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The Sunday Talk Given by Prof. Anil Kumar

CHICAGO - ILLINOIS - USA

"What is Religion?"

May 23, 2010

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Sai Ram

With Pranams at the Lotus Feet of our most Beloved Bhagavan,

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Respected Elders

RELIGION

I am fully aware of the fact that this gathering is heterogeneous, not necessarily Bhagavan Baba's devotees alone. I know that many people on different paths in the field of religion have assembled here. I have a few basic questions to ask before I go into the topic: What is religion?

How is it practised? Is religion different from the practice of religion? Why religion? In what way is it different from spirituality? How does religion help me? What is the harm if I am not religious, if I am not spiritual? On one side many are leading luxurious, extravagant lives having nothing to do with religion, while at the same time we see many people suffering in spite of their affiliation to a religion. Naturally these questions would strike our mind: what is religion, what is spirituality, what is success?

WHAT IS SUCCESS?

Mr. Ayush introduced me as a successful man. But I would like to ask this question: What is success? It all depends. Some people may consider amassing money as success, yes why not?

For some people occupying exalted positions, wielding influence in the community and society are signs of success. Some people consider collecting degrees of academic excellence as success. What is success? These questions naturally come to our mind when we sit relaxed and if we are not emotional.

Most of us see religion as an emotion, an emotional expression. Religion is not emotion. Let me be very clear because we find people losing their balance and going to extremes and yet they call themselves religious. It is not true. Balance is religion, certainly not emotion. In the world we crave for position. In the world we crave for recognition, position, status, dignity, respectability. These are the criteria that determine the success of any man. If one is highly placed in society, he is considered successful in the worldly sense. A highly respected man can be called successful. But in the case of religion it is totally different. Expression of one's personality, recognition of that personality in society etc. are the signs of the world. They are not signs of success, spiritually speaking. So long as I crave for recognition, so long as I crave for propaganda, publicity, name and fame -- it has nothing to do with religion. It is all the worldly way, the physical mundane life. There is nothing wrong with it. But let us not confuse this with religious life.

WHAT IS RELIGION?

Religion is self-effacement, religion is self-denial. When 'I'-ness or ego is lost, then I can call myself religious but not otherwise. So long as I want to be known, so long as I want to be popular, it has nothing to do with religion. Why? In religion one is lost; he does not exist any more as ego, as a separate entity. A simple example! If I stand near the shore of a river, I am quite comfortable and converse well. When I get into the river and stand in knee deep water, still I can manage to speak. If I go into the depth of the river and am standing in neck-deep water, well I can still express myself though not very comfortably. When I am sunk deep in the river, then it becomes impossible to talk. Therefore the talking, conversation, communication are possible only so long as I am along the shore of the river, so long as water is up to the knees, so long as I am neck-deep; the moment I am deeply immersed, I will have no words to express.

EXPERIENCE AND EXPERIENCER

Therefore my friends, religion is not expression. So long as there is expression, there is still a long way to go. When that expression is gone and experience alone remains, when you are the experienter, that is religious awareness. Expression is verbal, oral and merely vocal; religion has got nothing to do with expression. The *Upanishads* have clearly said that by word you cannot describe, by mind you cannot comprehend. That is what *Taitriya Upanishad* says. When the mind cannot comprehend, when the word cannot describe, then how do I express?

Therefore my friends, religion is not given to expression but to experience. There again, experiences are many. Your experience may be different from my experience. You may have

many experiences. Nobody can generalise experiences. Your experience may be different from others' experiences. Experiences are varied and many, but the experiencer is one and the same. The one who experiences -- the experiencer -- is the same in everybody, and that experiencer is religion. Experience and expression are merely physical; they exist only at the body level.

Religion and spirituality are often misunderstood. That is the reason why people are dissatisfied and disgruntled even in that field. The reason is that they have physical goals in religion also. We find a small religious group where people fight to be a convener. 'I want to be a convener. Let me throw out the present convener and be the convener myself!' Instead 'you' should be forgotten; you should be lost and ego should not exist. It is ridiculous to fight to be a convener in a spiritual organisation.

If anyone says that you are a great man and if you think it is true, there is no greater fool than you, no greater fool. Who is greater than the other? All are the same. That essential basic core is the same in all. The spirit is the same. It is only a question of the periphery. A simple example! There is a centre around which you draw a circle, a bigger circle. You may draw any number of circles, but the centre continues to be the same.

So religion wants you to be centred, but we are self-centred. That is a different thing of course. We are to be centred, 'centred' meaning to be focused on the very being of our life, the very core of our life, the centre of our life. The circles are different in their periphery. So we are different at the peripheral level; but so far as the centre or the very being is considered, we are one and the same. When this is forgotten, we go by the periphery, go by the diameter, go by the circumference, and get ourselves divided. We think that it is religion. There cannot be a greater betrayal than this.

BEHAVIOUR OF A RELIGIOUS MAN

So, my friends, being a professor for 46 years, I am prone to be repetitive in my expression because I am habituated to that -- old habits die hard. So the first thing which I wanted to share with you is that the experiencer is important, not the experience; experiencer is important not the expression. The second point is that it is not the status or respectability, name or fame or dignity that are important, certainly not. Self-denial, self-effacement are the criteria of religious awareness. Third, if we are really successful and if we are really religious, what should be our temperament? How should we go about?

A religious man is in the present, neither thinking of the past or the future. If I go on bragging about my past -- "I was like that, I did that" -- past is death, past is history. A religious man will never go back in life. So let us not be worried about our past because the past is already buried. There is no use in bringing it back unless life has become monotonous.

Many youngsters avoid old people because they live in the past. Most of the old people live in the past so if any fellow comes and tells him, "Sir I am officer of so-and-so," he will start telling, "In 1930 I was an officer." (*Laughter*) "So what? I am telling you that I am an officer *now*. Why do you speak of your position 40 years ago?"

Therefore my friends, a religious man will never live in the past because the past is death, past is gone, past is history. Even if the past is glorious, what are you going to do now? What you are right now is what is important, not what you were. Therefore religion is not the past nor is religion the future.

Some people say they want to meditate from the year 2011. (*Laughter*) Or some would say, "I have decided to fast every Saturday from the year 2012." It is not a 5-year plan or 10-year plan of action. Religion is not the future because the future is uncertain. Future is a mystery, while past is history. When you do not know anything of the future, how do you resolve to do these things? We are not sure of our lives in the next moment. So how can you say, "I will do from 2012 or 2015" -- nonsense! Therefore religion is not the future because the future is quite uncertain, yet to come.

So what is religion? Religion is the present. It is existential, experimental awareness. It is realisation and analysis, here and now. That has to be recognised. Some people say, "I would like to go to heaven, therefore I start doing the right things from now on" My question is: "Has any fellow returned from heaven and told you, 'I did this, therefore I am here, so please join me'." (*Laughter*) "Are you ready to join him?" Therefore all that is said, all that is spoken about repeatedly is more of an imagination, more of poetic exposition or narration, but not really applicable at this moment of life. Therefore religion is this moment. It is existence. It is the present, neither the past nor the future.

WHY RELIGION?

Speaking about religion, again "Why religion?" will be the next question. Why? I am very happy without religion. We have forgotten one fact: religion will certainly mould and shape our attitude. Many students ask me, "Why all this?" (If we are free with students, they will ask very good questions; but if I look like a tiger to them, they look at me like an animal in a zoo. I am not given to that. Though I have completed 46 years of service, no one has looked at me as a tiger or a lion much less a serpent.) They come very close to me and ask me all kinds of questions. I welcome, I welcome it. We don't want simply nodding heads, certainly not. We want them to challenge. We want them to question.

Why religion? Many people ask me this, also boys ask me. I tell them religion is a matter of attitude. It is a matter of temperament -- attitude and temperament. To elaborate further, if a man is successful but not religious, he turns egotistical. A man who is not religious, if he is a

failure, he becomes frustrated and depressed. He becomes a classic patient for a psychiatrist. Therefore my friends, success or failure will make you lose the very mental balance of your life. Religion will help you to maintain that balance. It is a question of attitude and temperament.

You must have gone through the biographies of many great people. In one of the recent books by Mr. Abdul Kalam, the past President of India, he writes in the last chapter that success depends upon how much we go within. Kalam goes on to say, the more you do not give publicity to yourself outside – do not speak about your own glory, do not go about blowing your own trumpet – you are nearer the reality. The less I am given to publicity, the less I am given to my external self and the more and more I go within, I become more religious and more successful.

RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

Let me also tell you how to distinguish between religion and spirituality. Religion and spirituality are different. Religion is the banner, while spirituality is the manner. Banners are different, but the essential principles, the fundamental values of all religions, are the same. That essence, which is the same in all, is spirituality while the different forms are religions. Gold is spirituality, while the jewels are the religions. Clay is spirituality while different things like a pot, slate or a lid made out of clay are the religions.

Variety is the nature of religion, whereas uniformity, homogeneity and oneness make up the nature of spirituality. To be more precise, religions divide but spirituality unites. Religion is like a pair of scissors that would cut a cloth into pieces, whereas spirituality would join all these pieces, getting them stitched so as to make a nice garment for you to wear. So spirituality is a unifying factor while religion is divisive. If we are divided it is because of this kind of attitude and this kind of approach.

But the modern approach is different; people are aware of this fact. No one speaks of *karma*. No one speaks of the fundamentals like a fundamentalist. No one is narrow-minded. Basic spirituality is broad based, applicable to anybody because spirituality is universal, cosmic and global. It is not individual. Spirituality is based upon our total understanding and awareness while religion is totally ritualistic, or full of rituals. So my friends, I want to draw a distinction between religion and spirituality from this point of view, from this dimension. Just as we think of Shirdi Sai (as we are assembled here in a Shirdi Sai temple), let us take a few episodes from the biography of that *Avatar* or incarnation.

UNITY IS DIVINITY

He stayed there in a mosque. Though He stayed in a *masjid* (mosque) He was not against Hinduism. There used to be Vishnu Sahasranama *parayana* (chanting the 1008 names of

Vishnu) going on on the one hand, while He was clarifying doubts on *Gita* to many people. Shirdi Sai's life, the place where He stayed, and His principles and teachings speak of the unity of religions. Even though there was *Tulasivana*, *Tulasi* (Basil) plants all around, Dwarakamayi temple, Lendi *vana*, He chose to stay in the *masjid* only. Lighting of the lamps was a regular practice there. So the practices of Islam and the practices of *Sanathana Dharma* had both been blended and followed, adopted without any rivalry. So it is Shirdi Bhagavan who worked for the synthesis or unity of religions. The same programme is continued today in the name and form of Sathya Sai, now at the global level, at the international level. The unity of religions is being carried out today in a very big way.

Therefore the basic principles are the same, the fundamental principles are the same. They are different only at the superficial level. And once again, as we think of religion, a few questions from the life of Shirdi Bhagavan arise in our mind. "Where is God? Where is Brahman?" His answer is, "He is in the form of Rs 500 in your pocket." God is in the form of Rs 500 in your pocket! What does that mean? It means I am attached to money, I am attached to position, luxuries and a very high standard of life, yet I am claiming to be spiritual. It is political and not spiritual.

Politically you may impress somebody, politically you may win everybody over, politically you may have all the people along your way; but it is a kind of self-betrayal. Whom are you going to betray? So long as I am attached to money, attached to position, attached to a luxurious life, if I call myself very religious and spiritual, it is bogus. Simplicity is religion, humility is religion, openness is religion, and universality is religion. We have to understand that in the first place. That is what we find from the lives of the saints and *Avatars*.

WHAT IS SPIRITUALITY?

But mere practise of religion, which is ritualistic, sounds meaningless. You know, a *Gita* talk was going on at some place and after everybody left, one lady was crying. The speaker was very happy that at least one listener took his talk seriously so the speaker asked her, "Amma, why do you cry like that? Is it because of the essence of *Bhagavad Gita* that you have heard?"

"No, sir. That *Bhagavad Gita* text you are carrying is bound with a black thread, which reminds me of the waist belt of my dead husband. He had that kind of waist belt, a black one, and I am reminded of that. Therefore I am crying."

On an auspicious night like Shivarathri, some say they observe *jagarana* or vigil, and keep awake throughout the night by playing cards or by going to the 3rd or 4th cinema show. That is not religion, it is not spirituality. No! If it is religion to be merely awake through the night, all engine drivers, truck drivers, hospital nurses on duty and all watchmen should have their place in heaven. First berth reserved for them! (*Laughter*)

So being physically awake has nothing to do with spirituality. And yet it is given that one has to 'be awake' to the inner self. One has to be *aware* of the inner self. Awaken, be aware – that is what is called observing vigil or being awake throughout the night on sacred festivals like Shivarathri.

Some people also say, "I don't eat on Thursday night" or "I don't take food on Saturday night." I recommend them not to have food every night! (*Laughter*) At least that will improve their health. Not taking food has got nothing to do with religion or spirituality. If you have some digestive problem, you don't take food. (*Laughter*) That does not mean you are religious and that I should fall at your feet. Certainly not! Ridiculous! This has got nothing to do with spirituality.

Actually, fasting means constant contemplation, fasting means deep meditation, fasting means total identification with Divinity. That is what fasting is -- not skipping food or replacing it with other means of 40 *dosas*! (*Laughter*) Some people say, "I am fasting tonight – only 40 *dosas*, that is all! Not more than that!" So the lady of the house starts making preparations from morning because this fellow will fast that night! How can you say that is spiritual? How do you say it is ritual? We are cut off from the depth, from the profundity, from the actual spirit of these rituals. So we have forgotten what spirituality is. We stick to the ritual and call ourselves religious. There we are mistaken.

So, religion is different from religiousness. Religiousness is quality, while religion is quantity. Some say, "In our group, there are 1000 people." So what? Somebody said, "Anil Kumar, our Sai centre is so small, there will be just 20 to 30 people; but would you still come and address us?" I said, "I am not a political leader, expecting thousands and thousands to be brought in lorries as for a political meeting." No saint ever addressed huge gatherings. Go through all *Upanishads* and sacred *Puranas*. No one had huge crowds like in a huge political meeting. It is just not so.

An aspiration, a deep yearning, a deep pining and waiting -- that is what is called the spirit, religiousness. That religiousness is something like a child waiting for the return of dad from his office. Religiousness is something like a beloved wife waiting for the return of her husband who left her 10 years ago, due to some assignment in a foreign land. That kind of anxiety, that kind of a feeling is religiousness, not religion.

So let us be religious and not simply be men and women of religion. Religion or spirituality is love once again. We have to question ourselves: Is there love within us? Well, one has to be true to one's own self. Some of us cannot be happy when others are happy. Some people are happy when others are unhappy. Why are you unhappy? "I am unhappy because he is happy." Oh I see. (*Laughter*) But he attends *Nagarasankirtan*, he does *puja* and fasts every Saturday. Can you call him a religious man? Certainly not! He lacks the kind of love which is unconditional love.

Unconditional love is the quality of a religious man. Whether you oblige me or not, whether you greet me or not, whether you accept me or deny me, whatever it may be, unconditional love is religiousness. 'Oh God, I love You, provided my son gets married.' 'Oh God, I will come to You, You are the Lord of Seven Hills, I will offer You my most precious hair on my head (which will grow next month anyway...).' This hair itself is temporary; more so a bald head is ready to offer hair because he has no hair already! (*Laughter*) All this nonsense we call spirituality; that is why it has become ridiculous and has become a big joke. We don't enjoy the depth of it; we don't go into the reality.

There are three levels that I understand. The first level is thinking -- the thinking level. Yes, some people have got good memory so they can recite all the *slokas*, all the verses from sacred scriptures upside down. That is not religion; we have DVDs and cassettes which will do the same job much better than this fellow. Repetition is not religiousness. Scholarship is not religiousness. Then what is religiousness? What do I mean by that?

Thou art That -- *Tatvamasi*. Living up to That is religiousness; am I That? Have I realised that? Have I experienced that reality within me? *Aham Brahmasmi*. (I am Brahman.) Have I experienced That? Have I known the similarity between me and the Divine? What are the similarities? What is it that separates me from the reality? That kind of enquiry is religiousness. Self-enquiry is religiousness. Pomp and show are religion.

There are various religious practices all over. All the temples are busy; every single meeting is attended by large numbers of people. Every leader attracts huge crowds. Yet in spite of that, no one seems to be comfortable or happy. Why do I say that? If we have eaten sumptuously at home, we don't have to go to the neighbour's house and eat there. If you are satisfied in one particular path, you don't have to go to another path. When you go on searching one path after another, in the meantime your life is exhausted. Your life is spent. Therefore we have become more or less spiritual vagabonds, spiritual wanderers, because we don't know what we are or what we are doing. Let us ask ourselves, "Have I gone into the depth and have I experienced?" When once we experience the ultimate in one path, we will understand that any path will take us to the same reality.

One example: in the court of a king, there was a heated argument between Saivites and Vaishnavites. The Saivites went on arguing that Shiva was superior to Vishnu, Vaishnavites, with roaring voice, thumping their desks, wanted to impress everyone that Vishnu was superior to Shiva. Ultimately the king was asked to pronounce his judgement as to who was superior to the other.

The king said, "Before I say who is superior to whom, let me say this -- both of you are fools number one. You say Shiva is superior to Vishnu, yet you have not seen Shiva anywhere. You have not experienced Him. You others say Vishnu is superior to Shiva but you do not know who Vishnu is; you have never met Him in this life. If you are really a worshipper of Shiva, you will see Shiva in Vishnu also. If you are really the worshipper of Lord Vishnu, you will see Vishnu in

Shiva too. Thus you will experience the oneness of reality. The one who experiences the oneness of reality is a realised soul.

I will go a step further and give an illustration. Shirdi Bhagavan instructed a devotee to get out from Dwarakamayi temple. The devotee felt very badly, having been used to that place for decades. Since he is asked to vacate, how will he feel? So he went on crying. Finally Shirdi Bhagavan said, "You can come back after one year." All these things are recorded in author Osborne's biography entitled, *Incredible Sai Baba*. Baba gives him one year of banishment. So this man goes away (because Shirdi Bhagavan believed in manhandling also). If you didn't follow Him, well you would get it!

So he immediately left Shirdi, Dwarakamayi, and started counting the days when that one year of exile would come to an end. Well, 360 days were over with only 5 days to complete, and then he went to a garden. He was thinking of his Lord Shirdi Bhagavan and started crying. 'Oh Swami, You asked me to get out from Your premises. You shouted at me and You have debarred me. You wanted me not to come back within one year. Why have You forsaken me, My Lord?' While he was still crying, he turns and finds Shirdi Bhagavan right there. Then Bhagavan tells him, "Why did I ask you to get out? Why? Because you think I am in Shirdi only. I wanted you to experience Me everywhere. Therefore I asked you to get out."

Therefore, feeling your chosen deity, experiencing your chosen Divinity and also experiencing Divinity which is there in everyone in the same level is what we call awareness. That awareness is spirituality. Awareness is religion. Just go to the temple and observe people, as they go around the temple, doing *Pradakshina* or circumambulation; you will find some tension on their faces. They carry some *mala* and they chant "Sai Ram, Sai Ram", like some cricket score. Their face is full of tension. I see many people going around Ganesha. "Are you going into some operation theatre (surgical ward) or what? (*Laughter*) What happened to you?" They are in a such hurry to complete 108 rounds! That is not religion. Religion is relaxation. When you are relaxed, when you are blissful and joyful, when you are humorous, when you are ecstatic, when you dance and when you sing, then you are religious -- not with long faces or, as Baba puts it, 'castor oil faces'. (*Laughter*)

Seriousness is sickness, while laughter is religiousness. Laughter is religion. Ecstasy is religion. Dance is religion. Music is religion. Relaxation is religion. Tension and anxiety are mundane. Some people are so tense -- as in accounts, we say "amount brought forward" -- the tension of the world is brought forward to the temples also. "I am full of tension outside so let my Sai centre also be full of tension." We will be successful patients but not aspirants, much less seekers. But what kind of relaxation are we talking about? What do we mean by relaxation? Relaxation means a thoughtless state. There is no thought whatsoever, positive or negative. Empty mindedness is complete relaxation.

WHAT IS MEDITATION?

When you empty your mind, when you are thoughtless, when you are totally free, that is what is called meditation. Some people say, "When I sit in meditation, Baba will stand in front of me." Oho! Where was He till then? (*Laughter*) Some people also say, "When I sit for meditation, some cool breeze comes towards me!" Please watch to see if there may be a pedestal fan close by him! (*Laughter*)

Meditation is not dreaming. Meditation is not assumption. Meditation is not hallucination. Meditation is a thoughtless state. Meditation is one of relaxation – no state at all. When you feel some idol or form, well, it is all hallucination or imagination. But hallucinations, imaginations, and psychological factors are different from meditation.

Moreover, we have got some artificial meditation today. We have artificial flowers. Why not? Artificial smiles, so artificial meditation. We find some advertisements: "Meditation 20 days, Rs 250." Well, I wonder if meditation is so cheap, do you think that saints are fools? Can't they afford Rs 250? Why did they spend hundreds of years like that? We really made our religion a mockery. True meditation is a state which is thoughtless. True meditation is a state that would not help you to say what happened. In true meditation, you cannot say what has happened. You cannot say why. When you say what has happened, it means you are still there.

"Sir, in my meditation what happens is that I sit in meditation from 5 to 6." How do you know it is 6 o'clock? (*Laughter*) You go on looking: 5:25, 5:35, then 5:45 (*Laughter*). There cannot be greater joke than this. How do you know it is 6 o'clock?

Meditation is beyond time and space. Meditation is not restricted to any place. Some people say "That is our *puja* room where my husband meditates." Oh, other places what does he do? What does he do at other places? Some people say, "He will come out of deep meditation at 6 o'clock." Okay, he comes out at 6.00, then what does he do? He shouts at his wife? (*Laughter*) And he will first demand a hot cup of coffee. So that must have been coffee meditation, wife meditation, or *dhobi* meditation, but not God's meditation.

So we have got to understand and review our practices. We don't have to think of any other joke, or any other thing which is more ridiculous than what we have been doing. As Baba rightly observed at one time, theists -- the followers of God, the believers in God -- are responsible for the growth of atheism because when we do not act as per the expected norms, atheists grow more and more in number. It is a thought to ponder. If we reflect upon it, we will certainly agree.

Therefore my friends, religion has got to be examined. We have to review how we are practising, how we live in our daily lives. How many times we are given to a loss of temper. A fellow goes on losing his temper. Can I call him a religious man? No! Certainly not! A man of stinking jealousy, pride, or ego -- these are not the qualities of a religious man or a devotee. So we have to have something like an income tax check-list. We should have a check-list of our

ego, pride, popularity, position, luxurious life, etc. Come on, let us tick one by one. We will get zero if we are honest with ourselves. We don't need to show our accounts to any income tax officer.

So my friends, acceptance, total acceptance is religion, total acceptance. Suppose you are in a good position -- remember God gave you that. Suppose you are out of position; it is also God's gift. Unconditional total acceptance of what is given to you is surrender. Some people tell me, "Sir, I have surrendered to God. I have surrendered." When that 'I' is still there, what is the meaning of surrender? First, surrender the 'I', then there is nothing else to surrender. What are you to surrender? This 'I'-ness must be surrendered, not your property or this second-hand body.

Somebody said, "I have dedicated this body to God." You are not the owner of the body, so how can you surrender someone else's property? You cannot surrender your neighbour's property, can you? Try to this evening! (*Laughter*) When I am not the owner of my body, when I am not the owner of my mind, when I am not the owner of my intellect, if I say that I surrender, well, who is the greater fool, I do not know. First, be the owner of what you can surrender. Be master of the senses, be a master of sense. Master the mind and be a mastermind; then that mastermind is fit enough to be surrendered.

What is the mind being surrendered? A mind which is thoughtless, which is withdrawn, *mano-laya*, a mind which is annihilated, *mano-nasana*, is fit enough to be surrendered. Not the mind full of ego, pomp and small self.

I am so happy to meet youngsters; I am also happy to meet some seniors. I am very happy to learn that this gathering is a mixed group. In fact, I really wanted it so that it would help me to evolve, it would help me to grow and help me to think seriously about what I am saying in my talks.

I am reminded of a beautiful episode from the life of Shirdi Bhagavan. It so happened that a revenue officer was a devotee of Shirdi Bhagavan. His brother happened to be a district collector and the district collector used to visit this revenue officer frequently. As ill-luck would have it, the revenue officer's son developed acute pain in the abdomen. The boy was struggling. This again is recorded by author Osborne in the book, *Incredible Sai Baba*. This boy was struggling for life and the father, the revenue officer, was sitting by his side just waiting,

In the meantime, the district collector came from the neighbouring district headquarters. He looked at him. He asked this gentleman, "What are you giving to your son? He seems to be suffering from acute stomach ache, so what are you giving him?"

This fellow said, "I am giving him *vibhuthi*." Oho! The collector should have kept his mouth shut. But he asked him, "When do you expect the cure?" The revenue officer said, "Within 24 hours."

What happened? This revenue officer took his afternoon nap after a sumptuous lunch (as we had this morning).

As he was lying on his bed, suddenly Shirdi Bhagavan appeared in his dream. He sat on his chest, and He went on beating him left and right. He told him, "You stupid fellow, why did you say 24 hours? Do I need 24 hours to cure the stomach ache of your son? Useless fellow. You should have said, 'Immediately!'"

Therefore, do we feel the immediate august presence of God? Do we get an immediate response from God? That state is awareness. That state is meditation. That state is prayerfulness. What we seem to understand by prayer is nothing but submission of demands and requests. "I want visa for the first son, *meesalu* (meaning 'moustache' in Telugu) for the second son." (*Laughter*) This list is endless, after all. Prayer is not the submission of demands or requests. Prayer is an expression of thankfulness. Prayer is gratitude, prayer is thanksgiving, prayer is repentance, prayer is self-introspection and prayer is self-examination and self-assessment, not a petition of demands and requests.

It is in the light of all this that I would like to draw your attention to an important fact. It all began during the time of Shirdi Bhagavan, when He started to explain the depth and meaning of every ritual. Now that has been taken up on a much larger scale by Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba. Somebody said, "Swami, I have no time to do meditation. I have no time to offer my prayers. I have no time to do anything, so what shall I do?" If you were there in that place, if I were there in that place, we would have answered, "You are irreligious, so you are unfit." That would have been our judgement; but Bhagavan did not say that.

"When you do your duty dutifully in the name of God, anything that you do is meditation. Reciting His name, cooking, writing, reading, riding, walking, talking -- everything is meditation." Anything in totality, with total forgetfulness of this ego 'I', when you are totally identified, *maya vescha mano veeyama* (total identification with that), that is what is called meditation.

Sathya Sai Baba has given a new direction and a new meaning to our religion today. Religion is not merely a ritual in the presence of Sathya Sai Baba. Whatever we do with love, what we do selflessly, that is a sacred ritual! There is no necessity to do all the external practices that we do; they are merely symbols. They are merely indications. They are merely representative in nature. It is comparable to a piece of cloth that represents the entire nation, our national flag. Yes! The national flag is a piece of cloth that represents the whole nation. Similarly, all practices that we adopt are only symbols. But they have an inner significance, something beyond our understanding -- a call from within.

Somebody asked Swami, "I don't hear my inner voice." (Some say they hear an inner voice and some others listen to their inner voice. I don't have any such experience.) Baba told him, "You are busy with the outer noise, so how will you listen to the inner voice?" (*Laughter*) So you cannot listen to an inner voice because you are overwhelmed by the outer noise.

Therefore my friends, Sai is the incarnation. The Sai *Avatar* is multi-dimensional today, which is really the greatest boon to our individual lives because His teachings, procedures and methods are adapted to the present challenging times, which is really fantastic.

It is not a question of any conversion; it is a question of Self-awareness. He always tells you to dig deep and find Him within you, not search for Him outside.

Somebody told Swami, "I want to settle here in Prashanti Nilayam."

Do you know what He said? "Where is Prashanti Nilayam?"

"Swami, this is Prashanti Nilayam".

"No, no, no! Your heart is Prashanti Nilayam. I am there, not here." This is the meaning we should understand. We should experience that oneness with Him.

Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba gives altogether a new interpretation and a new direction in every field of life. To feel Him is meditation, to speak about Him is prayer, and to work in His name is service. That gives us the greatest joy, the highest levels of satisfaction in our lives. Without sacrifice, whatever you do is useless. It is all self-propaganda, vain glory. When we say sacrifice, what is it that we have to sacrifice? We have to sacrifice our time, our resources and our intelligence, not grow more intelligence or more popularity. That is in no way spiritual.

Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba is the best example to the whole of mankind because of His tireless work for at least six decades, tireless work! He has done so much work that it should have taken more than 500 years. His work is permanent. Starting a university and a hospital in a tiny village all by Himself, is a wonder of wonders, with no political support whatsoever. It was done all by Himself.

Puttaparthi was once a hamlet of 100 inhabitants, but today it is a global village! Today it is an international centre! Yes, He has given His life, given His time and given His resources for the uplift of mankind. That is the best example of how to be religious. That is the only way to be religious: sacrificing one's own life in total identification with the mission.

I am very happy to speak these words. You will be happy to elicit answers to your questions. Kindly pass them on or ask from where you are. Thank you very much for listening to the talk with such rapt attention. (*Applause*)

OM

*Asato Maa Sad Gamaya
Tamaso Maa Jyotir Gamaya
Mrtyormaa Amrtam Gamaya*

*Om Samastha Lokā Sukhino Bhavantu
Samastha Lokā Sukhino Bhavantu
Samastha Lokā Sukhino Bhavantu*

Om Shanti Shanti Shantifi

*Jai Bolo Bhagavan Sri Satya Sai Babaji ki Jai
Jai Bolo Bhagavan Sri Satya Sai Babaji ki Jai
Jai Bolo Bhagavan Sri Satya Sai Babaji ki Jai*

Thank you, and God bless you.

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