

Sathya Sai Newsletter, USA

Dedicated with Love and Devotion to Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba



"Vibhuti"

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SAI'S MESSAGE



The Divine Secret of Ash

In the Brihad Jabala Upanishad, ash or vibhuti is equated with prosperity and one's spiritual splendor. As a talisman containing a divine secret, it also destroys danger and protects the one who wears this "Sai" ornament of purity. It is a silent messenger of detachment and renunciation, teaching the most elementary step of one's sadhana (spiritual practice).

Vibhuti also has an element of immortality, which makes it a fit offering for worshipping God. Flowers offered during worship will fade away, leaves will dry up, fruit will decay in the course of time, and water will breed germs if left standing for any length of time. Only vibhuti remains unchanged, as it is the final result of the five elements of creation. It is our desires that must be reduced to ashes, and vibhuti is symbolic of this renunciation and detachment. This result is the ash that must be offered to God, not the artificial ash bought in packets from shops. If artificial ash is offered to God, then the results of such an offering will also be artificial.

—Sri Sathya Sai Baba
Vision of the Divine, p. 5

Splendor and Ash

The Significance of Vibhuti

The three basic paths available to mankind for spiritual advancement and self-realization are: the path of knowledge and wisdom (*jnana marga*), the path of righteous action (*karma marga*), and the path of devotion (*bhakti marga*). A person can choose any one of the paths or a combination of the three to get a satisfactory answer to life's fundamental question, "Who am I?"

Swami has answered this question by telling us that each one of us is divine. But we do not know this as fact, due to our ignorance, which stems from ego and the overriding influence of the senses in our daily lives. Ultimate reality is *Brahman* (the Absolute Godhead), and all other "realities" are transient, so the process for arriving at a definitive answer to the question of spiritual identity is known as *Brahmavidya* or *Atmavidya*. *Brahman* means formless, nameless, attributeless, unsullied energy. In other words, Brahman is the primeval energy from which all the manifest worlds have come into existence at the will of the Supreme Self (*Paramatma*, or Universal Self). Easwara, Narayana, Absolute Godhead, and God—among others—are some of the names referring to Brahman.

Yoga means the process of uniting with God. Therefore, we often hear the three paths to Godhead mentioned above also referred to as *jnana yoga*, *karma yoga*, and *bhakti yoga*.

The Supreme Yoga Scripture

The famous dialogue that took place between Lord Krishna and his devotee, Arjuna, on the Kurukshetra battlefield is called the Bhagavad Gita ("Divine Song"). The Bhagavad Gita is the supreme repository of spiritual knowledge and a guidebook for those interested in liberation from wordly bondage (*moksha*) and in union with Brahman. That is why the Bhagavad Gita is known as the supreme yoga *shastra* or scripture.

The Bhagavad Gita consists of eighteen cantos, each named after a particular kind of yoga. The first canto, "Arjuna Vishada Yoga" (yoga of Arjuna's righteous despair), portrays the delusion and weakness displayed by Arjuna at the prospect of fighting against his own kith and kin in the impending battle. This initial canto sets the stage for imparting to Arjuna the *Brahmavidya*, or the spiritual knowledge and wisdom of the relationship of the individual self to the Supreme Self.

The subsequent seventeen cantos explore different kinds of yoga, each throwing its particular angle of light on the subject of Brahmaavidya.

The final canto, entitled “Moksha-Sanyasa Yoga,” dwells on liberation through the path of renunciation and sacrifice. Thus Lord Krishna has built a staircase of spiritual wisdom for Arjuna (or Everyman) to climb gradually, surely, and steadily—a progression for appreciating without any doubt the nature of ultimate reality and distinguishing the real from the temporary. The cumulative effect of the entire Bhagavad Gita is to awaken Arjuna from his weakened state of delusion and helplessness, and to give him the ultimate truths and knowledge for fighting the righteous war.

Vibhuti Yoga and Vibhuti Prasadam

The Sanskrit term *vibhuti* means splendor, glory, power, and the like. The term also means sacred ash. *Vibhuti yoga* and *vibhuti prasadam* are likewise two important terms in Indian spiritual culture. *Vibhuti yoga* is a metaphor for extolling the splendorous attributes of God, in order to achieve union with the Godhead. In this sense, the term *vibhuti yoga* pertains to a person’s spiritual practices.

The tenth canto of the Bhagavad Gita is titled “Vibhuti Yoga,” wherein Krishna tells Arjuna about His splendor and glory. The beauty of this canto is that one hears about the glory and splendor of the Lord, from the Lord himself—from the horse’s mouth, as the expression goes! Krishna repeated the same vibhuti yoga, along with other aspects of

Brahmaavidya, to Uddhava, another beloved devotee, just before He decided to end His sojourn on Earth. This discourse has come to be known as the Uddhava Gita. A third Gita also exists, the Avadhuta Gita, which was also narrated to Uddhava as a story. The tale explains how a young philosopher-sage, Dattatreya, acquired Brahmaavidya through the help of 24 items in the manifest world or nature, including a python, pigeon, mountain, young girl, spider, and so on. An important message of this trio of Gitas is that the vibhuti of God can be accessed and understood either via the mouth of the Lord himself, or through the agency of nature (*prakriti*), the Lord’s creation.

On the other hand, the term *vibhuti prasadam* means the use of a splendorous material called *vibhuti* or holy ash as a *prasadam* or offering to God. Here *vibhuti* refers to the ash left behind after the burning process of a given material is complete, and *prasadam* refers to any sacred offering made to God before partaking of it. Sanctified and sacred vibhuti, a symbol of the ultimate reality, Brahman, is usually offered as prasadam in temples. Krishna says to Arjuna that He will accept even a leaf, a flower, a fruit, or water, if it is offered with the purest of pure devotion. Thus it can be said that the term *vibhuti prasadam* refers to any material offering made to God.

Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba (Lord Krishna with a different body, and now moving amidst us) gives vibhuti prasadam to devotees. Also, vibhuti and other materials—such as nectar, kumkum, sandalwood powder, and turmeric powder—are found

sticking to pictures, idols, and other artifacts in many of Swami's devotees' homes, in seeming defiance of the law of gravity, indicating the all-pervasive and almighty nature of Brahman. Not only that, but the beneficial and curative properties of the vibhuti given by Swami are numerous, so people use it profusely in their daily lives.

Vibhuti in the Christian Religion

Sacred ash is given prominence in the Christian tradition on Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, about six weeks prior to Easter each year. Ash Wednesday can occur as early as February 4 or as late as March 10, depending on the date of Easter, which is observed on the Sunday following the full moon on or after March 19. This places Ash Wednesday roughly in the same time frame as Mahashivaratri in the Hindu calendar, where the entire new moon night is spent in prayer and praise of Lord Shiva or Easwara, whose chief adornment is vibhuti ash.

On Ash Wednesday, worshippers in churches are blessed with black ashes by a priest or minister as a sign of penitence and sacrifice. These ashes are prepared by burning palm leaves from the previous year's Palm Sunday (Sunday before Easter) celebrations and mixing them with olive oil and water. The priest makes the mark of the cross on each penitent's forehead with the black ashes, the cross being a chief symbol of Christianity and Jesus's life of sacrifice. Symbolically, this ritual is similar to the three parallel lines of vibhuti smeared across the forehead of devotees of Lord Shiva, known as Shaivaites in India.

The Christian priest offers the worshipper an instruction while the ashes are applied, such as, "Remember that you are dust, and unto dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19), or "Turn away from sin and be faithful to the gospel."

The Judaic and Christian association with ashes also signifies repentance before God, sincere sorrow for sins and faults, and the desire to change for the better. For this reason, Psalm 51 is another scripture often cited in association with Ash Wednesday:

"Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.
Cast me not away from thy presence,
and take not your holy spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit. Then
will I teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you." (Psalm
51:10-13)

Followers of the Roman Catholic church observe Ash Wednesday by fasting, abstinence from eating meat, sacrifice of some kind, contemplating one's transgressions, and repentance. In this sense, it becomes a purification ritual. This kind of austerity is similar to the fasting schedules observed by Hindus on various holy days, including Mahashivaratri.

—**Dr. Sastry V. Pappu**
Wichita, Kansas

In 2008, Mahashivaratri will be observed on Thursday, March 6. Ash Wednesday falls on February 6, Palm Sunday on March 16, and Easter on Sunday, March 23. —Ed.

Vibhuti Yoga and Practical Life

Bhagavan on the Duty of Parents and Teachers

Who makes the sun rise and set regularly, and race across the sky every day? Who makes the stars that spangle the sky by night vanish by day? Who makes the wind-god sustain with breath, without respite for a moment, billions of lives the world over? Who has made the bubbling brook that gurgles along its winding course forever? Why then should there be man-made barriers of caste, creed, and wealth? Worship Him, the Lord of the Universe, to whose command all are bound. Do not deny the Lord just because you do not see him. Your ignorance denies you the vision of God, even as daylight renders the stars invisible to you. TELUGU POEM

Embodiments of love! For many millennia, the Bhagavad Gita has propagated the high ideals of the life divine. The Bhagavad Gita has brought great fame to Bharath (India), whose unique privilege it has been to have received this peerless spiritual text. The Gita is a unique scriptural poem, unsurpassed in metaphysical content by the texts of any other country.

Unfortunately today, however, there is a growing miscomprehension of the message of the Gita. Some say that the Gita teaches only the path of action (*karma marga*). Others assert that it proclaims only the path of devotion (*bhakti marga*). And quite a few hold that the Gita expounds only the path of wisdom (*jnana marga*). Thus, depending on their own subjective experiences and powers of understanding, different people develop varying ideologies based on the teachings of the Gita.

The Gita, however, observes no distinctions at all on the basis of caste, creed, community, nationality, or between men and women. It is an eclectic and catholic

scripture, transcending all man-made barriers, and is of universal relevance. It reveals the importance of one's own *dharma* or duty (*swa-dharma*) to all those who study it in a spirit of adoration.

The first word of the first line of the Gita is *dharma*. The last word of the last verse of the Gita is *mama*. The fusion of *mama* and *dharma* is *mama dharma*, which means one's own dharma or *swa-dharma*. Thus, the Bhagavad Gita infuses each individual with the principles of his own dharma.

The articulator of the Gita is Krishna, and Krishna is also the person who heard the Gita and wrote it. This statement may surprise you. You might ask, "Was it not Arjuna who heard the Gita? How could Arjuna be Krishna? Did not Vyasa write the Gita? How could Vyasa be Krishna?" The answers to these questions have been very simply given by Krishna himself!

"Among the Pandavas, I am Arjuna," said Krishna in the tenth chapter of the Gita, the chapter titled "Vibhuti Yoga." Furthermore, among the nine names of Arjuna, the epithet

Jayakrishna (Victorious Krishna) equates Arjuna with Krishna (God). Since Krishna was firmly established in Arjuna's heart and there was total spiritual empathy between them, it is absolutely correct to say that Krishna was not only the articulator of the Gita but also the person who heard it.

In the same manner, Krishna identified himself with Vyasa. "Among the *munis* (adepts), I am Vyasa," said Krishna. Not only this; the Lord dwells in the hearts of the sages. It would, therefore, be quite correct to say that Krishna himself wrote the Gita. We are reminded in this context of Potana (a Telugu poet-saint), who declared that the Bhagavatha, which he had translated into Telugu, was composed by Ramachandra, the Lord. Potana was so devoid of ego that he became the medium of divine poetic inspiration.

The Best of the Best, the Essence of All

In the chapter, "Vibhuti Yoga," Krishna proclaims his identity with the best and most exalted of all the sentient and insentient beings in creation. It is no doubt true that Krishna is omnipresent, that he pervades the whole universe. Nevertheless, he identifies himself only with the best, the foremost, and the highest of various entities, both animate and inanimate: "I am the Himalayas among mountains, the Ganges among rivers,

Vasudeva (Krishna's father) among the Yadava lineage, the sacred fig among trees, the lion among beasts, the cow among cattle, the young sage Prahlada among the demons, the king cobra among snakes, and Garuda (divine bird) among the birds," Krishna declared, for he is the integral incarnation of superlative excellence and perfection.

Krishna declares that he is the *prana* or

life-force in all beings. The head is of great importance for man, and the body comes next. But body and head are not enough for man, as there must be *prana* to keep the body and head functioning.

Thus, Krishna pro-

claims, "I am the *prana* in all living things." He is the *prana* for the physical body, just as desire for liberation is the *prana* or life-force for all spiritual endeavors, of which differentiating the real from the unreal is like the head, and tolerance (*sama*), endurance (*dama*), and other virtues, like the body.

Krishna also states in the "Vibhuti Yoga" that He is **light** (*jyoti*), **prosperity** (*aishwarya*), **courage** (*dhairya*), and **bliss** (*ananda*). The divine utterances of Krishna should inspire [all] to perform right actions in their daily lives. God manifests himself as divine effulgence, and we must therefore make optimum use of the divine light of wisdom. On the physical plane, too, we must ensure that the body is kept healthy by well-illuminated and clean surroundings.



*Courage or dhairya is also a
divine vibhuti. True courage
is the dhairya that comes from
the practice of dharma and as a
benediction from God.*

Divine Vibhuti of Prosperity and Courage

Prosperity also indicates a divine vibhuti or attribute of the Lord. Therefore, one should try to uphold the divine nature of prosperity by spending one's money and wealth properly, and for the promotion of dharma. Misuse of money is evil and leads to sin. If today's students develop evil thoughts and habits, it is because they have too much money to spend. You should be careful in your spending and curtail your expenditures. If you require ten rupees to meet your needs, ask for only nine rupees from your parents. On the other hand, if you ask for fifty rupees, you will be spending only ten rupees rightfully and squandering away the other forty rupees, ruining yourself. You should regard money as being as precious as blood and use it with prudence. Only when you spend money properly, for the promotion of dharma, can it be regarded as *aiswarya*, or divine vibhuti—otherwise, it can only be considered as the devil's gift!

Courage or *dhairya* is also a divine vibhuti. True courage is the *dhairya* that comes from the practice of dharma and as a benediction from God. All other forms of courage, such as the courage based on physical prowess or on intellectual strength, are of no avail. Physical and mental strength, economic power, and public influence are like passing clouds.

The body is meant to enable man to perform sacred actions and to spend his time in such a manner that time, the ultimate destroyer, is itself destroyed by him. This transition to the deathless state is brought

about by spiritual evolution. Just as the minerals became the tree, the trees gave rise to animate life, and the lower animals evolved into man, man too should evolve further and become God.

Liberation or *mukti* is the attainment and experience of pure, unalloyed, and absolute bliss. Only ignorant people think that *mukti* is attained only after death or in some future life. This simplistic view implies a gross misconception of liberation. *Mukti* means freedom from bondage and implies an ascent from a lower state to a higher state. Thus liberation is the result of a process of transcendental evolution, by which the human becomes the Divine.

Your mother liberates you from the pangs of hunger by giving you food, and your doctor liberates you from the agony of disease with some medicine. These, however, cannot be examples of true liberation. Food and medicine relieve you only temporarily of pain. True liberation is attained when you merge with the Almighty and experience absolute bliss.

Will the snake die if you keep beating the anthill? Will the vices in man die if the body is punished? Does one become the knower of the Self merely by giving up food and water? How can the science of the Self be known, unless you know yourself? Therefore, first try to realize who you are.

You must know from where you have come and whither you are going. When you write a letter, you put on the envelope the "from" address and the "to" address and only then drop it in the mailbox. But if these addresses are missing from the envelope,

there is every likelihood of the letter finding its way to the wastebasket in the post office. Your life is like a postal envelope, and you must know the name of the sender as well as that of the addressee; otherwise, it will be lost in the dustbin of worldliness.

Thus, you must know where you have come from, what you are, and where you are going. In other words, you should comprehend your divine antecedents, your divine nature, and your divine destiny. You must strive to get back to the spiritual haven from which you have come. You have come from the Atma, you are essentially the Atma, and you must realize your identity with the Atma. Dedicate your faculties for the realization of the sublime truth of your divinity.

Spiritual Knowledge Is Essential

Man should realize that his relationships with his family and friends and all his worldly attachments are primarily based on the physical body. A man and his wife are strangers before they get married. The relationship between a husband and his wife does not exist prior to their marriage. Similarly no filial love could be there between a baby and its mother before the birth of the baby. Only after the baby is born does the relationship between the child and the mother arise. All such mundane bonds are ephemeral. The Atma or divinity that you really are knows no

parents or other relations. To realize the truth that you are the Atma, you must acquire spiritual knowledge. Secular knowledge is no doubt necessary to eke out one's living, but spiritual knowledge is essential, if the purpose of life is to be fulfilled.

Spiritual knowledge is comparable to the infinite ocean, and the various branches of secular knowledge are like rivers that ultimately merge in it. Spirituality enables an individual to harmonize the separate elements of his psyche into an integrated experience of the immanent divinity. Secular knowledge, on the contrary, has brought about the dehumanization and fragmentation of the human personality.

Here is a small illustration. Ten students specialize in different branches of medicine. One of them becomes an ophthalmologist and another, a cardiologist. A third becomes an ear-nose-throat (ENT) specialist. Like this, they become specialists in ten different fields. They acquire so much expertise in their respective fields that they cannot see a patient as a harmonious, integral personality and are unable to look after his general well-being. Each of them performs an operation by which the patient is cured of the ailment that falls within the scope of each doctor's own limited knowledge. But none of them can ensure, by himself, total health for the patient. All their specialization is directed



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merely for their own individual prosperity. [Thus] the vivisection of the human body into many parts for the purpose of medical attention is designed to promote the selfish interests of a few.

We have to recognize the divine macrocosmic principle that governs and regulates all microcosmic entities in the universe. When you see a piece of cloth in its entirety, you can tell that it is, say, a handkerchief. But if only portions of the piece of cloth are exposed to your gaze, how can you identify it and know for sure that it is a handkerchief? Thus, the prevailing tendency toward specialization in modern education is leading to the atomization of the human psyche.

“Why should you study and stuff your mind with all sorts of useless knowledge and then die in ignorance to be born again and again? Acquire the knowledge that will make you immortal,” said (the Telugu poet and social reformer) Vemana. You may be well-versed in worldly knowledge, but without knowledge of the Self, you will remain an ignoramus. Man searches in the world outside but fails to find his true self therein. ... Seek within, realize the Self, which resides there, and then experience the bliss of God.

Bliss and Sound Are Divine Vibhuti

Bliss or *ananda* is a divine vibhuti. That is why it is said, “Happiness is union with God.” Your true nature is bliss. Know this and be cheerful always. The mind that is morose harbors nothing but malice and jealousy. Divinity cannot reside in such unholy minds.

Cheerfulness is the first sign of spirituality. Therefore, strive to be happy always. Live in contentment and with cheer, and thereby qualify yourself for the experience of divinity, which is bliss supreme.

Sound (*sabda*) is also a vibhuti. Divinity is described as “*sabda Brahma mayi*,” or as being immanent in sound. Use the faculty of speech in a manner that is becoming of your divine status. Speak gently and softly. Do not let your tongue indulge in evil talk or revile others and misuse the God-given gift of speech.

Embodiments of love! ... By *vidya* (true education), you get *vinaya* (humility). Humility confers on you the deservedness by which you acquire wealth. Wealth you must put to use for the promotion of dharma, and this will lead to both material prosperity and spiritual upliftment. ...

Make your life meaningful by acquiring spiritual knowledge. Remember your great ancient heritage; revere your parents as the embodiments of God. Your mother and father are God for you. Do not cause them anguish, for then your children will surely cause you pain in your later life, as for everything in this world there is a reaction and a reflection. For the sacrifices they undertake for you and for your own future well-being, love your parents and serve them with devotion. Be good, do good, and see good—that is the way to God!

—Sri Sathya Sai Baba
Summer Showers 1979:30

SYMBOL OF DIVINITY

Traditionally vibhuti symbolizes divinity, which is obvious from the various ways that Easwara (Shiva or God) is described. One of these descriptions is that his entire body is smeared with greyish-white (sashivarnam) vibhuti. Sashivarnam stands for the color... neither pure white nor dark but a combination of these. This simply means that among the several strengths that Easwara possesses is the power of maya (illusion, a mixture of the real and the unreal).



Yet there is another significant meaning for vibhuti. What remains of the human body when burnt away is a small quantity of ash. The human body, consisting of different organs and senses, undertaking ever-so-many activities while alive, gets burnt away after death like a piece of firewood and reduced to a small quantity of ash. You can purify or transform any matter with fire; it all reduces ultimately to ash.

Vibhuti is a sacred substance, as its color or form does not change further. If you burn iron, it reduces to ash; if you burn wood, it reduces to ash; if you burn the human body, it reduces to ash; if you burn anything, it reduces to ash. Thus, ash is the ultimate substance, which does not change its form. When it is burnt, it still remains as ash. The one thing that remains permanent and does not change is ash.

This is the lesson one must learn and constantly remember. It is in this context that pundits take this ash in the name of the five elements and wear it in the center of their brow. This signifies that all the elements are equivalent to ash. What remains ultimately as an unchanging substance is ash, and this is why Easwara himself wears ash all over his body. Ash is the only substance symbolically equivalent to God, and that is the reason I create and give vibhuti to the devotees who come to me. This is to convey to them that ash is permanent and even liked by Easwara.

—Sri Sathya Sai Baba (*Summer Showers in Brindavan*, 1974-2:3)



Sai's Vibhuti

In this account from *Vision of the Divine* (1977), Dr. Eruch Fanibunda gives history and background on vibhuti and vibhuti manifestations, including personal experiences. Today, over thirty years later, such events continue to take place.



In his previous body at Shirdi, Baba used to maintain a fire in the *masjid* (Muslim house of worship), which has been kept alive to this day. From this fire, Baba used to give ash, or *udi*, as his special gift to devotees upon their departure from Shirdi, or for alleviating their physical and mental ills. Some of the lucky ones had the unique experience of hearing Baba sing his *udi* song:

Rumthe Rama, ao-ji, ao-ji!
 (Come, come, O playful Rama!)
Udia-on ki gonja, lao-ji lao-ji!
 (Bring, O bring sacks of vibhuti!)

In his present body, Baba materializes this ash or *vibhuti* (as it is known now) and uses it for the same purpose as he did before. Not only does he materialize this vibhuti by a mere circular movement of his hand, but also he distributes packets of vibhuti from small baskets to thousands of people on special occasions.

Once this author happened to be present in a room where the empty baskets were being replenished, and he noticed that they



“Vibhuti helps purify the mind, when used in conjunction with other spiritual disciplines. It produces a slow cure, but a steady and permanent one.”

were being filled from a large sack full of vibhuti packets. Truly, it was a “sack full of vibhuti.” On other occasions he has observed large cardboard cartons or wooden crates being used to contain the packets of vibhuti. Sometimes the words *Sri Sai Ram* are printed on these packets. The author has seen a few silver rings materialized by Baba, which not only bear the inscription *Sai Ram*, but also have an image of Shirdi Baba carved on them in bas-relief.

When Baba merrily sang his vibhuti song at Shirdi, he was more than likely foreshadowing his present incarnation as “Playful Rama.” [In years past, one could] witness the *vibhuti abhisheka* (ceremonial outpouring of ash) performed by Baba on Vijaya Dasami Day or Maha Shivaratri day at Prasanthi Nilayam. [At such times,] the full significance of Shirdi Baba’s song could not only be understood in the mind, but also felt in one’s being. The word *Rama* means *ananda*, that is, unconditional joy. During the vibhuti abhishekam, Baba [used to give] us an opportunity to derive *ananda*, or bliss, by witnessing his “playful Rama” or blissful form: for him, the cascading manifestation of pounds and pounds of vibhuti from an empty pot was but divine play. The author

experienced this bliss at Prasanthi Nilayam on many occasions, and this very same bliss draws millions from all over the world to this little heaven or *Vaikunta* on earth.

Real bliss is unconditional, just like love, and like love it comes forth from within one’s Self, unaffected by discomfort, hardships, or other environmental factors. As a matter of fact, when one is immersed in such bliss, external troubles have little or no effect on the individual, and the person’s heart itself becomes Vaikunta, which is also known as the place where there is no shadow of grief.

Properties of Vibhuti

This “playful” activity of the present “Rumthe Rama” is not confined only to his immediate physical presence. It reaches far over the oceans and across the continents, where the frames of Baba’s picture may produce showers of vibhuti in the homes of many devotees. The ash suddenly appears, more or less over the whole picture, or it may accumulate gradually in small mounds and build up to cover the picture, or it may appear as discrete, scattered dots.

The color is usually grey but may be red, pink, or yellow. To the touch, it is either satiny smooth or slightly gritty. The taste is

usually chalky but may be bitter or salty, and sometimes it produces a burning sensation. When it appears fresh, it emanates a peculiar but pleasing fragrance, unlike any other known odor, which at best can be described as “vibhuti fragrance.”

The ash accumulates on the picture frames up to a certain depth, and after that, any further accumulation simply falls down—hence, the popular saying, “vibhuti shower.” On some days these showers are more frequent, and at other times, less. However, there is nothing regular about these occurrences, and nobody can predict them in advance. Masses of vibhuti manifest on an unknown number of pictures around the world. What a magnificent play of majestic omnipresence, and of such colossal magnitude, too! This is not all. One also comes across picture frames that manifest droplets of a sweet tasting fluid, called *amrith*, or nectar.

In spite of such manifestations over the past many years, there is no fanfare, not a sound, not even a murmur—only a silent shower of his grace and ananda, a silent messenger from the depths of his silence to his devotee, reminding the devotee of renunciation and detachment—renunciation from the fruits of one’s actions and detachment from external objects.

The final end product of all material things in this ever-changing universe is dust, and vibhuti is a symbolic reminder of this end product. So, one has to dedicate all actions to the Lord and cease attachment to external objects. One’s vision must be directed from the external to the internal, that is to say,

from external gifts to the internal giver of gifts. This is the spiritual lesson that vibhuti imparts to all mankind.

There is another little-known aspect of the role played by vibhuti in one’s *sadhana* (spiritual practice). Fire or *agni* is a sacred symbol, used not only in many ancient Vedic rites of worship, but also as a symbol of purity among the followers of Zarathustra. Fire burns away ignorance and confers wisdom. The residue after the burning process is ash, and this ash is not only a symbol of purity but also of wisdom, because it teaches renunciation and detachment. In all Zoroastrian fire temples, devotees commonly apply this symbol of purity, from the sacred fire in the temple, to the forehead, in the form of a dot between the eyebrows. One offers unto the fire all one’s bitter thoughts, words, and deeds, and brings back from the fire only that which is pure—the ash. Then one may adorn oneself with that ornament of purity. This pure ash also serves as a reminder to see only purity in others. Baba has said:

Your recognition of purity in others brings into yourself a like amount of the purity you see in others. There are many ways to load your chariot with me. Seeing purity in all actions of others is wonderful to experience, but even more so is knowing that all actions, regardless of their kind, contain elements of purity.

When Baba materializes vibhuti for a devotee and asks him to eat it, he is literally pouring a “charge” of purity from his divine hands into that devotee.

Vibhuti's curative properties are well known to Sai devotees, particularly of the vibhuti coming directly from Baba's hand. Sometimes this vibhuti cures spontaneously by virtue of the divine grace and will (*sankalpa*) that accompany the dose.

The author has personal knowledge of a case of chronic threadworm infection that had resisted treatments for thirty years, which was finally eradicated by a single dose of vibhuti from Baba's hand.

Vibhuti may also affect a recipient indirectly, by curing the root cause of most modern ailments—the human mind. An impure mind is a diseased mind, which eventually affects the physical body. Anger, pride, envy, jealousy, hatred, greed, worry, ambition, fear, and so on take their toll on human lives through various diseases affecting the body, directly or indirectly.

Vibhuti helps purify the mind, when used in conjunction with other spiritual disciplines. It produces a slow cure, but a steady and permanent one. Actually, the physical cure, or the prevention of other ailments, is incidental and of secondary importance to the far superior, subtler benefit a person derives from being able to control the mind. For only then can he achieve freedom from bondage to birth and death.

Unlike modern pharmaceuticals, one does not have to pay heavily for obtaining the panacea of Sai's vibhuti. On the other hand, it is readily available to all those who need it. Just as a chemist increases the potency of common aspirin by combining it with phenacetin and caffeine; similarly, the potency of vibhuti can be increased

in practical life by combining it with the ingredients of duty and devotion. Peace of mind and security can only be assured by paying the premium of spiritual discipline and not by payment of worldly insurance premiums. Such are the properties of vibhuti.

Baba's Visiting Cards

Baba has declared that the various silent messengers of grace that he gives to his devotees are like "visiting cards" that help them to draw nearer to him. These "visiting cards" range in variety from vibhuti to sweets, fruits, flowers, images, idols, rings, medallions, books, rosaries, crucifixes, and many other objects. Baba has said:

If I had come among you as Narayana, with four arms holding the conch, the wheel, the mace, and the lotus, you would have kept me in a museum and charged a fee for those who sought my *darshan* (holy sight). If I had come as a mere man, you would not have respected my teaching or followed it for your own good. So I have to be in this human form with supra-human wisdom and powers.

The author came to know Baba in 1970, through such a vibhuti "visiting card." The author, having been an amateur magician in his student days, was well versed in the theory, art, and practice of conjuring. Back in 1954, he had even written a series of original methods and effects for conjuring, mind reading, and so on, for which he had been given the "Linking Ring" award by the

International Brotherhood of Magicians (USA). At the time, the author had also received training in hypnosis for dentistry.

So the author was keen to find out whether Baba was actually materializing various objects from thin air, as was claimed by his devotees, or if he was producing them by sleight of hand. Scores of gurus and babas in this country make a business of spirituality, using methods of conjuring to beguile and trap gullible people for their own selfish ends. The author was not going to be satisfied with secondhand reports. He wanted to experience these phenomena for himself and find out the truth.

One day Baba gave him the opportunity, although at that time, the author did not know that it was only through Baba's grace that he got such a unique opportunity in the first place. Armed with a camera, this skeptic arrived at Dharmakshetra, Baba's ashram in Andheri, a suburb of Bombay, where Baba was due to give darshan.

It was 9:15 in the morning, and Baba was due to arrive in a few minutes. The author was aghast to find about ten thousand people between him and the stage from where Baba was to give his darshan. The volunteers did not permit anyone to go near the stage, but by some good fortune, the author was able to make his way right up to the forefront and observe Baba closely. However, nothing was materialized by Baba that day in front of the author.

After the meeting, the author by chance encountered a relative of an old classmate, who offered to inform him if Baba were to visit any private homes where the author

could get a chance to observe Baba at close quarters. A few days later, the author was informed by telephone that Baba would be visiting the home of Mr. K. Munshis in Juhu that same afternoon, and an ex-employee of Mr. Munshis had offered to accompany the author.

About a dozen people were waiting in the sitting room of the house. Baba was due to come out of the inner apartments after a little while. The author stood unobtrusively in one corner of the room. Baba entered the room, and everybody stood up. He talked to various people about their personal problems. Everyone was elbowing and pushing each other to get close to Baba. However, Baba came and stood near the author—so near that the author was almost touching Baba's left side.

By this time, the author's practiced eye had already given Baba's gown the once over. Nothing was detected. On the contrary, the author found Baba to be a most gracious person. Someone from the crowd asked for vibhuti. This was the moment the author had been waiting for. Baba pulled up his right sleeve, almost to the elbow, and in the process, turned over his right hand. The author could see that there was nothing in the palm. Quickly, the hand went round in circles a few times, and vibhuti appeared between Baba's fingers, which were partly closed to hold the vibhuti. The vibhuti was given to some people.

The author wished then that Baba would materialize some more ash, so that he might also get a little bit of it for examination. Lo and behold! Baba's hand went round and

round a second time, and more vibhuti appeared from nowhere. This time, the author held out his hand and received his first “visiting card.” Immediately the author could see and understand, based on his prior experience, that the vibhuti had been materialized without any sleight of hand or trickery. The author did not require any further demonstrations from Baba to be convinced that Baba possessed supra-human powers, for which the author had no explanation to offer, and still has none.

Transcending Worldly Science

As the author drove home, a distance of fifteen miles, he held the vibhuti clutched firmly in his right hand. This tangible reminder prompted a train of thoughts. Ever since his student days, the author had been trained to think scientifically and to apply strictly rational scientific methods for research in his own field of work, which involved most tools of modern biological science.

That day, however, in the being of Baba, the author had found a person who had created matter by his will alone. Baba did not use any sophisticated physical tools or processes for this manifestation; his word or will—call it what you may—sufficed for the change or precipitation of matter, from his *chitta* or consciousness. This demonstration of *sankalpa* or will was not a physical thing bound by laws of time and space. Therefore, one might conclude that he who uses his will in this manner must also transcend the barriers of time and space. Note: *That which transcends time and space cannot be*

explained or understood by modern scientific methods, tools, or thought disciplines born of the five senses, which are themselves conditioned by the limitations of natural laws governing time and space.

Thus, the author arrived that day at a useful conclusion: Baba cannot be explained by science. He lives in a physical body that is subject to laws of time and space, but he can transcend these laws at any time, at will.

How then can one come to know even a fraction of what Baba is? The obvious answer is to discover and know one’s inner self, the inner consciousness. Only a study of one’s own inner self can reveal and help one to understand a little bit of what Baba is.

For many years the author had been interested in spiritual matters, and after reading Baba’s books, he intuitively knew that at last he had met the one who could clarify his doubts and dispel his ignorance about God. By a mere wave of his hand, Baba had shown to the author the limitations of scientific thought processes, and the correct perspective in which to view this world’s scientific achievements.

By the same token, Baba had proved to the author His fantastic omnipotence. One has only to realize that the universe is also matter, and if Baba could project and create vibhuti from his own self, then nothing could prevent him from doing the same for any other form of matter. Fantastic, but true. That is the author’s experience.

—Dr. Eruch B. Fanibunda
Vision of the Divine, pp. 3-7

The Wave of the Hand

Even as a child, Baba had the miraculous power of getting things from “nowhere.” He surprised his playmates by taking peppermints and sweets from empty bags. In spite of his requests to keep this a secret, the news spread among the elders, and when they inquired about it, Baba remained silent. Later, when pressed by his friends, he said that a certain angel obeyed his slightest wish. This was, of course, to ward off further queries, because the villagers were satisfied by such an answer. They began to admire him as a specially blessed boy, to be watched with care and treated with respect.

Even at school Baba helped many classmates with pieces of rubber or pencils, which he materialized by a wave of the hand. When any of them complained of an illness or pain, Baba “got” green leaves “from the Himalayas,” as he told the boys, and made them chew them and swallow the juice. Some elders called it magic and even characterized it as black magic, warning the children that they should not have anything to do with Sathyanarayana.

It was only after “the announcement” [at age 14, of being Sai Baba] that Baba regularly “took” vibhuti and began giving it for a variety of purposes to all who came to him. Baba has often spoken of

the significance of this vibhuti. Since it is materialized out of nothing, and since the ash is specifically associated with Shiva, it is reverentially referred to by devotees as *Kailasa vibhuti*, the sacred ash of Shiva, who resides on Mount Kailasa. It is called *vibhuti* since it endows one with prosperity; *bhasma* (“ashes”) because it burns away all sins; *bhasitam* (“brightened”) because it increases one’s spiritual splendor; *kshara* (“destruction”) since it removes danger; and *raksha* (“protector”) for it serves as an armor against the machinations of evil spirits. These are all ways that vibhuti is praised in the Brihad Jabala Upanishad, one of the ancient spiritual texts.

Baba says that vibhuti is also a constant reminder of the evanescence of the body, which ultimately is reduced in cremation to a potful of ash.

Thousands of devotees and visitors have witnessed the miracle of vibhuti. It is indeed an inexplicable, ultra-scientific wonder! It is produced so casually, informally, gracefully, quietly, and naturally that one might well miss the significance of the blessing. The right palm of Baba’s hand is held down at a slight angle; a wave or two occurs, scarcely noticeable, and the fingers close, to arrest the fall of the vibhuti that has

already materialized. The wonder product is handed to the recipient, as a token of Baba's blessings, and applied to the forehead. At a minimal rate of one pound per day, the quantity of vibhuti thus produced, "out of the elements," by his will, must now have reached the astounding figure of over five tons!*

Every idea has an inherent tendency to manifest itself in physical form. It all depends *on the will*, whether it is human or divine. When Baba wills, it is done!

Vibhuti may also be placed on the tongue or mixed with water and drunk as a specific remedy against illness. It may also be carried as a talisman. A devotee from South America wrote that every night she went to bed with a packet of vibhuti in her palm. Invariably she dreamed that her palms were resting at the feet of Lord Krishna. It is difficult to enumerate all the curative and alleviatory purposes to which recipients put the vibhuti that Baba produces by a wave of the hand.

The vibhuti given is of innumerable kinds, each suited to the purpose for which it has been created. Sometimes it is in the

shape of a hard cube, or often a powder—fine, grainy, or flaky. It may be fragrant or pungent, salty, sweet, or tasteless, white or blackish, or of any intermediate shade.

Sometimes, when Baba waves his hand, it materializes—container and all! Once

a person left for England for higher studies, and Baba gave him vibhuti in a silver container with the additional blessing, "This will never become exhausted!" His will, thousands of miles away, can replenish the ash in such a container by a predated expression of his



desire. When the vibhuti is to be taken as a medicine for a long period, such as during pregnancy, Baba may ask the person to bring a receptacle, and by a light tap on the surface, the vessel fills with vibhuti. When he [used to] gather his devotees on the sands, as at the Chitravati River, the river bed of Kaivalya at Venkatagiri, the beach at Kovalam in Kerala, at Kanyakumari in Tamil Nadu, or on the river Godavari, Baba would dig into the sand playfully with his fingers. He would extract a huge cube of vibhuti hiding there and distribute it to all present. He might take the sand itself in both his hands and pour it onto a plate. That which fell on the plate would be not sand, but fine, fragrant vibhuti.

*If this estimate was current in 1969, one can imagine how much vibhuti has been produced during the decades since then. —Ed.

Baba's entire physical frame seems [at times] to be suffused with vibhuti. In processions on Vijayadasami and other festival days, thousands have clearly seen fine vibhuti falling from Baba's brow onto his eyelids and cheeks. When he seemingly leaves the body and goes to save his devotees, vibhuti often emanates from his face, mouth, thumbs, toes, or forehead.

There have been instances in which devotees have dreamed that Baba came to them and applied vibhuti on their brow, and found upon awakening that the ash was actually there! Some have dreamed that Baba put vibhuti upon their tongue, and when they awakened, they found vibhuti in their mouth! Baba signifies his presence at the residences of his devotees by scattering the tell-tale vibhuti on the floor of the shrine where his picture is kept. When Baba presents a vision of himself to save someone from an impending calamity, he [may administer] vibhuti to them to initiate a cure.

Once during a Dasara festival, a certain visitor from Telengana received an urgent telegram from home, informing him that his father-in-law had had a stroke and that his condition had created anxiety. Baba asked him not to worry. A similar wire came the next day, and Baba agreed to his going alone, leaving his wife to watch the festivities, even though she was the daughter of the stricken man and the most needed at his bedside.

When the son-in-law left, Baba gave him vibhuti to apply to the father-in-law's forehead, materializing it by a wave of the hand. At about eight o'clock the next

evening, Baba was discussing the timings of the trains by which the son-in-law was proceeding.

Then, quite suddenly, Baba sat up and said, "It has all gone wrong. The train won't take him fast enough. He will not reach the place before 9:00 p.m. Oh! What a pity!" Then with a wink of the eye, Baba "left" the body and was "gone." He was "away" for about half an hour. When he "returned," he expressed great happiness that he himself had applied the vibhuti to the sick man in Telangana.

"Did you use the same vibhuti that the son-in-law was carrying with him?" he was asked.

"Yes, and you will know that when he returns," he replied. "Ask him, and he will say that the packet was empty when he went to the sick man."

And so it was. Upon returning, the son-in-law related the story of his discomfiture—how he had at first been blamed for being careless; how those present had rubbed their fingers over the folded paper in order to collect at least the tracings of the holy vibhuti; and how they had failed in that desperate endeavor!

—N. Kasturi

From *Sathyam Sivam Sundaram*, Vol. 1

2008 Festival Dates - India

March 6, Thursday: Mahashivaratri This most auspicious night is celebrated with continuous devotional singing from sunset till dawn, in full contemplation and adoration of God, so that the vagaries of the mind can be totally subdued and transcended to attain realization of the Atman.

April 7, Monday: Ugadi New Year's Day for the people of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Maharashtra is thought of as the day upon which Krishna left the body, signaling the change of *yugas* or ages, and the day upon which Brahma created the universe.

April 13, Sunday: Tamil New Year

April 14, Monday: Sri Rama Navami and Vishu This occasion celebrates the birth of Rama, the avatar of the Treta Age, and Vishu, the Keralese New Year's Day.

May 6, Tuesday: Easwaramma Day May 6 each year commemorates the anniversary of the passing of Easwaramma, mother of the physical body of the avatar of the Kali Age.

May 19, Monday: Buddha Purnima or Vaisakh Purnima, observed by Buddhists worldwide, commemorates Gautama Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and attainment of Nirvana, each of which is said to have taken place on the auspicious full moon day in May.

2008 Retreat Dates - USA

Region 1 (Northeast): May 23–25, 2008, at Russell Sage College Campus, Troy, NY. Contact: Cheruvu S. Murthy, saicheruvu@hotmail.com or 845-227-8567.

Region 4 (Mid-Central): Only Love for God Is True Love. May 16–18, 2008 at Camp Wyman, near St. Louis, MO. Contact: Jack Feely, jfeely2ta-stl.com or 314-862-1254.

Region 5 (North Central): Aug. 29–Sept. 1, 2008 (Labor Day weekend), at Camp Henry Horner, 26710 W. Nippersink Road, Ingleside, IL 60041. Contact: Vijay Sai Reddy, Regional Communications Coordinator, 847-452-2777 or info@sathyasaicenters.org.

Region 9 (Southwest), Arizona: Sri Sathya Sai Baba Amrith Retreat, May 23–25, 2008, at Camp Chapel Rock, 1131 Country Club Drive, Prescott, AZ 86303. Speaker: Gene Massey. Contact: Ramya Kumar, 978-985-7835 or ramyak@hotmail.com.

Region 9 (Southwest), New Mexico: Land of Enchantment Retreat, Aug. 29–Sept. 1, 2008, at the Bodhi Mandala Zen Center, Jemez Springs, NM. Speakers: Leonardo Gutter, Wendy and Jeremy Hoffer. Contact: Elaine Hausman, 505-660-0283 or ehausman@rockridge.biz.

Region 6 (Pacific North): Aug. 30–Sept. 1, 2008, at the conference center at Silver Falls State Park, Oregon (<http://silverfallsconference.com>). Contact: Ram Pochincherla 503-531-0490 (h), 503-261-3452 (c), or rampochincherla@yahoo.com.



OPPORTUNITIES FOR MEDICAL SERVICE AT SRI SATHYA SAI HOSPITALS

Om Sri Sai Ram, Dear Brothers and Sisters,

This letter is to keep you informed of the ongoing opportunities for medical service at the Sri Sathya Sai General Hospital in Puttaparthi and the Sri Sathya Sai Institutes of Higher Medical Sciences in Puttaparthi and Bangalore.

With the Divine Blessings of our beloved Bhagavan, overseas medical personnel have been serving at the above hospitals on a regular basis. At present, Bhagavan has blessed the physicians to do clinical work, the nurses in select fields to engage in teaching, and the physiotherapists to work as necessary from time to time.

All personnel are required to work for at least two weeks. They must hold a current license to practice independently in their countries. Fluency in English is a requisite, and knowledge of Telugu is an asset.

Since several overseas medical personnel are interested in these opportunities to serve, space is limited, and applicants may need to be flexible when arranging service dates. For further information, please contact Dr. Venkat Sadanand at v.sadanand@utoronto.ca, or by phone using the USA number, 312-320-2818.

We are grateful to Bhagavan for blessing us with these opportunities to serve with love.

Lovingly, in the service of Sai,
Narendranath Reddy, MD
Chairman, International Medical Committee
Director, Sri Sathya Sai World Foundation



Center Seva

A Roundup of Recent Service Projects around the U.S.



Region 2: Organizing Medical Supplies

Washington D.C. Area Sri Sathya Sai centers in the Mid-Atlantic region participate regularly in a service project with CrossLink International. Sai Centers of Washington D.C., Fairfax, and Loudon in the Washington D.C. metropolitan area join together on the second Saturday of every month for the unpacking, sorting, shelving, and repackaging of donated medical supplies, prior to CrossLink's charitable trips to impoverished areas.

The CrossLink organization ships medical materials to relieve suffering around the world, supporting an international humanitarian network of doctors, nurses, and missionaries working in the US and in over 120 developing countries.

Region 4: Senior Companionship

Belleville, Illinois At first glance, it appears to be party time. About thirty people are gathered in a big hall, seated around tables in groups of four or five. A game of bingo is in progress: the hosts announce the numbers animatedly from their microphones while the players anxiously wait for the winning numbers. The party seems complete, with snacks and drinks being served by the men and women who are apparently the hosts.

A closer look, however, reveals that most of the players in the room are senior citizens. Some of them are in wheelchairs; others are connected by oxygen tubes to ventilators. These are the residents of the Calvin Johnson Nursing Home in Belleville, Illinois.

SAI SERVICE: LOVE IN ACTION

This game of bingo, organized by the Sri Sathya Sai Baba Center of Southern Illinois, has been held on the fourth Saturday of every month since 1999. About a dozen devotees make it a point to be at the nursing home on the appointed day each month, to spend time uplifting the spirits and morale of the residents.

The outcome of this particular project is evident in the faces of the nursing home residents. For one full hour, from 3:00 to 4:00 p.m., their illnesses and discomforts are forgotten. They are engrossed in the game, and the best part is, of course, the prizes. The joy in their faces when they win prizes is heartwarming, and the volunteers are as enthusiastic as the players themselves, keeping busy distributing prizes, cheering the players, and serving snacks. The game finally ends, and the party winds up with a “Happy Birthday” to Michelle, one of the residents of the nursing home.

As Craig Seipp, another resident, puts it, “The project gives people a chance to unwind, to relax.” He is fulsome in his praise for the volunteers, saying they are “warm and giving people, and it feels like one big family.”

Typical of Sri Sathya Sai Baba’s projects, the identity of the volunteers is not emphasized to the residents. Rather, the service itself is the most important aspect, exemplifying Baba’s message, “Service to man is service to God.” The service coordinator of the Southern Illinois Center, Nitesh Patel, is a man of few words. But he, along with all the Sai volunteers, tries to live up to this ideal.

St. Louis, Missouri, West County Devotees from the Sathya Sai Baba Center of Saint Louis, West County, visited senior residents at the Delmar Gardens Nursing Home in August 2007. They played bingo with the seniors and served juice and snacks. The fifty or so seniors look forward to these visits, not just for the enjoyment of playing bingo and winning prizes but also for the loving human contact. Children of the devotees bring a lot of joy and youthful spirit, and the seniors seem very happy to spend time around them.

During this visit, a senior resident, who spoke only Chinese, had trouble communicating with those present. She formed a special bond with one of the devotees’ daughters, and very soon the two were speaking in the language of the heart. Toward the end of the visit, the resident insisted on sharing her bingo prizes with her newfound daughter, and the hug they exchanged filled the hearts



and souls of those who witnessed this loving human connection.

The program concluded with sing-along music. Music moves even those who have retreated into an unintelligible corner of the mind due to illnesses such as Alzheimer's, and one finds seniors singing along as some memory stirs inside them. At the conclusion, one of the visiting family members thanked the devotees and expressed to them that she had never before witnessed the presence of love as when the Sai group came to serve. The devotees humbly accepted her thanks and said to themselves, "Swami, this one's for you!"



Region 7: Blind and Low-Vision Olympics

Elk Grove, California For the second straight year, the Sathya Sai Baba Center of Elk Grove, California, provided volunteers for the Northern California Blind and Low-Vision Olympics. This annual event, held in early fall at the track practice field of California State University, Sacramento, provides an opportunity for youth up to age eighteen to highlight their athletic abilities despite vision handicaps. Modifications are made to each sporting event to address the needs of low-vision and blind participants.

This year a total of forty-one blind or low-vision youth competed in the Olympics. Eighteen Sai center members helped out, including five SSE students. Sai members led the participating youth to the 50-yard dash, 100-yard dash, shot put, and javelin throw events, measuring distances, filling out their result scores, and awarding medals. The day's service also included all aspects of cleanup after the event.



Service for Transformation and Purification

Before embarking on a service project, one must introspect and examine his equipment for the sadhana—whether his heart is full of selfless love, humility, and compassion; whether his head is full of intelligent understanding and knowledge of the problem and its solution; whether his hands are eager to offer the healing touch; and whether he can gladly spare and share time, energy, and skill to help others in dire need. The candidate for this spiritual activity has to avoid egotism, exhibitionism, and favoritism.

—Sri Sathya Sai Baba (SSS 19:25, Nov. 21, 1986)

Southfield, Michigan As a center, the service we carry out is for our own purification and spiritual transformation. It helps us control our ego, creates a sense of humility, and instills feelings of love and joy in our hearts. With these feelings we are able to experience the oneness with God we are always striving for. Our service activities take place both at the center and off-site.

Correctional facility visits: A few people go to a number of correctional facilities in our area and visit inmates. One of the inmates we visit is originally from India and was incarcerated shortly after arriving in this country seven years ago. Recently, one of our center members sponsored this inmate's mother to come to this country from India, so she could visit her son for the first time in seven years. The ladies of our center volunteered to accommodate her in their homes, as well as provide her with

transportation to and from the facility. When she first arrived, she was very frightened and disoriented; however by the end, just looking at her face, the shining love was limitless. All the ladies who helped her have created a loving relationship with the family. Now that she has returned to India, we continue to visit her son as well as keep in touch with her, giving her updates.

Food service projects: Once every month we go to the Gleaners food bank to package food items and toiletries. These packed kits are then delivered to needy people.

We actually have two projects related to the Sisters of Charity Soup Kitchen. One food service project takes place on the first, third, and fifth Sundays every month. We make sandwiches and send these along with vegetables and other food items, to the Sisters of Charity soup kitchen. Then, on the last

SAI SERVICE: LOVE IN ACTION

Saturday of the month, we go to the soup kitchen and cook and serve a vegetarian meal to all attendees. In addition, recently we have been holding health education sessions.

Service Day: The second Sunday of every month is devoted only to service. This consists of both on-site and off-site activities. On-site, we make hospital gowns, quilts, lap blankets, scarves, and bags for holding personal items. Once completed, we provide these to needy people as well as to patients at the Karmanos Cancer Institute. We also have provided the cancer patients with greeting cards, made by our children, containing cheery messages, such as Swami's sayings.

Our off-site activity involves visiting a nursing home, sometimes accompanied by our SSE children. Here we converse, play games, and otherwise keep the residents company. On a few occasions we have performed English music programs for the residents. Seeing the happiness on their faces when we arrive just fills us with happiness and joy.

Two recently added projects are giving blood donations (liquid love) and visiting Alpha House, a facility that provides needy families with temporary living quarters for up to six months and helps them become self-sufficient, including finding jobs and homes. We go there with the SSE children and keep the families company, as well cook them a meal.

With Swami's grace, we have been able to start these activities and keep them going for many years. We pray that he will allow us to continue these and to add others, and that by partaking in loving service, we can live in the presence of our beloved Lord. We are also hoping, with Sai's grace, to add a project where we can work with an elementary school to help teach children computer skills, music, and a foreign language—and that this eventually becomes an Educare program.

—SSBC of Southfield, Michigan



Region 8 Free Medical Screening, Oxnard, California

With the divine grace of our dear Lord, we were given the opportunity to serve a total of 360 needy people who came for medical screening in Oxnard, on October 21, 2007. Besides medical services, a total of 449 food packages, each containing ten pounds of rice and beans, five pounds of sugar, one packet of cereal, and a half gallon of cooking oil, were also handed out to those who came.

Even with 80 mile-per-hour gusts of parching wind that prevailed from the very early hours on this day, unusually high temperatures, and devastating fires that were rapidly spreading throughout our region, the love in our hearts to serve the needy was amply rewarded.

Below are summaries of services provided that day: 105 males, 200 females, 55 children (360 total). Finger-stick blood draws, 259 (patients received blood tests for glucose, hemoglobin, and/or cholesterol levels); primary

care, 272; pediatrics, 51; vision screening, 253; dental screening, 218; Pap smears, 81; mammograms, 92 (along with education on breast self-examination); psychotherapy, 38; nutritional education, 140; social services, 187; and sign-ups for state medical insurance for low income persons, 149.

Sai doctors, along with the Lions Club, provided services for vision screening. The Lions Club referred 91 patients to their own clinic, for further follow-up, including the supplying of free eyeglasses.

As we had prepared 600 packages of food, the remaining 151 packages were delivered for distribution to the needy through the Arcadia/Glendale centers' food bank and the Santa Barbara Mission.

—**Rohan Balasuriya**

Service Coordinator, Region 8
Photography by Victoria Hargreaves



focus on devotion

Study Circle: Support in Personal Transformation

In our center study circle we have been talking a lot about detachment and surrender to God. As with many things that Swami teaches us, it sounds simple, but in practice can be quite challenging. Between meetings we practice one of Swami's teachings, then we discuss our experiences at the next study group.

Recently we have been paying closer attention to our attachments. This practice, simply put, is an exercise in noticing when we want something to be or turn out a specific way. Our intention is to notice our attachments without judgment, so that we develop greater self-knowledge and understanding. Many in our group found that through identifying an attachment, it often would release, especially when non-judgment was present.

Shedding light on the desire for a certain outcome seems to be half the battle. Offering the attachment/desire to Swami is the next step. At first, that simply involves the mechanics of stating this as our intention. For example, "Swami, I offer you my desire for chocolate." Then, thinking and feeling the release of our desire to Swami comes next.

It takes practice, lots of practice. Some things are easier to let go of than others. Swami, our loving teacher, seems ever ready

with an abundant array of opportunities to help us identify our attachments and surrender them to him.

Setting the intention to surrender all to God and to be detached from the outcome of our actions is very powerful. When I have the experience of true surrender, I feel light and content. Even when I am conscious of feeling attached to certain outcomes at work and in my private life, I can set the intention to surrender. Swami, in his love, helps me let go—at times through gentle grace, and other times through pain and tears.

The intention to surrender is in itself a prayer to God for help in this important personal transformation. The more I let go and trust that Swami is taking care of every detail of my life, the more I surrender, and the less I worry. Interestingly enough, when I let go and allow God to take complete charge, everything works out better and more smoothly than I could ever manage on my own.

Sometimes when I am completely at a loss as to what to do, I say to Swami, "Please Lord, take charge and take care of every detail." Then I continue to do the work I'm directed to do, and like magic, everything falls into place. As silly as it may sound, I still revert to believing that I need to take care of

things, and I find myself interfering in God's work. This tends to create stressful drama and turmoil for me—until I recognize, “Ah yes, there's that desire for things to be the way I think they should be.” When I let go and surrender my actions to God, peace returns. It feels like a dance of *attachment, detachment, surrender*. One, two, three; one,

two, three—we dance on and on. I am so grateful to have the support of my Sai family and our study group discussions to talk it all through, and laugh, and learn, and dance together.

—Corinna Dilts
Atascadero, California

Shivarathri

Controlling the Senses

The significance of Shivaratri is that it is a time when one can get closest to Bhagavan, because the moon, which represents the mind, has shed fifteen of its aspects, and is about to shed the last or sixteenth aspect. The ancient sages, who explored the link between numbers and the divine, found that the letters in the name Shivaratri came to eleven, which was the number of the dark forces called rudras (agents that lead to crying). The rudras cause tears because they turn people's minds away from God and toward evil. The eleven rudras enter one's intellect and turn one's desires toward worldly things, thereby giving rise to attachments, hatreds, and sensual pursuits. The sages declared that whoever can keep the rudras in check on the sacred day of Shivaratri will be able to experience divinity. This means that controlling the senses is the primary requisite for realizing the Divine and attaining liberation.

Control of the senses is not easy. Even an evolved person like Arjuna confessed to Sri Krishna that sense-control was extremely difficult. The sages knew this well from their own experience. Hence, they suggested that even if control of the senses was not possible all the time, it should be practiced at least on sacred days like Shivaratri. If one has nothing to do, the mind wanders in all directions. Hence the sages prescribed continuous absorption in thoughts of God on Shivaratri night. Repetition of the name of God and meditation on his glories can keep the mind away from other trivialities and promote control of the senses. . . . The vigil on Shivaratri night means concentrating one's thoughts on the sacred, the pure, the beautiful, and the glorious form of the Divine.

—Sri Sathya Sai Baba
SSS 19:04, March 8, 1986

The Question of Dating

Dating is a difficult and controversial subject by nature. We have talked with young adults from various countries, and many are troubled and confused over this issue. Not only are the young adults confused, but so are some of their coordinators. They write me and ask, “What does Swami say about dating?” This question has been asked by more than one young adult coordinator. In response, I would like to share with you Swami’s teachings on the subject, as well as some of my experience.

Swami says, *In the modern world, youth should know the nature of true love. Many from abroad mix with persons of the opposite sex, calling them “boyfriend” and “girlfriend.” If you really love each other, you must get married and not continue living as “friends.”*

A few years back, a foreign youth was sitting under a tree with a crestfallen face. He was just in his late teens, and when questioned by Swami, he said that his second wife had deserted him, and he was anxiously thinking of his child that she bore. If, at this age, he had worries, imagine what would happen when he became older?

Some young people, even before they are twenty years of age, get married, divorced, and re-marry again, and get separated from wife and child, too, and later feel sorry for

themselves. They do not realize the value of human life, which is both rare and sacred.

(World Youth Conference, July 17, 1997)

Dating Today

Let us characterize the term dating. Dating today does not mean a coy look, a kiss on the hand, a box of chocolates, flowers, and chaperones. Dating today is much more than holding hands.

In a young adult workshop on relationships and marriage, I asked the question, “Why do you want to date?” A young adult male said, “I want to live with a female before marriage to make sure that we are compatible.” Then I asked this young man, “What happens after you live with someone and then discover that you are not compatible?” He responded, “I’ll find someone else. There will always be another bus that comes along.” What a revealing statement.

I then asked, “What do you think happens to the woman whom you no longer want?” The reply was, “Someone else will come along.” I asked the group of young men, “Does anyone have another answer to this question.” There was silence.

Then I asked the young women, “What happens to the woman who was rejected?” The women in unison responded without

hesitation, “She will be very hurt.” It seems that women identify more with their feelings, and their reason for dating is many times entirely different than the men’s. Again, most women tend to look for a commitment, a marriage partner, someone to share their life with who is trustworthy.

Both sexes, of course, have feelings. If a man who loves deeply is rejected instead of being the one who rejects, he also feels hurt. But young men are not always in touch with their feelings, which may be overshadowed by their hormonal drives.

Young women many times are looking for a one-and-only marriage partner, while young men tend to be looking for a partner, not necessarily a lifetime commitment.

Recent data from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth said:

“Among unmarried, non-cohabiting respondents ages 19-35, 41 percent of men agreed that they would like to live with someone before getting married, compared to 18 percent of women. Moreover, men’s approval of cohabitation appeared to depend less on marriage plans than women’s. A greater percentage of men than women agreed that ‘it would be all right for me to live with someone without being married, even if we had no interest in marriage.’”

“Cohabitation has become an integral part of the courtship process, and even adolescents are expressing an interest in cohabiting at some point in the future.” (Manning, Longmore, and Giordano, 2005)

This is not surprising if you look at the content of advertising, movies, television, and so on. What do you see? You usually

see one male surrounded by more than one female. It is rare to see the reverse. But who knows? The more that today’s women move toward behaving like men, the more they adopt their behaviors.

So instead of women bringing the morality of men upward, they have taken on more of the negative habits that in the past were ascribed to men, such as going to bars for “happy hour,” smoking, drugs, staying out all night, drinking, and sexual misconduct. They also dress and flirt conspicuously to attract male attention.

Media content and programming cannot and should not be discounted by young adults or parents. The “progressive” attitude portrayed in the media of seeking pleasure at any expense, “to do whatever one wishes,” is increasingly repeated in most societies. Many, especially the young, are not being taught discrimination, nor are they adept at identifying the messages coming from the media and how these messages affect them. They just automatically react to—and eventually identify with—what they see and hear. They accept whatever their peers are doing without realizing the consequences of their actions.

I have asked various young adult groups to hold debates on the pros and cons of dating. The results have been almost identical everywhere.

Young adults list the pros as: attraction, companionship, and being able to test compatibility before committing to marriage.

They list the following cons: feelings of guilt; risk of emotional injury, rejection, or unwanted pregnancy; educational

distraction; fear of being hurt again; and sexually-transmitted disease.

The pros and cons of dating and the discussions in our workshops with young adults have been repeated around the world and with the same responses. Young people are all getting programmed by the same type—or should I say *hype*—of immorality. The question I have to ask is, “Where is the power of discrimination in all of this?”

What Else Does

Swami Say about Dating?

Swami does not usually speak on this issue publicly, but in private he makes some very clear statements. In an interview with some American youth, Swami said, *If you see a girl that you are attracted to, talk to her parents and inquire if you can marry her.* This advice to me implies no dating.

At the risk of sounding unrealistic, I would seriously offer an alternate suggestion: if you are interested in someone and wish to get to know each other, have a parent or responsible adult chaperone present. Definitely don’t ask your friends to be chaperones, because they will not give you the protection that you need. Why not involve your family? If you go on a date chaperoned by your mother and/or father, you will also get a chance to see how the dating partner responds to your parents or chaperone.

I encourage you young people to go ahead and have good, healthy, fun, but in the company of your families. Only if there is an ulterior motive, will you seek to avoid a chaperone. But be aware that dating without a chaperone is a step toward losing

your purity. Today you cannot afford to be naïve and think nothing will happen to you. It simply doesn’t work that way any more. Think this through carefully. If you date alone, the deck is stacked against you. You run the serious risk of intimacy proceeding further than you intend it to, and you are placing yourselves in harm’s way.

A new study on premarital sex has been published in the peer-reviewed journal, *Public Health Reports*, by Lawrence Finer, Director of Domestic Research of the Guttmacher Institute. Dr. Finer observes that “over the past decade, increasing amounts of advocacy, findings, and programmatic efforts have focused on encouraging Americans to abstain from intimacy until they marry. Based upon a study on the probability-sampled National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), a set of nationally-representative surveys conducted in 1982, 1988, 1995, and 2002, showed that by age twenty, seventy-five percent of respondents had had premarital sex. In short, the answer is no—the abstinence until marriage message is not taking root.”

Swami’s Advice

Once in the early 1990s Swami spoke to the students in Brindavan before they went home for the summer holidays. Robert, my husband, was inside Swami’s house and heard the following:

When you go home you will be asked to sing bhajans at many aunties’ homes because you know all the latest bhajans. But sing in your home and at the Sai center. Don’t go anywhere else.

If you are living with a person without a commitment of marriage, you are living an illusion. If you are living with a person who is promising marriage but without a commitment, you are being told a lie.

He continued, *First you go to sing bhajans, and you see a girl, you look. The second time you go, you introduce yourself to the girl. The third time you go, you slip her a note asking if you can take her to the movie. You take her to the movie . . . and then there is crying in Swami's interview room. Her parents want your parents to give permission for you to marry the girl.*

Swami has just described the entire evolution of dating. This story is his absolute, clear advice on dating, and it is for all ages. Not only young people, but many divorced couples face the same situation and these same consequences.

Even in our Sai centers, men and women must remain separate. It is essential when men and women work together on a project that you make sure that you are in a group. We must be aware that among devotees, all of us have different degrees of self-control, and temptation can be present. There is a constant need for all of us to observe the guidelines for behavior that Swami has given us, regardless of age.

Swami also told this story: *A husband brought home a businessman for dinner and introduced him to his wife. Several weeks later, the husband brought home the same man for*

dinner. The third time the man came to visit, he came on his own. The husband was gone on a business trip, and the businessman asked the wife to go to a movie. After that there was crying.

Swami asked this question, *Whose fault was it?* Swami said, *It was the husband's fault, because he should not have brought the businessman to his home.*

In relationships of dating, often what happens is that one partner will be ready to leave the relationship and the other will not. This is part of the normal process of selection. The person who wishes to leave is less affected emotionally, while the rejected person feels pain and hurt, unless it is a mutual separation. This dilemma points out a major problem with dating, based on why people date in the first place.

Why Do People Date?

Many people date to have companionship, to have someone to share their experiences with, and to avoid feeling alone. Unfortunately, what often happens is just the opposite. The pain of an eventual separation can cause feelings of loneliness to escalate, because you have experienced some moments of togetherness, and now all that is gone. Then there is the guilt from having shared too much of yourself.

It is also natural to try and look for someone else, but the consequence of having multiple relationships is that with each failed relationship, we pile on more hurt and guilt, and often suppress more and more of the pain within us. In fact, we tend to deny that it exists.

If you get into this situation, by the time you get married, your ability to engage positively and openly in the relationship may be impaired, overshadowed by your negative experiences. This causes you to hesitate to share completely of yourself, because you fear being rejected again. You may think, “I hurt so much. I don’t want this pain again, so I’ll protect myself. I don’t want my spouse to know what I really think and feel.” But it is our inner thoughts and feelings expressed with love and honesty that deepens the trust between two spouses and creates a strong, lasting relationship. You share together the ups and downs of life, and this builds trust. You trust one another to be there during the good as well as the not-so-good experiences of life.

Trust and truth are essential in a marriage. They are the foundation. If we cannot trust one another to be honest and truthful, the foundation of the relationship gets eaten away through ever-growing holes of suspicion. If you make up half of the marriage and your marriage partner is the other half, how then can one half lie to the other? In such a case, there will be no unity, no honor, and ultimately no relationship. We may not like what we sometimes need to hear from our spouse, but at least it is his or her truth. Without truth, you cannot rely on the other person—and vice versa; your relationship is doomed before it has begun.

If you are living with a person without a commitment of marriage, you are living an illusion. If you are living with a person who is promising marriage but without a commitment, you are being told a lie.

Where is the truth and trust in empty words, promises unfulfilled, and deeds not performed?

This is a powerful reason for not dating. You will say, “But Auntie, all of my friends are dating. I will miss out on all the fun. I don’t want to sit at home alone. I want to be accepted and popular.”

Yes, I understand your feelings. That is exactly what happened to my husband and me when we became Sai Baba devotees. We lost all our friends because we no longer ate meat, drank alcohol, went dancing, and did the social things that our friends did. And we believed that some Indian guru was God. We were laughed at. My family thought we were going to hell because we gave up the family religion. I do understand peer pressure.

But we had to make a conscious decision. We asked ourselves, “What are we trying to achieve in this life? What is the purpose of life, especially since we are privileged to know that God exists and is on earth in human form?” There is simply no contest between the permanent bliss and happiness we can achieve by applying Sai Baba’s teachings, as opposed to temporary pleasure.

You may think, Auntie, you are so old that you don’t understand our lifestyle, our needs; your ideas are old-fashioned and unrealistic. But I ask you, what does age have to do with being hurt? Age does not remove the memory of past pain when you were rejected. Nor does age mean that you no longer have any feelings. Nor does age stop others from rejecting you. Peer pressure exists for all ages; it’s not exclusive to youth.

One underlying motive for caving into peer pressure is a need to be accepted. But the question is, “Who is accepting whom?” You are searching for someone else’s approval, and that person is also busy looking for your approval—and neither one is giving. What approval can we give if it does not exist within us? If you do not accept and love yourself, you cannot give the same to someone else. You need to love yourself in order to give love to someone else.

What Is the Solution?

How can we correct this problem? The solution is simple. Accept ourselves; love ourselves. Then there will be no need to give others control over us. When we go along with the peer crowd, and it is against our moral principles, we slowly diminish our self-esteem and love. Guilt undermines our self-esteem. The teachings of Sai Baba give us very clear guidance. We must develop our ability to listen to the inner voice of the conscience in order to learn to discriminate right from wrong.

It is not easy to admit our mistakes. Most of us tend to hide and deny what is true. We don’t want to face our shortcomings. But I have to ask, why not? Avoiding a problem only increases its strength. The effort we make to understand and correct our mistakes removes the karma we have already created. On the other hand, running away from our problems only keeps them alive, possibly to return in the next life. What a terrifying thought!

If the same problem keeps recurring in our life, then we can conclude it is a

significant karma that we have come to remove. In this case, the sooner we deal with our situation, the quicker the karma may be dissolved.

So what stops us from examining ourselves? We are trying to protect our image. We want to look good. But if we were perfect, we would not be here. It is an illusion, this idea of not having any faults. We are in the classroom of life for the extreme purpose of looking at ourselves and analyzing our problems. In fact, this is how we learn and expand our consciousness.

How can we know what is the right or wrong thing to do? How can we develop the discrimination we need? The first thing to do is find a quiet place, then tune into our conscience. We surround ourselves with Sai Ma’s love—the love of a thousand mothers. We sincerely ask our beloved Sai to show us the truth, so we can change. We continue by asking for his guidance and strength to help us to overcome our karma. We come back and do this again and again.

Remember, God loves us very much. In this self-examination process, you have to be honest with yourself as to your inner state. If you are peaceful, then you will have harmony within; if not, then you may be denying a problem within yourself. Examine both your feelings and your behavior, as these will be your best clues that something is bothering you. Don’t be afraid to acknowledge your emotions, how you *really* feel about yourself and about your actions—for emotions are our truth serum. Bear in mind that if your feelings are denied and not recognized, they will still be expressed outwardly in your

words or behaviors anyway, whether you are aware of those feelings or not.

The only person whose approval we need to seek is God's. No one else is important. In reality, who is approving of whom? Swami says, *The only reason for tears should be the loss of God.* Seeking approval is usually based on need fulfillment. I have a need, and you fulfill it for now. But when there is no longer a perceived need, the relationship is at risk unless the couple has a firm commitment in marriage to work through it.

Young adult women speak to me about relationships they have been in for years—living with someone, but not married. Eventually the relationship ends, and they end up crying in my arms, emotionally devastated. They had thought that their boyfriend would eventually marry them. I have to say, “Don’t count on it!” This is a case of temporary need fulfillment. Understand, dear sisters, that if an honorable man is interested in you, he will not hurt you. And if he or she thinks that you are the one, he/she will make a commitment; if not, the relationship can be judged to be based on pleasure and sensual gratification—temporary values yielding a temporary result.

Sai says, *Men set no limits or restraints on themselves. They do not care to ponder over where they should go, why they should go there, nor how they should behave.* (SSS 28:32, Nov. 19, 1995)

Sai also says, *A woman should know her limits. She should not hanker after too much liberty in her movements. Women suffer most when they are moved by this desire.*

When she breaks all rules and runs unbridled into freedom, she becomes dangerous to the reputation and good name of both families—that of her parents and that of her parents-in-law. (Sai Chandana, Nov. 23, 1985)

Why, oh why, do you think Swami separates the sexes? He knows about the attraction between males and females. He created it! Do you realize that this separation is for your own good? He does this out of his love for you, because he knows the consequences of your raging hormones. Do you think God doesn’t know about this?

He is omnipresent and knows everything about you; don’t doubt this. I know for a fact that he knows everything I do, because he has told me in interviews. He told me things that no one else knew. You may think that you are fooling your parents, but let me assure you, without a doubt, you are not fooling your divine parent, Sri Sathya Sai Baba.

The question of dating is complicated and of widespread concern, as it touches every person in every family. I encourage you to think deeply and honestly about its implications and to pray avidly for the development of divine conscience and discrimination, and to be an instrument and example of right action.

—Rita Bruce
Austin, Texas

Optimouse and Pessimouse

Two mice friends lived together inside the wall of a small neighborhood grocery store. Although they were friends, the mice were quite different. Optimouse was always cheerful and looking for the best in things, while Pessimouse was always grumpy and looking for something to be wrong.

Every night, after the store was closed, they would search for food. One night, as they were looking around, Optimouse suddenly said, “Look! A piece of donut! It even has chocolate frosting!”

“Too bad it doesn’t have sprinkles on top,” said Pessimouse.

After eating the donut, Optimouse said, “Gee, that donut made me thirsty. Let’s find something to drink.”

“Fat chance,” said Pessimouse. “There’s never anything to drink around here.”

Looking around the store, the two mice found a large open jar of cream. As they leaned over the edge, eagerly stretching their necks to get a drink, they both fell inside.

“Oh, a cream bath!” said Optimouse. “This will make my fur coat nice and shiny.”

“It’s too cold,” said Pessimouse. “Let’s get out.”





As the two mice approached the edge of the jar, they discovered that the top was too high for them to get out.”

“Well, we might as well enjoy the swim,” said Optimouse.

After a while Pessimouse said, “I’m tired. It’s no use, we’re never going to get out of this jar.” With that, Pessimouse gave up.

Optimouse was determined not to give up. “Hop on my back, friend. We’ll make it.”

As Optimouse continued to mouse-paddle with his friend on his back, he found that the cream he was swimming in was starting to change. He noticed small yellow chunks floating in it.

Optimouse yelled to his friend, “If we kick hard together, the cream will become butter.”

They kicked and kicked and struggled to keep their heads above the cream. Finally, a big chunk of butter formed. They scampered onto the chunk and jumped out of the jar to freedom!

***Always see the good in things—
and keep trying cheerfully!***

Sai Spiritual Education Lesson Plan for Group 2

OPTIMOUSE AND PESSIMOUSE

VALUE: Peace

SUBVALUE: Seeing the good in everything

QUOTE: *Seeing a glass half-filled with water, the optimist is glad that it is half-full, while the pessimist is sad that it is half-empty. Though both statements are correct, the optimist hopes to fill the other half, too, while the pessimist gives up in despair. The one has faith; the other has no faith to sustain him. So we must develop faith by steady effort. Faith must lead to effort. Faith is essential for human progress in every field.*

—Sri Sathya Sai Baba (SSS 15:12, June 27, 1981)

AFFIRMATION(S): I am optimistic. I see only good in life.

SONG: Don't Worry, Be Happy!

*Don't worry, be happy, our Baba loves us so.
Illusions are many, but underneath them all
There's one reality, that you and I are one,
That God is love and love is God, and God and man are one.*

PRE-STORY DISCUSSION: Fill a container of water half-full. Read the Sai quote and discuss: *What is optimism? What kind of face or attitude shows optimism? What is pessimism? What kind of face or attitude shows pessimism? Why does Swami say optimism is important?*

STORY: "Optimouse and Pessimouse" (see pages 38-39)

DISCUSSION: Discuss how optimism means being cheerful and seeing the good in life, no matter what happens. Answer questions such as:

- Optimouse always saw something good in whatever happened. Can you remember five examples of this in the story? (*When he was hungry, he found a donut and was grateful. When he was thirsty, he found something to drink. When he fell into the cream, he was happy because it would make his fur nice and shiny. When the jar sides were too high to climb, he enjoyed the swim. Even though they had to swim a long time, Optimouse kept going, the cream turned to solid butter, and they climbed out.*)
- No matter what happened, Optimouse responded cheerfully and didn't worry. How did this affect how things worked out?

ACTIVITY: *Materials:* one container of water, a container of lemons labeled “problems,” a container of sugar labeled “optimism,” a stirring spoon, some paper cups, a large sticky-note pad, pens or pencils, and a lemon.

Instructions: Give your students sticky notes and have them write or draw a stick-figure sketch of a problem they have, or one they have had in the past.

Have students stick their “problems” on the outside of the lemon container. Cut one or more lemons and squeeze the juice into the container with water. Pour a small bit of this sour mixture into cups and have the students taste it. Ask: “How does it taste? How is this like a problem?” Then have students describe the situation they wrote on the sticky note, and different ways they could react to the problem. What good can they see in the situation?

After each student shares, allow the student to spoon a small amount of sugar from the “optimism” container and stir the sugar into the lemon juice and water. After everyone shares and stirs, pour the sweetened mixture into a cup and let the students taste the “lemonade” made with their “optimism.”

Share with students the proverb, “When life gives you lemons, make lemonade.” Discuss how the activity and proverb show what it means to look for the good in things.

LIFE APPLICATION: This week when you have a problem, be like Optimouse. Say, “I see the good in what is happening. I will keep working at this, and God will help me.” Be cheerful, look for a solution, and keep trying.

PRAYER: *Lord, I know that whatever happens is your will and that you will always take care of me. Help me see how whatever happens is good for me. Help me to be cheerful and confident, and to do my part.*

Adaptation for Group 1

QUOTE: *Do not stand with a frowning face! With such a serious face, you can never hope to experience bliss. You must always be happy, because bliss is your true nature. Always maintain a pleasant smile on your face.*

—Sri Sathya Sai Baba (Summer Showers 2002:09, May 23, 2002)

AFFIRMATION(S): I am happy. I keep a happy, smiling face.

ACTIVITY: Ask students to show you what a frowning face and smiling face look like. Help children make one “frowning face” and one “happy face” mouse mask each. Guide them in acting out a group reading of the story, using their masks.



SRI SATHYA SAI WORLD EDUCATION CONFERENCE

Dear brothers and sisters, Sai Ram to all of you!

I am very happy to inform you that divine blessings and approval for the Sri Sathya Sai World Education Conference have been given by Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba. The conference will take place in Prasanthi Nilayam from July 20–22, 2008. Bhagavan has advised delegates to have meetings in their own countries prior to the conference in Prasanthi Nilayam, and as such, preliminary conferences will be convened in all countries with national Sri Sathya Sai organization central councils or coordinating committees, between March 1 and June 1, 2008.

The conference will be devoted to the clarification of the spiritual principles given by Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba and to the realization of these principles in all of our Sathya Sai Education programs. Delegates will include active Sathya Sai educators in SSEHV, SSE teachers at regional and national levels, educators in Sathya Sai schools and institutes, Sri Sathya Sai organization zone chairmen, central coordinators, presidents of national councils, and young adult zone coordinators. The number of delegates to the conference has to be limited. Depending on the enrollment and the facilities available, we will try to be more inclusive in our enrollment, after preliminary evaluation. However, plenary sessions in the Divine Presence can be attended by all. Furthermore, the proceedings will be recorded and published. Therefore, everyone will have access to all conference deliberations.

Lovingly, in Sai service,
Michael Goldstein, M.D.
Chairman, Sri Sathya Sai World Foundation



Swami and “Just Plain Bill”

A Life of Seva, Signs of His Grace

I had met Bill over twenty years ago. Bill was adept at playing the stock market and had amassed a great deal of wealth while still a relatively young man. Seeing him, you would not have guessed this, as he dressed, acted, and lived normally, with little show of his financial status, except in one way: Bill loved to give money away both to charities and directly to those in need. In fact, Bill gave away an amount equal to, or more than, he made each year, which was quite considerable. Further, he would not allow himself to be recognized for his many acts of charity.

For example, a respite house for infants and babies with AIDS was in need of a large amount of money to redo an entire house that they had been given by their local government. It needed to be done up with the necessities for dealing with the afflicted children, and this outfitting was very costly. They had started a fund-raising project and hoped to have the necessary money in the next few years or so, as the service was desperately needed.

Bill had made more money than he expected that year and was looking for a new charity to give the additional money to. When he heard about the plight of this worthwhile cause, he not only gave the extra

money he had made but covered the entire cost of the refit, two-and-a-half times the already sizable amount he had planned to donate originally. Bill did this and many other similar deeds, long before hearing of Swami or his teachings. To Bill, it was just the right thing to do, and he wanted no recognition. In fact, he insisted that everyone call him Bill, “just plain Bill.”

Searching Beyond the Material

Yet, with all his wealth and good deeds, Bill felt a spiritual vacuum. He often felt lonely and unloved. By Swami’s grace, he started to learn a bit about Vedanta, and over the last few years, he started reading about Sai Baba. He loved hearing stories of Swami’s miracles and *leelas* (divine sport), especially when they related to how our Lord helps those in need. Bill had several pictures of Swami and meditated frequently. Yet, he still felt somewhat empty. He had a sharp mind, and that, in a way, had continuously gotten in the way of his being able to accept God. He had a number of friends who were deeply involved in spiritual pursuits, but Bill struggled to find faith.

As Bill’s 80th birthday approached at the end of July 2007, he started to experience some dizziness and found that he was having

a hard time walking. Upon examination by CAT scan, it was determined that he had suffered a mild stroke. Undeterred, Bill attended two parties held in his honor by friends who deeply loved him. While he needed assistance to walk, he made the parties enjoyable and later told me that he realized that while he had little family of direct blood, he did have a large family of direct love.

Shortly after the parties, Bill's symptoms worsened. Another CAT scan showed that he had suffered several more strokes. Due to his weakness, Bill checked himself into a hospital. After several days, he had had enough of that and resolved to go home, especially since the doctors told him that, while they could do more tests, not much else could be done at the hospital for him. As my wife and I were quite close to Bill, we arranged the home care the doctors insisted on, and Bill headed home.

This was on a Sunday, and my wife and I were planning to fly to Puttaparthi the following Thursday. We felt we should change our plans, as I had promised Bill that I would be there for him in such situations. On Monday, Bill's condition worsened, and he told me that he was ready to "check out."

Several years ago, Swami had materialized a bit of vibhuti for me, and I had a small amount left. That night was our Sai center meeting, and one of my friends had just returned from seeing Swami. He had had an interview, in which Swami gave him some vibhuti, and he graciously shared some with me for Bill. I left the meeting early to go see my friend and give him the vibhuti.

Bill did not look well at all. In fact, another friend of his told me that he felt Bill



"My wife visited him later that day and noticed that he had developed a rather large bruise on his arm. ... Upon closer inspection, she noticed that it resembled an AUM."

was indeed "ready to go." I felt the same and thought the vibhuti might help his passing. As Bill was not eating or drinking much at all, I placed a bit of the vibhuti in a glass of water and offered it to him, after telling him what it was. He drank it down with great relish, talking about how sweet it tasted and how good it felt. As I left that night, I thought it would be the last time I would see

my friend ... but Swami had other plans.

Marked by the Divine Insignia – "Aum"

When I went to Bill's house the next morning, he greeted me with a strong "How ya doin', Davey?" (He was the only one who ever called me that.) I was stunned. His speech was clearer, his mind was sharp, and his eyes were sparkling. My wife visited

“ . . . This stuff like baby powder appeared right between them and flew everywhere.”

him later that day and noticed that he had developed a rather large bruise on his arm.

Upon closer inspection, she noticed that it resembled an “AUM.” By the time I saw it, it was much clearer. Indeed, it looked like the symbol of the *Pranava* (sound of creation). Swami had signed his work! This was on a Tuesday. My wife and I were still wondering whether or not we should proceed on our trip to see Swami, and asked Him for some type of sign as to what to do.

On Wednesday, I received a call from Bill’s young caretaker, who was in a bit of a panic. It seems that when he was helping Bill out of the wheelchair, this “stuff like baby powder appeared right between them and flew everywhere.” As this young man had only first heard of Swami the day before, he had no idea what he was seeing and was more than a bit scared. I calmed him down and explained the situation to him. He was a little skeptical, but how could he deny his own direct experience of Swami’s grace?

Needless to say, this young man has quickly developed more than a bit of interest in Swami. When I went to see Bill, he reported that he was feeling much better and, in his own gruff style, suggested that we go ahead and leave on our trip to see Swami. Accordingly, we took this as the sign

we needed and left the USA on Thursday, arriving in the Divine Presence the following Monday afternoon.

On the following Friday, Swami called me to his lotus feet. I gave him the letters I was carrying for some of the devotees from our area, including a letter thanking him for his help with Bill. I had a chance to talk to Swami and said, “Swami, you saved this man’s life.” Swami just looked at me and smiled.

I then showed him the picture of the bruise; Swami smiled and lovingly traced the AUM with His finger on the picture, and as he did so, he said, *AUM*, in his very sweet voice. He returned the picture to me, and I decided to give it to Bill on my return to the US. Swami then mimicked a hug, something that Bill loved to get. I vowed to myself to pass this on to my friend, too.

We returned to California in early September. I saw Bill the day after our arrival. He was able to walk with a bit of help and greeted me with one of those special smiles that I so treasure, and his signature, “How ya doin’?” Then I shared with him the interaction with Swami and some pictures that were taken by one of Swami’s students, which I had framed for him. I especially shared the hug (which he loved). But he

didn't seem to want to take the pictures home with him. He looked at them several times when we were together but "forgot" to take them when he left.

Bill talked a lot about what he wanted to have happen, both as he was dying and after his death. He told me that he wanted to die at home, surrounded by those he loved. He was concerned about making sure that the charities he supported were taken care of.

In late September, Bill took a turn for the worse; while his mind was clear, his body started to deteriorate. One day, I went to see him and thought he looked too dehydrated. I convinced him to allow me to take him to the hospital. Upon examination, it was determined that he had suffered another series of strokes, and he was admitted. After several weeks of tests, treatment, and care, he was transferred to inpatient rehabilitation. He stayed there for a number of days, until it was felt that he could go home (something he really wanted) and return frequently for outpatient rehab.

Throughout this time, Bill and I talked about Swami, His teachings, selfless service, spirituality, and love. A week or so after Bill's release from the hospital, we were told that he was not able to do the three hours a day of therapy required for the outpatient program, and an in-home rehab program was suggested. Before that could be instituted, I noticed that Bill was having difficulty breathing. I took him to his doctor and was told that he had a mild case of pneumonia.

Bill was definitely not happy about having to go back to the hospital again. This

was on Thursday, October 11, 2007. What I was unaware of was that Bill needed to finish some of the paperwork that ensured that his estate would continue to support the charities that he so loved.

Giving "Life" After Death

On the following Saturday morning, I, along with several of his friends, an advisor, and his attorney, witnessed Bill signing the last papers necessary to secure the foundation he was establishing for charitable purposes. I asked him if this was really what he wanted and if it made him happy. Again, I witnessed that beautiful smile as he strongly said, "Yes."

That afternoon, he told one of his dear friends that he wanted to "go home," that he was "done." When she told me, we arranged for a group of his friends to meet with Bill and his doctor. Bill repeated his request with the full knowledge of what it meant. I asked to be left alone with him to make sure that he really understood what he was asking.

He clearly let me know that he was ready to "go home," meaning more than just back to his house. As I had promised him long ago that I would do all in my power to make sure his wishes about being at home with his friends were followed, I helped him check out of the hospital and return to his condo. Having completed the work necessary to secure the charitable foundation, Bill was ready to "let go." I now understood the look that Swami had given me while I was in Parthi; he had not saved Bill's life but rather had given Bill an extension of life to complete the task set out for him by Him.

Traveling to Love, with Love

As the word went out regarding his condition, Bill's friends came to see him. They were from all walks of life—cooks and maids, doctors and lawyers, retired professionals close to Bill's age, and pre-teens. They all had stories of how this man had affected their lives with his love, charity, and humor. It was a sad, joyous time as we all laughed and cried together, thinking about Bill and the many ways he had impacted us all. The love was palpable. Though Bill couldn't talk and was growing visibly weaker, he loved having his friends around.

Calls came in from as far away as South Africa, and he listened to them on his speakerphone. We read to him the numerous e-mails, cards, notes, and letters written by friends that had known Bill most or all of their lives. Bill would often smile and squeeze the hand of whomever was closest, indicating his awareness of the messages.

On the morning of Wednesday, October 17, 2007, I was meditating and praying to Swami. Obviously this whole situation was foremost in my mind. Suddenly, I had the very strong feeling that Swami was guiding me to tell Bill that He loved him and was completely around him, and that He would take him in His arms whenever he "let go." I shared this with Bill when I got to his house later and received one of his sweet smiles. Bill passed peacefully into Swami's arms later that night at 11:11 p.m.

Thus three of Bill's four wishes regarding his death had come true: (1) to die at home; (2) to be surrounded by his friends; and (3)

that the passing be peaceful, in his sleep. The fourth was that he did not wish to suffer, and this provided another example of divine compassion stepping in. Unfortunately, the pneumonia he had contracted was not responding to medication, and this meant that his death would likely be caused by suffocation, as the lungs would fill up with fluid.

This would obviously be traumatic for him (and us). I felt very upset, knowing Bill's fears over experiencing a painful ending to this life. However, when the nurse came to check on Bill that last morning, amazingly, she found that his lungs were completely clear of fluid! The loving Lord had arranged for him to die later that day, peacefully in his sleep, just as he had wished.

Thank you, Swami, for letting Bill know so directly that you loved him, and for being with him, especially at the final moments of his life. Thank you, Swami, for making Bill's life so meaningful, and such an inspiration to all of us who knew him.

Thank you, Lord, for allowing all of us to come together in celebration and acknowledgment of this wonderful man, who lived your teachings in so many ways. May Bill's story of love and selfless service be an inspiration for us all. And thank you, Swami, for letting me have such a great friend as "just plain Bill."

—David Cornsweet
Encinitas, California

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Selected Books from Our Listings

Baba: God is Love, Live in Love, compiled by Grace J. McMartin, contains passages from Swami's discourses on children, motherhood, and teachers. BW-012.....\$ 4.00

Divine Journey, by Dr. G. Venkataraman, gives a detailed, day-by-day narrative of Bhagavan's weeklong trip to Delhi and Bombay in 1999, including Swami's discourses and photos from the journey. The author was among those invited to accompany Swami on this memorable tour. Soft cover, 192 pages. BW-047\$4.00

Help Ever, Hurt Never is a set of six booklets that highlight Swami's mission and his projects in service, education, super-specialty hospitals, and water systems. BW-093.... \$18.00

Love All, Serve All, a pictorial message on Bhagavan, is an offering solely for spreading Sai's incomparable divine love. The inspiring text and photographs depict Swami's service projects in glorious color and black-and-white. Hardcover, oversized. BW-096 ... \$55.00

Sathya Sai Speaks, Volume 36, Parts 1 & 2, collects twenty-six discourses of 2003 in two volumes. Some of the topics include: The Spirit of Sacrifice, You Are God, Rise Above Body Consciousness, and Love Is God, Live in Love. Soft cover (sold as a set); Part 1, 236 pages; Part 2, 171 pages. BA-036.....\$8.00

Sathya Sai Speaks, Volume 37, contains twenty-two divine discourses from 2004. Topics include Respect for Parents, Love Is the Royal Path to God, and Do Constant Namasmara for Mental Peace. Soft cover, 297 pages. BA-037.....\$6.00

Sathya Sai Speaks, Volume 38, presents twenty-five discourses given by Swami in 2005. Topics include Purity of Heart Is True Sadhana, Win the Love of Your Mother to Win God, and Education without Educare Is Inadequate. Soft cover, 242 pages. BA-038.....\$6.00

Sathya Sai Speaks, Volume 39, features twenty-seven discourses from 2006, including those given during the Athi Rudra Maha Yagna. Soft cover, 286 pages. BA-039.....\$6.00

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