SPIRITUALITY & UNIVERSALITY
The Fifth Annual Public Affairs Lecture

His Holiness Sri Sri Ravi Shankar

PUBLIC AFFAIRS CENTRE
BANGALORE
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The Fifth Annual Public Affairs Lecture was delivered on August 25th 2004 by His Holiness Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, Founder, The International Association of Human Values & The Art of Living Foundation, in Bangalore. The lecture was organised by Public Affairs Centre, Bangalore.
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His Holiness Sri Sri Ravi Shankar delivering the Fifth Annual Public Affairs Lecture
ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, founder of The Art of Living Foundation, has inspired numerous educational and charitable organisations across the globe and touched the lives of millions of people. Taught in over 140 countries, his Art of Living courses help individuals develop their highest potential, reinforce human values and create a sense of love and belonging through scientific breathing techniques and meditation. The Foundation is involved in a wide range of social activities like poverty alleviation, rural education and working with prisoners. The organisation’s much-acclaimed 5H programme, on social and economic upliftment, has been carried out in more than 20000 villages all over the country today. By involving and training rural volunteers in community services, the centre has undertaken several campaigns on health, hygiene and environment in these villages. Sri Sri Ravi Shankar is also the founder of the International Association for Human Values, an international NGO in special consultative status with the United Nations.

Public Affairs Centre invited Sri Sri Ravi Shankar to deliver its Fifth Annual Public Affairs Lecture on August 25, 2004. His theme was “Spirituality & Universality”. 
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Service and Awareness

The world starts from where we are. We should always remember that life is special. You must have noticed that people who are engaged in public services have no time for other things. Often they are irritated and fatigued due to the work pressure and end up being victims of blood pressure, heart problems and severe depression. The simple reason is they have no inner strength! I also hear a lot of people in the social service sector who complain that they are tired of doing seva (service)! It’s surprising! But if they do not have inner strength, how can they have the strength to empower others - the weak and the needy?

We cannot claim to change the whole world tomorrow or in the next couple of years. But we should have the inner strength to fight back. When we come across an adverse situation, most of us feel that it is the end of the world. But remember, this is the real test. It is our inner strength, or the inner calling of the spirit that brings back the fire of enthusiasm. In other words, it is the spiritual element within us, which recuperates the inner strength to fight adversities, including those we face in public affairs.

I’ve come across people who are engaged in seva but keep away from spirituality. On the other hand there are people who are involved in spiritual activities, but do nothing about seva and keep away from service. Both these attitudes need to change. Many a time, spiritual people even keep away from politics. Again, there are some people who have no aspirations and do not even work towards making the world a better place - they will tell you that this is a dirty world and you can’t change it. Whether it is Rama, Krishna or Buddha, no matter who or how much one tries, things will remain the same. This is equally disappointing!

I have noticed many ‘good’ people who don’t even go to vote. They think, “What is the point in voting?” They feel things are corrupt - so they stay out of it, and confine themselves to their own job. This is wrong. Actually when your own shoe starts biting, you
feel the pinch. Until then, you think it is somebody else’s affair. I am very happy about what Dr. Paul has said about the activities of Public Affairs Centre in terms of empowering citizens. In fact, this is the need of the hour. I am sure that if we create mass awareness, people will willingly come together and take care of public affairs themselves.

Let me give you a simple instance. Way back in 1978, I was happily walking on the sparkling clean streets of Switzerland. It was my first visit to the country. I had a chocolate, and looked around for a dustbin to throw away the wrapper. I could not find a dustbin anywhere around, so I just threw the wrapper on the ground where I stood. To my surprise, an 85-year-old lady, who was standing about 100 meters away, came all the way over and asked me, “Where have you thrown the wrapper?” I told her that I’ve just put it under the tree, so that someone could pick it up later. She told me, pointing her finger to the other side of the road, “No, please pick it up. The dustbin is about 500 meters away from here, you can put it there”. Though she was firm, her way of talking was very polite. I still appreciate that lady in a far off land who taught me a lot.

This, in fact, is a lesson for all of us. If we had even a little awareness on these things, we would have done a lot to check environmental pollution. Our ancient scriptures and the lifestyle of people in those times were very environment-friendly. Even now, if you go to any village you’ll find that it is much cleaner than a city or a town. Recently I visited a tribal village in Chattisgarh. I was surprised to find that their level of awareness is so high that they never throw litter around - it is in-built in the culture. Nature teaches us a lot. If you go to any forest; you will not find any pollution, as no animal causes pollution. Unfortunately, we are moving away from nature. It is only when we align ourselves with nature that our spirits get uplifted.

**Spirituality**

When we are too formal, we move away from our natural dispositions. Likewise, when one deals with a theme like good governance, I think there should be something more than the formal atmosphere, and this is what I would call Spirituality. We are made up of both matter and spirit. What does this spirit consist of? Truth, love, compassion, joy, trust, or anything that boosts our enthusiasm,
brings people together in love and harmony and gives life a bigger dimension.

To bring in this spirituality, we need to adopt three “C”s in our life. The first “C” is Cosmology. Our country has an ancient tradition - before we begin any task, we do a ‘Sankalpa’. Sankalpa means seeing this present moment in context with the whole universe. Today, at this point, when I take up this job of sharing my experience on spirituality and universality, I too take up a Sankalpa - giving a broader perspective of life in relation to time and space. The universe is vast. If you go to a planetarium and see where the planet earth is in relation to the universe, you will see how tiny this world is, and how small our lives are! Billions of years have passed and billions will come in the future, but what is our lifespan? 50, 60, 70 or 80 years! This is not even a drop in the ocean of time when you see life in the context of time and space! If you begin to see life from this perspective, your own consciousness will spread out. You will start thinking ‘big’ and forget the petty things in life. If we all start thinking about this, then pettiness, selfishness, terrorism and fanaticism will surely disappear. Hence, cosmology is seeing life in connection to time and space.

The second “C” that we should adopt is Compassion - compassion for our fellow beings. Usually when someone commits a crime, we hold him responsible, accuse him and label him, without even trying to find out the reasons. But let me tell you that inside every culprit

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar releasing PAC Publication, “Civic Engagement for Better Public Governance”
there is a victim crying for help. We have to reach out to the culprit and talk to him compassionately. The third "C", which is vital, is Commitment to a cause - something we all should abide by.

When we adhere to the three "C"s, we are able to see the world in a better way. Spirituality is the common thread, which unites all the religions of the world. Every religion has three aspects - the first one is values, second is customs and practices, and the third, symbols. However, today people are stuck mostly to symbols, and have forgotten about the value systems and practices. That is why I say religion is like the banana skin, and spirituality is like a banana. We forget the banana by just holding on to the skin. Sometimes we even dismiss spirituality from our daily lives. This is the most unfortunate thing that we have been doing in this country. We must remember that India gained her freedom because of her spiritual renaissance. It was Mahatma Gandhi, who performed sat-sang morning and evening, and brought all the people together, motivated them to work for society. But when we start forgetting the spiritual dimensions and think that even singing bhajans is 'non-secular,' then we are getting into the problems of depression and violence. This is the biggest challenge our society is facing at present.

Lack of spirituality causes two things. On one hand it may lead to aggression and violence; and on the other hand, it leads to depression and suicidal tendencies. If you detach spirituality from society, what is the result? Depression, and suicidal tendencies! Today it is the highly educated youngsters who are committing suicide, not the poor man alone. Kerala, which has the highest literacy rate, also has the highest number of suicide cases in the country today. It is indeed alarming! In Washington D.C., school age children commonly become criminal offenders. One in every four children in Europe goes to a psychiatrist. Finland, where the per-capita income is among the highest, also has the highest suicide rate in the world today. It is not just poverty alone that kills people, but lack of spiritual dimension. It is the lack of inner or spiritual strength that is the root of all problems.

**Sense of Belonging**

Now you must be wondering, what is it that spirituality can bring to a person? First it relieves you from anger, violence,
depression, and suicidal tendencies. Secondly and most importantly, it creates a sense of belongingness with everybody else. Indeed, the lack of a sense of belongingness is one of the reasons for growing corruption. Corruption can happen only outside the purview of a sense of belonging, in the absence of concern for our fellow men.

In our organisation we have been constantly educating people on how to develop the sense of belonging, through simple yet diverse techniques of breathing. Through breath, your mind calms down; you can get rid of anger and hatred, and become considerate - even to the worst criminal. This is what I call the Art of Living. It means appreciating life. But as human beings, we tend to appreciate objects more than life - this is a root cause of corruption. No wonder the world is pervaded by violence, greed, and lust! It is the spirit that needs to be honoured in oneself and in everybody. That's why spirituality brings a universal approach - what I call "Universality".

I always tell people, if we can accept technology, clothing styles and food from different parts of the world, why not accept wisdom as well? During my recent visit to Pakistan, I raised this question. This made people stop and think. In this time of globalising wisdom, we cannot afford to live in narrow isolated pockets. If Afghanistan gets into trouble, don't think they alone are responsible. I feel we are equally responsible, as we have not given them a broader vision of life. If they had learnt a little about Buddha, his knowledge and his teachings, they wouldn't have gone and destroyed the Bamiyan Buddha. We need to learn from every discipline to have a broader vision of life. Take some time off to learn from the Holy Bible, the Koran, Guru Granth Sahib, Zend-Avesta and so on. Learn from the Vedas and the Upanishads, which have so much to teach us. The saying Vasudaiva Kutumbakam for example, which means the world is one global family, is so true in the modern context, and emerged from ancient India.

Be open to knowledge, always. Diverse knowledge makes you think from different perspective and think freely. We can see a truth from many different angles. Today there is one Jesus but 72 different sects of Christianity, one Buddha and 36 schools of Buddhism, so many groups in Hinduism - Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Vishista, Advaiatha. Ekam sadvithram bahudavadnam, that is, one truth seen from various dimensions is fine, as long as we do not develop negative feelings towards other religions.
We have to go back to our roots, be it in the field of medicine, technology or art. You all know that it is a practice in our country to put tilak at the center of the forehead. Do you know why we have this norm? It is at this point on the forehead we have the pituitary gland, also known as aagya chakra. All the organs in the body are controlled by the pituitary gland, so put a little chandana to stimulate the gland every day. The pituitary gland sends signal to the hypothalamus, which controls the entire body. Every part of our body is connected to emotions. When you are emotionally stable, your interaction with people will surely be much more harmonious. During most of our interactions, we talk, not listening to what others have to say. But listening is an essential part of communication. You need to listen to both sides of the story in order to make a judgment. This skill, and many others, can be developed when you have control over your breath, learn to be emotionally stable and augment your inner spirit. Spirituality can provide that focus and concentration, clarity of mind, clarity of purpose, compassion and commitment to service.

Indian Roots

If we look at our own country, there are six elements to be proud of and promote all over the world. The first is tourism, which we have been ignoring for a long time. India is a land of beauty and heritage. We have great monuments, fantastic tourist spots, lakes,
mountains, forests and sea beaches but we have not taken care of them.

The second element is the cuisine of this country, which is simply amazing. The diversity in taste and variety of the food from every Indian state is unique. However, we have not done much to promote this. Today’s youngsters seem to be more delighted with pizzas and burgers. But we have lots of special dishes - like *samosas* and *chaats* - which will be appreciated anywhere in the world if we take the initiative. Take for example a local dish - *obbattu* - *holige* of Karnataka, a homemade recipe specific to certain regions. If promoted, it could be as popular as pancakes. But we have not done much. Instead we have contempt for some of our foodstuff. *Ragi*, especially in the Karnataka region, where *ragi rotti* and *ragi mudde* are made, is rich in iron and vitamins. If you take it everyday, you would not have any iron deficiency diseases. International guests who visit the ashram are surprised to see our villagers lift stones so easily because *ragi* gives so much energy. But we have labelled *ragi* as the grain of the poor. The moment we become a little rich, we refrain from eating it, not realising its food value. We just need to globalise our food.

The third element is dance and music, the varieties of dance and music forms from different parts of the states. They always have a social, spiritual and political message to convey, and need a worldwide reach.

Fourth is yoga and spirituality. If you observe a baby from the time of birth to the age of three, it does all the *yogasanas*. Whether he is born in Mongolia, Africa, Australia, India, or anywhere in the world, every child does all the yoga postures. But we hardly give a thought to this. Babies first lie on their back, stretch their legs and then take the cobra pose - *bhujang asana*. They also do *trikon asana* with legs crossed. Every asana they do helps their mental growth. So, we need to promote this distinctive art.

Fifth, we need to celebrate our traditional clothing and jewellery, which speak volumes about the values and rich culture we inherited.

Finally, Ayurveda, which is acknowledged as one of the best practices in medical science, but has been lost in the villages. You neither find *vaidyas* (Doctors practicing Ayurveda) these days nor do
we give them any encouragement. But believe me, ayurvedic medicines can work wonders! In Iraq, I sent two doctors along with our volunteers. The women and children there were so depressed that they could not sleep after the sounds of bombs and terror. They were so traumatised that they used to wake up screaming in the middle of the night. As for the children, many were treated with steroids, as a result of which their livers and kidneys got affected, and their bodies were swollen. We sent them ayurvedic medicines for simple treatment, and then taught them some pranayam and meditation. And let me tell you, in just three to four days time, people started getting back to normal. The experiences they have shared were so touching! They said that for the first time they were able to smile again, after some two years. We started the same programme in both Kosovo and Gujarat.

Do you know that your breath is linked to your mind and emotions? Whenever you have negative feeling, neuropeptides are generated in your system, which accumulate around the nerve centers in the body and block you from communication and natural movements. Medical research has found that these can only be eliminated from your body by oxidation — that is, by meditation, yoga and pranayam. And mind you, not by any medicine.

Conclusion

All of us should have the inner strength to reach out and work for people. In every spiritual satsang, I request people to commit to do some seva. I advise doctors to run three free medical camps, and lawyers to handle three free cases in a year. It is unfortunate to see so many people awaiting trial, and languishing in prison. If you go to Tihar Jail in Delhi, you will find very old women, some even aged 75-80 years, languishing in the jail. We took a petition to the Lt. Governor of Delhi and asked him to release these women so that they could at least be cared for in some old age home, rather than dying in the prison. We need to inspire the spirit of seva in everybody, and engage with more people to create a sense of belongingness.

In the Art of Living seminars we ask people to love their neighbours, because at times strangers are closer to your heart than even your kith and kin. In India, often villagers live like a close-knit family. A village panchayat head knows about every household. So there is a sense of belonging, which is gradually fading away in urban
areas. We cannot expect modern India to accept every norm from the villages. But urbanites would definitely be wise to pick up the best practices from the villages - and even to import good practices from everywhere else in the world. I always say, you need to learn team work from the Japanese, precision from the Germans, dignity from the Swiss, decency and ethics from the British, marketing skills and negotiations from Americans, and human values from Indian villagers. They may have just two glasses of lassi, but when you go to their place, they will share one glass of lassi with you. We should not allow these human values to disappear from this country. All of us have to work together towards that.

Thank you very much.

QUESTION HOUR:

Dr. Kamala Chowdhry (Thanking Guruji for his speech): Dear Guruji, as you are aware, in the beginning of this millennium, United Nations along with 87 countries identified 10 goals, such as poverty, water, housing, HIV/AIDS, sustainable development, and set up a committee for each. I happen to be a member of the water committee, which proposes to improve the condition of water in various countries. I strongly feel that technical expertise alone is not enough to resolve these issues. And hence there is a strong need to build up a technical-spiritual partnership to deal with basic crisis across the globe. Could you explain to us on how we go about building an effective technical-spiritual partnership?

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar: You are right. Any work involves compassion and hard work and that is also spirituality. When Mr. Wolfhensen of the World Bank met me in Washington DC for the first time, he asked me the secret of my success, for uniting 21,000 villages and carrying out the 5H programme in such a short time just with two-crore of rupees. Under the 5H programmes we have built more than a thousand homes for the poor and destitute women and children in a year’s time. I told him it is not money alone but love for mankind that matters. He smiled and soon introduced the Art of Living courses for senior officials of different departments in the World Bank. Now they conduct monthly courses under the supervision of our instructors. Interestingly, one of the World Bank staff has even taken the training
in meditation, breathing and Sudarshan Kriya from us. Partnership brings in a spirit of unity and strength. Of course, funding is necessary but the spirit to work should be there. See, just a handful of people can create so much zeal and enthusiasm. I feel that if a few terrorists can terrorise the world, some good people can also make this world beautiful by joining hands together. We all need to partner with different civic groups, religious organisations, and government officials, bring them all together and work with an attitude of compassion.

Dr. K.R.S. Murthy: Gurudev, individuals somewhat feel helpless even at a very senior level as the system itself is divorced from spirituality or the 3 ‘C’s that you mentioned. We as individuals, no matter how much meditation we may do, seem to be helpless in the biased society. When you realise this it is even worse, as you get isolated, or marginalised by the system itself. So is there a way to introduce spirituality into the colossal system that we have built at every level?

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar: Let me tell you something from my last couple of experiences abroad. We did a lot of work in Buenos Aires in Argentina, in the slums and also in the different departments of the government. The training programmes we conducted brought about tremendous change in the work culture and attitude. So the Buenos Aires government honoured me and invited the Indian embassy to share this interesting experience. However, our Indian ambassador refused to come and said that it is not a political issue and that they won’t turn up for a religious person. The Buenos Aires government was a little confused as whether to put the national flag or not, as the Ambassador has to be present to raise the flag. In the end they decided to keep the Indian flag, breaking protocol, just to honour me, as a respectable Indian citizen. There were 7000 people and our Indian ambassador refused to come! The same thing was repeated in Pakistan, when they invited me to the Assembly. It was the first time an Indian spiritual leader was doing this in Pakistan. Our Ambassador again refused to meet me. So when our bureaucrats think spirituality is something like untouchability, they are the ones who need to be changed first. I had similar experience even in Brazil, where I was invited to deliver a speech and the ambassador again refused to come. Our volunteers however, had taken up a non-aggression programme to reduce violence among children in slums through Yoga. So, first we need to teach our bureaucrats the immensity of
spirituality. These days we tend to brand everything as ‘Hindutva in an communal way’ - even yoga and meditation! It is pathetic! We should understand that spirituality is universal. It includes respecting every religion and culture, loving ones fellow men, music, dance and yoga, love, joy and much more.

Sunil: Guruji, do you agree with capital punishment?

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar: No, I don’t. I think you should give a criminal enough rope to reform. There is no point in just hanging them. We should understand that even the worst criminal is a victim and crying for help from within and we need to help them. In Scotland, the prisoners completed the Art of Living courses. Today 1,25,000 prisoners across the world have taken these courses, and, trust me, a big transformation has taken place!

Suresh: Guruji, you have very rightly enlightened us that we have to be united and spread the message of love and belonging. How do we go about changing the mindset of the people, make them understand the benefits of yoga and meditation, especially to those who are rigid and not ready to accept the fact?

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar: I must tell you that in America, yoga is a 27-billion dollar industry. If you see, it is the local Americans, who make most of the yoga tapes, not the Indians. The need of this hour is to create awareness. But I must also say that things are changing for the better. Today young people are coming forward to take up meditation courses, and yoga classes are in vogue. We should guide them in the right direction. Perhaps the world has become too complicated and people are looking for change in a positive way. What moves me is that they are going back to their roots. The other thing we need to do is selfless seva, and learn to trust others. This is something we are lacking at present. True, there is widespread corruption in every field, but your commitments and your compassion can reign true and make people change their minds.

Question: Swamiji, when I go abroad, what strikes me most is that the common man is honest. He generally doesn’t break rules, and even if he is wrong, he is prepared for the penalty, whereas in India, our thinking is crooked. The middle class has been reduced to tamasik stupor. When we don’t even vote, we have no business to criticise the system. How do we galvanise this group?
Sri Sri Ravi Shankar: This is not the problem in India alone. Even in America only a small percentage cast their vote. We are at least better in India. What we need to do is bring back the lost enthusiasm through satsang and seva, bhajans, kirtans - unite and motivate them to do good things collectively. We have to inform them that we all have responsibilities towards society, towards the family, towards friends and towards the nation. So it is a long, complicated process, but we should keep trying and never break off. Let me share something interesting. Our group had worked with some militants in Kashmir. Nearly 450 Hizbullah Mujahideen and Lashkar-e-Toiba boys underwent the Art of Living course. They shared their beautiful experiences after the training programme, which we have recorded in a CD. Another instance worth mentioning is that we made Ranvir Sena and the CPIM leaders get together in Bihar. They were very angry at each other to start with, but you’ll be surprised to know that in the end they celebrated Holi together. So we have to make people understand. At times we succeed, other times we may not. The process is complicated, but we should never give up.

Question: Guruji, you’ve said religious conflict is the principal cause of depression and agony in the world. I feel you can take man out of religion but not religion out of a man. Do you agree?

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar: Exclusion of faith from the whole system in the name of secularism would not cause any moral upliftment in the society. The fate of USSR in the late 80s is a lesson to all of us. On the contrary, in Japan, the Shintoist and Buddhist are so friendly that you cannot segregate them on the grounds of religion. In Punjab, the Sikhs and Hindus are so friendly. So is the case with the Jains and Hindus in Rajasthan. In Kerala, the Marthoma Christians and Hindus live in harmony, and in several parts of Maharashtra, Hindus and Muslims are united. It is only a section of people from every religion who are fanatical and bring a bad name to their religion. Far Eastern religions have remained without conflict for centuries. This is the lesson India brings to other countries where religious intolerance is immense. We should always strive to maintain harmony and the spirit of tolerance.

Thank you.
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Public Affairs Centre
422, 80 Feet Road,
VI Block, Koramangala
Bangalore - 560 095, India
Telefax : 25537260 / 25525452 /
25525453 / 25520246
E-mail : pacindia@vsnl.com
Website: www.pacindia.org