

Up, Down, and All Around

Part II of Q&A with Brahmachari Uddhav Chaitanya in Bentonville, Arkansas

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While living in *samsara*, how do you live with detachment in order to lead a spiritual life?

Is spiritual life detachment from every thing and every feeling? Leading a spiritual life doesn't mean you live in a vacuum. You have the same responsibilities; you are around the same people. Suddenly becoming spiritual doesn't make the people or things around you disappear—though sometimes you may wish it.

Don't ever put spirituality as part of your 'To-Do List,' like it is one more task to be completed during the day, as and when convenient. Every moment of our lives should be lived with a spiritual attitude. Living with this attitude means always being cautious and alert, dedicating every thought, word, and deed to the Lord. This attitude is what makes every thought, word, and deed spiritual, not my visiting the temple once in a while. Weekend devotees are weakened devotees.

Don't run away from where you are or what you are doing; spirituality is irrespective of time and space. Even operating a business, done with utmost alertness and awareness, dedicated to the Lord, is spiritual living.

Why do we need temples?

A temple is a central point where all kinds of human sentiments are expressed. In South India, the temples are huge. You may consider this a waste of space, but it is not. The temple complexes are huge, but the Lord sits in some tiny, dark space, way inside. There are five doors (representing our five *koshas*, or "layers")—four you go through, but the fifth, which you cannot go through, is the one into the sanctum sanctorum. This fifth door represents the last door that can be opened for the spiritual seeker only by the Lord Himself.

Traditionally, the temple's outer areas are a center for trade, education (sacred and secular), art, and cultural events. Within this all-inclusive cultural, economic, educational, and socialization hub lies a spiritual powerhouse. Therefore, when you stand before the Lord in the sanctum sanctorum, your purpose should be solely spiritual.

We need temples because they are highly, positively charged centers where we go to get our batteries recharged, as and when needed. Either keep recharging your lifelong batteries or get battered by life. A temple fulfills different purposes at different levels. Use it wisely.

What is the significance of the *mangala-sutra*?

I'm the wrong person to ask. Never needed one, never shopped for one, never held one. Well, it would be wrong to say that I don't know anything about it. When it comes to physical utility, I've seen *ammās* use it to hang safety pins and small keys. Men are not far behind; they similarly use their *yajnopavitas* (*janeyu*, or "sacred thread").

A *sutra* is that which connects one thing to another. *Mangala* means "auspiciousness." That which connects you to auspiciousness is a *mangala-sutra*. The philosophical and symbolic meanings of the *mangala-sutra* can be seen in the mantras chanted in a Vedic marriage ceremony. One of these mantras is, "*Mangalyam tantunanena mama jivana hetuna kanthe bhadname shubhage tvam jiva-sharadam shatam.*"

Marriage is an institution established to bring discipline in life. In Hindu tradition, you don't find talk of divorce. Other than in extreme cases, such as abuse, once we are bound, we are bound for a lifetime—however the other person is. It's not a 'deal or no deal;' it's a done deal.

When I first came to the US, aspects of this culture shocked me. One day, a Caucasian couple told me they had just gotten married—after living together for 13 years. And their

three kids were part of their wedding party! This kind of system shocked me then and still remains beyond my comprehension.

Discipline in marriage channels and exhausts physical desires through a sacred and loving relationship, so these desires are not blocked or suppressed. Most importantly, it helps the couple grow in oneness. When marital partners come together, it is not to be equals. This is another concept that throws me off. How can you be equal? Why should you be equal? Oranges and apples cannot be equal. But together, they can make a beautiful fruit salad. Someone once asked me, "If you have four apples and three oranges in your right hand, and five bananas and a pineapple in your left hand, what do you have?" I said, "Two big hands!"

Uniting in marriage is not to be equal; it is to be one. I once read a beautiful saying on marriage: "Maintain a beautiful relation in oneness. Give 60% to the relationship and expect only 40%. Martial troubles arise because one or both partners give 10% and expect 90%."

You can give without love, but you cannot love without giving. Giving immensely enhances inner growth, for it teaches you teamwork, sacrifice, selflessness, and respect. When each partner put the other's needs first, their union is *mangala*. As youth, we learn to first help ourselves. When we marry, we learn to grow beyond ourselves. Helping each other grow is the primary goal. But this aspect has been long lost and has to be reinstalled. Just as you uninstall corrupt software and reinstall a new or improved version, so too, marriage has to be approached with a newer vision and understanding. I'm not proficient in the subtleties of marriage; a successful grandparent who has gone through it can advise you better.

The *mangala-sutra* connects and disciplines a couple in, to, and for, a higher purpose. The necklace itself is basically made of gold and comes in various designs. When worn, it rests on the chest. Especially for women, gold on different body parts—hand, ears, and chest—has an effect on specific neural points. Women, more so than men, undergo a lot more hormonal changes throughout their lives—from childhood, to puberty, to marriage, to childbirth, to motherhood. These changes are immense on all levels. Gold is a pure metal that affects certain points in the nervous system and helps balance hormonal changes. Thorough research on gold and its effects has been done at an institution near Khandala (Maharashtra, India). Just as silver toe-rings worn by women on their second toe help balance hormones, so too, scientific studies show the benefits of wearing a *mangala-sutra*.

Nowadays, the *mangala-sutra* is worn as a fashion statement or just during festivals. Many men also wear their *yajnopavita* or *janeyu* in the same way. The *janeyu* should be worn 24/7. I had a college roommate who sincerely did his daily *sandhya-vandanam*, but had a weakness for non-vegetarian food. Whenever he ate non-vegetarian food, he would first take off his shirt, and then take off his *janeyu*, hang it on a nail, cover it with his shirt, turn his back to the shirt, eat his food, shower, and then put his *janeyu* back on. The sacred thread is to be worn with discipline, for it is a reminder of life's higher purpose. It is not to be misused or misinterpreted to convenience, for its effects are immensely powerful, as are those of wearing the *mangala-sutra*.

What is the importance of chanting *Lalita Sahasranama*?

Sahasranama means "1,000 names." When you count them, there are more than 1,000 names in *Lalita Sahasranama*. *Vishnu Sahasranama* has 18-24 more names. *Sahasranama* thus refers to the Lord's innumerable names. This is the simple meaning. *Lalita Sahasranama* extols Divine Mother and Her various aspects. If you keenly observe the names, 90% of them are the same in every *sahasranama*. Cut and pasted. Because, from the essential standpoint, all the Lord's forms are One, so the attributes cannot be different. Chanting these attributes means singing the glories of the Divine.

The mechanical chanting that we were forced to do as kids was our form of prayer. In my family, until we finished our chanting, we didn't get food. It was a daily, painful bargain. So my brother and I would finish the entire *Vishnu Sahasranama* in seven and a half minutes—all-inclusive! I did it for just a few years . . . and look where I landed! So you can see that even mechanical chanting has an effect.

When we chant these names, each name has its own power and effect. If someone in the crowd suddenly screams out, "Hey, stupid!" what is the effect? There is a negative force associated with the words. So too, regardless of whether or not you understand the meaning and depth of each name, our ancient *rishis* created each one with the utmost positive energy.

Some people are happy chanting without understanding the meaning; this is fine. Some people want to understand the meaning of each word and revel in it in meditation; this is the best use of any prayer. But whether or not you understand the meaning, chant the prayer with intense devotion. If you don't have intense devotion, at least be particular about, and perfect in, your pronunciation. The slightest mistake in the pronunciation of a Sanskrit word changes its entire meaning.

A husband once visited a beautiful place and sent his wife an SMS: "Wish you were here." When she got the message, she was furious and called him immediately. The poor guy was so confused and asked her what was wrong. She said, "Do you know what you sent in your SMS? 'Wish you were her.' Who is she?!" Imagine . . . all he did was miss one letter!

In addition to pronunciation, you should also know where to pause in Sanskrit chanting. In *na karmana na prajaya dhanena*, the meaning is, "Not by action, not by progeny, not by wealth (can one be happy)." *Tyage naike*: "(Happiness is attainable) only by abandoning the ego." Now, if you pause at the wrong place and chant *dhane na*, instead of *dhanena*, the meaning changes to, "Happiness is attainable only by wealth." Therefore, whether you know the meaning or not, at least chant the mantra correctly. You don't know the chemical composition of a jasmine flower, but you still enjoy its smell and it has its own effect. So too, is the power of chanting a mantra, and its effect is greater and deeper when you know the meaning and contemplate on it.

Regardless of everything, when it comes to chanting, just start. It helps you better tune or focus your mind. It's also never boring to chant the Lord's glories. Because that would be like saying you're bored when talk about yourself. We are never tired of hearing about ourselves; we revel in our personal lives. If we learn to love, contemplate, and revel in the Lord, or His names and glories, we will find, and be lost in, the depth and beauty of our Source. The Source is the Lord, and therefore, the Lord's names are My glories, because He is the Self in all. This is 'the journey within,' and it includes Kamsa's type of *sadhana*, which was constant, though hateful, attention on Krishna. Whatever you do for God, do it perfectly. If you want to criticize God, criticize perfectly, with 100% attention. What matters is your intensity, your focus.

What is the best way to chant 'Om?'

There are different ways to chant 'Om.' But first, it is important to understand why to chant Om. We arrived into this room from different places—through beatings of traffic, responsibilities, and to-do lists—and the remnants of these are still floating around. So, to pull ourselves together, center ourselves, quiet our minds, focus better, we chant Om—to invoke a concentrated mind. By attending a *satsanga*, you cannot create concentration; you need to have concentration to attend *satsanga*. Just by systematically chanting Om thrice, you can gather your potent energy and cut your mind off from other trains of thought.

Concentration is your ability to focus your thoughts on a given purpose, for a given time, without being distracted or disturbed in any way—without allowing any dissimilar thought flow. Presently, our thought flow tends to be random: while doing x, I am thinking of y. While sitting here, I am wondering if I locked my car door. From where I sit, it is so easy to see everyone's different actions and reactions. The variety of facial expressions, searches for keys, and archaeological digs into pockets and purses during the first 10-15 minutes of class, is a priceless and continual drama!

To bring some order into our flow of random thoughts, try breathing deeply. Breathing and thinking have an intimate, hand-in-hand relationship. When we are angry, our breathing is rapid, agitated. When we are peaceful, our breathing is slow, rhythmic. Therefore, to calm down, inhale and exhale fully and deeply—for this, sitting straight is a must. In this posture, chant "Om" as you exhale, and synchronize its length with your

breath. By doing this, you cut off other thought flows, conserve mental energy, and generate powerful vibrations. This is a prerequisite to practice the art of listening properly. It doesn't take long, but it is extremely powerful. 'Om' is used for different purposes in different situations. But when chanting it as a mantra, I would say it should be synchronized with your breathing.