

“Hinduism in Mauritius requires a shot in the arm”

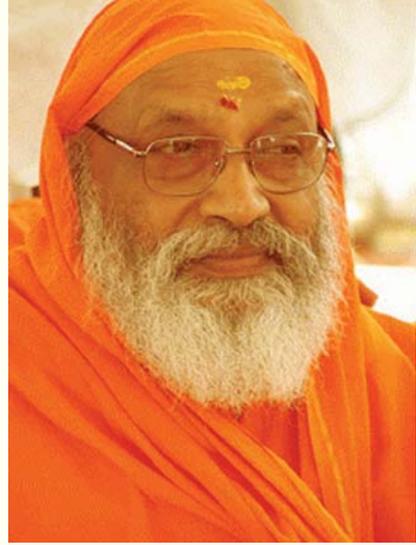
Courtesy: Mauritius Times

Swami Dayananda Saraswati is an internationally recognized teacher of Vedanta and an eminent scholar of Sanskrit. He has been teaching for over 40 years in India and extensively worldwide. Gifted with sensitivity to cultural diversity, he understands the current social, domestic and psychological issues people face and offers help in addressing these matters pragmatically and fundamentally. We spoke to him during his recent visit here. Excerpts:

Mauritius Times: There is a common perception that Swamis renounce the world and spend their days in the Himalayas in meditation. How come you are away from the Himalayas?

Swami Dayanand Saraswati: That’s unfortunately a very widespread perception, but a wrong one: Swamis are all over India, and they renounce from wherever they happen to be. You need not go to the Himalayas to do that. The thinking that Swamis should stay put in one place is also not true. Swamis are supposed to keep moving so that they do not strike roots in one place; in ancient times they used to spend three nights at one place before moving on to some other place. But you also had other sadhus who would stay put in one place only. You’ll find the same trend to this day in India.

* Your presence here and in other places shows you care also for how matters are regulated in mundane life. Can you briefly



tell us how a life of renunciation comes to bear upon day-to-day living?

Renunciation is really a mental thing; it is about growing into maturity. One can keep going places or one can stay put in only one place yet one can be free either way. I go to places, like here, because I am invited; I never go to some place uninvited. And I teach.

* What do you teach?

I teach whatever I am supposed to teach, namely spiritual wisdom and the spiritual teachings which are enshrined in our Vedas, in the Gita, etc. Essentially, they are about how to live one’s life meaningfully. To put it in simple terms for a lay person, I would say I teach about how to make one’s life more meaningful and how to face situations with a certain maturity, composure, that is, with the sameness of mind to both pleasant

and unpleasant situations. For those who come to me and wish to delve deeper into the domain of spirituality, I teach them for three or four years on a variety of subjects including Sanskrit, the Gita, Vedanta, etc.

* A person in your position may not have any concerns about what one should do for earning a living. What explains that those who are daily doing everything in their power to increase their earnings, resort to spiritually advanced persons like you to improve their lot nevertheless? What exactly do you give them?

I do not think that many people have understood what it takes to be spiritual. Yet today's society requires one to have a deeper spiritual grounding. It is so important for people to have a sacred space within themselves. A lot of people do not know and they do not seem to be interested.

* How do you create that sacred space?

That's what we are teaching. For discovering that sacred space within yourself, your value-structure should undergo change. That requires a change in priorities. Your priorities don't change unless your value-structure changes. When your value-structure changes, then you have already shifted from what is perceived as primarily important to something that is much more important. That sacred space is attainable if you adopt an objective attitude towards the value of money, the value of power, the value of name. What is their real value? We superimpose too much value on a value which is not there inherently. I do not want those who come to me to give up anything; I want them to be objective. That money is everything is not true; it's a fallacy. Money can buy a book, it can never make you read. Money can buy a house but it can never make your home; it takes a lot to make a home. We need to shift our scale

of values, but it takes a lot of self-inquiry to do that.

* The priority of the poor person who has to feed his children is such that he may not have the inclination for such spiritual inquiry, isn't that so? His priority at one point in time could well be about his material needs, not spirituality...

That's not true. No father wants his son to be a drug addict or a gambler, nor to be agitated, angry, restless or jealous all the time. Parents are interested in their children doing well and being more compassionate, more objective. But doing well, according to them, implies earning plenty of money and having a good house and getting married. But whether their children do well in marriage, make a home for themselves, or whether they handle the money properly or the money handles them — in fact money sometimes mishandles you — is another matter. It requires from each one of us a change in our scale of values to come to that sacred space I mentioned earlier.

* Your idea of happiness and somebody else's idea of happiness can well be different. You do concede to that person the liberty to decide about what would make him happy and how he would want to be happy, don't you?

Let us take the case of a king; he may be happy or sad; so it is for a rich man or a poor man. Is there any difference in the sadness of the poor/rich man and that of the king? All of them are sad. What is the difference in (their respective) sadnesses? Only that the rich man's sadness will appear on the front pages of newspapers! What I am saying is: sadness is sadness; happiness is happiness; it does not make any difference who or what the person concerned is. What makes the difference is the value structure of each one of us: one

may go for that which he thinks will bring him happiness; the other takes to another thing or idea of happiness. The king thinks in terms of going for one more kingdom for himself — Saddam Hussein thought in those terms although he was doing quite well on his own; he had to take over Kuwait so that he could fulfil his urge for happiness.

Happiness does not lie in any object, nor can any object deny you happiness. Your status or profession or even marriage will not deny you happiness: the world will not deny you happiness, but neither can it *give* you happiness. Happiness is with you, you have to own it, and that is why when you are happy you cannot look at it as an object. When you see a person and become happy, the person is objectified, but happiness cannot be objectified. You cannot say: this is happiness.

* It is a state of mind?

It is you. And the mind enjoys it. But the mind, object and yourself... all become one.

* Would you say that the same applies to the person who is at pains to earn his living?

The person who does not have power or money will think that those things will make him happy. Money and power can make one comfortable — but one can be comfortably unhappy. And therefore one has got to change one's scale of vision, one's value structure to be able to find happiness. Otherwise one would be drifting from one thing to another all through one's life without ever finding happiness.

* A number of inspirational gurus – the New Age philosophers like Deepak Chopra and some others – have emerged and command a very respectable following the

world over. There are also the self-help groups, etc. What are your views on this phenomenon?

Self-help support groups like Alcoholic Anonymous and many others that are quite active in the United States and elsewhere are doing a wonderful job. They are a real blessing to people who are in real need of help. I have no reservations about recommending such groups to people who are in need of such support. You'll also find some people who have become popular thanks to the techniques they make available to help people overcome their difficulties. These techniques are helpful and that is why people go to them. In the same manner, yoga is equally proving helpful. We should therefore appreciate all these contributions that eventually put the people on a spiritual track. But I won't say that's all what Hinduism is all about... maybe they will say that. As for Deepak Chopra, he does not give you any technique; he helps you think and that is much more effective in bringing about a shift in your thinking – that's what is really important.

* What are your general impressions on the way today's men, women, young and old are evolving?

I do not have a categorical answer either this or that way; I am not judgemental. But what I would say is that they are all looking for some answers, especially the young who now network on a global scale and are exposed to a certain type of thinking. The fact that they are looking for answers means that they are questioning, and that in itself is a healthy sign. However, what is important to know is not really who is providing the answers but what answers are being given? Enquiry is very important, but thoroughness in your approach is significantly important. I see that some are

easily satisfied with shallow answers and that regrettably brings them disillusionment later.

* Are you saying that it is also important that you choose your guru properly?

You need to choose the teacher who emphasises clarity, who doesn't want you to buy techniques or ideas but who wants you to explore, and helps you to explore all the way. That's the type you have to choose.

* Can you tell us about Vedanta, how relevant is it in today's times?

Vedanta is and has remained the same; it does not change. The human urges to be free from being small, from being one subject to all limitations: this has not changed. The human being is still self-judging and self-conscious, unlike an animal. No cow thinks that she is a black or white, a small or ugly cow; a cow does not have a problem with being self-judging and self-conscious, unlike the human being. Therefore one has to see oneself as not that insignificant. I have to see myself thus: I am not insignificant. And that's not idea- or thought-based; that has got to be a reality. Vedanta says that you are the only significant being and everything else is dependent upon you. That may be too much for you to understand or even to visualise, but that's the truth. It's not a truth to be believed: being the truth, it has got to be understood. We have a tradition of teaching — sophisticated teaching — to enable you to understand that.

* Would you say that Vedanta is a religion or a way of life?

It is a view of life as well as a view of reality. We talked initially about attitudes

and values — about a way of life advocated by Vedanta to live a life that will help you appreciate the fact: I am the answer because I am the problem. When I am self-conscious and self-judging, I become the problem. If I am the problem, nobody else is the solution, I am the solution. No messiah is the solution, no god is the solution, no other person is the solution — I am the solution... and that's what God is about.

* But you do need a guru to guide your steps in that direction?

There is a guru available always; only the *shishyas* (students) are not there.

* Can Vedanta empower the poor as well as the rich in the same manner?

A rich person is not a sinner; neither is a poor person. What is required is a mature person. A poor person should not think that he is poor. He should think he is a person and similarly for the rich person. There is no poor or rich person; there is only a person. That is very important in Vedanta; then only does it make sense and will work for you because it tells you that you are the answer and guides you to appreciate that. To come back to the previous example, no cow thinks that she is poor. It's a confused value structure that makes a person think he is poor. People are confused, the whole of humanity is confused. It is not a current but an ancient problem, a human problem. A human being is born to be confused and grows to resolve the confusion — one has to grow to resolve the confusion.

* Is it a life-long process?

Why should it be life-long? It is a process. That's enough. Somebody can solve it quickly, another may take more time,

someone else may solve it in the next life. It is a process, and it is a pleasant process.

* Youngsters and even many adults criticise Hinduism for its plethora of religious rituals which they do not understand and are not in tune with. Moreover the youth get confused when confronted with criticisms that Hinduism has so many Gods, especially from believers in monotheism. How does one deal with the problem?

We face this problem even in India. We need to educate the people, especially Hindus wherever they are that they are inheritors of riches they are unaware of. Education is often conveyed through parents, and parents themselves know little about this great heritage. We therefore require special teachers. I suggested the other day that we need to have small independent centres of Hindu spiritual and religious education all over Mauritius, for instance, which need not fall under any umbrella organisation. It is easier to set up such centres here, and Mauritius will thus be the pioneer in this regard. You'll require only half an acre for this centre which will be manned by a teacher from India who is conversant in Hindi, English and Sanskrit, or Hindi-Tamil-English, or Telegu-Sanskrit-English. That teacher need not be a swami, but a householder, who does not belong to any organisation. His job here will be to teach to children and teenagers about Hinduism, about Tamil literature which is predominantly spiritual. We can help Mauritius by assisting in the education programme and in identifying the right type of teachers. I'll be happy to help, but this however should be a Mauritian initiative, run and looked after by the people here. I do not want it to appear like some kind of self-promotion.

* What is your impression on the state of Hinduism in this country? How is it doing?

I admire the people who have preserved it, and they have preserved it very well. But what they have received are but forms and we need to instil the spirit. Hinduism here requires a shot in the arm by instilling the spirit. It's very important. People need religion and spirituality, and therefore they should know the meaning of forms. This is especially important since you are no more isolated, you are in touch with the whole globe and you are therefore given more choices. You therefore need to know the meaning and significance of temples, idols, rituals. You need to have the answers to the questions that children and adults will be asking.

* Do you have the feeling that the spirit is lacking here?

I will not make any judgement. I only say that it is important for every form to be understood properly. This has to be done in India also. We all receive forms, and we have to fill up the forms with spirit. And spirit filling-up is nothing but teaching. *Without the spirit, a form is dead; without the form, the spirit is a ghost.*

Indian heritage is very rich and profound. It has got a message for humanity, namely that every human being is purity, is all happiness, all joy... that's what the message is. We don't say: God is one, or God is many. We don't say there's one God, we say there's only God. Whatever you face is God, and whoever faces it is God. Both the subject and object are God. There is only God. This is Hinduism.

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it can never make you read. Money can buy a house but it can never make your home; it takes a lot to make a home. We need to shift our scale of values, but it takes a lot of self-inquiry to do that..."

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