

Mānasa Bhajare: A Commentary on Sathya Sai Baba's First Public Discourse

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Abstract Ratnākaram Sathyanārāyaṇa Rāju alias Sathya Sai Baba (1926-2011), from the village of Puttaparthi in the Anantapur district of Andhra Pradesh, has been one of the most popular Indian *gurus*. Scholarly attention has focused on his charismatic figure, purported powers and transnational movement but very little on his teaching activity, though the guru considered it to be an essential part of his mission as an *avatāra*. Indeed he constantly engaged in teaching (*upadeśa*), both through his discourses and his writings. This article offers a commentary to his first public discourse, which he delivered in his ashram of Prasanthi Nilayam on 17 October 1953, on the final day of the Dasara festival.

Keywords Sathya Sai Baba. Guru. Teachings. First public discourse. Mānasa Bhajare.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Sathya Sai Baba's Opening Words. – 3 The Reeducation of Mankind. – 4 The Secret of Spiritual Success. – 5 Pains Indicate Birth of a New Life. – 6 Shine Forth in Your Real Nature. – 7 Do Not Give Up Your *Sādhanā*. – 8 Conclusion.

These days, listening to lectures and discourses has become just an itch, a disease, a craze. When they have been heard once people imagine they have known all. But the real purpose of the search for Truth is to liberate oneself. The yearning must be deep and persistent. The longing to know and experience the Truth will then become a Yoga, a process of union... Do not rest content with mere listening to advice. What you have listened to must later be reflected upon, and what has thus been imprinted on the mind has later to be experienced and expressed in thought, word, and deed. Only thus can the Truth be a treasure in the heart; only then can it flow through the veins and manifest in full splendor through you.

(Sathya Sai Baba 1984, 48)

1 Introduction

Ratnākaram Sathyanārāyaṇa Rāju¹ alias Sathya Sai Baba (Telugu: Satya Sāyibābā; 23 November 1926-24 April 2011) from the village of Puttaparthi² (Telugu: Puṭṭaparti) in the Anantapur district of Andhra Pradesh, has been and still is one of the most popular Indian *gurus*: his portraits, smiling under a round mass of hair clad in an ochre robe, are familiar both in public spaces and in private homes. In India and throughout the world his devotees count in the millions, predominantly from the urban upper-middle classes. His towering fame was and is due first and foremost to his alleged miraculous and healing powers, which are inextricably interwoven to his life and message.³ Scholarly attention has focused on his movement as well as on his charisma and purported powers but very little on his teachings, though the *guru* of Puttaparthi viewed it as a crucial aspect of his mission as a full, divine incarnation (*pūrṇāvatāra*). To be sure, from 1953 up until the end of his life his teaching activity (*upadeśa*) has been intense, both through his public discourses and his writings. Steeped in *bhakti* or devotion, his instruction was based upon

1 He belonged to the Rāju or Bhatrāju caste of bards and genealogists, which is recognised as a Kṣatriya sub-caste. In Andhra Pradesh, the Bhatrājus are generally occupied as teachers or speaking minstrels, popularising sacred literature through songs and poetry. They are supposed to be the offspring of a Kṣatriya female and a Vaiśya male and are mostly Viṣṇu worshippers. They are the only non-Brahmin caste that performs the duties of a religious teacher.

2 On the village of Puttaparthi and Sathya Sai Baba, see Rigopoulos 2014.

3 For an introduction to Sathya Sai Baba and his movement, see T. Srinivas 2010, 2018; S. Srinivas 2008.

Advaita Vedānta metaphysics upholding the non-dualism of the individual Self (*ātman*) and the Absolute *Brahman*, and placed emphasis on ethics and social service through the creation of schools, hospitals and a variety of charitable works as is typical of neo-Hinduism.⁴

His early discourses, translated and edited from their original Telugu⁵ into English by his secretary and biographer Prof. Narayan Kasturi (1897-1987),⁶ are important since they reveal the basic lines of his teaching and strike me for their simplicity and depth, their freshness and beauty.⁷ Whereas in the first five years, i.e. in the period 1953-1957, the *guru* delivered just five speeches,⁸ starting from 1958 he intensified his teaching activity true to his word that he would be dedicating himself to the task of *upadeśa* especially after his 32nd year. Thus in the period 1958-62 he delivered fourteen discourses in 1958, six in 1959, ten in 1960, twenty-eight in 1961 and twenty-four in 1962, for a total of eighty-two. Thirty-four of these eighty-two talks took place outside Puttaparthi, with N. Kasturi always by his side, during the *guru*'s tours of North India⁹ and his visits to towns and villages of Andhra Pradesh and other southern states.¹⁰ The number of the *guru*'s public discourses increased throughout the decades, to the point that to date 42 volumes of the series *Sathya Sai Speaks* have been edited which comprise his speeches up to 2009. All in all, Sathya Sai Baba delivered over a thousand public discourses during his lifetime.

Unfortunately, there are no recordings of the early Telugu discourses of Sathya Sai Baba. It was Kasturi who scrupulously not-

⁴ On neo-Hinduism, see Halbfass 1995, 227-350. On Sathya Sai Baba's service (*sevā*) to society, see Aitken 2004, 191-206.

⁵ The *guru* spoke the Rayalaseema dialect of Telugu, sometimes with verbal endings of modern standard Telugu; see Rama Raju 1985, 292. On rare occasions, he delivered his public speeches in Kannada. Gokak (1983, 5) reports that the *guru* could freely converse in Tamil and Malayalam and could also play with Hindi and English.

⁶ A distinguished Kannada litterateur and a university lecturer, he first met the *guru* in Bangalore in July 1948 and became a permanent resident at Prasanthi Nilayam's ashram in 1954. On this most important figure, see Rigopoulos 2021.

⁷ The first eleven volumes of his discourses cover almost twenty years, from 1953 to 1972, and were all compiled by N. Kasturi from notes he took on the spot. Rama Raju observes: "They were again translated into Telugu by scholars like D. Picchayya Sastri and Dr. Amarendra. Telugu has two styles (1) Grandhika (classical) and (2) Vyavaharika (spoken) styles of writing. Baba's first 11 books [...] are very near to the classical style and the rest of the books are in the spoken style of Telugu" (Rama Raju 1985, 288).

⁸ The first three were delivered at his ashram of Prasanthi Nilayam in Puttaparthi in October 1953, February 1955 and August 1956; the fourth was delivered in Venkatagiri in April 1957; the fifth was delivered in Tirupati in July 1957.

⁹ In Lucknow in April 1961; in Badrinath and Nainital in June 1961.

¹⁰ He delivered five speeches in Madras, three in Bangalore, three in Venkatagiri and two in Tirupati.

ed down his words and edited his talks.¹¹ It was not at all easy for him to capture the *guru's* words, however, given that he spoke very fast and extempore, never resorting to a prepared speech.¹² Kasturi then translated his discourses into English, always subjecting them to the *guru's* scrutiny and approval prior to publication.¹³ He points out the beauty of Sathya Sai Baba's melodious Telugu, which was inevitably lost in translation.¹⁴ Yet, even though Kasturi states that his translations were a poor rendering of his master's sublime words and that "English is too blunt and too blatant a tool to unravel the subtle treasures of Avataric wisdom" (Kasturi 1982, 259), he still thought that "even when Swami's¹⁵ Telugu nectar is diluted and deformed by translation into English the call does not lose either its urgency or its intimacy" (Kasturi 1982, 252). Referring to the quality of his *guru's* speeches, he observed:

11 He took down his notes in both Telugu and Kannada, Kannada being the language he was most familiar with. With no tape recorder available, he had to rely on his ability to memorise and write down his *guru's* words as fast as possible.

12 As Kasturi states: "Imagine my struggle to scribble on the pages of my notebook the series of adjectival or adverbial clauses that hurry one behind the other from His lips and the nouns and the verbs encasing ideas, personalities and principles" (Kasturi 1982, 262). Referring to his own torrential, 'Ganga' speeches, the *guru* observed that "only the swift stream can flush the slime away" (Kasturi 1985, 284).

13 The *guru's* speeches and writings were first published in the *Sanathana Sarathi* monthly newsletter and later in the *Sathya Sai Speaks* and *Vahini* series. Recently, a digitalized archive of his discourses and writings has been created so as to preserve the original audiotapes and videotapes, his handwritten texts, letters, photos, etc.; see "A Documentary on Sri Sathya Sai Archives". Robert Priddy's idea that Kasturi "acted as a kind of 'spin doctor' and even 'ghost writer' for Sathya Sai Baba" ("PROFESSOR' N. KASTURI - the 'official biographer' of SB and prolific prosyletizer") is unfounded given that he never substituted himself to his master. The opinion voiced by M. Krishna - an ex-devotee who was close to the *guru* from 1950 to 1957 - that Sathya Sai Baba's lectures "were mostly thoughts borrowed from Mr. Kasturi" (Haraldsson 2013, 186) is also far-fetched. If the proximity with a learned man like Kasturi must have had its impact upon the *guru*, the suggestion that he acted as a kind of *éminence grise* and that Sathya Sai Baba's discourses were borrowed from him is unjustified. Kasturi was literally in awe of the *guru's* purported omniscience, constantly craving to record his 'revelations' and pearls of wisdom. In 1958, in one of his poems, he celebrated the 'alchemic potency' of his *guru's* discourses with these words: "Every word a Manthra, every phrase a Sutra; A Gayathri each sentence, Upanishad, a speech; Every hour a minute, a minute but a second" (Kasturi 1982, 249).

14 Even Vinayak Krishna Gokak (1909-1992), one among the most eminent Kannada writers and poets who became a devotee of Sathya Sai Baba in 1966, praised the *guru's* Telugu as being "incomparably beautiful and expressive" (Gokak 1983, 238). He observes: "The table-talk of Dr. Samuel Johnson and S.T. Coleridge has been justly famous. The casual talk by Sri Ramakrishna to groups of listeners that came to him has been collected together as *Vachana Veda*, - Spoken *Veda*. Baba's talk deserves to be recorded in a similar way. It will be a priceless possession for posterity. But Baba is not just a conversationalist of genius. He is a brilliant writer as well" (Gokak 1983, 211).

15 Kasturi, as all devotees, refers to his *guru* as Swami, i.e. 'lord', 'master' (Sanskrit *svāmin*).

Baba says His discourse is a 'mixture' prepared and prescribed by the physician [= *guru*] to cleanse, cure, and make us 'whole'-some. He calls them *Sambhashan*, Dialogue, Conversation [...]. He is no orator publicity-prone. He does not declaim, circumlocute, or even, speak. He talks to you and you and you and every single you, sitting there, the Arjuns, willing to reach, but afraid to march. (Kasturi 2012, iii)

From the very beginning, Sathya Sai Baba presented his talks as "conversations" and "medicine for the mind" (Sathya Sai Baba [2009] 2015, 139):

I do not give "speeches"; My talks are more of the conversation type: I want that you should follow every word of what I say with reverent attention, for your *anandam* is My *aharam* - your joy is My food. You can get *anandam* only by following the advice I give you and this is why I am particular that you should listen carefully and take to heart all that I say. This is not a mere lecture, wherefrom you do not seek new lessons for life. (Sathya Sai Baba [2009] 2015, 7)

In this article I focus attention on the *guru's* first public discourse, which he delivered in his ashram of Prasanthi Nilayam on Saturday, 17 October 1953, on the evening of the final day of the ten-day Dasara festival, i.e. on the auspicious Vijayādaśamī,¹⁶ while he sat on the *jhūla*, the floral swing.¹⁷ Sathya Sai Baba was 26 years old. The fact that he gave his speech while seated on a swing is meant to highlight his joyful spontaneity, the flowing of his words of grace being understood as a pure, effortless pastime (*vilāsa*) reinforcing his identification with Kṛṣṇa, paradigm of the juvenile god.¹⁸ Kasturi recalls: "Fortunately, I had my pen in my pocket and someone lent me sheets of paper. I could secure His words and put them together" (Kasturi 1982, 172). It should be noted that there were at least a couple of antecedents to this official discourse. The first was a speech he held in Karur, Tamil Nadu, on 27 October 1947, in which he spoke about his childhood experiences and avatāric mission (Padmanaban 2000, 391, 394), while the second was a speech he held in Puttaparthi on

16 Lit. 'victory tenth'. The culminating day of the nine nights or the Navarātri festival, celebrating the Goddess' defeat of the buffalo-demon Mahiṣāsura. Vijayādaśamī is also the climax of the Rāma Līlā festival, celebrating Rāma's victory over the demon Rāvaṇa; see Simmons, Sen, Rodrigues 2018.

17 See Kasturi 1982, 172; 1985, 283. For the account of an earlier Dasara festival and of the swing ceremony, see Vijayakumari 2000, 168-9.

18 On the *guru's* sitting on the *jhūla* and his identification with Kṛṣṇa, see Leela n.d., 61; Padmanaban 2000, 280-1, 300-1, 416-18.

1 October 1949, day of Vijayādaśamī, centred on the quality of devotion (Padmanaban 2000, 485, 487).¹⁹

The fact that he chose Vijayādaśamī to inaugurate his public teaching is noteworthy since it was on this very day that Sai Baba of Shirdi (d. 15 October 1918), his 'previous incarnation', had shed his mortal coil.²⁰ On every Vijayādaśamī the *guru* celebrated the saint of Shirdi by the ceremonial bathing (*abhiṣeka*) of his silver idol and, particularly in the early days, used to fall into states of trance claiming he visited the village of Shirdi in the State of Maharashtra through 'transcorporeal journeys' (Kasturi 1982, 96-7).²¹ In this way, he aimed at emphasising his link and purported oneness with the original Sai Baba. Regarding the sacredness of this day, he observed:

Today, Vijayadashami, is a thrice-sacred day [...]. Today is the *samaapthi* (conclusion festival) of Dasara. It is also the *samaapthi* (conclusion) of the *yajna saptaha*, the 7-day rite of *puja* and *parayanam* (adoration and recitation). It is also the *samaapthi* Day of the *poorva-avatharam* (the previous incarnation), the *Samadhi* day (the entombment) of the Shirdi *Sareeram* (body of Shirdi Sai Baba). (Steel 1997, 271)

Vijayādaśamī marked the time of crossing the borders (*śimollanghan*), being the day when kings such as Śivajī (1627-1680) set out on their campaigns of conquest by invading a neighbouring State.²² Shirdi Sai Baba's passing away on this day was symbolically interpreted by the saint himself as his crossing over the ocean of worldly existence. On Vijayādaśamī of 1916, two years before his demise, he predicted: "*This is my Simolangan* (my going beyond the boundary of life)" (Narasimhaswami 1942, 135).

In order to analyse Sathya Sai Baba's first public discourse and better appreciate its principal arguments and rhetorical strategy, I will break it up into thematic units and offer a brief commentary to each of them.

¹⁹ In his early years, the *guru* also gave occasional lectures to select groups of devotees; see Vijayakumari 2000, 215-16.

²⁰ For an introduction to the popular saint of Shirdi in the Ahmednagar district of the State of Maharashtra, paradigm of an integrative spirituality, see Rigopoulos 2013.

²¹ On the Vijayādaśamī festival held in Puttaparthi in 1947, see Padmanaban 2000, 383. For some photos of Sathya Sai Baba performing the *abhiṣeka* to the Shirdi Sai Baba idol in 1950, see Padmanaban 2000, 498-9.

²² See Kher 2001, 130. According to tradition, it was on this day that the Pāṇḍavas took up the weapons they had stored earlier during their long stay in exile, being symbolic of their coming out of exile.



Figure 1 Sathya Sai Baba seated on a swing near the Chitravathi River. His cross-legged posture is reminiscent of Shirdi Sai Baba's iconic posture. 1946. Puttaparthi

2 Sathya Sai Baba's Opening Words

When I was at Uravakonda, studying in the high school, you know I came away one day, threw off My books, and declared that I have My work waiting for Me. The Telugu *pundit* (scholar) described the incident of that evening to you all, in his speech. Well, that day, when I came out publicly as Sai Baba, that first song I taught the gathering in the garden, to which I went from the Telugu *pundit*'s house, was:

Manasa bhajare guru charanam I

Dustara bhava sagara taranam II

I called on all those suffering in the endless round of birth and death to worship the feet of the *guru* (spiritual preceptor), the *guru* that was announcing Himself, who had come again for taking upon Himself the burden of those who find refuge in Him. That was the very first message of Mine to humanity. *Manasa bhajare*: "Worship in the mind!"²³

I do not need your flower garlands and fruits, things that you get for an *anna*²⁴ or two; they are not genuinely yours. Give Me something that is yours, something which is clean and fragrant with the perfume of virtue and innocence and washed in the tears of repentance! Garlands and fruits you bring as items in the show, as an exhibition of your devotion: poorer devotees, who cannot afford to bring them, are humiliated and they feel sorry that they are helpless; they cannot demonstrate their devotion in the grand way, in which you are doing it. Install the Lord in your heart and offer Him the fruits of your actions and the flowers of your inner thoughts and feelings. That is the worship I like most, the devotion I appreciate most. (Sathya Sai Baba [2009] 2015, 1-2)

In 1953, Sathya Sai Baba's audience must not have exceeded a few hundred people: villagers, i.e. cowherds and peasants of Puttaparthi and surrounding rural areas, and middle and upper-class devotees mainly coming from the urban area of Bangalore.²⁵ The *guru* sets up the listening²⁶ by recalling the momentous time when he announced that he was Sai Baba, as had just been described in the preced-

²³ In Sanskrit, *bhaja* is the imperative, second person singular, of verbal root *bhaj*, "to serve, honor, revere, love, adore" (Monier-Williams 1988, 743). The interjection *re* in *bhajare* is an often used exclamation employed in addressing someone in an informal way. On this peremptory call to worship, see Savkur 2012.

²⁴ A currency unit formerly used in British India, equal to 1/16 of a rupee.

²⁵ The journey to the remote village of Puttaparthi was arduous in the early years. From Bangalore during the rainy season it could take a few days via Penukonda and Bukkapatnam; see Padmanaban 2000, 230-1.

²⁶ In following years, Sathya Sai Baba will acquire the habit of prefacing his talks by chanting a verse or stanza composed extempore, often expressing the core of his instruc-

ing speech by a local *paṇḍit* and Telugu teacher who was none other than his elder brother Seshama Rāju (1911-1985).²⁷ Indeed, it was Seshama Rāju who prepared the *guru's* discourse by narrating the occasion that brought to the solemn declaration of his younger brother Sathyanārāyaṇa. This declaration took place on May 23, 1940²⁸ in Uravakonda, a town about 80 miles away from Puttaparthi where Sathyanārāyaṇa was studying at the time, living at the house of his brother Seshama Rāju who taught in the very same school, i.e. the District Board High School.²⁹ With the words “I am no longer your Sathya, I am Sai Baba”, he announced the beginning of his mission.³⁰ Sitting on a boulder³¹ in the garden of one of his first devotees, the Excise Inspector G.S. Anjaneyulu, he sang the devotional hymn (*bhajan*) which was to become the all-time favorite among his *bhaktas*.³² Its solemn *incipit Mānasa bhajare gurucaraṇam* |

tion. He typically addressed his listeners as *divyātmasvarūpālāra*, “embodiments of the divine *ātman*” or *premasvarūpālāra*, “embodiments of pure love”; see Kasturi 1985, 284.

27 On Seshama Rāju, see Padmanaban 2000, 88, 349. On the memorable letter that Sathya Sai Baba wrote to him on May 25, 1947, see Padmanaban 2000, 350-1. Initially a skeptic, Seshama Rāju came to recognise his brother's divinity after 1950. Here is a testimony on Seshama Rāju dating to the early 1950s: “Sri Seshamaraju garu was Swami's elder brother. Because he was a teacher by profession, he would strictly observe discipline. He was not given to chattering much, and was reserved by nature. He did not come often to the Mandir. He did not like the way the young and the old swarmed around Swami, clamoring. While we were swarming around Him, Swami would say: “All of you go downstairs. Seshappa is coming.” His desire was that, because Swami was an incarnation of God, He should be solemn and serious, should order people to go on errands for Him. Like the Master that He was, He should go about grandly and royally like a King. He should sit only on a chair. He should never move closely with women. He should not indulge in child-like pranks. But, alas! Swami's thinking was the exact opposite of this. When the elder brother was approaching, Swami would get up and sit in the chair, looking serious. Only men were allowed to sit around His chair and chat with Him. Taking note of that, and feeling happy, Seshappagaru would chat for a while and go away. The minute he left, we all would run like horses and, once again, swarm around Swami. Sometimes, when there was not sufficient time for us to run downstairs before Seshappagaru entered the room, we would hide behind the doors and in the space under the staircase. From there, we would watch Swami's mask of seriousness” (Vijayakumari 2000, 207-8).

28 Or, perhaps more probably, on 21 October 1943. The *guru* was either thirteen or sixteen years old at the time; see Padmanaban 2000, 146-9, 160 fn. 64.

29 On Sathya Sai Baba's school education, see Padmanaban 2000, 128-9.

30 For a detailed presentation of these events and their antecedents, see Padmanaban 2000, 85-161. For the *guru's* own account of what happened that day, see Sathya Sai Baba 2014, 113-30.

31 It will become known as the Sai Baba *gundu*; see Padmanaban 2000, 122-3, 148, 150, 154.

32 From now on, he would often sing this song; see Padmanaban 2000, 134. For a couple of audios of Sathya Sai Baba singing *Mānasa bhajare*, see “Sri Sathya Saibaba singing ‘Manasa Bhajare Guru Charanam’ Bhajan” and “Sai Baba singing Manasa Bhaja re Guru Charanam”. Here is a full translation: “Worship in thy mind the *guru's* feet; They are [the bridge] for crossing the troublesome ocean of worldly existence. Glory be to the *guru*, the supreme sovereign; Glory be to Lord Sai who is the true *guru*. I bow to

Dustarabhavasāgaratarāṇam || can be rendered as follows: “Worship in thy mind the *guru*'s feet;³³ They are [the bridge] for crossing the troublesome ocean of worldly existence”.³⁴ This verse, which Sathya Sai Baba extolled as the greatest *mantra*,³⁵ encapsulates his fundamental teaching, i.e. that the regal way to attain the ultimate goal of human life, freedom (*mokṣa*) from the painful round of births and deaths, is devotion to the *guru*, the complete surrender of oneself to him.³⁶ *Gurubhakti* is understood to be both the means *and* the goal³⁷ and it must be pointed out that Shirdi Sai Baba taught the same lesson to his devotees: “Hence to get safely across this *Maya*, hold fast to the Sadguru's feet, surrender to him single-mindedly. And the fear of worldly life will vanish instantly” (Dabholkar (Hemadpant) 1999, 650, ch. 39, v. 82).³⁸ Finding refuge at the *guru*'s feet (see *Bhagavadgītā* 2.7d; Edgerton 1964, 9), i.e. in Sai Baba, can only be achieved through a worship (*bhajana*, *pūjā*) that is inward, not based on any exterior

Śiva; to Śiva whose abode is the Aruṇācala hill; I bow to Baba who is the syllable *om*”. According to devotee M.L. Leela (1927-1999) who was a testimony of Sathya Sai Baba's early years in the 1940s, the original closing line was not *Om̐kāraṃ Bābā Om̐kāraṃ Bābā Om̐kāraṃ Bābā Om̐ Namo Bābā*, as found in current *bhajan* books, but *Om̐ Śrī Datta Anasūyā Putra Sāi Bābājī Veṅkuśārā*, i.e. “*Om̐* Lord Datta, the son of Anasūyā, [who is] the Revered Sai Baba, [the ‘son’ i.e. pupil] of Veṅkuśā”; see Leela n.d., 132. The *guru* taught that the daily, congregational practice of singing devotional hymns was a must: “You eat twice a day for the body; shouldn't you do *bhajan* at least once a day for the mind?” (Gries, Gries 1993, 16). On the importance of *bhajans* in Sathya Sai Baba's life and teachings, see Padmanaban 2000, 34-5, 272-3, 320-1; Sathya Sai Baba [2009] 2015, 114-27 (discourses nos. 22 and 23, delivered on the occasion of an *akhaṇḍa* or twenty-four-hour *bhajan* session held in Bangalore on 10 July, 1959). See also Steel 1997, 24, 41-3. For a collection of *bhajans* sung in Prasanthi Nilayam, see *Bhajanavali* 1983.

33 A later Prasanthi Nilayam *bhajan* with this same initial line is *Mānasa bhajare gurucaraṇam* | *Sai caraṇam praṇamāmyaham* ||; see *Bhajanavali* 1983, 53.

34 See Kasturi [1961] 1980, 54-6. *Mānasa bhajare*, the initial words that give the name to the song, might have been influenced by the popular composition *Mānasa saṃcarare* of the 18th century Advaita Vedānta saint and composer of Carnatic music Sādāśiva Brahmendra; see “Manasa Sancharare”. Here is a translation: “In your mind roam in *Brahman*, in your mind roam in *Brahman*; A fine peacock feather adorns his [= Kṛṣṇa's] hair, surpass a bud his celebrated cheeks fair; In his consort Lakṣmī's bosom does he reside, as a wish-fulfilling tree is he where his devotees reside; Nectar his moon-like face is to the highest sage, sweet music from his flute completes this visage”. Sathya Sai Baba was especially fond of Carnatic music and himself a fine singer. Among his devotees were the twin brothers B.V. Raman (1921-2006) and B.V. Lakshmanan (1921-1996), celebrated masters of Carnatic music who sang for him on several occasions; see Padmanaban 2000, 475.

35 See Vijayakumari 2000, 176.

36 On the frequency of Sathya Sai Baba's references to the *guru* in his early discourses, see Gries, Gries 1993, 78-80.

37 See *Nāradabhaktisūtra*, v. 30. For an introduction to the subject of the *guru*, see Rigopoulos 2009; 2018, 1-8.

38 On these issues, see Rigopoulos 2021, 217-62.

appearance but on inner contemplation,³⁹ it being an adoration that has mentally renounced all actions and is purely spiritual.⁴⁰ Solely in this way can the mind be disciplined and ultimately transcended.⁴¹ This teaching is regarded as the foundation of authentic religious life and symptomatically Kasturi titled this discourse *Mānasa bhajare*. Through the uninterrupted, interiorised worship/remembrance of the *guru*-god one's whole being is believed to be sanctified and transmuted: there is nothing the devotee must do since everything is left to the *guru* and one is totally dependent upon him and his grace. The interiorisation of the *guru* or of the so-called "*guru principle*" (*guru-tattva*) is what leads to the realisation of his omnipresence, the veritable acme of *bhakti*. Here is how Sathya Sai Baba himself explained the *incipit* of the first *bhajan* he taught in a discourse he delivered on 14 January 1964:

The very first lesson I gave when I declared My identity at Uravakonda was: "*Manasa bhajare guru-caranam, dustara-bhava-sagara-taranam*". That is to say: first know that you are in this cycle of birth and death, the ocean of worldly life (*bhavasagaram*); then, resolve on crossing it (*taranam*); then fix on a *guru* or the name and form of God which appeals to you; lastly, dwell on His glory, do *bhajan*, but do it with all your mind. He who is deluded by this relative reality is the worldly person (*samsari*); he who is aware that it is only relatively real is the spiritual practitioner (*sadhaka*). Egoism is the most dangerous illusion that has to be exploded and destroyed. (Sathya Sai Baba 2012, 14-15)

The *guru* underlines that what he wants from his *bhaktas* is their heart and soul, not any hypocritical display of devotion. He openly criticises rich devotees who make a grand exhibition of their faith and humiliate

³⁹ As the refrain of a poem (*abhang*) attributed to the Maharashtrian poet-saint Tukārām (c. 1607-1649) says: "How can my mind wander elsewhere, after I have seen your feet?" (*ātā koṭhe dhāve man | tujhe caraṇ dekhliyā ||*). For a fine musical rendering, see "Aata kothe dhave Abhang - Sant Tukaram".

⁴⁰ One is here reminded of a devotional hymn such as the *Śivamānasapūjā*, "The mental adoration of Śiva", a short composition ascribed to Śaṅkara (8th century CE), the great master of non-dual Vedānta; see *Stotraratnāvalī* 1992, 12-13; "Śhiva Manasa Puja All Five Shlokas". On inner worship, see *Bhagavadgītā* 5.13, 6.15, 6.27, 6.45, 8.10, 9.13, 9.34, 12.8, 12.14, 17.16, 18.33, 18.51-53 (Edgerton 1964, 29, 33, 35, 37, 43, 47, 49, 62, 63, 80, 86, 88). In *Bhagavadgītā* 10.22c, Kṛṣṇa solemnly states: "Of sense-organs I am the mind" (*indriyāṅṅṃ manaś cā 'smi*) (transl. by the Author). On *pūjā* practice, see Valpey 2018.

⁴¹ See Murthy 1983, 222-5. As the *guru* once observed: "Man is life with desire; life without desire is God. Mind is desire: when mind disappears, desire disappears" (Hislop 1979, 18).

the poor who cannot afford to buy flower garlands and fruits.⁴² Again, Sathya Sai Baba emphasises that the divine must be installed in the heart, i.e. that “the feet of the *guru*” must be worshipped interiorly,⁴³ not through any pompous, outward ritual: what we have is a critique of ritual theatricality⁴⁴ in favour of inner contemplation.⁴⁵ What the master requires from his *bhakta*, be he/she rich or poor, is his/her own self, not any outer thing. Preliminarily, this entails an act of sincere repentance,⁴⁶ since only inner purification will predispose to genuine worship, i.e. to the offering of the fruits of one's actions and the flowers of one's thoughts and feelings to one's “chosen deity” (*iṣṭadevatā*).

3 The Reeducation of Mankind

In shops, things are kept in separate packets and each one specialises in some particular article or set of articles. But, in an exhibition, hundreds of shops join to make all varieties of things available and there is a great deal of window-dressing, arrangement, and display. I have been, all these days, generally giving individual advice, like the packets available in shops and giving answers to individual questions. This “speech”, today, is a new experience for you. I am addressing a gathering today, but even though it may be new to you, for Me it is not new. I have given advice to large gatherings before, though not in this appearance. Whenever *nira-*

⁴² Apparently, the *guru* always disliked the traditional offerings of flowers and fruits; see Murthy 1983, 223. As he remarked in a discourse held on 16 April 1964: “You must offer the Lord, not the flowers that plants grow; that will reward the plant, not you! The Lord wants you to offer the lotus that blooms in the lake of your heart, the fruit that ripens on the tree of your earthly career, not the lotus and the fruit available in the market place! You may ask, ‘Where can we find the Lord?’ Well, He has given His address, in Chapter 18, *Sloka* 61 of the Bhagavad Gita. Turn to it and note it down. ‘*Easwara sarvabhutanam hriddese, Arjuna, tishthati*’. ‘O Arjuna, the Lord resides in the heart of all beings’. Now, after knowing that, how can you look down on any living being in contempt or how can you revel in hating him or indulge in the pastime of ridiculing? Every individual is charged with the Divine Presence, moved by Divine attributes. Love, honour, friendliness - that is what each one deserves from you. Give these in full measure” (Sathya Sai Baba 2012, 120-1).

⁴³ On *guru* worship, see Sathya Sai Baba 2000.

⁴⁴ On these issues, see Sax 2009, 79-105; Cremonesi, Fava, Scarpi 2018.

⁴⁵ This teaching calls to mind Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount* and his critique of the hypocrites, who “love to say their prayers standing up in synagogue and at the street-corners, for everyone to see them”, and his advice to “go into a room by yourself, shut the door, and pray to your Father who is there in the secret place” (Mt. 6,5-6; *The New English Bible. New Testament* 1961, 10).

⁴⁶ On Sathya Sai Baba's call to repentance in his early discourses, see Gries, Gries 1993, 162.

kara (formless) becomes *sakara* (one with form), it has to fulfill the mission and it does so in various ways. But, the one purpose – the reeducation of man – persists, whatever the *yuga* (the era).

The first sixteen years of this life have been, as I have often told you, the period, when *bala leela* (divine child sport) predominated and the next sixteen is being spent mostly in *mahimas* (miracles) in order to give *santosha* (joy) to this generation. Joy and contentment are short-lived sensations; you have to catch that mood and make it a permanent possession: *ananda* (bliss). After the thirty-second year, you will see Me active more and more, in the task of *upadesha* (spiritual instruction) – teaching erring humanity and in directing the world along the path of *sathya*, *dharma*, *shanti*, and *prema* (truth, righteousness, peace, and love). Not that I am determined to exclude *leela* and *mahima* from My activity after that. I only mean that reestablishing *dharma*, correcting the crookedness of the human mind and guiding humanity back to *sanathana dharma* (eternal, universal religion) will be My task thereafter.

Do not be led away by doubt and vain argument; do not question how and whether I can do all this. The cowherds of Brindavan also doubted whether the little boy, who grew in their midst, could lift Govardhanagiri and hold it aloft! The thing needed is faith and yet more faith. (Sathya Sai Baba [2009] 2015, 2-3)

By using the story of the difference between single shops and an exhibition in which hundreds of shops join together,⁴⁷ the *guru* explains that whereas prior to this public occasion he had mainly given individual advice answering to individual questions, from now on he will also be giving advice to large gatherings. He argues that this is nothing new for him, given that in all prior incarnations he used to give both individual and public instruction. Here, Sathya Sai Baba has in mind the famous passage of *Bhagavadgītā* (*BhG*) 4.1-3, in which Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna that he taught this same eternal *yoga* or discipline to Vivasvat, who in turn told it to Manu who then passed it on to Ikṣvāku. Thus received in a line of succession, the royal seers (*rājarsī*) knew it but in the long course of time it became lost and therefore needs to be proclaimed once again to each and all. The idea is that the one essential mission of all *avatāras* in all *yugas* is always the same, i.e. the reestablishment of *dharma* as Kṛṣṇa solemnly proclaims to Arjuna in *BhG* 4.7-8:

⁴⁷ Even in another early speech he presented himself as a shopkeeper giving what is asked for; see Gries, Gries 1993, 251.

For whatever of the right (*dharma*)
 A languishing appears, son of Bharata,
 A rising up of unright (*adharma*),
 Then I send Myself forth.
 For protection of the good,
 And for destruction of evil-doers,
 To make a firm footing for the right,
 I come into being in age after age. (Edgerton 1964, 23)

As the self-proclaimed *avatāra* of the present age, Sathya Sai Baba constantly pointed out that his mission was that of reeducating erring humanity to the eternal values of truth (*satya*), righteousness (*dharma*), peace (*śānti*) and love (*preman*), i.e. to *sanātānadharma*, the 'eternal religion'.⁴⁸ For this reason, he assigned to himself the task of renovating and recasting education by establishing schools in which male and female students could be trained in human values. The education in human values (EHV) based upon *satya*, *dharma*, *śānti* and *preman* – to which *ahiṃsā* or nonviolence will later be added – will be the guiding principle of his teaching, being implemented at all levels of the Sathya Sai Baba Organisation and in all the educational institutions he created, in Andhra Pradesh as well as throughout India, primarily through a variety of service activities (*sevā*).⁴⁹ The assumption is that these values are shared by all humans, though it is recognised that they require to be contextualised and adapted to the culture of each society. The *guru* taught that through such practical education men and women could rid themselves of their ego and realise their original nature, the divine *ātman*.

Interesting is Sathya Sai Baba's subdivision of his *avatāric* career into three phases, the first sixteen years of his life being mainly characterised by childish play (*bālalīlā*), the subsequent sixteen years by miracles (*mahiman*), and starting from his 32nd year up to the end of his life by teaching (*upadeśa*). In retrospect, it can be said that he was faithful to such programme though as he himself noted *līlās*⁵⁰ and *mahimans* were not at all excluded from his action but continued to play a significant role throughout his life.⁵¹ The final aim is to lead all dev-

48 His insistence on the primacy of education in his early discourses is noteworthy; see Gries, Gries 1993, 53-5. In particular, see Sathya Sai Baba [2009] 2015, 23-33, 41-4, 86-91, 139-44, 180-3 (discourses 5, 6, 8, 17, 19, 26 and 33). On the *guru's* views on education, see Gokak 1983, 115-45.

49 On the EHV programme at the beginning of the 1980s, see *The Path Divine: For Sri Sathya Sai Bal Vikas, Group III* 1983. For an overview, see Romano 1999. On the implementation of EHV programmes, see Arweck, Nesbitt, Jackson 2005. See also Sankar 2004.

50 On the notion of *līlā*, see Schweig 2018.

51 For a hagiographical account of Sathya Sai Baba's many miracles in his early years, see Purnaiya [1976] 2003. For an introduction to the *guru's* wonders, see Babb 1987,

otees to enduring bliss (*ānanda*), which can only be achieved through an inner transformation and not merely by experiencing the variety of his astonishing deeds (a vast array of 'materialisations' starting with *vibhūti* or sacred ash, miraculous cures, etc.), since these are said to afford only temporary joy (*saṃtoṣa*).⁵² As he once explained in a discourse he held on 1 January 1992, in order to be fixed in *ānanda* one must achieve the perfect union of the *sat*, i.e. divine reality, with the *cit*, i.e. the individual consciousness.⁵³

By identifying himself with Kṛṣṇa, Sathya Sai Baba tells his audience that they should not doubt how and whether he will be successful in reestablishing *dharma*. As in all Indian religions, doubt (*saṃśaya*) is considered to be poisonous since it paralyses the mind: Arjuna's case in the *Bhagavadgītā* is paradigmatic in this regard. The main function of the *guru* is precisely that of helping his pupils to overcome all doubts by cultivating firm faith in God or the master and in oneself (*ātmaśīvāsa*). Moreover, by instituting a parallelism between the cowherds of Brindavan, who doubted that the little Kṛṣṇa who grew in their midst could lift the Govardhana mountain with his finger,⁵⁴ and the cowherds of Puttaparthi, who doubt that the 'little Sathya' who grew in their midst will ever be able to achieve his *avatāric* task, the *guru* invites them to put all their suspicions and vain arguments aside and have full faith in him. Just like Shirdi Sai Baba, who insisted on the necessity of *niṣṭhā* or faith (Rigopoulos 1993, 273-4, 287-9), Sathya Sai Baba taught that faith was the one indispensable virtue along the spiritual path and constantly treated this topic from his early discourses (Gries, Gries 1999, 61-2).

4 The Secret of Spiritual Success

Once, Krishna and Arjuna were going together along the open road. Seeing a bird in the sky, Krishna asked Arjuna, "Is that a dove?". He replied, "Yes, it is a dove". He asked Arjuna, "Is it an eagle?". Arjuna replied promptly, "Yes, it is an eagle". "No, Arjuna, it looks like a crow to Me. Is it not a crow?", asked Krishna. Arjuna replied, "I am sorry, it is a crow beyond doubt". Krishna laughed and chided him for his agreeing to whatever suggestion was given. But,

168-86; Rigopoulos 2016, 3-28.

⁵² On *saṃtoṣa*, see Murthy 1983, 180-2. On the *guru's vibhūti*, see Bhatnagar 2011.

⁵³ On Sathya Sai Baba's references to *Brahman* as *sat-cit-ānanda* in his early discourses, see Gries, Gries 1993, 170.

⁵⁴ On this famous episode narrated in both the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (10.25) and the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* (5.11.1-25), see Dimmitt, van Buitenen 1978, 116-17.

Arjuna said, "For me, Your words are far weightier than the evidence of my eyes; You can make it a crow, a dove, or an eagle and when You say it is a crow, it must be one". Implicit faith is the secret of spiritual success.

The Lord loves not the *bhakta* (devotee), but his *bhakti*, remember. The Lord's grace is like rain, pure water, falling equally everywhere, but its taste gets changed according to the soil, through which it flows. So also, the Lord's words are sweet to some, bitter to others. The Lord's ways are mysterious; He blessed Vidura⁵⁵ with the words, "Be destroyed", and Dushasana⁵⁶ with the words, "Live for a thousand years". He meant that Vidura's 'I' will be destroyed and that the wicked Dushasana will have to suffer the ills and tribulations of this world for ten centuries.⁵⁷ You do not know the real reasons behind the actions of the Lord. You cannot understand the motives of other men, who are almost like you in everything, actuated by the same motives and having the same likes and dislikes! But yet, how easily you discover the motives of the One, who is far, far above the level of man! How glibly you talk and judge of something that is as strange to you as atmosphere to a fish! (Sathya Sai Baba [2009] 2015, 3-4)

With the above story of Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, Sathya Sai Baba offers a good example of what it means to have complete, unquestioning faith in the words of one's *guru*. Each and every word of the *guru* is thought to carry a profound meaning and is never to be taken lightly. Thus the pupil must listen with utmost attention to whatever the *guru* utters and must cultivate an attitude of unquestioning faith, which entails one's full surrender (*śaraṅāgati*, *prapatti*) to him: indeed, for a disciple the *guru*'s words are far weightier - in Sanskrit *garīyas*, comparative of *guru*, lit. 'heavy' - than the evidence of his/her own eyes.⁵⁸ This story was a favourite of Sathya Sai Baba who, with a few variants, often repeated it in his discourses.⁵⁹ The source from which he got it is probably the Bengali mystic Rāmākṛṣṇa (1836-

⁵⁵ A son of sage Vyāsa by a *sūdra* slave girl. An incarnation of *dharma* as a sort of lower double of Yudhiṣṭhira, Vidura gave good advice to both the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas and in the *Mahābhārata* war sided with the Pāṇḍavas.

⁵⁶ Lit. 'hard to rule', Duṣśāsana was one of the hundred sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra. When the Pāṇḍavas lost their wife Draupadī in the rigged dicing match with Duryodhana, the leader of the Kauravas, Duṣśāsana dragged her forward by the hair humiliating her. For this outrage, Bhīma vowed he would drink his blood and he fulfilled his promise on the sixteenth day of the *Mahābhārata* war.

⁵⁷ On these issue, see Aithal 2009.

⁵⁸ On surrender in Sathya Sai Baba's early discourses, see Gries, Gries 1993, 197-8.

⁵⁹ See Gries, Gries 1993, 259. See also Balasubramanya 2015, ch. 16 ("Being a Platform Hero but a Practical Zero").

1886), who is reported to have told a similar tale carrying the same moral lesson.⁶⁰ We read:

One day at Dakshineswar, an arrogant but sincere young devotee was raising objections against what the Master was telling him. He continued arguing even when the Master had repeated his statement several times, at which he gave him a mild rebuke and said, "What sort of a man are you? I say it again and again and you don't accept it". The heart of the young man was touched and he said, "When you say it, I accept it of course. It was for the sake of argument that I spoke thus". On hearing it the Master smilingly said with an expression of delight in his face, "Do you know what devotion to the spiritual teacher is like? One is certain to perceive immediately whatever the spiritual teacher mentions. Arjuna had that devotion. One day while driving with Arjuna in a chariot Krishna looked at the sky and said, 'See, friend, how beautiful is the flock of pigeons flying there!' Arjuna saw it and immediately said, 'Yes, friend, very beautiful pigeons indeed'. The very next moment Sri Krishna looked again and said, 'How strange, friend! They are by no means pigeons'. Arjuna saw them and said, 'Quite so, friend, they are not pigeons at all'. Now try to understand the matter; Arjuna's truthfulness was unquestionable, he never could have flattered Krishna when he said so. But he had such great devotion to him and faith in his words that he actually saw with his eyes whatever Krishna described to him, right or wrong". (Saradananda 2008, 397-8)⁶¹

Sathya Sai Baba further points out that God is absolutely impartial given that his rain, i.e. grace (*kṛpā*), falls equally everywhere.⁶² The Lord has no preferences for any *bhakta* whatsoever but is attracted solely by *bhakti*, he being pure love, *preman*: though his ways are unfathomable and humans will never be able to comprehend them, still they are infallibly righteous notwithstanding the fact that his words may be bitter to someone and sweet to others. That the taste of the

⁶⁰ Sathya Sai Baba held Rāmakṛṣṇa in high esteem and often mentioned him in his early discourses, i.e. at least twenty times starting in 1963; see Gries, Gries 1993, 273. He once observed that Rāmakṛṣṇa "was fascinated by the friendship exemplified by Arjuna and Krishna" (Gries, Gries 1993, 273). Rāmakṛṣṇa himself must have received this story through oral transmission. Though some recent writers have set this episode in Dvārakā, Kṛṣṇa's capital on the Saurāṣṭra peninsula of Gujarat - see Srivastava 2017, section 88 ("Arjuna sees a bird changing form"); Vanamali 2018, 278 - I could not identify a source for it neither in the *Mahābhārata* nor in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.

⁶¹ See also Rāmakṛṣṇa [1949] 1963, 193. On Rāmakṛṣṇa's stories and parables, see Sen 2010. For a psychoanalytical interpretation of this story, see Kakar [1991] 2007, 41-63.

⁶² These words are reminiscent of Mt 5,45-46, in which Jesus in the *Sermon on the Mount* talks of the heavenly Father "who makes his sun rise on good and bad alike, and sends the rain on the honest and the dishonest" (*The New English Bible. New Testament* 1961, 10).

rain changes according to the good or bad soil, i.e. the good or bad person through which it flows,⁶³ means that each and every one gets what he/she deserves as per the law of karmic retribution. Sathya Sai Baba uses a comparison connected with farming, evidently in order to be better understood by his audience.⁶⁴

But even beyond the law of *karman* which God has fixed, the *guru* wishes to emphasise that man will never be able to understand the motives which underlie and determine the Lord's actions, his supremely free and spontaneous *līlā*, though in his foolish pride he/she may speculate on them, vainly talking and judging. The *guru* notes that humans do not even understand the motives of other humans, who are driven by the same impulses and have the same likes and dislikes: *a fortiori*, the Lord's reasons are said to be as strange to man as atmosphere is to a fish, there being an insurmountable hiatus between God and his creatures.⁶⁵ As he often liked to repeat love, i.e. God, has no reason or season.⁶⁶ What the *guru* underlines is the mystery and unknowability of God and of he himself as an *avatāra*. What man is invited to do is to surrender himself/herself to the divine and cultivate an implicit faith in the master: this is the only cure for the disease of birth and death (*samsāra*), the essential quality that must characterise the aspirant (*sādhaka*).

5 Pains Indicate Birth of a New Life

There are four types of persons; the "dead", who deny the Lord and declare that they alone exist, independent, free, self-regulating, and self-directed; the "sick", who call upon the Lord when some calamity befalls them, or when they feel temporarily deserted by the usual sources of succour; the "dull", who know that God is the eternal companion and watchman, but who remember it only off and on, when the idea is potent and powerful; and lastly, the "healthy", who have steady faith in the Lord and who live in His comforting creative presence always. You proceed from "death" to "life" and

⁶³ The illustration of the good and bad soil calls to mind Jesus' parable of the sower; see Mt 13,1-23; Mk 4,1-20; Lk 8,4-15. Elsewhere, Sathya Sai Baba has commented on what happens when the soil is good: "When the thirst for liberation and the revelation of one's reality is acute, a strange and mysterious force in Nature will begin operating. When the soil is ready, the seed appears from somewhere! The spiritual Guru will be alerted and the thirst will get quenched" (Sathya Sai Baba 1981, 97).

⁶⁴ It should be noted that he was always delighted in going to villages and meeting villagers; see Sathya Sai Baba [2009] 2015, 128.

⁶⁵ Along these lines, on another occasion the *guru* of Puttaparthi remarked: "How can an ant (man) calculate the depths of the sea (God)?" (Gries, Gries 1993, 227).

⁶⁶ See "Sai Student: Experiences and Musings".

from “illness” to “health” by the experience of the buffetings of the world. The world is a very essential part of the curriculum of man; through the agony of search is born the infant, wisdom. The pains are worthwhile; they indicate the birth of new life. From *ashanti* (restlessness) you get *prashanti* (absolute peace), from *prashanti* to *prakanti* (bright spiritual illumination), and from *prakanti*, *par-amjyoti* (supreme divine radiance).

It is like the alternating of night and day, this recurrence of joy and grief. Night and day are twin sisters, both are necessary to increase the fertility of the soil, to activate and refresh it. They are like summer and winter. There are some who ask Me, “Baba! Make this summer less hot!” But, in the heat of summer, the Earth takes in the needed energy from the Sun, so that when the rains come, she may yield a plentiful harvest. “Cold” and “heat” are both in the plan of God and yours is only to know this and treat both as valuable. (Sathya Sai Baba [2009] 2015, 4)

Sathya Sai Baba's classification of people in four types, i.e. the “dead”, who deny the Lord and live egotistically as if they alone existed; the “sick”, who remember God only in times of difficulty; the “dull”, who acknowledge God as their eternal companion but are not steady in cultivating such awareness, and the “healthy”, who have faith in the Lord and live in his presence at all times, is reminiscent of *BhG* 7.15-17 where Kṛṣṇa distinguishes the “deluded men”, who do not resort to him and are of a demonic nature – who may be likened to the “dead” – from the fourfold who worship him, i.e. the “afflicted” – who may be assimilated to the “sick” – the “knowledge-seekers”, the “goal-oriented” and the “possessors of knowledge”. These latter ones are the best and can be equated with the “healthy”, being disciplined and of single devotion (Edgerton 1964, 39).⁶⁷

The world with all its experiences, both good and bad, though being illusory (*māyā*) is the arena in which one is called to develop *viveka*, discrimination,⁶⁸ and thus proceed from “death” to “life” and from “illness” to “health”. The idea is that only through the agony of search, only by clearing all doubts and developing an inner view, can *jñāna* or wisdom be born. Thus the difficulties and pains one experiences in life are to be regarded as useful, as a sign of divine grace, since they are the ‘labour pains’ through which one may be reborn to spiritual life.

⁶⁷ The *guru* distinguished four other classes of people: those who pay attention to own faults and others' excellences; those who pay attention to own excellences and others' excellences; those who pay attention to own excellences and others' faults; those who present own faults as excellences and others' excellences as faults; see Gries, Gries 1993, 145.

⁶⁸ On the indispensable cultivation of *viveka* in Sathya Sai Baba's early discourses, understood as the chief aim of education and often coupled with the twin virtue of *vairāgya* or detachment, see Gries, Gries 1993, 40-1, 48.

The dualistic world in which we are immersed with alternating days and nights, this whole universe with its inevitable mixture (*miśra*) of joy and grief is itself our 'university,' i.e. our *guru* from which we must learn what is essential in order to achieve final liberation (*mokṣa*).⁶⁹ Sathya Sai Baba mentions the stages of this *itinerarium ad Deum* leading from darkness (*tamas*) to light (*jyotis*): from a condition of worldly entanglement and restlessness (*aśānti*) to detachment and supreme peace (*praśānti*), from supreme peace to spiritual illumination (*prakānti*), and from spiritual illumination to the supreme light (*paramjyotis*) of one's communion with the Lord.

If the real *guru* or *sadguru* lies within us, yet the idea is that man must discover him also in the exterior world since God is omnipresent and fills everything and everyone being 'the fullness of the full'. As *Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* 5.1 states: "The world there is full; The world here is full; Fullness from fullness proceeds. After taking fully from the full, It still remains completely full" (*pūrṇam adaḥ pūrṇam idaṃ pūrṇāt pūrṇam udacyate ṽ pūrṇasya pūrṇam ādāya pūrṇam evāvaśiṣyate ṽ*) (Olivelle 1996, 72-3). This is the reason why Sathya Sai Baba liked to encourage his devotees by telling them: "Life is a challenge, meet it; Life is love, share it; Life is a dream, realize it; Life is a game, play it" (Gries, Gries 1993, 107). Moreover, he reminded them of the four 'f's: "Follow the master; Face the devil; Fight to the end; Finish the game!" (Murthy 1983, 178). On the other hand, if man does not learn his/her lessons, he/she will inevitably have to 'repeat the class' and be reborn in *saṃsāra*.⁷⁰

Once more the *guru* illustrates his point by having recourse to agriculture, saying that the twin sisters of night and day, just like summer and winter, are both necessary in order to increase the soil's fertility and activate life. Many villagers of Puttaparthi and surrounding areas, believing him to be endowed with exceptional powers, often asked him to alter nature's course. For instance, he would be asked to send the rain so as to prevent drought or, as he himself recalls, "to make this summer less hot". However, he typically refused to interfere with the laws of nature. Only in exceptional cases, such as when Puttaparthi was threatened by floodwaters, did he claim to in-

⁶⁹ As he once stated: "Do not confine your studies to this Circle and these books. The Universe is the University for you [...] all beings and things in the Universe. Approach these teachers with awe, reverence and humility: they will respond with their lessons" (Murthy 1983, 158). Moreover: "The true *guru* is nature, creation, the world" (Gries, Gries 1993, 80). Along these lines, he also observed that "the best scripture is the world" (Gries, Gries 1993, 79).

⁷⁰ Kasturi wrote in his autobiography: "I have no knowledge of the years when I was last on earth. But I must congratulate myself that, this time, I have had good schooling. Now! I am waiting to receive my School Leaving Certificate - namely, the signal to leap into the warm lap of Sai, for the final rest in Him" (Kasturi 1982, 390).

tervene through his divine will (*saṃkalpa*) changing the course of natural phenomena (Steel 1997, 146-7).

6 Shine Forth in Your Real Nature

Thorny plants and thorn-less plants are both there in nature; the wise man knows the value of both; he plants the thorn-less one and surrounds it with the thorny ones, so that what he fosters is left unharmed.

Activity can save as well as kill; it is like the cat, which bites; it bites the kitten, in order to carry it in its mouth to a place of safety; it bites the rat, in order to kill and eat. Become the kitten and work will rescue you like a loving mother. Become a rat and you are lost.

God draws the individual towards itself; it is the nature of both to have this affinity, for they are the same. They are like the iron and the magnet. But, if the iron is rusty, covered with layers of dirt, the magnet is unable to attract. Remove the impediment; that is all you have to do. Shine forth in your real nature and the Lord will draw you into His bosom. Trials and tribulations are the means, by which this cleansing is done. That is why Kuntī⁷¹ prayed to Krishna, "Give us always grief, so that we may never forget Thee".⁷² They are like the dietary and other restrictions that the doctor prescribes to supplement the effect of the drug of *namasmarana* (remembrance of God). (Sathya Sai Baba [2009] 2015, 4-5)

⁷¹ In the *Mahābhārata* she is the daughter of the Yādava king Śūra and the sister of Vasudeva. She married Kuntibhoja - hence her name Kuntī - and subsequently Pāṇḍu whom she chose at a *svayamvara*, thus becoming the mother of the three eldest Pāṇḍava brothers: Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma and Arjuna. In her maidenhood she had shown great respect to sage Durvāsas who had blessed her with a charm by means of which she could have a child by any god she pleased to invoke. Her so-called Pāṇḍava sons Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma and Arjuna were actually the sons of the gods Dharma, Vāyu and Indra respectively. Kuntī was also, secretly, the mother of Karṇa, result of an earlier union with Sūrya, the sun. Towards the end of the *Mahābhārata*, she retires to the forest with Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Gandhārī where she dies with them in a fire.

⁷² Sathya Sai Baba reiterated this point in another of his early discourses in September 1960: "Trouble is the bait, with which the fish is hauled out of the water. Kuntī asked that Krishna should continue giving her and her sons all kinds of misery, so that He may grant them His grace continuously" (Sathya Sai Baba [2009] 2015, 157). See also Gries, Gries 1993, 267. The source for Kuntī's prayer is *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 1.8.25: "I wish that all those calamities [of the *Mahābhārata* war] would happen again and again so that we could see you, the world teacher [= Kṛṣṇa], again and again, for seeing you means that we will no longer see repeated births and deaths" (*vipadaḥ santu tāḥ śaśvat tatra tatra jagadguro | bhavato darśanam yat syād apunar bhavadarśanam* ||). For a modern commentary to her prayer, see Prabhupāda 1978, 43-51.

Sathya Sai Baba again resorts to an illustration taken from farming.⁷³ The good farmer, i.e. the wise man, is he/she who has discrimination and knows the value of all plants, the thorn-less ones as well as the thorny ones. The thorn-less ones are the ones that need to be planted with utmost care and fenced by the thorny ones in order to be protected and grow safely: they correspond to the tender plant of devotion, which in order to grow in man's heart needs to be protected from the pests of evil agents and worldly passions by an adequate fence, i.e. the thorny plants of discipline and spiritual *sāadhanā* without which the mind is like a wild elephant in rut.⁷⁴

Activity or *karman*, warns the *guru*, is that which decides of one's life since it can either save or kill man.⁷⁵ If the dutiful, dharmic action is performed at the best of one's capacities in a spirit of detachment and dedication to the Lord, with no craving for the fruit (*phala*) that will derive from it, then it is pure and it is thought to save man since it loses its binding force freeing him/her from all *samsāric* shackles, as per the doctrine of *naiṣkarmya* taught in *BhG* 2.47-48, 3.4 ff. On the other hand, if man performs his/her actions with attachment, egotistically longing for their fruits, then the power of *karman* is said to inexorably bind him/her all more tightly to the painful round of re-births. Finally, it all depends on the intentions that inspire and determine one's actions.

Sathya Sai Baba points out that if man becomes like a kitten and surrenders his/her whole mind and heart to the Lord, dedicating all his/her actions to him, then the mother cat, i.e. God, will take total care of his devotee carrying him/her safely and lovingly in her mouth. But if man becomes like a rat, being carried away by his/her passions and desires, he/she will inevitably be lost ending up being eaten and killed by the cat, i.e. he/she will be inexorably trapped in *samsāra*, being bound to it all the more forcefully.⁷⁶ Here, the *guru* had in mind the doctrine of *prapatti* or full surrender to the Lord, the culmination of *bhakti* as it is taught in the southern Teṅkalai school of Śrīvaiṣṇavism according to which a devotee must surrender himself/herself to God as a kitten passively and confidently lets himself/herself be carried in his/her mother's mouth wherever she pleases. The *bhakta* must abandon all self-effort at salvation and wait for this

⁷³ On the frequent analogies of farming and fencing in the *guru's* early discourses, see Gries, Gries 1993, 236.

⁷⁴ On the need for discipline, see Gries, Gries 1993, 47.

⁷⁵ On acting as a way of salvation, see Haberman 1988.

⁷⁶ In another of his early discourses, Sathya Sai Baba equated the cat with the body, saying that it must be fed something so that it is strong enough to catch rats, i.e. attack wicked tendencies; see Gries, Gries 1993, 230.

spontaneous gift of grace from God.⁷⁷ Sathya Sai Baba explained self-surrender as follows:

Surrender is when doer, deed, and object are all God. It cannot be forced. It comes naturally to a heart filled with love for God. God is as a spring of fresh and sweet water in the heart. The best tool to dig a well to that inexhaustible source and savor its sweetness is *japa*, the repetition of the name of the Lord. Dedicate every action to the Lord and there will be no place for ego. That is the quickest way for the ego to subside. (Hislop 1979, 17-18)

The Lord is compared to a magnet and each individual soul to iron: the magnet irresistibly attracts the iron, the two being really one and the same.⁷⁸ But what prevents the Lord from attracting the individual souls (*jīvas*) to himself are the layers of rust and dirt (*mala*) that cover them, i.e. the impurities and defilements that pollute each *jīva* and which are due to the illusory deception of ignorance (*avidyā*). The *sādhaka* is therefore called to remove *avidyā*, the essential impediment, since nothing else is needed. Then the *ātman* will shine forth in its pristine splendour and the Lord will draw it to his bosom, in the blissful communion of pure love.

The cleansing leading to real knowledge (*vidyā*, *jñāna*), sole antidote to *avidyā*, must be achieved through *bhakti*, the quintessential characteristic of which is the remembrance (*smaraṇa*) of the Lord.⁷⁹ This is the reason why the *guru* states that trials and tribulations are to be welcome as the means to achieve such catharsis, since man is drawn to remember his Beloved and call for his help especially in times of difficulty, when he/she is confronted with physical and mental ailments. Sathya Sai Baba recalls the figure of Kuntī, who in the *Mahābhārata* war lost all her dear ones and was subject to all sorts of tribulations and yet prayed that such calamities be always given to her so as to never forget her Lord, i.e. Kṛṣṇa. The *guru* observes that such trials are like the restrictions that a doctor gives to his/her patient in order that the medicine of the remembrance of the Lord's name (*nāmasmaraṇa*) be most efficacious. The master is popularly revered as the "doctor of the illness of existence",⁸⁰ the one thanks to whom the painful wheel of births and deaths is put to a definite stop.

⁷⁷ On *prapatti* and Śrīvaiṣṇavism, see Raman 2007. The major theologian of the Teṅkalai school was Piḷḷai Lokācārya (trad. 1264-1369).

⁷⁸ On the analogy of the magnet in Sathya Sai Baba's early discourses, see Gries, Gries 1993, 242.

⁷⁹ On the practice of *nāmasmaraṇa*, see Tulpule 1984, 127-45; *Kalyāṇa Kalpataru* 5(1) 1938.

⁸⁰ *Bhavarogavaidya; Guruḡītā*, v. 93. See also *Guruḡītā*, v. 34. On this famous hymn to the *guru*, see Rigopoulos 2009, 225-318.

It is hard to overstate the significance of the practice of *nāmasmaraṇa* in Sathya Sai Baba's teaching, given that it constitutes its cornerstone being constantly recommended in all of his discourses. We read:

Remembrance of the Lord's name is the method of crossing over the ocean of the worldly life for this age; remembering the Lord by means of His Name is enough to save man. The Lord is Aanandamaya (of the nature of Bliss); He is also Aananda (divine bliss), which is to be tasted through the Name. It is Sat-Chit-Ananda (Being-Awareness-Bliss Absolute). You may doubt whether such a small word like Rama or Sai or Krishna can take you across the boundless sea of worldly life. People cross vast oceans on a tiny raft; they are able to walk through dark jungles with a tiny lamp in their hands. The raft need not be as big as the sea. The Name, even the Pranava (Om) which is smaller, has vast potentialities. The recitation of the Name is like the operation of boring, to tap underground water; it is like the chisel-stroke that will release the image of God imprisoned in the marble. Break the encasement and the Lord will appear.⁸¹

Revered in the *vaiṣṇava* tradition as the third of the nine limbs (*navāṅgāni*) of *bhakti*, *nāmasmaraṇa* can be practised in a variety of ways: one is called to repeat the chosen name vocally, i.e. muttering it in a low tone (as in the practice of *japa*) and most importantly mentally, i.e. worshipping it in the heart at all times, typically associating it with the charming form (*rūpa*) of the Beloved. Sathya Sai Baba observed that as an ant moves slowly but steadily towards its goal, climbing over all obstacles, in the same way each and every man ought to follow the path of *nāmasmaraṇa*. He further noticed that though the mind is hard to control being led astray by all sorts of distractions like a snake or a monkey, yet it can be disciplined and charmed into innocence by the sweet music of the Lord's name (see Gries, Gries 1993, 227, 251). Significantly, in the *Bhaktisūtras* ascribed to Nārada the sage solemnly states that the highest, quintessential characteristic of *bhakti* consists in the offering of all of one's acts to the Lord – physical, vocal, and mental – and in feeling the highest perturbation and pang of separation on the occasions of

⁸¹ "Sai Inspires. Loving Sairam and Greetings from Prasanthi Nilayam". On the relevance of *nāmasmaraṇa* in Sathya Sai Baba's early discourses, see Gries, Gries 1993, 130-4. On the weightiness of the practice of *nāmasmaraṇa* in the Sathya Sai Baba Organisation, see Shah 1980, 97-111 (ch. 7, "Namasmaraṇa Movement"). On the *guru*'s 108 names, see Kasturi 1979.

losing the remembrance of him (*sūtra* 19).⁸² Cultivating the remembrance of the Lord avoiding all distractions, living at his presence realising that “in Him we live and move, in Him we exist” (*Acts* 17,28; *The New English Bible. New Testament* 1961, 231), is the alpha and omega of a *bhakta*'s life.

7 Do Not Give Up Your *Sādhana*

Sai is *sarvajanapriya* (beloved to all people) and so, any name, which gives you joy, you can take up. Tastes differ according to temperament and the character one has earned by generations of activity, as a living being in the world. The proprietor of a coffee house goes to the nearby druggist for a pill, to ward off his headache and the druggist, when he gets a headache, goes to the coffee house for a cup of coffee, which he thinks will cure him. Men are like that; *loko bhinna ruchih* (tastes of people differ). The *jnani* says, *sarvam brahma mayam*: “In God is all”. Another, a *yogi*, says all is energy; a third, who is a *bhakta*, says all is the play of Bhagawan (the Lord); each according to his taste and according to his progress in *sadhana* (spiritual practice). Do not hurry or ridicule them, for they are all pilgrims, trudging along the same road.

Sadhana is most required to control the mind and the desires, after which it runs. If you find that you are not able to succeed, do not give up the *sadhana*, but do it more vigorously, for it is the subject in which you did not get passing marks, that requires special study, is it not? *Sadhana* means inner cleanliness as well as external cleanliness. You do not feel refreshed, if you wear unwashed clothes after your bath, do you? Nor do you feel refreshed, if you wear washed clothes, but skip the bath. Both are needed, the *bahya* and the *bhava* (the external as well as the internal).

Children believe your words, when you say that the policeman will catch them, or the ghost will beat them. They are full of fear, fortitude and faith! But, having grown old and stuffed your heads with all kinds of doctrines, dogmas, theories, and arguments, you have now to use your *viveka* (discrimination) and discover God the hard way.

This I will tell you, there is no escaping it; all creatures have to reach God, someday or other, by the long route or by the short route. (Sathya Sai Baba [2009] 2015, 5-6)

⁸² The Sanskrit aphorism runs as follows: *nāradastu tadarpitākhilācārātā tadvismarāṇe paramavyākūlateti* ||. For a translation and commentary to the *Nāradabhaktisūtras*, see Sarma 1938. See also Arya 2010. On *virahabhakti* or ‘love in separation’, see the monograph of Hardy 1983.

In harmony with the integrative teaching of the *Bhagavadgītā* and adhering to Vivekānandian inclusivism,⁸³ Sathya Sai Baba remarks that the various names of God are equally dear to him since all religious paths – the path of knowledge (*jñānamārga*), the path of action (*karmamārga*) and the path of love (*bhaktimārga*) – are but different ways leading to the same ultimate goal. One is free to choose the divine name and spiritual path he/she views as the most appropriate for him/her. Therefore, all aspirants are to be respected: one should never dare to criticise the *sādhanā* of others, judging it to be inferior to one's own. The *jñānin* who, echoing the “great sayings” (*mahāvākyas*) of the *Upaniṣads*, says that “everything is made of *Brahman*” (*sarvaṃ brahmamāyam*),⁸⁴ the Tantric *yogin* who says that all is *śakti*⁸⁵ or energy and the *bhakta* that says that all is but the *līlā* or play of the Lord are regarded as equally praiseworthy, since their roads will inevitably converge and lead to the same destination, i.e. *mokṣa*.

Sathya Sai Baba always advocated the *bhaktimārga* since he viewed it as the easiest and most direct path to liberation (Sathya Sai Baba [2009] 2015, 45-6). The attraction towards different names and forms of God is linked to the different tastes and idiosyncratic tendencies and convictions of people, as per his humorous example that to ward off a headache the proprietor of a coffee house goes to the nearby druggist for a pill, whereas the druggist goes to the coffee house for a cup of coffee.⁸⁶ The idea is that all preferences are the re-

⁸³ On these issues, see Rigopoulos 2019. The *guru* cited Vivekānanda (1863-1902) at least eight times in his early discourses; see Gries, Gries 1993, 277-8. Howard Levin, who first met Sathya Sai Baba in June 1970, recalls how the *guru* talked a lot about Rāmākṣṇa and Vivekānanda; see “Souljourns, Part 2 – Howard Levin, with Sai Baba for 50 years and remembering it all”, minute 11. For an excellent biography of the *Bhagavadgītā*, see Davis 2015.

⁸⁴ Compare with the saying *sarvaṃ khalvidaṃ brahma*, “All this is verily *Brahman*”, of *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 3.14.1. Sathya Sai Baba may have had in mind a famous song titled *Sarvaṃ brahmamāyam* composed by Sadāśiva Brahmendra. Here is an English translation: “Everything is filled with God: all that is spoken and all that is not spoken; all that is written and all that is not written; all that can be learnt and all that cannot be learnt; all that can be sung and all that cannot be sung; all that can be taught and all that cannot be taught; all that can be enjoyed and all that cannot be enjoyed. In all places, the meditation of the *haṃsa* scale (*Brahman*) is the only thing that leads you to salvation”. For a fine rendition of this song, see “Malladi Brothers – Sarvaṃ Brahmamāyam – Madhuvanti”.

⁸⁵ This is the power of *kuṇḍalinī*, ‘the coiled one’, visualised as a dormant snake coiled at the base of the spine which the *yogin* awakens, leading it through the central channel of the spinal column (*suṣumnānāḍī*) to finally merge with the unlimited power of the *sahasrāracakra*, i.e. ‘the thousand-petalled lotus’ located at the crown of the head. On these issues, see Silburn 1988. Kasturi reports that Sathya Sai Baba occasionally quoted from the works of Sir John Woodroffe, i.e. Arthur Avalon (1865-1936), a pioneering writer on Hindu Tantrism and the translator of important Tantric texts; see Kasturi 2005, 21. On Tantra being “the spiritual science based on *śakti*” see Sathya Sai Baba [2009] 2015, 141.

⁸⁶ This story is found in another of the *guru*'s early discourses: “Like the hotel-keeper who goes to a druggist for a pill when he gets a headache, while that same druggist

sult of one's *karman*, which extends to one's past lives. The *guru* recalls the proverbial phrase coined by the great poet Kālidāsa (c. 4th-5th century CE) in *Raghuvamśa* 6.30, according to which "different people have different tastes" (*bhinnarucir hi lokah*) (Kale 1922, 46).

Furthermore, he reiterates the importance of practicing a spiritual discipline so as to learn how to control the mind and its whims and purify oneself. Addressing the public as if it were students,⁸⁷ he states that *sāadhanā* must never be given up even if one finds it hard and is not able to succeed in it: this only means that one must engage in it more vigorously since, like in school, it is the subject in which one has not obtained passing marks that deserves special attention and a focused effort.⁸⁸ The *guru* equates spiritual discipline with cleanliness through which the catharsis of the *sādhaka* is to be achieved. As he poignantly exemplifies with the analogy of refreshing oneself through a bath and washed clothes, both inner (*bhāva*) and outer (*bāhya*) cleanliness are needed, i.e. inner worship and the outer expression of one's devotion through selfless service towards all fellow beings. If one does not engage in daily *sāadhanā*, he/she will inevitably remain dirty: filth and rust will accumulate upon him/her thus preventing the magnet, i.e. God, from attracting the individual soul. The master's insistence on cleanliness is a characteristic of his early discourses, since he often remarked how cleanliness is the doorway to godliness starting with inner cleanliness, i.e. inward contemplation, which has faith and constant practice as its soap and water (see Gries, Gries 1993, 29).

In bringing his speech to a close, Sathya Sai Baba remarks how man must discover a new innocence.⁸⁹ He makes the example of children⁹⁰ who naturally believe the words of their parents and are full of fear, fortitude and faith. Even Rāmakṛṣṇa made similar remarks, highlighting how it is difficult to realise God and obtain his grace without having the innocent faith of a child (see Rāmakrishna [1949] 1963, 192). By contrast, the grown-ups who have forgotten the Lord have their minds filled with all sorts of worldly and religious doctrines, dogmas, theories

goes to the same hotel for a cup of coffee when he gets a headache, the West comes to the East for mental peace and the East is enamoured of the West for what it considers necessary for mental peace!" (Sathya Sai Baba 2008, 336).

⁸⁷ It is probable that several students were present at this first public discourse of the *guru*.

⁸⁸ On the *sāadhanā* prescribed by the *guru*, see Sathya Sai Baba 1978. He once noted: "*Sadhana* is just replacement of the bad tendencies of the mind by the divine attributes of the *Atma*. Mind has two principal bad characteristics: its tendency to not go straight, but to move obliquely; and its tendency to desire and grasp all objects that it sees. It is compared to the snake, which moves by twisting and who bites all it sees. The mind must go straight to God by facing Him directly" (Hislop 1979, 96).

⁸⁹ On the need for a new innocence, see Panikkar 1982.

⁹⁰ On the *guru*'s frequent mention of children in his early discourses, see Gries, Gries 1993, 27-8.

and arguments, which are utterly poisonous. Consequently man must be unmade and remade, i.e. reeducated, discovering the Lord the hard way by exercising at each and every step the subtle art of discrimination, *viveka*, along with detachment, *vairāgya*, i.e. the emptying of all of one's selfish and insane notions and presuppositions.

The *guru's* praise of fear, i.e. fear of God (*timor Dei*), fortitude (*dhairya*, *utsāha*, *sabūrī*) and faith (*niṣṭhā*, *śraddhā*) may be read as an implicit reference to the teaching of Shirdi Sai Baba – to whom he often referred to in his early discourses – given that the last two virtues were a fundamental pair on which the saint of Shirdi constantly insisted, requesting the 'two coins' of *niṣṭhā* and *sabūrī*, faith and courageous patience/forbearance, from all of his devotees.⁹¹

Appropriately, Sathya Sai Baba concludes his discourse with a solemn, positive assurance. He declares that all creatures are inevitably destined to reach God, to merge themselves in him, either by the long route or by the short route, it being only a matter of time. The final destiny of all beings is said to be pure *ānanda*, 'bliss', which coincides with one's 'coming back home' after having wandered in *saṃsāra*: in the end, all creatures will come to realise that they had never been separated from their Beloved, the very idea of being separate or far away from him being a consequence of ignorance and of the bewildering power of illusion, *māyā*. As the *guru* proclaimed:

Born in water, floating over water,
The watery bubble dissolves in water,
Nara (human being) is the watery bubble and
Narayana (God) the water.
What I tell you is a fact.
The essence of all philosophical works
I tell you at once in one sentence:
The Atma exists in all living things
And you are one. Remember! (Rama Raju 1985, 294)

8 Conclusion

Kasturi, the *guru's* biographer, vividly remembered the occasion of his beloved Swami's first public discourse. When he concluded his speech and the *jhūla* function ended, "as usual... the women devotees insisted on an elaborate Arati,⁹² which involved no less than 108 flames to be waved in many-tiered lamps and also the presentation

⁹¹ See Rigopoulos 1993, 147-8, 175-6, 179, 273-4, 287-9, 358.

⁹² The ceremony of circling a tray of lights before a deity or a holy person at the end of worship while chanting a hymn.

of a variety of fruits and sweets. It all ended with the singing of traditional lilts by women devotees" (Kasturi 1982, 173).

All in all, Sathya Sai Baba's discourse did not last more than twenty minutes. In the early years he often opted for short yet incisive talks. It must also be remembered that on this occasion his discourse was preceded by the one of his elder brother Seshama Rāju. The *guru* did not speak again in public for more than a year: it was only on 20 February 1955, on the auspicious occasion of the Mahāśivarātri festival,⁹³ that he delivered his second public discourse in Prasanthi Nilayam.⁹⁴

This survey of Sathya Sai Baba's first public speech confirms his traditionalism and *advaitabhakti* orientation, in harmony with Vivekānanda's neo-Hinduism. A characteristic of the *guru*'s talks is that they are both simple and profound, their language being crystal clear and comprehensible to all.⁹⁵ In particular, the rhetorical strategy he adopted in this first speech deserves notice. After recalling his declaration, when he disclosed his identity as Shirdi Sai Baba, he is keen to portray himself as the *pūrṇāvatāra* of the age, a universal saviour figure endowed with all powers. And in order to present his mission and teachings, he employs a wide variety of illustrations (*dṛṣṭānta*), metaphors (*rūpaka*) and similes (*upamā*): flower garlands and fruits are compared to thoughts/feelings and actions; the difference between single shops and an exhibition is used to indicate the difference between his giving individual advice and this first, seminal public speech; divine grace is equated with rain; the transcendent character of God's motives is said to be as strange to man as atmosphere is to a fish; the fertility of any soil, i.e. of each person, is said to be dependent upon the nature and peculiar characteristics of each and every soil/person; thorny plants and thorn-less plants are both precious and must cooperate: the sage knows that the former must protect the latter, the thorny ones being symbolical of discipline and the thorn-less ones of the growth of man's ātmic awareness. Other significant illustrations are the ones of the cat and the rat, the iron and the magnet, the doctor and the drug of *nāmasmaraṇa*, the *sādhanā* that requires passing marks, and the taking of a bath and the wearing of clean clothes.

Sathya Sai Baba also narrates captivating stories taken from Epic and Purāṇic sources as well as from general lore: Kṛṣṇa lifting the

⁹³ The "great night of Śiva", during which worship of the sacred *liṅga* with *bel* leaves and the recitation of Śiva's thousand names are performed. This festival is celebrated on the fourteenth night of the new moon of the lunar month of Māgha (January-February).

⁹⁴ For Kasturi's English translation of this second public discourse titled Sharanagati, i.e. "Surrender", see Sathya Sai Baba [2009] 2015, 7-14.

⁹⁵ As Rama Raju notes: "Bhagavan Baba's Telugu is simple but forceful, straight but pregnant, with suggestive meanings that penetrate the hearts of different categories of readers according to their capacities" (Rama Raju 1985, 292). For an assessment of Sathya Sai Baba as a speaker, see Kasturi 1985, 211-51.

Govardhanagiri mountain; the touching dialogue between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna; Kṛṣṇa's opposite blessings to Vidura and Duḥśāsana; the existence of four types of persons; Kuntī's prayer to Kṛṣṇa; the anecdote of the proprietor of a coffee shop and the druggist and their opposite behaviour in order to try to rid themselves of a headache; the children's fear of policemen and ghosts and their faith in their parents' words.

By illustrating his points through such means, and oftentimes sprinkling his stories with humour, the *guru* is able to capture the minds and hearts of his listeners proving himself to be an excellent orator. He will put to use such rhetorical strategy in all of his future discourses, displaying a vast array of figures of speech (*arthālaṅkāras*)⁹⁶ and even resorting to alliteration (*anuprāsa*), delighting his listeners by word play and "by punning, stressing and splitting words so as to yield *double entendre*" (Rama Raju 1985, 292).

The kṛṣṇaite character of the *guru*'s discourse is self-evident as well as his implicit identification with Kṛṣṇa. In his youth Sathya Sai Baba especially emphasised his identification with Kṛṣṇa while simultaneously claiming to be an *avatāra* of Śiva-Śakti and to encompass the fullness of divinity as represented in the *trimūrti* of Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva. In his speech the theme of *bhakti* is dominant throughout, culminating with the call to perfect surrender to the Lord, with clear echoes of the *Bhagavadgītā* and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.⁹⁷ From beginning to end Sathya Sai Baba insists on inner worship, on one's faith and love for God which are to be manifested through pure thoughts and intentions, i.e. through an inner purification. The lavish performance of outer rituals for displaying one's devotion and dogmatic religiosity are condemned.

The call to inner worship (*mānasa bhajare*) requires radical conversion and repentance, the surrendering at the *guru*'s feet, and coincides with consecrating oneself to the practice of *nāmasmaraṇa* or *japa* singled out as the easiest and most effective way leading to divine communion. As Kṛṣṇa instructs Arjuna in *BhG* 8.7:

Therefore at all times
Think on Me (*mām anusmara*), and fight:
With thought-organ and consciousness fixed on Me
Thou shalt go just to Me without a doubt.
(Edgerton 1964, 42)

⁹⁶ For some examples of his figures of speech and their explanations, see Rama Raju 1985, 293-4.

⁹⁷ Significantly, the *guru* wrote his own commentaries to these two seminal texts; see Sathya Sai Baba 1979; 1983. For a comprehensive survey on Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*, see Holdrege 2013.

It is a Purāṇic axiom that in this degenerate *kali* age⁹⁸ in which chaos and unrighteousness (*adharmā*) prevail, humans must resort to the constant remembrance of the divine name and form as their privileged means to achieve liberation. Taking to the repetition of the divine name is thought to lead to complete self-surrender given that the name is infallibly powerful. The way of *bhakti* is universal and open to all: there are no secrets, no esotericisms in Sathya Sai Baba's *upadeśa*. As he once pointed out: "The most subtle aspect of Swami's teaching is love" (Hislop 1979, 57). Even in future discourses he will recommend *bhakti* as the royal path leading to salvation,⁹⁹ its most precious limb (*aṅga*) being the treasure of the divine name, never insisting on any particular contemplative technique.¹⁰⁰ After all, precisely this had been Shirdi Sai Baba's own habit. Following the practice of *dhikr* which is the Sufi equivalent of *nāmasmarana*, he used to repeat to himself one of the ninety-nine beautiful names of Allāh, i.e. *Allāh Mālik* meaning 'Allāh is the King'.¹⁰¹

98 The *kali* age or *yuga*, the last and worst of all world ages, is said to begin with Kṛṣṇa's death believed to have taken place in 3102 BCE. Its length is of 1200 divine years, i.e. 432,000 human years.

99 If the centrality of *bhakti* in Sathya Sai Baba's teachings is self-evident, nonetheless Kasturi noted that the *guru*'s discourses tended to go in cycles, often concentrating on the same selected themes for a week or a month though with altered presentation and examples according to the different types of audiences; see Priddy 1998, 223.

100 With the exception of the meditation on the light (*jyotis*), which he often recommended: "Light a lamp or a candle. Gaze straight ahead at the flame... The form of God may also be included, Krishna, Rama, Jesus, Sai, as you wish. The form of God selected may be seen in the centre of the flame wherever it is carried and then you are with God everywhere. Then take the candle flame, the *jyoti*, into your heart and see it in the midst of the petals of the heart. Watch the petals of the heart unfold and see the light illumine the heart. Bad feelings cannot remain. Then move the flame to the hands and they can no longer do dark deeds. In turn move the flame in like fashion to the eyes and ears so they may henceforth take in only bright and pure sensations. The *jyoti* is then moved to other body parts. There is no particular sequence. But important is the final body station, which is the head. The light is then moved outside, from the particular to the universal. Move the light into relatives, friends, enemies, trees, animals, birds, until the entire world and all its forms are seen to have the same light at their centre as has been found to be within oneself. The idea of moving the light into the universal phase, the idea of universality is that the same divine light is present in everyone and everywhere. To impress this universality on the mind, we do the spreading of the light outside one's own body. One should understand that what comes about in meditation as one moves deeply into it, is not thinking of the light, but the forgetting of the body and thereby the direct experience that the body is not oneself. This is the stage of contemplation when the body is totally forgotten. It cannot be forced. It comes about by itself and is the stage that naturally follows correct concentration" (Steel 1997, 127-8). For a collection of the *guru*'s discourses on meditation (*dhyāna*), see Sathya Sai Baba 1982. See also Hislop 1979, 172-5; Murphet 1982, 119-25.

101 *al-Malik* (المَلِك) is the name of Allāh as the "King of Kings", the Lord of the worlds in an absolute sense, above and beyond all earthly rulers; see Rigopoulos 1993, 293-7. The term *malik* derives from the Semitic root *mlk*, 'to reign', 'to possess', which occurs more than 200 times in the Quran. Forms of the root *mlk* occur more than 3000 times in the Old Testament; see Soggin 1997, 672-80. On God as king in the Bible, see *Exodus* 15,18 ("The Lord reigns for ever and ever"); *Psalm* 22,28 ("For dominion belongs to the

As per Sathya Sai Baba's initial analogy of the flowers and the fruits, from the purification of one's thoughts and intentions, i.e. the 'flowers' of one's inner love of God, must naturally descend a life of selfless acts of service (*sevā*), which are the concrete 'fruits' of one's love of man and of all creatures, as per his dictum "Work is worship: duty is God" (see Murthy 1983, 262-5). As he noted at the very beginning of his talk, even the *avatāra* has a lot of work to do in order to accomplish his mission. As a consequence, every *bhakta* is called to cooperate with him and sanctify his/her life in society, given that worldly life and spiritual life are not different but one and the same.¹⁰²

The *guru* underlined that *mānava sevā*, service rendered to man, is *Mādhava sevā*, service rendered to God. He therefore summoned all his devotees to "care and share", in the awareness that "anything you did for one of my brothers here, however humble, you did for me" (Mt 25,40; *The New English Bible. New Testament* 1961, 48). Love of God and love of man were inseparable in his *upadeśa*. Ultimately, Sathya Sai Baba taught that selfless service to man is the highest form of worship:

Seva rendered in the faith that all are Forms of the One God is the highest *karma*. You must watch and see that the inspiration for the *seva* comes from the heart, not the head.

Seva is more fruitful than the *japa*, *dhyana*, *yajna*,¹⁰³ or *yoga* usually recommended to spiritual aspirants, for it serves two purposes, the extinction of the ego, and the attainment of *ananda*, or bliss.

The real value of *seva*, its most visible result, is that it reforms you, reshapes you. Do *seva* as *sadhana*; then you will be humble and happy. (Steel 1997, 242)¹⁰⁴

Lord and he rules over the nations"); *Psalm* 103,19 ("The Lord has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all").

¹⁰² See Steel 1997, 274. One must be in the world but not of the world; see Murthy 1983, 94-100.

¹⁰³ Ritual sacrifices.

¹⁰⁴ The *guru's* teaching is consonant with the Bible quote "I desire mercy, not sacrifice" (*Hosea* 6,6; see also *Mk* 12,33; *Mt* 9,13; 12,7).

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