

The Many Roads Home

The Reverend Sri Swami Satchidananda

an interview by Rev. Patrick J. Harbula

Swami Satchidananda is one of the early pioneers who helped bring the spiritual treasure of the East to our country. He is the founder and head of Integral Yoga and Satchidananda Ashrams, with forty branches internationally. Bringing peoples and faiths together is a primary focus for Satchidananda. As we spoke of his teachings of the heart, I was impressed by his humility and a deep sense of peace that seemed to flow from him. Swamiji, as his friends respectfully call him, offers himself as one whose purpose is to serve.

Meditation Magazine: *Swamiji, you're very involved in ecumenical work and breaking down the barriers between faiths, which is also the purpose of our magazine. How does one best go about recognizing and maybe helping others to recognize the unity in diversity?*

Swami Satchidananda: Simply, one has to go a little deeper into one's own religious picture, see what are the basic requirements, the foundations of the religion – beyond the superficial, the mode of the service, the rituals and the language – what are the basic requirements. When one goes into that part, they can easily see that almost all the faiths, all the religions, seem to have to same common goal. Every religion talks about universal love, friendship, brotherhood, no matter how the other fellow looks, or what his beliefs are. When we go into those common principles we can easily see that there is little difference between faiths except the labels.

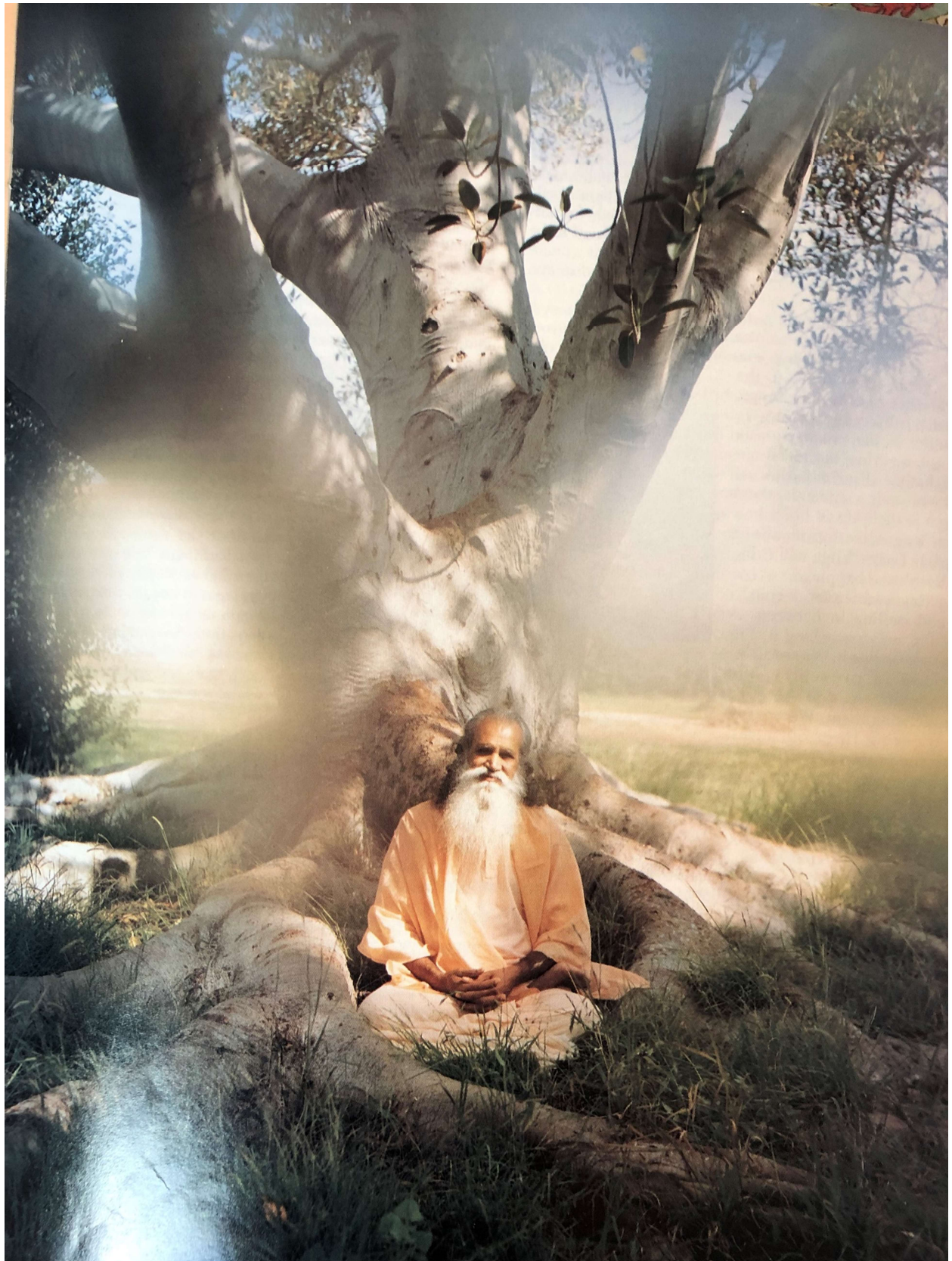
We can also learn to respect each other's paths. We are different types of peoples: our taste, our temperament, our capabilities are very different from each other. So we have to search: "What is conducive to my spiritual growth?...What is to my taste?" Naturally there are many paths. In the Hindu pantheon there are hundreds of gods. That doesn't mean there *are* hundreds of gods; there is only one God. The Hindus themselves say that. But one God can be approached under any name, any form. So the names and forms vary, but the essential awareness, essential power is the same.

Once I was in the Vatican talking to a Cardinal, who questioned me, "How can there be so many paths to one goal, God?" I said, "Sir, you are living in Rome, you should not be asking me this question. *All roads lead to Rome.* If Rome itself can have so many roads, why do we think our home will have only one road? So we have to accept other's approaches to God.

Let's talk about the basic principles. All religions have a format more or less similar to the Ten Commandments of Christianity and Judaism, they are based on keeping the mind clean and making it more one-pointed. Another important factor is to rise above one's own selfish, little attitude, to sacrifice individual goals and to feel compassion for everybody. Sacrifice seems to be the common goal; every religion talks about sacrifice. What is it to sacrifice one's own littleness? *Do unto others what you would want to be done to you.* That is rising above selfishness.

MM: *How do people do that? Do you have any techniques or teachings that you give people to go beyond their littleness?*

SS: Every time somebody gets into some sort of mental agony – frustration, disappointment, anxiety, worry, whatever it is – I ask them to sit back and question: "Why am I in this situation?...What caused this situation?" If they are really keen enough and frank in their questioning, they will ultimately find out that they wanted something personally. Nobody develops an anxiety, a worry or fear while they do something good to somebody else.



Whenever you are pointing a finger at somebody else, saying, “He’s the cause for my problems,” sit back and question yourself: “What did I do?...How was my attitude?...Others might have contributed to this situation, but it was first, and foremost me. I wanted something to happen to me...and it did not happen. Or even before it happens, I have a doubt: *will it happen or not?* Then, even if it happens, because of the anxiety to keep it up, I get into the fear: *will I lose it?*” All kinds, of problems come because the individual wants something for himself or herself.

We are all looking for peace of mind – that’s the most important thing in life. At no cost should one lose one’s peace. The basic reason for losing one’s peace is involved in selfish actions. If you look for even a *thank you* and don’t get it, you are disappointed. You don’t hesitate to blame: “Oh, he is not a civilized man. What kind of culture is that, not even to send me a thank you note?” You begin to blame somebody because you wanted a thank you note. That is the main cause for all the problems. That is the basic principle, basic practice of every religion. Every religion ask you to sacrifice your *I, me, my*.

MM: *Can a person have a personal goal, as long as they are not attached to it?*

SS: You can have a goal, but even that goal should have the motive of serving others, not your personal benefit – that will always create problems. Even the goal: Why do you want to achieve something? Why do you want to study? Why do you want to get a degree? Why do you want to make a lot of money? It’s not wrong, but if your aim is to make use of that money only for your benefit, then there is a problem. Whatever your goal, ultimately it should benefit everybody – that includes you also.

MM: *Of course, that’s beautiful. In the interest of world peace, you’ve visited the Soviet Union on occasions and you were the chaplain at the Summit talks last year. What do you see as the barriers between the Soviet Union and the United States? And, what are some of the ways that we can breakdown those barriers?*

SS: The main barrier is not knowing each other. What we read here is sort of a dirty picture of Russia. What they read about us is a sort of damaging, fearful picture – as if America is going to drop a bomb any minute on their heads. We don’t want to believe their approach. They don’t want to believe our approach. This lack of understanding is caused by mistrust and fear. The convention in Washington was mainly for getting to know people. We are all the same, we all want to be happy, peaceful, friendly.

MM: *The two governments seem to be so attached to their systems.*

SS: I understand it, I am not objecting to any government being attached to their principles, to their policies. But, if your policy is so great, prove it in your own life style. If democracy is so great, let us prove to the world that we are healthy, happy, comfortable, everything is beautiful in this country – no disease, no crime, no racial oppression or discrimination. If communism is so great, let them show it in their life.

At Yogaville I talk about Yoga. If I say, “Yoga will bring you health and happiness” – but I’m saying it with a lot of coughing and puffing in between – then I’m only preaching it, I’m not experiencing it. We are all interested in preaching our philosophies, we don’t seem to be practicing them. We are not experiencing them ourselves, that’s the problem. That’s why the so-called *heads* get stuck with their principles, their philosophies, which haven’t gone down to the heart. That’s why when I was giving the sermon at the Baptist church in Moscow, I brought in one of the beatitudes from the *Bible*: “Blessed are the pure in heart, they shall see God.” I told them, “Thank You, the *Bible* said, ‘Blessed are the pure in *heart*,’ because only in the heart we can be pure, we can come together, but not in the head.” That’s why we don’t want the *heads* of the countries, *heads* of the states. We want the *hearts* of the countries, *hearts* of the states.



MM: *So, it's important that people come from their hearts no matter what the system of government.*

SS: That's right, we should use our hearts. When two people get married, how do they call each other? "Sweetheart," is it not? Have you ever heard them calling "Sweetheads"? The heads of the countries should go and meet with each other in the heart, not in the head. This is a hard nut to crack. A heart feels love, friendship, sympathy, kindness, compassion. All these things come from the heart. And, again, before you preach, make sure you experience that.

MM: *I think our readers would be interested in hearing about Integral Yoga.*

SS: What I mean by Integral Yoga is any approach that will take you to that yogic state that begets peace.

MM: *How would you describe the yogic experience?*

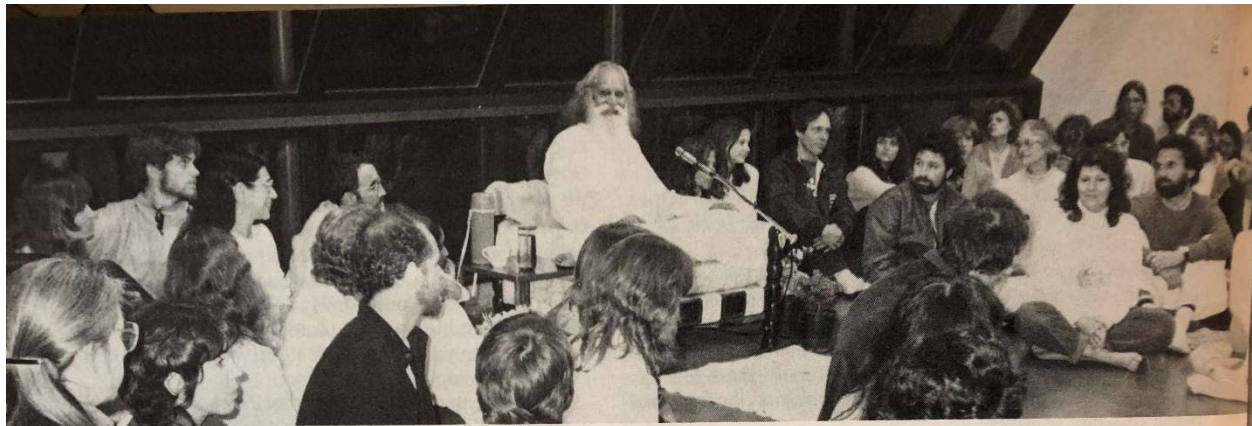
SS: That's the question. According to Patanjali, and almost all the scriptures, yoga is the state where your mind is totally balanced. Not to allow the mind to get upset over anything. When something terrible happens, people get upset. But even when something nice happens, people get upset. They call it excitement. When they get a big profit, they're excited. When they face a big loss, they're depressed. To me, both are disturbance of the mind – the mind has lost its balance. So, whether it is a big profit or loss, keep your balance. Face both accept both, because one isn't possible without the other. These are the dualities. There is a pleasure, there is a pain. There is a profit, there is a loss. There is an up, there is a down. Whatever you do, do it in such a way that should never upset your mind – that's what you call karma yoga, yoga in action.

SS: True meditation is a process of trying to keep your mind balanced. But of course, that meditation should permeate in your daily life. Whatever you do, meditate on it. Let the entire mind be on it. Meditation starts with concentration. In Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, it is called *Dharana*, concentration. *Dhyana* means meditation. The concentration part is the serious part of the meditation. That is when you try to focus the mind on one thing, it won't stay there long. In a few seconds the mind will wander here and there. You try to bring the mind back to the place where you want to stop, to concentrate. Again, it will run in some other direction. So continuously the running mind should be brought back again and again to the place where you want to meditate. That is what you call concentration.

Once that running part ceases and you are able to fix the mind continuously on one thing, it is only at that point you are meditating. When most people say they are meditation, they are not meditation – they are concentrating. Once that meditation happens, the mind stays on one point. It finds balance. Another important factor behind why people don't meditate that easily: in their normal life, they allow their mind to run away here and there, simply allow it to go wherever it wants. They follow the mind, instead of the mind following them. They become slaves of the mind, instead of keeping the mind as their servant.

If a person wants to really meditate, he should take care of his attitude. The first two parts (*yama* and *niyama*) of the eight limbs of Raja Yoga, according to Patanjali, are very similar to the Ten Commandments: keep your mind calm, take away your selfishness. Because of selfishness, people try to hurt somebody, steal somebody's things, tell lies. If their selfishness is not there, no one would be doing that.

So, the Commandments in a way put it the other way around: Thou shalt not lie, thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not hurt. But the basic thing is that if you have no selfishness, you don't do any of those. So keeping the mind calm, clean, and following these commandments in your daily life will naturally put you into a meditative state. Active meditation is when you are always meditating. We call it *sahaja samadhi*, which means natural center of equilibrium. No matter what, even on Times Square, even when Wall Street breaks down, you won't break down.



Swami Satchidananda during Satsang at Yogaville

MM: Seems harder at those time though.

SS: ...that's what we need. That is the reason yoga is catching on everywhere everybody is interested. It is helpful in our day-to-day life. It's not something that will happen in only part of our life. Right now I can enjoy my life more calmly, and with that calmness of mind I can ever handle my day-to-day life better. For example, if a doctor loses his balance, he cannot even perform his operation. With a calm mind he can do it.

Even to play games, you should keep yourself calm. How often do we see even the games are no longer games? They don't play anymore. They fight. Why? Because they lose their calmness. They are interested in only winning, winning, winning. I don't say that they should not have the interest of winning. At the same time, they should know the other fellow might want the same thing. They both are playing for the winning. So why not, occasionally, give the winning side to him?

"The winner is the loser." Do you want to know how?

MM: *Tell me.*

SS: If you win, what kind of face do you see in the other? A loser's face is it not?

MM: *Right.*

SS: So the winner will be seeing an unhappy face, whereas the loser will see a happy face. So, who really wins?

MM: *That sounds very Zen.*

SS: That's right. If you want to see a happy face, give the victory to the other guy.

So, getting back to the original question, Integral Yoga means anything and everything you do in trying to maintain your balance. If somebody comes to me and asks: "How should I begin? ...What should I do?" I give them some materials on how to meditate. Mostly I use mantras for them to meditate upon. The repetition of the mantra doesn't need any external aids, you don't even need an altar if you don't want. Simply sit anywhere and think of your mantra, repeat your mantra, focus your mind on the sound formula. Repeating the mantra is a sound approach, because you are repeating a sound. So that is generally what we do. But at the same time we tell the people that is not the end, that is only the beginning. You repeat the mantra even when you work. Part of the mind should be always dwelling on that. Keep your mind centered on that mantra and then perform your activities. That's meditation in action.

Of course, Integral Yoga doesn't stop only with meditation. A peaceful mind is not possible if the body is not peaceful. A healthy body also is very important.

MM: *Swamiji, tell me about Yogaville, I've seen pictures, it looks beautiful.*

SS: What I have been saying all along is to be practiced in a conducive place. If somebody wants to stop smoking, if he still moves around in the midst of smokers, he would find it very difficult. He has to swim against the current. Yogaville is a place where people come, when they want to practice all these things in a conducive atmosphere. We don't allow anything that would effect the body and mind here: plain living, no cigarettes, no alcohol, no meat, even no pre-marital sex. If people want to get married, they can get married and then have sex. Otherwise they should be single. As a community we say it is our home, not my home, your home. Even our children belong to everybody in a way.