



## Cultural Inclusion and Expansion Initiatives in Region 6

A newly formed team of office bearers in the Sathya Sai Center of Seattle-Eastside came together with fresh energy and seeking minds in the beginning of this year. They learned about the Cultural Inclusion and Expansion initiative that had recently been released by the SSIO-USA and understood that a lot of work needed to be done to make our centers more welcoming and all-embracing. All cultures are beautiful and respect-worthy, but a Sai center must first endeavor to be a model of the universal human values laid down by Sathya Sai Baba. How can we convey this universal message without any unconscious cultural biases in our communication? These and other questions led them to take on the challenge of spearheading two kinds of transformation. The first was expanding their own awareness and that of the center members on CIE and the second was overhauling the appearance of the center to make it more spiritually uplifting for all.

The newly launched Cultural Inclusion and Expansion (CIE) study modules played an important role in the first part of the transformation - the internal understanding and awareness. These study circles were launched in January 2019 and many discussions about the Sai Center and Baba's message took place. It so happened that around the same time, the new office bearers realized that there was need for a change in the picture of Sathya Sai Baba at the altar. It was an old photograph that had been fading. Thus, the search began for a new altar picture. Discussions took place at the study circles too about what kind of photograph it should be. It was thought that we should try and determine the different elements required for an altar picture. After many honest discussions, a beautiful square-shaped photo of Baba's face was chosen. Devotees all around the hall can make eye-contact with Baba's eyes in the photo and it helps the experience of devotional singing be more personal.



Now that the altar photo had been chosen, the entire backdrop had to be changed to compliment this picture. Many discussions took place about the application of the cultural expansion precept to the general altar area. Keeping in mind the sensitivities of the members, three open meetings were held with the membership to discuss these and other changes at the center. The entire center got involved to collectively make decisions. The debate about whether to have the Lord Ganesha idol at the altar and whether to place a chair for Baba in the altar area lasted almost three months. Lord Ganesha is one of the deities of the Hindu pantheon and the group felt that the presence of his idol is a symbol of one religion. The SSIO guideline about altar setup clearly states that the altar should not favor any one religious faith. So, it was decided that no idols be placed at the altar. There were multiple school of thoughts regarding the chair. Some devotees thought that the presence of the chair implies Baba is present. Some of the questions that were raised amongst others: How do we treat this chair while we transport it and during setup? Are we equipped to answer the question of a child attending our center about the significance of the chair? The devotional coordinator had a one-on-one discussion with every single member who attends center meetings and took their feedback. After much deliberation, the placement of the chair was discontinued.

In order to represent the theme of "Unity of Faiths", the hall for devotional singing has poster boards with quotes of six prominent religious teachers talking about the human values and Baba's own words about these human values. No religious symbols accompany these words. Members shared that reading



these inspiring words has helped them keep their focus on the goal of devotional singing. The Aarti in the end of bhajans is now sung in English on alternate weeks instead of being sung in Sanskrit every week. The tradition of singing one English unison song during weekly bhajans continues. Members join in and have expressed that unison singing makes them feel like they can contribute to bhajans even though they are not singing into a microphone. On any of the major religious festivals, multi-faith devotional songs are sung and some special program is planned to commemorate the event.

Another procedure that was discussed was the distribution of the holy ash or *Vibhuti*. It is no longer distributed by SSE children at the end of the bhajans. Instead, *Vibhuti* is now placed in two bowls at the back of the bhajan hall, one for the ladies and one for the gents. A picture of Baba and an explanation of *Vibhuti* is placed next to each bowl. Everyone serves themselves on their way out of the hall. This way, according to the center president, safety and hygiene are also maintained. Moreover, any newcomer to the center has the opportunity to first understand what the holy ash is and then decide to partake of this blessing.



Punctuality was another byproduct of the discussions on CIE. We live in a land where respecting one another's time is respecting one another. Baba himself is strict about discipline. Through everyone's coordinated efforts, the activities all take place at the appointed time now. At the entrance of the center, a nine-foot display has a photo of Baba, the program of events displayed along with directions pointing out where these events will take place. This way, newcomers are greeted and equipped to find their way around. Guidelines about separate seating for men and women is also written on this board. In the parking lot, too, a display board with the symbol of the five human values and a universal quote by Sathya Sai Baba sets the tone for the kind of

gathering that takes place on the center premises. This makes regular center-goers feel welcome and informs passersby of the message of Sai.

Sathya Sai Baba states "The main objective of the Sathya Sai Organization is to help man recognize the divinity that is inherent in him... So, your duty is to emphasize the One, to experience the One in all you do or speak. Do not give any importance to differences of religion or sect or status or color. Have the feeling of one-ness permeate every act of yours." <sup>1</sup> According to many members in the center, the process of grasping the concepts of the CIE study circles has helped them to be more sensitive to the expansive nature of our beloved Lord's teaching of oneness and understand the mere reason why Baba started the SSIO. No one ever loses their identities when they come to a Sathya Sai Center, and in fact it is always the converse. It is just coming home to yourself in a much deeper way than before.

More information about CIE initiative is available at [www.sathyasai.us/cie](http://www.sathyasai.us/cie).

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<sup>1</sup> SSS, Vol 13