moksha. The Gita doesn't, as many sadhus have done, talk only about achieving moksha. It describes liberation as the true goal of life, but it states also

that one should at least go in that direction: accept as much of the truth as we can, and live by that. It is a guide to behavior for everyone. We should all direct our thoughts and actions toward ultimate freedom from desire, compulsion, and sense-slavery. All these levels of teaching are contained in the Gita.

What Paramhansa Yogananda did was show that the Bhagavad Gita is based in truth as it is being confirmed by modern science. Krishna spoke of energy; of the vastness of the material universe; of subtler universes that people in former times couldn't understand. Another wonderful thing about his explanation is that it shows Krishna to have been completely practical in his understanding of human nature. The result is a teaching founded in perfect common sense. It is both supremely reasonable, and mystical in the highest, most sublime sense. It addresses reality on all levels, from the grossest to the most exalted.

What brought you to India, and what are your plans for the future?

I returned to India to fulfil my guru's mission of bringing the practical, relevant expression of sanatana dharma, which he brought to America in the 1920s, back to the land of his birth. They're particularly relevant in India today in their emphasis on the need to banish thoughts of East and West. His teachings emphasise that India's development and enrichment can be effected without westernisation and loss of values – with dharma and high ideals. India can become – indeed, she has always been – the guru of the world. Spirituality vibrates in the very soil here.

The form that Ananda Sangha, India, eventually takes will be largely defined by those Indians who are inspired by it and who choose to become involved. Our focus will be essentially in four areas: creating a spiritual community; opening two monasteries, for men and for women; building a non-sectarian temple in honour of Yogananda and our line

of gurus; and setting up the Yoga Institute of Living Wisdom.

Could you elaborate on this Institute?

The purpose of this institution will be to give students not only the information and tools they need for achieving success in today's world, but also the subtler understanding that is needed for people to live as complete human beings. Completeness may be described as including, physically: balance, fitness, and energy; mentally: focus, clarity, and intuition; and spiritually: direction, serenity, inspiration, and higher guidance.

One of the key objectives of this institute would be to integrate all forms of knowledge, which are like spokes of a wheel that eventually lead to a common center, where true wisdom exists.

And finally, Swamiji, how does one continue to have a feeling of love and kindness towards people when one feels mistreated or misunderstood?

Whether I love or don't love is something I can control. It is not something anyone else can dictate to me. I have found from my own experience that I'm happy when I love. I would not be happy if I didn't. It's really that simple! How others treat me need not, and does not, affect how I treat them or anybody else. My joy, love, peace of mind, and reactions are within my own power to control.

You can ask yourself, if you feel tempted to be bitter: Does it make me happy? Ask yourself, then: Which do I prefer? To be happy, or unhappy? Some people actually choose to be unhappy! If you don't like feeling unhappy, however, or if you decide you've had enough unhappiness, then why not make those choices which will make you happy? Why let anyone else condition your happiness? This doesn't mean to pretend that nothing matters. It means simply to give love actively to all. ☺

Swami Kriyananda can be seen on Aastha TV at 7:20 pm daily. Free books and meditation training online can be found on www.anandaindia.org. For more information on Ananda Sangha call (0124) 405-9550.