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A Panel Discussion for Youth:

“From I to We” – Part 1

March 15, 2009

WELCOME BY EDWARD WAHAB

Good afternoon and Sai Ram. My name is Edward Wahab, and on behalf of the Sathya Sai center of Milwaukee, I would like to welcome you all this afternoon. We know many of you have traveled long distances on short notice to be with us today. We are very grateful and honoured.

The theme of this afternoon’s program is, “Youth Awareness: From I to We.” It is our great privilege to have Professor Anil Kumar with us today, who not only inspired this program, but will also share some of his experiences and thoughts with us.

Professor Anil Kumar (you all probably know or have heard of him) has been a Sai Baba devotee for several years, and currently serves in the Sathya Sai Baba University in the Biology department. He translates Sai Baba’s talks when Sai Baba speaks in Telugu. There are several books credited to his name and he has travelled all over the world. He has been to the United Kingdom, Europe, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Malaysia, and of course, here in United States. We are very fortunate and happy to have him here with us.

Without further ado, I would like to introduce Dr. Sailaja Kamaraju, who is a member of the Milwaukee centre. Dr. Sailaja also happens to be the daughter of Professor Anil Kumar. Sailaja will introduce the panel and give us more information on this afternoon’s discussion. Dr. Sailaja, please come here.

INTRODUCING THE DISCUSSION – DR. SAILAJA

Thank you for your kind words. Sai Ram. How are you all today? Thank you for coming on such short notice. I won’t take much of your time. I know you are all waiting for the main program to commence and for Professor Anil Kumar to talk, but I think it is worthwhile to spend a couple of minutes introducing the Sathya Sai Organisation to those who are not familiar with it or with the Youth Awareness Program.

Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba is the founder of the Sri Sathya Sai International Organisation. It is a secular world-wide organisation. The organisation believes in the unity of religions and the synthesis of faith. Swami’s main goal is service - service to humanity and service to mankind. However, the ultimate goal is to realise the Divinity within all of us or Self-realisation. As we all know, Self-realisation doesn’t happen overnight; it is a journey from ‘I’ to ‘We’. To make this possible for all of us and make our jobs easier, Swami Himself has taken up several projects. His current focus is on youth awareness, since our current youth and young adults are facing economic, financial, and educational problems leading to despair, depression, frustration, and therefore, selfishness and self-centeredness.

So what can we do about this? Should we organise youth camps? Should we organise seminars? Should we have panel discussions? To address these questions, a pilot trial in Nellore was organised by Professor Anil Kumar in Andhra Pradesh, India. It was a huge success. Thousands of adults attended, including my own classmates who were on the panel discussion. With that as an example, we wanted to try and attempt this venture. I hope that you all appreciate this at the end of the program tonight. We are trying to set some objectives and methods for this program.

The main objectives are to:

- Encourage young adults and youth
- Feel youthful all our lives
- Respect and show gratitude to our parents and concern for elderly people
- Be sensitive and foster the culture and tradition of our motherland
- Develop self-discipline and intellectual growth

To achieve these, there have been several programs that have been put together in Nellore and other places in Andhra Pradesh, India, such as the “Sound Mind and a Sound Body” programs, “Sadhana Campus” where exercises such as yoga, breathing management, and *pranayama* have been taught to youth, personality development programs, and community service programs, showing by example that hands that serve are holier than the lips that pray. These programs are put together with the goal in mind of travelling from ‘I’ to ‘We’.

For example: a single house is not a colony, a single tree cannot be a forest, and a single man cannot be a community. It is when we travel from ‘I’ to ‘We’ with youth awareness, the young adults program, and community service that all of us can do things together which will lead to Self-realisation and Swami’s blessings. It is a way to achieve Swami’s desires and Swami’s aspirations. We need to do what He wants us to do. I hope that you all enjoy the program and give your suggestions, and encourage the panel members today. I thank you all again for being here. Sai Ram (*Applause*).

THE PANEL

I offer my humble *Pranams* at the Lotus Feet of Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba. Sai Ram everybody.

A lot of energy built up during the *bhajans*. We want each one of you to be touched by that energy. A question was posted to me just outside the hall by a gentleman in his forties. He said, “What is this youth about? Am I not a youth?”

And I said, “Yes, you are a youth.”

He said, “Then, what is the difference between the youth who are going to speak today and me?”

For a moment, I was taken aback. But this is what my explanation about youth is. Each one of you sitting here is a youth. The difference between the youth who are going to be in the panel and talking to us is that they do not have boundaries. We don’t go by the physical age, but by the mind and the heart. They do not have any boundaries. They can go beyond the box; it’s as simple as that. That is the difference between these youth and someone who is beyond that age; so that’s just a short clarification.

There are a few housekeeping items, as we comply with the proceedings of this session. We will maintain silence and keep our cell phones off. Doctors are an exception; they can keep their cell phones and pagers on because they are on call.

I will introduce the panel members. Let's start with the first one, Grace Wahab (*Applause*). Grace Wahab is the daughter of Mr. Edward Wahab and Mrs. Murin Wahab, who have been Sai devotees for more than a decade. It is a blessing that Grace has been born in the Sai family. Her grandmother, Shirley McCain, is the founding member of this Milwaukee centre (*Applause*). Grace is a second-year student at the University of Wisconsin, and she is majoring in international business and Spanish.

The second panel member is Ahilan Sivaswami. Please welcome Ahilan to the podium (*Applause*). Ahilan is the son of Mr. and Mrs. Kamaladevi Sivaswami. Swami, in a personal interview, told Mr. Sivaswami, "I have a plan for you. You are going to marry this beautiful lady sitting in the back, Rita Sivaswami." (*Applause*)

Ahilan and Rita have been blessed with a son named Darshan, and a daughter named Umi, very pretty kids. Ahilan moved to Wisconsin two years ago; he works for Swami at the University of Wisconsin as lecturer of computer science. He has been a lecturer for the last ten years. He graduated with a first class honours degree in computer systems and electronics from the University of London, UK, and has a Master's in advanced computer science. He is also a Balvikas teacher. I think I should not say anything else beyond that, for that is the biggest qualification he has! (*Applause*) Welcome to Ahilan. He has been with Swami for the last fifteen years.

The next panel member I would like to introduce to you is Sidhesh Barot from Chicago, Illinois. (*Applause*) Sidhesh is the son of Madhusudhan and Vibaben Barot. He is working as a quantitative analyst out of Naperville, Chicago. He is Swami's student, having studied in Parthi. He completed his Master's there, and subsequently came to the U.S. to do his Master's in Finance from the University of Illinois, Urbana. Welcome to Sidhesh.

Our fourth panel member is Yamini Bala from Chicago. Yamini is the daughter of Padmini and Ram Bala. She is working in the field of education as a teacher at Kripa Montessori School in Chicago. Her background is in community development and environmental science. Let's give a big hand to all four members of the panel! (*Applause*)

We are going to be a little more formal here by presenting each panel member with a bouquet. I would like to request that the Balvikas children come over and present the bouquets to our panel members. Let's give them a big hand. (*Applause*) Now let's say "Sai Ram" loudly! Sai Ram! (*Everybody says, "Sai Ram!"*) Let us now present the bouquet to our panel members (*motioning to the Balvikas children*).

We will start with Grace Wahab, followed by Ahilan, Sidhesh, and Yamini. Each member will have ten minutes, but we are not going to stick to that very strictly. We would like the panel members to present their points. Let's start and hand over the mike to Grace Wahab. Sai Ram.

INDIVIDUAL ASPECT OF 'I' TO 'WE' -- GRACE WAHAB

Sai Ram everybody! I can say with all my heart that I truly am very fortunate to have been raised by wonderful parents, who have been devotees since before I was born. I have been attending the Milwaukee Sai Baba centre since I was three years old, which is when we

moved to Milwaukee. My relationship with Swami is one of the strongest and the most important things in my life right now. But to be honest, it has not always been that easy for me to follow Swami's teachings, and I would admit that I have not always been the best devotee.

Even though my experiences and perspectives may be unique, I am hoping that some of you will be able to relate to them, and that talking about my own personal experience and journey from "I to We" will have some meaning for you. Up until yesterday, I had a very nice, ten-minute talk prepared to give to you today. I planned to tell you how it was, growing up in America as a Sai devotee, and how I used to be embarrassed when my friends would ask about all the pictures of Swami around my house. And I was going to tell you what it is like to be a non-Indian in the Sai Organisation and how I felt that I did not always fit in. I was going to talk about the challenges of practising Swami's teachings in what seems to be a pretty crazy world.

Those things are important and are part of my story, but I suspect you've heard similar things before. So I've decided instead to go out on a limb and share with you something that is deeply personal and actually really hard for me to talk about. I've only shared it with a few people up until today, and it is important because it reflects the "I to We" theme of today's event. It is closely related to my relationship with Sai Baba, because I hope it will help me become a more active young adult in the Organisation.

Just one piece of background here: I want you to know that I am quite sure when Auntie Sailaja asked me to be part of this panel today, she didn't know anything about what I am going to share with you now. It is more than a coincidence in my mind that I will have the opportunity to speak today at a time when I recently experienced one of the biggest and most significant changes in my lifetime. So needless to say, I am very honoured to share my story, and I thank you all for the opportunity, and I thank Swami for this opportunity.

About three years ago, I developed a horrible eating disorder. To say that it was difficult is more than an understatement. Eating disorders can have a devastating effect on the mind, body, and spirit; and we all know that these three are completely connected. So the most significant aspect of this, from a spiritual perspective, is that everything about my disorder totally contradicted the things that Swami taught me while I was growing up. I'll give you a few examples: eating disorders are all about the ego. A person becomes preoccupied with perfectionism and how they look on the outside, as if that is more important than the spirit within. I believe it is born out of lack of confidence, and we all know that Swami says that self confidence is very important for his devotees.

Trying to cover-up a disorder involves deception and secrecy, and it is disrespectful to the body. Also, the worst part for me was disappointing my parents and disappointing Swami. All the while I was trying to hide what was going on from people around me; yet on the inside, I knew that Swami knew everything. I would look at His picture and could tell that He was angry with me, and part of me felt that I was a hypocrite because I didn't want to abandon Swami, much less for Him to abandon me, so I started to pull away from Him. I was of the idea that being Swami's devotee was an all-or-nothing thing, and if I wasn't practising everything perfectly, He probably wouldn't want me at all.

Swami's young adults are a very impressive group, as you have all seen. I just couldn't pretend that I was a perfect devotee, as I thought that they were; so I stopped trying. It was spiritually a very bad time for me. With Swami's blessing and grace, I am happy to say that I no longer have any eating disorder. I went into a treatment program, and even though it

takes some people years and years to get over something like this, I am completely better and well now. Thank you, Swami! (*Applause*)

First and foremost, I know that I couldn't have done this without Swami. I am not trying to put myself on some type of pedestal. I am only sharing this because of what I've learned, and I think it might help other young adults, other young people who have had their own problems in today's world. I came to believe that when everything comes easy in life, we don't grow. So, even though these past years have been rough ones, I don't regret any of the experiences that I have had. I am not sure why I needed to go through this, but it brought me closer to Swami, and it helps me realise that He is really there for me. If I would have been asked to speak here a couple of months ago, I would have most likely turned down the offer because Swami wants us to practice what we preach; but I now have more confidence to reach out to other people who are going through hard times and support them.

I know that there are many young people out there -- maybe they are from families of devotees, or maybe they have never even heard of Sai Baba -- but they want to find a spiritual direction in the midst of challenges in today's society. On one hand, I understand the responsibility of being a good example of Swami's young adults, and I really hope that I can live up to that responsibility. At the same time, if someone else is having problems of their own, I want them to know that they can turn things around. When you are having trouble, it is not the time to turn away from spirituality; it is the time to embrace it.

Secondly, everyone slips sometimes; and if you turn away because you think you are the only one who is not a good enough devotee, you might miss out on something that will help you or somebody else. Trust me, I am not trying to make it look like I've got all the answers; I guess you could say that I am just at the beginning of my journey from 'I' to 'We'. I am definitely working on how to be a better devotee, planning for the future, taking care of my duties, practicing Swami's values, and at the same time, balancing that with my friends, and being like a normal person my age. I want to become an active young adult in the Sathya Sai organisation and I hope I can serve and inspire others. Based on what I've learnt, I look at it this way: I've had enough of the 'I and only I', and I am ready to start looking at the 'We'! (*Applause*) Thank you.

Thank you very much, Grace. I am going to take thirty seconds just to let you know the structure we are going to be following here, because I know a lot of you probably have questions on your mind. I would like all of you to withhold those questions. Please write them on an index card because, at the end of the panel session, we are going to entertain all those questions and Professor Anil Kumar is going to be the moderator for that session. So please bear with us. Grace spoke on the individual aspect of the life in the journey of youth from 'I' to 'we'. Our next panel member is Ahilan Sivaswami, and he is going to speak on the spiritual aspect of life on this journey.

SPIRITUAL ASPECT OF 'I' TO 'WE' – AHILAN SIVASWAMI

Sai Ram. I offer my loving and humble Pranams at the Lotus Feet of Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba. Sai Ram to our revered and honoured guests, Professor Anil Kumar and Mrs. Anil Kumar, brothers and sisters, and our beautiful children, who gave these beautiful flowers. Sai Ram.

On the theme of this conference, 'I to We', let me share my thoughts on the spiritual aspects of discovering the Self within. We are all on this spiritual journey together, as Grace

mentioned, and she is ready to go from 'I' to 'We'. To discover the light within as individuals, we should realise that we are all in some way caught up in this busy, materialistic world. We have identified ourselves with this body. Hence, we have forgotten who we really are - our true Self, the one within. So, brothers and sisters, we in the Sai fold are not here by chance. All of us have been chosen, and we are here on earth, walking this inner, spiritual journey, holding Bhagavan's hand in order to discover the light within. What we must have is unwavering and unshakable faith in our Lord.

Let us start with a small story which reflects how Swami shows us who we really are. Once upon a time, there was a mother tigress who was expecting a cub while crossing a river. While crossing the river, she happened to deliver the cub. Due to the swift water current, the little one and the mother got separated. The cub ended up on the other side of the river, far away from the jungle, near farmland. He grew up among the sheep and lambs, imitating their behaviour, eating what they ate, and soon began conversing with them, "baa-baa." Can you imagine a tiger cub talking like that?

One fine day, another tiger crossing the river happened to be hungry. On noticing the sheep as a prospective meal, he also observed that the baby tiger was behaving like a lamb among the sheep. The hungry tiger decided to do something about it. "Who does he think he is? Does he not know that he is a tiger?"

So brothers and sisters, even our Balvikas children know how the tiger taught the cub a lesson. The tiger put its hunger aside in order to teach the cub a lesson. He was determined to show the baby tiger who he really was. He went and picked up the little one, brought him close to the river, and showed him his reflection in the moving water. The realisation then occurred. What did the little one see in the moving water?

"I am not a lamb, but who am I?" Of course, you are not a tiger; you are verily, God. That 'I', what is that 'I' within all of us? I am I. It is not the body or mind or the intellect; it is not even the individual soul. I am that: *soham*, the indivisible supreme. This is what we discover, brothers and sisters, when we are with Swami, holding His hands at all times. Holding our hands together, working in unity with Bhagavan, is the journey from 'I' to 'We'.

First, we must discover our own true Self before we can see the same 'one Self' all around. Here is a concept which Professor Anil Kumar shared with me.

You can see it on the screen. Let us picture a circle in the centre, and by drawing bigger circles around it, you can see how it expands as the radius of the outer circle grows. The first circle is constant; it remains at the very centre. All the other outer circles cannot be drawn without it. This is how we can visualise that the ultimate Truth, the centre of the circle, is the same in you, me, everyone, and everything. Our Lord, the centre of all the Sai centres around the globe, the centre of all the temples, mosques around the globe, the centre of the whole universe, has said, "I have come to light the lamp of love in your hearts, to see that it shines day by day with added lustre."

Do you see how beautifully our Bhagavan is lifting us up to that Self? Once you are on this spiritual inner journey, He will see to it that our hearts are in our Self. So let us embark on the self-improvement program with His guidance. Working together in unity, we will reach the ultimate Truth on this spiritual journey. In a nutshell, what we should be doing as an individual is just like that tiger, who put aside its hunger to show the baby its truth. Let us make an effort: sacrifice our individual body identification and self-centred thoughts, rising above them to Oneness, the universal Self.

As for all of us, let us continue to practice at the individual level the art of discovering that Self. We, as members and officers of the Sai Organisation, see officers come and go; but the office remains.

The first tenet of the nine-point conduct is daily meditation and prayer. How simple! See that we meditate and not medicate. So let us not wait for any medication to be prescribed by our doctors. We have the Doctor of all doctors, the Teacher of all teachers, the *Guru* of all *gurus* - *Sadguru* - in the altar of our hearts. By practising just the first point of the Nine-Point Code of Conduct, we can start the process of self-improvement, which leads to Self discovery.

The light meditation and the daily prayers are incredibly powerful; they can remove all the false identification and put us in touch with the ultimate Self, the one within all. The first mode in the nine modes of devotion comes naturally by practising *sravanam* or listening. Listening to the Lord's stories, *leelas*, *mahimas*, and discourses, will help the individual 'I' make the inner journey to 'We'. The Lord cannot be talking all the time; He waits and listens to our prayers. *Yagnas*, *yantras*, and *mantras* are spiritual tools to connect with Him.

There was a video made back in 1981 that I watched repeatedly. It is a very beautiful video titled, "Interview with Westerners". In that talk, Bhagavan said, "You and I are We". You see, Bhagavan is in all our hearts. He continued to say, "We and We are one." See that journey from 'I' to 'We'? He is clarifying that we are all one. So what happens when we are in unity? There will be a unity and harmony in thought, word, and deed. We will experience a transformation in ourselves, due to the kind effect of grace. No more individuality, only universality. No more local, only global. We will be eternal witnesses to ourself.

The word "watch" comes into my mind as we speak of witnessing. We will not be watching movies, the news, the miserable world, but we will be busy watching the one permanent Self within - the *Atma*, the one in all. We will be watching our words, actions and thoughts, and we will be in perfect harmony. What does it reveal? Our character and our hearts shine the light, the lamp of love in our hearts, our true Self. "I have come to light the lamp of love in our hearts, to see that it shines everyday with added lustre," our Lord utters.

No more darkness, no more worries, no more miseries, no more anxieties, no more pain or pleasure, no more happiness, no more sadness; it is just bliss, absolute bliss, *ananda*, pure love. Let us experience that every moment in this 'I' to 'We' journey. Let us practice the very first thing that our Bhagavan has said—the first of the nine point code of conduct, daily meditation and prayer. Let us practice the first of the nine modes of devotion, *sravanam*, the first *bhajan* that Bhagavan sang, "*Manasa Bhajare Guru Charanam, Dustara Bhava Sagara Tharanam.*"

How beautiful! To escape from this miserable earthly life, hold on to the feet of the *Guru* in your heart and worship Him. That is our spiritual journey from 'I' to 'We'. Develop this relationship in your heart. Let us not close our heart with anger. No more selfishness, no more ulterior motives. Let us open our hearts with pure love, love, love. Share that lamp of love. Let us conclude that spirituality is the only refuge in this journey. We must make a constant effort to realise the Self.

In a recent discourse, just before Shivarathri, Swami spoke of the importance of self-confidence as being the first foundation to Self-realisation, confidence in the Self—the *Atma*. From our neighbouring state, Illinois, Abraham Lincoln was born exactly 200 hundred years ago, in 1809. His character reflected self-confidence. Due to his self-confidence, he rose

from a poor family to become the President of the United States. This self-confidence was infused by his mother.

Brothers and sisters: let us thank our dear parents, grandparents, and forefathers. It is through their efforts and prayers for us to reach that goal of Self-realisation, that our universal Mother and Father, Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba, has chosen all of us to be part of this organisation, working in unity, and discovering that one Self within. Jai Sai Ram. (Applause)

SOCIAL ASPECT OF 'I' TO 'WE' – SIDHESH BAROT

Thank you very much, Ahilan. I must confess, as I was listening to Ahilan I was speechless just like all of you. But I also got goose bumps on my body when he was talking. He has touched us with the help of Swami. He has given us a perspective to look at, to think of, and to understand. This is today's youth; this is what the journey and the future are all about. So, with that, we will move on to the third panel member. I would like to welcome Sidhesh Barot. Sidhesh will talk about the social aspect of the journey from 'I' to 'We'. Welcome Sidhesh!

I offer my loving Pranams at the Lotus Feet of my beloved Bhagavan. And I pray to Him to speak through me. Once the fingers were fighting because each thought it was better than others. So here is the conversation:

The thumb says to all the fingers, "You can't do anything without me; you are all helpless. So I am the most important of all. I am your leader."

The index finger said, "Thumb, you probably are useless without me. I am so important because I am used to point. So I am the most important, and I should be the leader."

The middle finger came in and said, "Wait, I am the tallest among all of you. Two on either side, you guys serve me, so I am your leader."

Then the ring finger came in. He said, "All the humans adorn me with jewellery such as a diamond, an emerald, topaz, etc. I am your leader."

So the last finger was left, and it said, "I think you all got it wrong. I am the leader because I am the one who helps cut everything, and I am the one who is bearing the brunt, so I should be your leader."

The conversation went on with each one emphasising why it should be the leader. The heart listened to all this, smiled and said, "All you madcaps, don't you realise that each one of you by yourself is useless? When the hand is folded and you work in unison, you are actually useful."

I think the problems in society today are like those of the fingers that I spoke about. Each of us thinks that he or she is separate, but we fail to realise that our source is one. We come from this one hand, and we are the best when we work together, not by each one trying to be a leader. The Vedas declare, "*Sahasra Shirsha Purushaha Sahasrakshas Sahasrapat*": God has thousand feet, thousand eyes, thousand hands -- if you can imagine that.

Swami often says, "Don't just imagine Me as a huge figure with a thousand heads, a thousand feet, and a thousand hands. That'll be a grotesque figure! Look for Me within society, within everyone, for I am in all, and I dwell in each one's heart. If you see Me there,

then those thousand feet and thousand hands you are looking at will respond to you as the need may be. So this journey is not just about me or 'I' getting there, but about all of us.

Swami emphasises two things: love and education. Education today teaches us that we should study for a living. The whole purpose of our education is to become a professional, and earn a salary to be able to support the family. But we fail to realise that true education is that which helps us understand this core principle that Swami often talks about: that we should go within and realise that each one of us has the same root -- and this comes through service.

Swami emphasises service as well. Service helps us empathise with others. It provides the opportunity to work at the grassroots level and realise how each one of us is going through pain and problems in life. By serving, you will empathise with others, and people will be able to thank God for this service.

In our daily life, we often forget about things we need to do; so we have a timetable or a task list. But do we actually have five minutes to thank God?

"God, thank You, for I am able to eat. God, thank You, for I am able to see. God, thank You, for I am able to feel, I am able to walk, and I am able to see the beauty of nature." Do I actually go ahead and thank God for all of that?

Be thankful for what He has done for you, rather than say, "God, I don't have this; God, I need this." So when that 'I' comes in, you see there is so much selfishness. Today in society by and large, any problem, be it an economic, social, or political, is all about focusing on selfish motives, leading to vices such as greed, hatred, jealousy, anger, and lust. It's all there in some form or the other, and these are the serious problems facing us today.

I remember an interesting experience with Swami. There were devotees sitting around Him. Swami came up to one of the devotees and said, "You all went for a service project. How was the service?"

The devotee stood up and said, "Swami, the service was nice. With Your grace, everything went well."

"So, how many of you went?"

"Ten of us went, Swami."

"Ten of you went?"

He thought about it, as Swami asked the same question again and said, "Yes, Swami, ten of us went."

"No," Swami said.

You know when Swami asks you something like that, you are likely to be speechless as to what may come next. Swami then said, "Eleven of you went. You forgot Me."

The next day, the same gentleman was there, and Swami came again and asked, "How many of you went for service?"

This time he was more careful and said, “Swami, eleven of us went.”

Swami said, “No, not eleven of you.”

Again the man was confused, and not being sure of the response, he said, “Swami, You tell us.”

“Twenty of you went,” Swami said.

So he was a little perplexed, “How 20?”

Swami said, “One Swami went with each one of you, for Swami is with everyone.”

On the third day, Swami came and asked him, “The service was nice; you are all doing good projects. So on that day, how many of you went for service?”

By now he knew that something else was coming. The man was not sure because one day Swami said eleven, the next day twenty; so he said, “Swami, I surrender. I don’t know. You tell me. You are the best person. You are God. You tell me. I give up.”

Swami said, “Only one person went, for all are one. You did service for one, and the person who did service is also one. There is no difference.”

So if we keep this particular principle and Jesus’s “Do unto others as you want others to do to you” principle in mind as we act, then I think the society will be a much better place to live in. You probably wouldn’t have to waste money, time and effort, for each individual will act according to his true conscience. That would make the society a much better place. With these words, I’ll end and thank you for your time. (*Applause*)

YOUTH ASPECT OF I TO WE -- YAMINI BALAJI

Thank you very much, Sidhesh. A question was posed to Swami, and this was with respect to what was going on all over in the world. This devotee asked, “What is all this happening, Swami, why can’t You stop it?” So Swami said to this devotee there, “Everything is within you, everything.”

He asked, “How?”

Swami went on, “The thoughts, words, and deeds have to be one.” If there is complete unity in these three things, then the individual will be in order. If the individual is in order, then the house will be in order. If the house is in order, then the community will be in order. If the community is in order, then the city will be in order, and then goes the nation and the world. So the undercurrent is the transformation of the individual, as Sidhesh mentioned. With that we now move on to the fourth presenter of the day. I would like to welcome Yamini Bala. She will be talking about the youth aspect of the journey from ‘I’ to ‘We’. Welcome to Yamini.

Sai Ram, everyone! Thank you all for being here, and thank you for giving me the opportunity to share this panel with such excellent speakers and model young adults. And also, I applaud Professor Anil Kumar for taking the initiative to organise a forum like this, to hear the voices, the concerns, and the ideas of young people, and I know that you faced considerable pressure not to share the stage today. I think it speaks to your conviction in the ideas of

youth that you are organising events like this in the USA and across the world. So thank you.
(Applause)

To start on the youth aspects on the journey from 'I' to 'We', I wanted to have a volunteer from the audience to read the Swami quote.

"It is only the youth who are capable of protecting the world. It is the youth and the youth alone who can set this world straight. Sometimes, the elders underestimate the capabilities of the youth, thinking that they are inexperienced and young; but the youth are endowed with immense power. If they make a firm resolve, they are capable of achieving anything. If they realise their power, they can emancipate the nation. The participation of youth is necessary for the welfare of the world."

So this is a very powerful quote that Swami has given to us, and I want to actually ask you how youth are characterised based on Swami's words. What are some of the ideas, or phrases, or words that jump out at you in the way that Swami describes young people? You can go ahead and just shout them from there.

(Audience reading from the slide)

"Firm resolve"

"Dynamic"

"A lot of energy"

"Conviction"

"Opinions, ideas of their own"

"Creativity"

"Self-confidence"

Yes, clearly very inspiring and positive traits that Swami notices in young people, and now I want to jump to the topic that I was asked to present about today, and this is the way it was presented to me. Can you read that again please?

"How are the youth? What do they want? What are the present day problems, chaos, and confusion among the youth? What is the cause of tension, anxiety, and restlessness among the youth? What do youth expect from the Sai organisation?"

So I am going to ask the same question again: How would you say that the youth are characterised based on the way we are talking about youth in today's discussion? What are some of the words that are jumping out of you from here?

(Audience reading from the slide)

"Confused"

"Tension"

"Restless"

"Frustration"

Right! So obviously it is a very different characterisation from what Swami described. I don't mean to imply that anyone is better or worse, or that one is more or less accurate, but I do want to show that there really is a stark dichotomy between the ideals that Swami sets forth for us as young people, and the reality or the perceptions of the reality by the broader Sai community, as far as where youth are today.

In order to address the causes of this dichotomy, I wanted to share a couple of snap-shots from my working life. I am working in the field of education and have had lots of experiences in different communities working with young people. This is actually a picture of a classroom (*shown as a power point slide*) from Kripa Montessori School, where I work right now. This is what I would call the best case scenario, the American dream. I think this is what a lot of people strive for in terms of their lifestyle and family life.

What we see here is that the kids at our school, by and large, are members of an affluent community. They have a comfortable home in the suburbs; it is a quiet area, and it is very safe. They have a lot of other kids around them to play with. Their family is stable; both their parents are at home. Their parents are educated, successful professionals, very loving, who want to provide the best of opportunities to their kids. There is no doubt that all these kids are going to grow up and do well in school, go to college, get good jobs when they come out, start their own families, and have a similar lifestyle to their parents.

But what we see a lot of times at school is that we are open from 7am to 6pm, and we have kids there for that entire time, everyday. When their parents come and pick them up, they don't say, "Oh I missed you so much, and I can't wait to go home and play with you." They say, "Come on, we've got to go now to study math and English."

These kids have not even reached kindergarten yet; they are about four-years old, and they already have 12 to 14 hour working days in their academic life! It's good that their academics are strong and they have a lot of opportunities, but what about the quality of their family life? What about the quality of their spiritual or cultural development?

I think that the values that they learn from a young age are competition, pressure, stress. They also learn to strive for perfection, and these things carry on as they grow older and go to high school and eventually enter working life. So what is clearly missing here is the time spent with their families, enjoying quality loving relationships in their lives. These relationships are present; but they don't have much time to really develop that sense of belonging in the family.

And now, let's flip to the other end of the spectrum and I ask you to read again (*the power point slide*). This is a testimonial of one of the youth that I worked with in Detroit, in the inner city, and this speaks to the quality of the public schools there.

"When I wake up, my mum is already gone. She works three jobs with minimum wage and no health insurance. I barely get to see her. I have to be quiet because my uncle is usually sleeping on the couch. He is an alcoholic and lives with us. He is sick a lot, and most of our money goes to him. If I wake him up, he gets angry and hits us. I leave for school, and I have to be careful because I walk through a gang area. I see people who sell drugs or their bodies. There is a lot of stealing, shooting, and other stuff. School is important because education is supposed to be my ticket to success; education is supposed to set my mind free."

"When I get to school, it is more like a jail than anything. I don't feel free at all. I think they are training us to be criminals sometimes. There is a long line outside to get through the security. We need to pass through metal detectors, then the guards with guns do a body search and search our backpacks; but I don't know why because we have to carry clear backpacks, anyway. Then we get to our lockers, but we don't have the keys so we have to wait for the guards. If they take too long, then we are late to class, or we don't get our books. But if we

show up late or unprepared we get suspended automatically. This happens a lot now because of zero-tolerance. So after going through all of this just to go to my class, when I'm supposed to learn, they tell me to leave. What is the point then? I wonder if the kids that dropped out enjoying games or selling drugs are the smart ones. They have more money than my mum. They have each other and someone to take care of them. They can support their families, too. It is better than I can say for me." – 7th grade, Eric

So if Eric actually makes it to high school, he has a 21% chance of graduating in 4 years from a Detroit public school. And given these circumstances, for about 50% of students, the choice is clear: they opt out of their schooling around the age of 16 or so. So, this is what I would call the worst case scenario, something that everyone wants to avoid if at all possible. And given that this is the reality on both ends of the spectrum, my question is: can we expect young people not to be confused, or restless, or anxious, or tense? Is there any way that there would be anything else to strive for, just looking around at the world around them, seeing all these problems, and seeing their peers go through these problems? What can we expect of our young people? And I think that internally and externally our energy mirrors itself.

Swami says, "Reflection, reaction, and resound." So when there is chaos and confusion in the world around us, then there is chaos and confusion within us, and vice versa. So when I was asked what is the cause of the present day confusion and chaos among the youth, my question is how can be there anything but chaos and confusion among youth? I think that the world that young people are about to inherit is riddled with problems. Everywhere you look -- there is an economic crisis, an environmental crisis, a global crisis, a moral crisis, a health care crisis. These are the things we hear about constantly. For Sai youth, there is this imminent feeling that our time with Swami, as a physical Avatar on Earth, is dwindling. So we are running out of time to connect with Him on that physical level. So of course, the youth are restless and anxious, confused and scared; but my question is this: Is that necessarily a bad thing?

I, for one, would be more worried about the state of the world if young people didn't care; if they weren't impatient and didn't have a sense of urgency to reach out and to change some of this reality; if they didn't want to lift their hands in service and make transformation within themselves and in their communities to help improve or eradicate some of these situations.

The common thread that I saw in both of these scenarios is that there is a lack of loving relationships to really nurture the best character and potential out of these students. And as Sai young adults, we are blessed with the knowledge that there is an endless source of Divine love that is accessible to all of us at any moment. And although this is accessible to everyone in the world, we actually know about it, and that is our blessing as young adults. So with everything that is going on around us, I think the role of young adults today is to be the ambassadors of that Divine Love. We should cultivate this love within ourselves, and then allow that to radiate out into the world and share it with everyone we come in contact with. We should go into communities and spread that message, by banners or our manners.

I would argue for the Sai organisation that the restlessness, the tension, and the anxiety we perceive is actually an asset to this organisation. And when young adults have to live with that un-harnessed restlessness, it can lead to walls of resistance. So I would say that restlessness by itself is not bad; it is a sign that there is potential, a bubbling energy that is seeking an outlet.

So what does Sai youth need from the Sai organisation? I was asked: what do we expect from the Sai organisation? I think the key question is to think about how the Sai organisation can really harness that energy and put it into action in meaningful ways. Service is an opportunity that speaks to youth and gets a lot of us inspired and excited. And it's amazing that despite the high need of service in our communities, it is hard to do service today. Young people find it really hard to get a project going, and there are a variety of factors that contribute to that.

I think that we would be served by having pro-active programs to foster and nurture leadership potentials from young people in the Sai organisation. I think that we could use mentoring and guidance on applying Swami's teachings in the real world. We have the advantage of Swami's values and Swami's love in our lives, but I think we struggle to strike a balance between societal expectations and Swami's expectations.

Youth need a sense of belonging; we need to feel that we are part of something greater than ourselves, and we need an environment that's more in tune with our needs and challenges. And it is during this age range that we go through major transitions in life. Change is pretty much the only constant when we are young; so as long as we have any kind of aversion or fear of change, we will run the risk of alienating young people from our activities. So we need to have the opportunities to try new things, to experiment, and if we make mistakes, have the benefit of the entire Sai community and the adults to catch us as a support net. They can help us and guide us back to the right path.

Another thing that young people have expressed to me is that we need to seriously begin to make the transition from our reliance on Swami as a physical Avatar, to Swami as an internal driving energy within us. We really need the guidance and the support of the adults in the organisation to help us make that transition.

Finally I think that a time comes in every organisation when we need to look critically at ourselves as a collective force, and see what we can do to improve our standards and reach our highest potential. We've all heard the saying that it takes a village to raise a child; but now that child has to raise the village. We need to have this type of village that we are happy to raise children in, grow with them, and be able to see their struggles through their eyes. If we can accomplish this together, the children, youth and adults, all together can make that journey from 'I' to 'We', and complete the journey beyond 'We' to 'He', to Sai. Thank you.
(Applause)

Thank you very much, Yamini. Very well said! Today's youth are ambassadors of Swami's love. I would like to quickly share a personal experience with Yamini's permission. This happened in December 2007. Yamini was travelling on an Air India flight from Bombay to Chicago. I happened to be on the same flight. I got to the airport at 5 am. We were in Frankfurt after 8 hours, and I was very hungry. I had skipped my dinner the previous night, and so I was very hungry. As I sat in the transition lounge, there came Yamini. She offered me a box full of lemon rice. It's like Swami sending you the food, the love. You hope for something, and there is God sending his messenger with love and food.

Once again, I would like to thank all the panel members here for complying with the proceedings of our session. We now invite the audience to ask questions, which our panel members and moderator will answer.

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