SRI SATHYA SAI
INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION

100 EXPERIENCES WITH SAI

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The Resurrection of Walter Cowan

Ever since they got the blessed privilege to know Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba, Mr. Walter Cowan and Mrs. Elsie Cowan regularly visited Prasanthi Nilayam and Whitefield. Their shrine at their home in Tustin, California, was known to many as the 'Jasmine Shrine' since it was permeated by the distinct fragrance of jasmine flowers, an undeniable indication of Bhagawan's presence for many devotees. Even the picture in that shrine was mysteriously placed there by Swami in answer to Mrs. Cowan's prayer for that particular picture, which she failed to acquire in India despite her best efforts. On one occasion, in response to a sincere prayer from the Cowans for a sign of Baba's presence, an eight-rayed star jewel appeared in that picture for many days, and many devotees were blessed to witness the miracle. *Vibhuti* showered from the pictures at their Tustin home just as it does in the homes of countless devotees in India and around the world. Hundreds have seen the sacred *vibhuti* shower and returned home, convinced of Baba's irrefutable divine blessings, which transcend the laws of science.

However, among the many miracles that the Cowans have experienced, the resurrection of Mr. Walter Cowan stands out among the most celebrated and documented ones, fondly recalled by His devotees. It is as profound and magnificent as the resurrection of Lazarus of Bethany by Jesus Christ. Here is a summary of the astounding recollections of that sacred episode based on the narrations of notable and ardent devotees of Swami: Dr. Jack (John) Hislop, Prof. Narayan Kasturi, Mrs. Ratan Lal, and the chief beneficiaries themselves, Mrs. Elsie Cowan and Mr. Walter Cowan.

Sudden Death

Mrs. Elsie Cowan and Mr. Walter Cowan arrived in Madras (now known as Chennai) on December 23, 1971, to attend a conference that Swami was hosting. More than 3,000 presidents of various Sai Seva Samitis were in attendance. The Cowans checked into the Connemara Hotel, and later arrived at the venue. Baba at once gave them a warm and affectionate welcome. Mr. Cowan was not feeling well, so the ushers gave him a chair to sit down on that day and during subsequent *darshans*. On the morning of the 25th of December, Christmas Day, news spread quickly among the devotees that an elderly American had had a fatal heart attack and had passed away. Soon the word was out that it was Mr. Cowan.

Mr. Cowan had suffered from what seemed like convulsions early that morning, around 2:30 am, and it appeared that he was having a severe heart attack. Mrs. Cowan prayed to Swami for help at that most trying moment of her life. With great self-control and understanding of human mortality, **she ended her prayer with, "Let God's will be done."** She then reached out to Mrs. Ratan Lal, who was staying almost next door with her husband. It was around 3:00 AM.

When Mrs. Ratan Lal opened the door, Mrs. Cowan was crying. "Come, come help me! Help me! Walter is in serious condition." Mrs. Ratan Lal immediately followed her to the room and saw that Mr. Cowan was still

having convulsions. Knowing that Walter is also a diabetic and seeing his condition, she told Mrs. Cowan to hold him down because he could fall from the bed and injure his bones. But soon, his body stopped shaking, became stiff, and appeared lifeless. Mrs. Cowan was now distraught. She kept saying, "Baba, Baba, Baba... Swami, Swami." Mrs. Ratan Lal reminded her, "Elsie, it's three o'clock in the morning. We can't disturb Swami at this hour. Let us go to Him in a few hours..."

The ambulance was called, and Walter was taken to the missionary hospital, Lady Willingdon Nursing Home, but Mrs. Cowan knew that her husband had died in her arms! She was exhausted and did not accompany the then-lifeless body into the ambulance. At around 7:00 AM, Mrs. Cowan recovered enough strength to go with Mrs. Ratan Lal to Baba's residence to tell Him the news and ask for His advice and help.

And the Resurrection

Even as they reached the divine residence of Swami that morning, Mrs. Cowan went on calling her beloved lord, "Swami, Swami, Swami." Swami looked through the window and saw the two women standing at the door. He beckoned to Mrs. Ratanlal alone to come up. She went to Him and conveyed what had happened. He said, *"You go back. See where the nursing home is, find out the visiting hours, and then at 9 o'clock, we will go."* Once Mrs. Ratanlal had found out all the details, at 8:45 am, Swami said, *"Let us go now."* So, Swami, along with two nurses, two hospital doctors, and the third doctor who had brought Cowan to the hospital, left for the hospital. Swami asked Mrs. Ratanlal to accompany Him. "What about Mrs..." she ventured to ask, but He immediately said again, *"Leave Mrs. Cowan here."* Swami then blessed the grieving wife, told her to wait, and left.

When they arrived in the hospital room, Mr. Cowan's body was fully covered with a white sheet. Swami asked one of the nurses to remove the sheet. The nose and ears were all plugged with cotton. The face was also tied with a cotton bandage, all part of preparations for the disposal of a dead body. Swami asked them to remove all of these. Then, He removed the sheet further and started hitting Mr. Cowan on his stomach with His hand. He called out his name, *"Walter."* There was no response. The second time, again, He hit him and called out, *"Walter."* There was still no response. And the third time, Swami hit him hard on his stomach. **Lo and behold, Mr. Walter Cowan slowly opened his eyes!**

A thrill of awe and inexplicable joy coursed through Mrs. Ratan Lal, who was standing there and witnessing this amazing miracle! A man who was dead had come back to life! All the nurses and the doctors present there immediately fell at Swami's lotus feet. Swami blessed them and, turning toward Mrs. Ratan Lal, said, *"Now, go and bring Mrs. Cowan."*

The Attending Doctor's Confession

At 10:00 AM, Mrs. Ratan Lal returned to the hospital accompanied by Mrs. Cowan. Baba had left just before they arrived. Mrs. Ratan Lal had not said anything to Mrs. Cowan, who was overwhelmed to find Walter very much alive! A discerning reader might ponder, "Was there medical verification that Mr. Cowan had died?" After all, neither of the ladies could have verified if Mr. Cowan was dead or alive the way a medical doctor would. This is well clarified by the findings of Judge Damodar Rao of Madras (the father of Mr. Narendar, then the Principal of the Sathya Sai College at Whitefield, Bangalore). He interviewed the doctor who had attended Mr. Cowan when he arrived at the hospital. The attending physician was personally known to Judge Damodar Rao.

The doctor told Judge Rao that Mr. Cowan was dead when he was fully examined shortly after the ambulance delivered his body to the hospital. The doctor said there

were no clinical signs of life, and so he pronounced Mr. Cowan dead. He instructed the staff to have Mr. Cowan's ears and nose plugged with cotton to prevent decay, cover the body with a sheet, and move it into a vacant room. The doctor then left the hospital on some other professional duty and missed Swami when He came to the hospital. The doctor returned only after Swami had left the hospital and, to his utter surprise, found Mr. Cowan very much alive!

Triple Resurrection

As Swami returned from the hospital, He told Dr. Hislop and others within hearing distance that Mr. Walter Cowan had indeed died, that the hospital had plugged his ears and nose with cotton, covered him over with a sheet, and left the body in a closed room. **Baba said that He had brought Walter back to life as everyone listened with rapt attention.**

A day later, on December 26, Sri Appa, an ardent senior devotee, and Dr. Hislop accompanied Swami to the home of a devotee. From there, they went to a meeting of lady members of the Nigara Sai Samiti, where Swami gave awards and delivered His divine discourse fluently, without any break or hesitation. Sri Appa and Dr. Hislop sat on the stage just a few feet from Swami. After the meeting, they were to go to the home of another devotee for lunch. As soon as Swami got in the car, He turned to the duo and said, *"While I was giving the discourse, Mrs. Cowan called me. I at once went to the hospital and did what was necessary.* Mr. *Cowan's health had taken a turn for the worse."*

Sri Appa and Dr. Hislop looked at each other in wonderment and awe! Swami had continued His discourse and presence on the stage for the whole time while He had also gone to the hospital and done what was necessary! How does anyone explain this mystery? When they reached the devotee's house for lunch, Swami turned to the duo and said, *"You will not be able to join me for lunch. Take this vibuthi to the hospital and give it to Mr. Cowan. Put some in his mouth and rub the rest on his forehead and chest... If you walk to the corner over there, you will find Mrs. Hislop in a taxi. She will take you to the hospital."*

When they reached the hospital with the *vibhuti*, Mrs. Cowan said, "Walter's condition took a very bad turn just a little while ago. I thought he was dead, and I was terrified. I at once called aloud to Baba for help. When I called Baba, I felt His presence at once. Now Walter seems a little improved." Mrs. Cowan had simply and spontaneously corroborated Baba's narration in the car to Sri Appa and Dr. Hislop!

A week or so later, when the Cowans were still in Madras as Mr. Cowan was still recouping in the hospital, Swami told Dr. Hislop, *"Today I received a telegram from Mrs. Cowan. Mr. Cowan was in a very serious condition again. I answered the telegram. Mr. Cowan will be out of the hospital soon and will come to Bangalore. It is My Sankalpa, My Will."*

Of course, there was no physical telegram. The telegram was Mrs. Cowan's ardent, heartfelt prayer. In the same conversation, Baba said, *"Mr. Cowan died three times. I had to bring him back to life three times."*

Mr. Cowan's First-Hand Narration and Revelations

Mr. Cowan himself narrated the events he had experienced first-hand, with all the details to his wife.

"While in the Connemara Hotel in Madras, two days after I arrived, I was taken very ill with pneumonia and was in bed. As I gasped for breath, suddenly, all the body struggle was over, and I died. **I found myself very calm, in a state of wonderful bliss, and the Lord, Sai Baba, was by my side. Even though my body lay on the bed, dead, my mind kept working throughout the entire period of time until Baba brought me back.** There was no anxiety or fear but a tremen-

dous sense of well-being, for I had lost all fear of death.

When Baba took me to a very large hall, there were hundreds of people milling around. It was the hall where all the records of all my previous and present lives were kept. Baba and I stood before the Court of Justice. The one in charge knew Baba very well, and He asked for the records of all my lives. He was very nice and kind, and I had the feeling that whatever was decided would be the best for my soul.

The records were brought into the hall–armloads of scrolls–and all of them seemed to be in different languages. As they were read, Baba interpreted them. In the beginning, they told me of countries that had not existed for thousands of years, and I could not recall them. When they reached the era of King David, the reading of my lives became more exciting. I could hardly believe how great I was in each life that followed. As they continued reading about my lives, it seemed that what really counted was my motive and character, as I stood for outstanding peace, spirituality, and governance. I do not remember all the names, but I was included in almost all the history books of the world from the beginning of time. **As I incarnated in different countries, I continued to carry out my mission for peace and spirituality.**

After about two hours, they finished reading the scrolls, and the Lord, Sai Baba, said that I had not completed the work that I was born to do. He asked the Judge that I be turned over to Him to complete my mission of spreading the Truth. He requested that my soul be returned to my body, under Baba's Grace. The Judge said, "So be it." **The case was dismissed, and I left with Baba to return to my body. I hesitated to leave this wonderful bliss, but I knew it was best to complete my mission so that I could merge with the Lord, Sai Baba.**

I related the story to Elsie at once, and she recorded it. I also talked it over with Baba, and He said it was not my imagination, *"It was a true experience."*

Swami Performs the 'Second Marriage' of the Cowans

Dr. Hislop, always precise in his documentation, asked Swami whether Mr. Cowan's narration was true. Swami replied, *"The experience was a real experience, not an illusion. It was an experience occurring within Mr. Cowan's mind, and I was, Myself, there–directing and clarifying the thoughts."* The mind, as Swami says, travels across births. Mr. Hislop then asked if every person has a similar experience at death. Swami replied that it was not necessarily so; some had a similar experience, and some did not.

Swami later told Mrs. Cowan that Mr. Cowan was strong enough to make the fifteen-mile drive out to Whitefield each morning and that he was to return to the hotel at noon each day and rest during the afternoon. Dr. Gnaneswaran was his attending physician in Bangalore. He considered himself extremely fortunate because he would be in the room when Swami visited Mr. Cowan. Mrs. Cowan graciously allowed him to bring his family inside the room to have Baba's *darshan*. Being Mr. Cowan's physician, Dr. Gnaneswaran was also privileged to be in Swami's residence at Whitefield to witness Swami performing a very beautiful and significant Vedic wedding ceremony for the Cowans.

Swami called the Cowans to His Presence at Brindavan, Whitefield, and invited a few devotees like Dr. Bhagawantham, the Hislops, Ms. Indra Devi, and Mr. Richard Bock for the ceremony. The ceremony included exchanging rings, flower garlands, and marriage vows. Vedic hymns were recited. The American group and the students of the College at Brindavan sang *bhajans*. **Swami explained the meaning and purpose of the Vedic rites, celebrated when persons reached the ages of fifty, sixty, seventy,**

eighty, ninety, and one hundred. He blessed the happy couple by creating wedding rings and jewels. He then asked the Cowans to narrate the story of Walter's death and resurrection.

A New Walter Cowan

Dr. Gnaneswaran was the physician who attended Mr. Cowan in Bangalore. He had Mr. Cowan's medical history and details of laboratory tests showing severe diabetes of long-standing, as well as various other coexisting conditions. After assuming his responsibility, the doctor compared the findings of Mr. Cowan's laboratory tests done in the USA with the laboratory tests he did in Bangalore. He could scarcely believe the new results!

Not only were the diabetic symptoms completely absent, but the tests for other coexisting disease conditions were all negative. **He explained, "Only Baba–only God Himself could do this." The extraordinary fact was that when the total organism that was Walter Cowan died, the only entity that returned to life was Mr. Cowan's soul or *Atma*.** Mr. Cowan's various diseases died with his body, and the diseases were not reborn. Only Mr. Cowan was reborn!

Mr. Cowan's mental state had also changed. Both the Cowans confessed that previously, Mr. Cowan was one of the world's champion worriers. In the past, he was filled with worry and fear that this or that unfortunate event might occur and that the desired outcome may not happen. **But after this event, the new Mr. Cowan became calm, free from worry, with no fear of death or anything else.**

A Peaceful End

On May 8, 1973, Walter Cowan wrote to Prof. Kasturi, "We are delighted that you are printing the story of Sri Sathya Sai Baba bringing me back to life. **Everyone seems very interested in hearing this story, and it gives them encouragement to hear that there really is no death, just the loss of the physical body. It rids people of the fear of death.** I am really feeling fine. Would you believe this? I have gained about 30 pounds since 'coming back'!"

Swami has declared that when devotees whom He chose were threatened with fatal accidents or 'untimely' death, He rescues them so that they may continue to be instruments for His mission. He also says that He shows His presence during their dying moments and showers consolation, courage, and comfort to devotees who have won His compassion. Eighteen months after his resurrection, Mr. Walter Cowan passed away peacefully in California. Sri Ra Ganapati records in his book that Swami sent a telegram to Mrs. Elsie Cowan, stating, *"Rani (Queen), Walter arrived here in good shape."*

Our beloved Swami not only takes care of our 'welfare' but also our 'farewell.' He makes us focus on truth during our lives and ensures that we attain it even in our passing.

Jai Sai Ram.

Mr. Walter Cowan
USA

Mr. Walter Cowan *and his wife Mrs. Elsie Cowan lived in California, USA. Mr. Cowan was a land developer who owned a thousand acres in the affluent Orange County, near Los Angeles, in 1944. They were among the earliest devotees of Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba from the USA and came to Swami in 1968. In the early 1970s, the Cowans set up a Sai Center in their house and also opened the Sathya Sai Book Center in Tustin, California. On April 28, 1977, Swami inaugurated the 'Walter Cowan Block' of the Brindavan (Whitefield, Bangalore) hostel of the Sri Sathya Sai Arts, Science and Commerce College, in the presence of the President of India, Sri B. D. Jatti. Mr. Cowan finally merged with Swami in 1973 and Mrs. Cowan in 1988.*

The Only Doctor Who Can Grant A Permanent Cure

It was November 22, 1979, the eve of Baba's birthday. We finally arrived in Puttaparthi! My spouse, son, and I had gone through so much trouble getting here. Just as we entered, Baba finished His discourse and started a *bhajan*. When we heard His beautiful voice, we left the luggage unattended and ran to the assembly hall, which we later learned was the renowned Poorna Chandra Auditorium. There He was singing a melodious *bhajan*; a chorus of thousands of voices followed Him with devotion. **We were overwhelmed, in the divine presence, and we could hardly believe it.**

Discovering Divinity in Desperation

Just three years ago, I had been a militant atheist. I felt sorry for those who believed in anything other than palpable materials. At that time, it was more likely that I would visit Moscow to take a course on Dialectical Materialism rather than travel to Bangalore, a city whose name I didn't even know, to meet a 'Baba.'

But on December 22, 1976, the fateful diagnosis arrived for my ailing son:

> "Dr. Bravo, your son has congenital hemolytic anemia, types S and T, of severe degree. His prognosis is very uncertain and will likely follow a very painful course due to the complications that you, as a pediatrician, know fully well."

I felt the world was crumbling around me. I thought this could happen to 'others,' but why me? Of course, I know the answer now: **Baba was bringing me back on the right path through suffering, which was the product of my past actions, that is, *karma*,** which I had so often laughed off before. These concepts were then philosophically unacceptable to me, given my dialectical materialist training.

Desperation and helplessness made me reluctantly accept all the options of alternative healing that Manuela, my wife, suggested to me, from sorcerers to pseudo-miracle workers. But in the end, they ended up disappointing and misleading us. It was 1977, and I had already devoured all the esoteric and spiritual literature that came to my hands. I had been introduced to the term 'Avatar' and had become a believer in that concept. **Thus, when "by chance" I learned of the existence of the Avatar, I believed immediately that Sai Baba was God incarnate and I was His devotee.** I had no doubt! I was surprised at myself for my immediate and unconditional acceptance of this concept! A short article in some magazine with the picture of a man, whom some of my 'spiritual friends' found strange and laughable, was more than enough to convince me to become a devotee of Sathya Sai Baba!

The spiritual guide of this group of friends had tried to heal my son, but the disease had only worsened. The doctors had given up hope, too. In the end, everyone said that only God could heal him. "Then only Baba can do it," I said aloud with conviction. The guide tried to dissuade me, saying that since

he could not heal, Sai Baba certainly could not do it. But I was determined to try.

Dejected and Wounded in Puttaparthi

Weeks later, using the money I had saved for the purchase of a house, Waltercito (my son, also called Walter, Jr.), Manuela, and I left for India without knowing how to speak English and without knowing how to locate Baba in such a vast country. We also didn't know any Peruvians who had made such a pilgrimage before!

When we finally arrived at Puttaparthi, we were three tiny specks in a sea of devotees who had come to celebrate His Birthday. How could we speak to Swami? Before leaving Lima, we had been told that Baba would leave the *ashram* after His birthday for over a month. So, I had to find a way to get Swami's attention, even though I was determined to wait months or even years, if necessary, to ask Swami to heal our four-year-old son.

On the day of His Birthday, Baba went out in a Jeep to inaugurate a temple in the village. We thought this was the last chance to see Swami before He departed, and we began to follow Him, running with our child in our arms. The volunteers and the police prevented us from approaching the vehicle, but we stubbornly persisted and pointed our little boy out to Baba. Finally, Baba spoke to us. But it was in English! We understood neither His English nor His hand gestures. Such was our desperation that we created a fuss, not ready to leave Him without understanding what He said. But Swami moved on. In the melee, the saree that a devotee had lent to Manuela got torn completely. I had never tried learning English because I considered it the official language of "imperialism," but now it was also the language of God! I considered this sad situation symbolic of the distance between me and spirituality.

That night, on my way back to our accommodation in a school about 1.5 km from the *ashram*, I stumbled, and a glass piece lodged in the heel of my right foot. I felt a deep pain, and my shoe was flooded with blood. It was raining heavily, and I cried out loudly for my wife, who had returned to the accommodation much earlier, hoping she would respond. It was to no avail. Suddenly, in the deep darkness of the night, I was surprised to hear a sweet and youthful voice saying in Spanish, "Do you need help?" What joy amid the pain! There was someone who spoke Spanish in that place of confusion.

Baba's Gift of an Interpreter

"Yes," I replied, "I just had a cut on my foot and can't walk. But who are you?"

"My name is Juan Carlos, and I am from El Salvador," he replied. "Lean on me, and I will help you. And where are you from?"

"I am from Peru, and I am with my wife and my ailing son. I brought him to be seen by Baba, but it has not yet been possible. I understand He is leaving tomorrow, and I don't know what to do..."

"But who told you that? Usually, Swami stays here for a while and then goes to Bangalore."

That was enough to uplift my spirit, and I almost forgot about the pain as hope again flooded me. We arrived at the lodging, where an American medical professional examined me and was shocked at the severity of the cut. He treated me with first aid and recommended that I be transferred to the Ashram Hospital. There, the doctor who examined me told me that the wound needed multiple sutures. I warned the doctor to do it without anesthesia because I was highly allergic to local anesthetics. Now, Juan and the doctor were shocked. I gave the doctor a small packet of *vibhuti* that had been handed out in the *ashram* that afternoon and said, "Don't worry! Apply this ash to my wound and proceed with what has to be done. Baba will take care of the rest." After a moment of hesitation, the doctor proceeded and finally discharged me, telling me not to get up for eight days and to take antibiotics and pain relievers. From that day, Juan

Carlos was our interpreter until the day of our departure.

A Divine Promise

The thought of eight days in bed without seeing Baba was agonizing and unbearable, so I decided to skip that part of the doctor's prescription. When I left the hospital, I asked Juan Carlos to pick me up at 4 in the morning to go for the auspicious chanting of *Omkaram* and *Suprabhatam* in the *mandir*.

After the morning prayers, we headed to Poorna Chandra Auditorium, where Swami was scheduled to deliver a discourse. Seeing a blood-stained bandage, the volunteers seated me right in front of the stage. When Baba came out, He spoke to a foreign devotee and then came straight to me. I don't know what He said, but I replied with great emotion and desperation that my son was sick and that He should help him. Swami asked His question again, and I insisted on giving my answer, this time showing him the photo of my son. Baba replied, *"I know, I know."* And for the third time, He asked me the same question, which I simply did not understand. Juan Carlos told me in a low voice that Swami was asking which country I was from. Then, I answered, **"From Peru, Baba." He replied, "I am going to give you an interview." When they translated it, I became speechless with joy and cried like a child.**

He moved ahead and continued to give *darshan*. In the end, He returned to me and asked for the letters. Once again, I didn't understand anything Swami said. But when Juan Carlos translated it for me, I remembered the bag with the letters from devotees in Peru I had placed behind me against the wall. Despite my conviction that He is God, I was impressed that Baba knew about the letters, which I had not even mentioned to Juan! I promptly handed them to Him, and Baba lovingly accepted them.

My foot wound healed completely on the fourth day without leaving even the slightest scar. I did not take any rest because Baba might call me for an interview at any time, and I could not miss a single *darshan*. The only medicine I used was *vibhuti* once a day.

Twelve days later, we were blessed with two interviews on successive days! So many things happened in those two blissful sessions on December 4 and 5, 1979.

Face to Face with God

As the memorable interview started, Swami began by asking us, *"What do the doctors say?"* Without even waiting for an answer, He materialized a medallion with His image for my son, bestowing permanent protection. Telling us to never take it off, He said that Waltercito, my son, would be cured. **He also lovingly assured us that He would take care of everything and that He had always been with us.** Swami gave us packets of *vibhuti* and told us to give it to the child with some water, morning and night.

Then Baba pointed to Manuela, saying, *"She was praying to me."* He imitated Manuela's posture as she cried and prayed to a picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus while holding Waltercito in her arms. Manuela reacted sharply, "I did not pray to You; I prayed to Jesus." Baba lovingly replied, ***"Yes, but there is only one God, so I listened to you. I have always been with you. I have brought all of you here."*** After that, Baba made a circular motion with His palm and created *vibhuti*. Manuela thought that He was surely pulling it out from under his sleeve. Just as the thought occurred to her, Baba turned around, smiled at her, and pulled up His sleeves to show that nothing was hidden.

Luis Muñiz (President of the Sai Organization of Mexico) began to say to Baba, "Swami, in Peru..."

Baba interrupted him and said, *"Yes, yes, yes, in Peru, there are many devotees of Swami and there is no Sai Center."* He pointed to Manuela and me, and as a sign of blessing,

He told us, *"I bless you and authorize you to form the first Sai Center in Peru."* He gave instructions to Luis Muñiz to help us with all the necessary arrangements to start a center.

He then provided us with many packets of *vibhuti* as medicine for our little one, instructing him to take it with water every morning and evening. Walter Junior sincerely promised Swami that he would do everything He said. At the end of the interview, Manuela worriedly asked Swami what to do when the *vibhuti* runs out. Swami replied, *"Don't worry, you will never be lacking."*

Vibhuti Cascade and Interview Blessings

When Swami said we would never be lacking, we assumed He was referring to *vibhuti*. Later, **I realized that when Swami says we won't lack anything, He means anything!** We also thought that perhaps *vibhuti* would be sent to us through some devotees returning to Peru. But we knew no one from Peru who would be visiting India.

We got the answer in March 1980, when *vibhuti* began to pour out from two of the numerous photos of Swami covering practically all the walls of our house! It was with great joy that we communicated Baba's miracle to the devotees we knew. A month later, the miracle occurred again in the same photos. In fact, from one of them, *vibhuti* fell like rain to the ground! When Manuela put out her hand to catch the shower of *vibhuti*, not a speck fell on her! I tried to do the same, but the *vibhuti* eluded me, too. Our children Miguel, Carmen, and Oscar tried, with the same results. Finally, we had Waltercito put out his hand, and immediately, his hand was covered with the sacred *vibhuti*. The message was clear! It was meant for him.

On May 27, 1980, the first Sai Center in Peru was founded with 52 members. Around August or September, the *vibhuti* manifestation stopped. In November of that year, we traveled to India for the second time as delegates to the Third World Conference of Sai Organizations. During that visit, Swami blessed us with three interviews. In one of them, He called the three of us, Waltercito, Manuela, and I, to the private interview room and made us kneel in front of Him. **He lovingly taught us to chant the Gayatri mantra, line by line.** We felt in our hearts that Swami thus initiated us and accepted us as His devotees.

We visited Him again in 1982, and Swami blessed us again with interviews.

More *Vibhuti* Miracles

In 1986, Waltercito had been suffering from recurring painful episodes caused by his illness. Since Western medicine did not relieve his suffering, we took him to a Chinese doctor, a friend of ours, who, in addition to acupuncture and moxa, prescribed Chinese herbs and medicines. Even though he knew we were vegetarians, the Chinese doctor told our son to eat meat; otherwise, he could not continue treating him. Waltercito listened to him, but once the doctor left, our 10-year-old child began to cry. He pleaded that he would rather endure pain than eat meat, which Swami had strongly forbidden for true spiritual seekers. We respected his decision and did not take him back to the doctor.

A couple of days later, on March 14, 1986, *vibhuti* again started forming on one of Swami's pictures as a sign of Swami's approval of our son's decision.

That same afternoon, while we were singing *bhajans* before this picture, Waltercito began to shout from the bathroom, telling us that *vibhuti* was coming from a small painting hanging there. Again, on March 16, our other son Oscar began to shout excitedly, *"Vibhuti! Vibhuti!"* The holy ash was now flowing out from the picture of Christ.

This miracle had a special meaning for Manuela. My wife was always worried that her devotion to Baba was a spiritual betrayal of Christ. **With this miracle, the apparent duality ended, and she understood the unity of**

all religions, that all names and all forms belong to God. The *vibhuti* miracles continued. After a while, even *Amrith* or nectar began to ooze from the pictures. These were tangible experiences that we shared with other devotees. **But what cannot be shared are the inner feelings of devotion experienced by every devotee who witnessed the manifestation of Swami's omnipresence, omniscience, and omnipotence.**

Modern Day Christ

During our visit to Puttaparthi in 1988, Swami blessed us with three interviews. In one of the interviews, Baba, like Jesus Christ, made the lame walk! A man had entered the interview room in a wheelchair but walked out hand in hand with Baba. I opened my heart to Him and listed my concerns, mainly about Waltercito. **Swami said, *"Why do you worry so much when I am always with you? Be happy!"*** He then pulled Waltercito's cheek tenderly and said several times, *"Good boy. Good Boy."* He promised us that He would give him a permanent cure.

At the end of that interview, Manuela's camera had run out of film, and she couldn't click any more pictures. But before leaving, Baba said to her, *"Take a picture of Me,"* and sat in His chair. Manuela wondered, "Now, what am I going to do? I don't have any more film." She still stood up and took the photo. It was a miracle because the camera worked! When we left the interview, the camera didn't work again!

On June 30, 1989, Walter Jr.'s 14th birthday, *vibhuti* started coming from the full-length painting of Swami above his bed. After that, so much *Amrith* oozed out that we filled a few pots with it! We have recorded that event on video as well. It was clear that Swami was referring to something deeper when He promised a 'permanent cure' for Waltercito.

Swami's Special Love for Waltercito

In November 1990, I traveled to India with Waltercito, without Manuela.

In that interview, Baba took my son on His lap and asked him, *"What do you want, boy?"* Walter Jr. replied mentally, "I want liberation." He later told me that he did not say it out loud because he knew of my attachment to him. Baba began to make His usual hand movement, and Walter Jr. could see that a small white light was forming in a spiral in Baba's hand. That light became a second medal, very similar to the first one He materialized in 1979.

Baba told everyone at that interview that He was very happy because the devotees gathered around Him had been with Him when He came as Rama, Krishna, and Shirdi Sai. He blessed them and told them that they all would have a peaceful, peaceful, peaceful death as a reward.

Waltercito's Permanent Cure

By 1995, Waltercito's health got very bad. His spleen had grown very large from anemia. He lost a lot of weight and could barely walk. I was in a lot of grief and anguish because the slightest blow could end his life.

A doctor decided to do an embolization, but things went wrong. Waltercito developed sepsis and had to undergo emergency surgery. A pumpkin-sized spleen had to be removed. The pain became more acute and more frequent. Waltercito felt that all this resulted from not obeying Swami, who had told him a few years earlier not to have surgery. But in 2000, when he sought answers from Swami, Baba came into his dream and showed him the actions he had committed in a previous life that had generated *karma* to be settled in his present life.

Walter Junior left his body on October 2, 2004. He died peacefully, holding Baba's medallions in his little hands. He was supposed to travel to India on October 4 with his parents. **Before the body was taken to the crematorium, a *vibhuti* spot formed on his forehead. For us, it was confirmation that he was now free and happy by Baba's side.**

The loving memory we have of his cremation is a hall full of devotees singing *bhajans* with strength, devotion, and love that filled our hearts with joy. Even Walter Jr.'s university friends, who were not devotees, participated in the *bhajans*.

It is only apt that I conclude this article with excerpts from the letter that Waltercito had written which was read after the funeral. Listening to it, everyone wept that day.

Letter Written by Walter Bravo Jr.

"Dear brothers and sisters, and parents, and family,

Carmen communicated that I was diagnosed with autoimmune hepatitis. Now that cirrhosis has started, I have decided to write to all of you so that you can understand how things are with me.

First, understand that I am tranquil, even more so than before. Some time ago, I wanted verification that I could unite with God. But don't worry. Though it is true that I am physically tired because of anemia and the typical pain that accompanies my illness, I am happy. Carmen and the rest of the family see my expression of fatigue, which may be interpreted as suffering. But this is not the case. My body suffers, but as I tell Fran and Ciro, one should not pay much attention to it because the mind wants you to believe that you are the body. But the truth is that I am happy.

Second, it is difficult to understand Him. Even if this life that He has given me seems cruel and hard, **it is really the love of God that is manifesting under all circumstances.** I thank Him for making me remember this. Our family can remember His message, and it gives us hope. Even if living through this illness is difficult, He will not give more pain than one can bear. Regarding my own life, I have asked Him to give me these trials while I have the blessing to know Him and when it is easier to overcome them with His help.

A little while ago, I read that Baba says that if the separation is going to end, there should be no balance of *karma* and no pending illness. For me, it is good that more illness is occurring because this signifies that God is accelerating my *karma* to make my separation even shorter.

Third, dear parents, brothers, and sisters, you should know that this illness came when I was prepared to receive it. For many years, I have been preparing to bear severe pain and the unpleasant things I feared at one time, but I am now ready to receive them with happiness. It is wonderful to have known all of you, and this makes me happy, too. **My terminal illness makes me happy because when I think of death, it is something natural that must happen to everyone. It makes me think of God all the time**, and now I realize how much time I have wasted.

And finally, remember that Baba said I would get well and be completely normal (in the interview when I was a little boy). Hence, don't worry about something that will go away with the body. Baba is curing me of my ignorance, which will help others to believe in His grandeur and divinity. This is the reason for all to be happy.

Even if Baba does not cure my body, it is not that He is not truthful; it is because He speaks in divine terms. It is quite possible that the cure which He offered me is not for the body. If this is the case, there is reason to celebrate because it means He will cure me of my ignorance and that I will know my true Self.

I want to make it clear to all whom I am writing that I am not trying to imply that I am enlightened I have been able to discover my defects and my ego, which are still very much a part of me. I am still very attached to my family and my Sai family, too. One can say this is natural, but we must remember that this attachment comes from identification with the body. This love exists because we

believe them to be ours; that is, identification with their bodies and their minds. This is pure ignorance. So you can see that I still have a lot of adjustments to make before I can realize God.

But all these trials are appropriate for self-improvement. We can take what we learn in the books of Swami's teachings and apply these lessons to our lives and treasure these teachings in our hearts. Then, this knowledge becomes a blessing. **We must always return to the truth that we are not the body, the mind, or the intellect; rather, we are the *Atma*, the Self. The *Atma* does not die, change, or decline.**

In this way, we can always be happy despite what happens to our bodies. Use the body to practice non-attachment. I don't pray that Swami should cure me or improve my health. This is in Swami's hands. If you want to pray and want your prayer to be fruitful, pray that in the end, you will be closer to union with God than at the beginning.

In an interview, Baba said to me, *'Don't worry, be happy.'* What would you do if God ordered you to be happy? He doesn't ask you to do anything impossible. In other words, the strength to be happy is inside us, no matter what might happen. One must try to discover it. **The order from Swami was not just for me; it was for my father, who was in the interview, and all of you reading this.**

So always be happy, and let Baba bless you and protect you."

Walter Bravo, Jr.

My son's death left a huge void in my life, and I did not know what to do. I lashed out in anger against Swami. I told Manuela that she should not take Waltercito's ashes to India as he had desired.

But on October 4, 2004, two days after he died, the phone rang very early in the morning. It was Leonardo Gutter, a Sai brother close to the family, who called to tell us that in his meditation that day, Baba told him, *"Walter arrived well and arrived on time."* That statement filled me with comfort, and I came to my senses. I traveled to India with Walter Jr's ashes and visited Swami, who called me to Him. I wept and sought His forgiveness for reacting in a wrong way. Swami just smiled and lovingly blessed me.

Dr. Walter Bravo, Sr.
PERU

Dr. Walter Bravo, Sr. *was a practicing pediatrician in Peru. He was an ardent devotee of Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba, and under Swami's direction, he opened the first Sai Center in Peru in May 1980. On June 21, 2006, Dr. Bravo merged with Baba peacefully. He practiced his profession until the end and encouraged his medical colleagues to serve the needy in the remote and poorest villages. In the words of his children: "Our father was a wonderful father, friend, and devotee of God, who most importantly, gifted us with love for Swami. Today, even his grandchildren follow the spiritual path and actively participate in the Sai Organization of Peru."*

The Greatest Miracle of Sathya Sai Baba

My parents visited Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba in 1969, six years before I was born. They brought back many pictures of Swami to our home in Colombo, Sri Lanka, and one of them was placed in our shrine room, as well. We were an orthodox, traditional religious Hindu family that worshiped all deities and paid respects to all spiritual personages. My father was an industrialist who operated companies in Sri Lanka. Though my parents never visited Swami regularly, my uncle and aunt, who resided in Australia, used to visit Swami regularly and bring back the precious *Vibhuti Prasad* for us whenever they visited Prasanthi Nilayam. More importantly, my uncle brought home many stories of Swami's amazing miracles and His blessed teachings. From 1981-82, I remember being impressed and inspired by these narrations even as a six to seven-year-old child. I felt very much drawn to Swami and felt that I, too, must see Him someday.

The July That Destroyed My Faith

In July 1983, a drastic and terrible sequence of events unfolded, which left a very dark stain on the glorious history of Sri Lanka. Mob violence engulfed the city for almost two weeks.

Fortunately, at that time, my parents were in the United Kingdom (UK) for medical treatment for my mother and two-year-old sister. My brother and I were left behind in the care of our grandmother, who moved into our home from her daughter's. Thanks to my father's valuable contacts and influence, there were members of the majority community who 'protected' our home by staying with us and claiming that it was their residence. Thus, our 'safe' house became a refugee camp of sorts, housing more than 45 people who had been evicted from their homes due to the pogrom. Even then, I remember climbing over the backyard wall to sleep at night in a neighbor's home for safety. I often saw my grandmother crying because her elder daughter had gone missing after their home had been looted and destroyed. Eventually, we managed to locate the children at a refugee camp and brought them back to our home.

Though I was very young, these incidents made me question the very existence of God. How could there be a 'loving' and 'all-powerful' being for such things to happen under His/Her watch? Also, between 1983 and 1985, there was a great famine in Ethiopia, where millions of people died. That further fueled my atheistic stance in my early teens.

Soon, we were also brought to the UK for our safety and returned home after six months when it was considered safe.

The Atheist Reaches Puttaparthi

My parents' faith had not been affected, and they continued to visit temples religiously. I would go to the temple only to challenge the 'Gods.' Without knowing who I was talking to, I would speak silently to the idols.

"You obviously don't exist because terrible things are happening to so many people, and you are doing nothing about it. You can't do anything about it because you don't exist."

In 1989, a different kind of crisis gripped the country, affecting the southern part. This time, it was an armed revolt led by a communist group against the government. So, our father packed us off to India for a few weeks and later to Australia until things settled in Sri Lanka. My mom decided to travel to Puttaparthi, and we arrived late at night in Prasanthi Nilayam in December 1989.

Finding 'Prasanthi' Through Love And Service

We were assigned a shed to stay in, and we hadn't come prepared. We had no mattress to sleep on, and the lights were turned off at 9:00 PM, as per the ashram rules. A kind lady offered us some Christmas cake, which was our dinner, and we slept, covering ourselves with my mother's sarees.

The next morning, we got ready and went for *darshan*. And then everything changed!

There is no particular incident I recall but even now, I can feel the surging happiness I felt in just seeing Swami and being in His presence. **We would sit on the sands in an unbelievably peaceful atmosphere and enjoy hours of bliss seeing Swami and participating in *bhajans*. I never felt such joy and peace in my life before**–and all of this was despite our spartan accommodation and living conditions. Within a week, our material comforts also improved as we moved from the shed to a comfortable room in the 'Round Building.'

One day, I met an elderly blind person who asked me the route to go back to his shed. I helped him all the way to his accommodation. I felt light, happy, and peaceful doing that. My cousin, who had come to Puttaparthi from Australia at that time, noticed me doing this and said, **"You did good *seva* (service)." That was the first time I heard the word '*seva*.' The feeling that arose in me was so wonderful that I decided to indulge in it more and more**. My brother would go off to the Hill View stadium to volunteer, where the grounds were being cleared, leveled, and greened. I, too, began to look out for opportunities to do *seva*. As a spontaneous outpouring of the peace and joy I was feeling within, I took a vow to never touch non-vegetarian food again in my life! I did not tell my parents, but they noticed it and even mentioned in their conversations: "He visited India to see Swami, and after that, he seems to have lost taste for non-vegetarian food completely."

I also began to always carry a photograph of Swami with me, along with two *vibhuti* packets that my uncle had given me. I don't know whether I accepted Swami as God, but my heart opened up to the reality that there is something in the universe beyond the mind and there is much more to life than the material world I see.

The Impact of the Company We Keep

I was sent to the UK for my University education. I was all alone there and did fairly well in the first year. In the second year, peer pressure and pleasure-seeking caused me to begin drinking. I irregularly attended classes and missed many assignments. In a couple of subjects, I failed the regular assessments and had to rely on doing well in the examinations to even pass. In short, I went completely astray in my second year.

Two weeks before my scheduled examinations, I developed severe abdominal pain that simply refused to subside. After a couple of days, I met a doctor who admonished me for being careless about my body and prescribed some medicines to be taken twice a day. Unfortunately, I don't recall what the diagnosis was. What I remember clearly

is that the side effect of the medicine was extreme drowsiness that always put me to sleep! That was something I could not afford to do with my examinations staring me in the face. With barely a week left before the exams, I decided to stop taking the medication. Within hours, I was in bed rolling with excruciating pain.

A Desperate Plea and the Immediate Response

The only way I could bear the pain was by eating something milk-based and drinking milk. But the relief would last barely four hours, and the excruciating pain would return. I could not study or sleep, however if I took the medication, I would be drowsy and fall asleep! Stuck between the devil and the deep sea, I was at my wit's end. That is when my eyes fell on Swami's picture and the two *vibhuti* packets. I recalled all the stories I had heard about the power of *vibhuti*.

With a sincere prayer, I said to Swami, "I have not been the best in behavior. But I need Your help. I vow that I will come visit You if you help me now." **I emptied a packet of *vibhuti* into a glass of water and drank it. The relief was immediate!** I quickly went to bed, hoping to get some sleep before the pain returned in a few hours. When I woke up, it was nearly 7 AM! I touched my stomach gingerly, and there was no pain! I was stunned that I had slept through the night after nearly 10 days.

I went straight to Swami's picture and said, "Swami, during the coming holidays, I shall surely come and see You. Thank you so much!"

How I Found My God

I completed my examinations and barely passed that year, but that was still a reason to celebrate the 'victory' with my friends. After returning to Sri Lanka, as per my promise, I traveled with my mother to Puttaparthi via Chennai to see Swami. I had several *darshans* in Prasanthi Nilayam, and nothing much happened.

One day, as I sat for *darshan*, I mentally said, "Swami, I came here seeking You, but You are not even looking at me. I need You to at least look at me." When Swami came for *darshan*, I hoped that He would answer my prayer. But I was disappointed again as He simply passed by me.

"SWAMI!"I screamed mentally, "I need You to look at me." It was as if He heard me because He simply stopped, turned around, and looked me in the eyes!

That was a life-changing look!

What shall I say? I cannot even begin to comprehend or explain all the things that happened within me. **There was so much love and divinity pouring out of His eyes and flooding my entire being. Every single part of my body was shivering, and tears began flowing uncontrollably from my eyes.** I could not comprehend what was happening but could experience every bit of it. Even now, as I think of that experience, I get 'goosebumps', and a warm feeling floods my heart.

I don't remember anything else about that session that day. I kept reliving that moment over and over again - a hundred times! After that session, I found picture postcards in a shop. **I bought a dozen of them and wrote to all my friends telling them that I had found my *raison d'etre* (reason for existence), that I had found my God!**

Swami's Greatest Miracle is the Transformation of the Heart

The following year, when I returned to the UK, I was completely changed. I gave up all my bad habits and swore never to indulge in wine, non-vegetarian food, and more. My outlook toward life changed dramatically from being extremely negative to highly positive. I also began spending my time reading a lot of literature by Swami and about

Swami. I quickly changed my company and dropped all bad habits. Needless to say, my academics improved a lot.

Spiritual practices became (and have remained) an important part of my life. It was my best year in college, and I returned to my motherland, Sri Lanka, in 1997 to serve her. Before embarking on my professional journey, I traveled again to Swami to express my gratitude. **Not only did I have the most beautiful *darshans* during that visit, but I was also blessed with the first-ever *padanamaskar* (touching Swami's feet) of my life. I felt so complete!**

And even to this day, I feel so blessed and complete!

Mr. Haridarshan Sathiamoorthy
SRI LANKA

Mr. Haridarshan Sathiamoorthy *came to Swami at a very early age. He served in various capacities in the Sri Sathya Sai International Organization of Sri Lanka from 2000 at the center, regional, and national levels. He serves as the National Council President of the SSSIO of Sri Lanka. He is a successful Industrialist and also serves on the board of directors of several public and private companies.*

Repetition of God's Name

Some time ago, I found myself facing what seemed to be an impossible dilemma. Both choices open to me were equally repugnant. Not only were they disastrous for my finances and my relationships, but both were contradictory to the teachings of Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba, whom I wholeheartedly embraced as my preceptor. There seemed to be no way to avoid acting on one of the choices, yet both seemed so wrong that I found myself indecisive. For several days and nights, my mind ruminated on the alternatives and the various possible outcomes of either choice.

Then, I became increasingly agitated. Finally, in great distress and emotionally, I prayed to Baba to clearly guide me on the proper action. The desire to be free of the problem and the unhappiness I felt was so great that it mattered little which way I chose as long as I had done the best I could under the circumstances.

One evening, I repeatedly asked Baba for an answer until I fell asleep. I woke up in the morning with the same old dilemma, and pleaded aloud, "Oh, please, Baba, please tell me what to do." **The thought that came to me vividly at that moment was completely unexpected. It was, "Just repeat the Name."** I sat down in disbelief and continued speaking aloud to Baba, retorting vehemently, "That's no answer!"

I waited expectantly, hoping for a solution that was a little more down-to-earth. "After all," I reasoned, "I could repeat the name of God nonstop for twenty-four hours, or even twenty-four days, and even then, I would still be faced with this problem." But no further direction came. Somewhat resigned that I must proceed without Baba's intervention, I thought, "Oh, well, if I do as instructed, at least I can postpone taking action for a little longer." So, I began to repeat the name I love, "Sathya Sai, Sathya Sai...." All day, I kept on repeating His name. **When my mind kept recalling the problem, I responded by repeating Swami's name out loud for a while. When bedtime arrived, I fell asleep easily and the beloved name echoed peacefully in my dreams.**

On waking up the following morning, I was still repeating the name, but, at another level, I looked inward for an answer to my predicament. My mind began to search for the two alternatives it was trying to decide between, and a feeling of strangeness overcame me. There was no change in external circumstances, yet all sense of urgency left me. From a firm conviction that I must decide and act immediately, I now felt there was no need for me to do anything. As I repeated His name throughout that day, the problem did surface a few times in my mind, but instead of becoming fearsome, it now seemed more like a dream that had come to pass.

In a very short time, even the memory of the dream disappeared. No decision was made, no action was taken, and no miraculous solution appeared. Yet, the problem simply dissolved miraculously, and I cannot even recall it now!

When this article began to take form, I petitioned Baba again for His help. "Where did

the problem go?" I asked. Waiting quietly this time, my expectant heart received a gentle response, **"When you removed the problem from the mind, you eliminated it from the only place that it existed."**

I recalled several discussions that I was privileged to have with Baba in His interview room at Prasanthi Nilayam. During one interview, I asked for His help with a relationship. I had been estranged from my only son due to a philosophical difference, and there was nothing I could do about it. Baba expressed compassion and told me, *"Put all your attention on your Center activities."* After two years, during which I served as president of a Sri Sathya Sai Center, focusing on the Center's activities, a letter arrived from my son affirming his love for me and stating that he felt that the bond between us could never be broken. The letter arrived on the last day of my term of office and came as a complete surprise since I did nothing to bring it about. **Nothing, that is, except remove attention from the pain of separation and place it on our oneness with Baba.** The memory of those gentle words comes to mind again: "When you removed the problem from the mind, you eliminated it from the only place that it existed."

Continuing to recall conversations with Baba, I remembered asking Him what to do about my chronic health condition. **He smiled lovingly and answered, "*Forget it!*"** This was certainly not the answer I had expected or one I could easily understand. The physical condition certainly was not imaginary. It could be weighed and measured. It had persisted for over fifty years. It caused emotional and physical pain. It inhibited movement. It affected almost everything I had to do. How could I possibly forget it?

Repetition of the name *(japa)* had been effective when dealing with financial and relationship problems, but it could not possibly mitigate a physical problem of these proportions. Actually, instead of forgetting the problem, I almost forgot the advice until recently I happened to see a television interview with Herbert Benson, M.D., Associate Professor of Medicine at Boston's Beth Israel Hospital, Harvard Medical School, and Director of the hospital's Division of Behavioral Medicine and Hypertension Section. Dr. Benson has authored two successful books, *The Relaxation Response* and *Mind/Body Effect*, outlining the benefits to the body of stress reduction through meditation. In this interview, however, he said that he had recently discovered a remarkable new technique which, when combined with meditation, measurably and dramatically improves health. "This technique," he said in the interview, "is the repetition of the name of God--whatever name you love." He went on to say that he had, under carefully controlled conditions, documented the strengthening of the healing effect when the "Faith Factor" (repetition of the name) was added to the "Relaxation Response" (meditation) and that it did not matter which name of God was used as long as it was one in which the person had faith. I recalled the numerous occasions on which Baba had said, "Call Me by any name; all names are Mine."

Dr. Benson has now written a new book, *Beyond the Relaxation Response*, published by Times Books, in **which he relates how he came to recognize the benefits of repeating God's name, or a meaningful prayer, and the results that have been witnessed when this "new technique" is added to standard meditation.** He outlines the resultant sequence of events which he has observed in his practice as follows:

- There is less concern about the symptoms or the illness; in other words, the anxiety cycle is broken.
- The symptoms become less severe.
- The symptoms are present less of the time, and short periods of complete relief are noted.
- The periods of relief become longer.

- The symptoms are completely gone or remain in a fashion that no longer interferes with everyday activities. In fact, I have found that many patients have difficulty remembering their original symptoms.

"The time duration for a person to experience these full benefits is quite variable. For some, it can be as short as one to two weeks. For others, up to a year is required. Most people can expect improvement to occur in approximately four to six weeks."

Repetition of the name erases the thought of the symptoms from the mind, and when they no longer exist in the mind, they no longer persist in the body. Baba's instruction to "Forget it!" was His instruction to me, and His advice to someone else might be different. Nevertheless, those words could have meaning for others as they follow His injunction to repeat the name of God. Baba has promised that all illusions will be dispelled and that His mission will be accomplished. A Course in Miracles echoes this promise by urging students to "Repeat God's Name, and all the world responds by laying down illusions."

Now, in addition to repeating the name, I have a little daydream in which I indulge frequently. I imagine myself saying, "You know, I used to live in some sort of form which took me from place to place. I needed it almost all the time. As a matter of fact, there was virtually nothing that I could do without it. It seemed paramount to my existence then, but now I can't remember what it was."

Ms. Joy Thomas
USA

Ms. Joy Thomas *and her husband, Mr. Raye Thomas, ventured to India in 1983 in search of a living Master. Their search led them to Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba, and they were blessed with many miracles. Ms. Thomas is best known for her series of 5 books based on the lines in a popular quote by Swami, "Life is a Game, Play it. Life is a Challenge, Meet it. Life is a Dream, Realize it. Life is Love, Enjoy it." In addition, she wrote two more books entitled Life is Awareness and Life is a Journey from the Self to the Self. She served the Sathya Sai Organization sincerely and was the President of the Cherry Valley Sathya Sai Center in Southern California. She remained deeply committed to the teachings of Sathya Sai Baba till her demise on April 17, 1999.*

The Search for Sai

My great adventure started in 1940 when I was born in Bangkok, Thailand, at the beginning of the Second World War. My parents' home at that time was in a military area surrounded by military barracks and supply depots. Japanese soldiers soon occupied the country. The Allies were bombing the military installations, and the area surrounding our house was among the main targets. My mother related to me that one day, someone dressed in a yellow-orange robe like a Buddhist monk came and knocked on the door of our house. My mother did not know who this person was. **The monk then gave a packet of fine sand and instructed her to spread the sand over the roof. He said that the house would then be safe from bombing.** My mother did as instructed, but when she came back to thank the monk, he was gone. Only a few days later, there was a heavy bombardment of the area, which destroyed all the buildings around us. But our house remained unscathed!

When I narrated this incident decades later, during the Summer Course in Brindavan (1990), **Swami said to a few devotees sitting around Him that He gave *vibhuti*, and not sand, to my mother!**

My Eternal Companion

So, it was only by Bhagawan's grace that I survived the war. In my young days, I became very naughty and was also a good boxer. Having learned Thai boxing, I was able to compete and, on occasion, beat my school friends. Soon, I also became a champion boxer in the boxing ring. By then, I was transformed by His grace!

When I was a 15-year-old boy studying in an English public school, I woke up in the middle of the night in my dormitory, where many boys were also sleeping. I heard a resounding voice, "Art-Ong, Art-Ong, Art-Ong–why are you doing this?" There was also a bright light shining everywhere. I became very frightened as I thought that it was a ghost. This was repeated the next night and the night after that. Slowly, my fear transformed into introspection. I realized that it was my conscience, God within me, correcting me. I became determined to change my life. I took up meditation and started to study the holy scriptures. I read about the Gurus of India and prayed that I may meet my Guru. I prayed and lamented, asking God why I was not born at the time of Lord Buddha or Jesus.

Finally, in my dreams, **I received the answer from an unknown saint dressed in a white robe sitting under a big tree. He told me to be patient and that I would soon meet my Guru.** However, I was restless and continued the search by studying the teachings of Paramahamsa Yogananda, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, and Swami Vivekananda, as well as by meeting leaders of various religious organizations in England at that time.

Despite my sincere efforts, there was always something that kept eluding me. I was not satisfied, and the search continued. After completing my studies in England, I returned to Thailand and worked professionally as an educator, a scientist, an engineer, and finally, a businessman. There were

many ups and downs in my life's journey, but somehow, **I felt a strong, invisible hand guiding and saving me whenever I was about to fall.** Thus, 42 years of my life passed away.

When I went to Sai...

One day, in 1982, a friend asked me if I would like to go and see Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba. I had heard about the miracle man called Sai Baba. So, I thought that if He was so great, He should call me. As the thought entered my mind, a strange thing happened. I felt a strong surge of energy enter my body, so I shivered and shook. Tears rolled down from my eyes, and I started to cry with joy for no apparent reason. I surmised that this was His call! So, I decided to join my friend and go and see Bhagawan immediately.

We traveled from Thailand together as a group of five, including my mother. We finally arrived in Puttaparthi on November 21, 1982. There was a crowd of about 250,000 people as it was the time of Swami's Birthday celebrations. We joined the crowd. Then, a figure dressed in an orange robe appeared at a distance and started walking toward us. **My body was shivering and shaking again, and I was in tears. It was the very same experience as the call from Him! I was full of joy because I knew then and there that this was the moment I had been waiting for all my life.** I knew this was verily the Guru that I had been searching for.

The search ended, but the great adventure had only just begun!

Dr. Art-Ong Jumsai
THAILAND

Dr. Art-Ong Jumsai *has been a devotee of Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba for over four decades. He obtained his M.A. in Mechanical Sciences from Cambridge University and D.I.C. and Ph.D. in Communications from London University in the U.K. He also holds a Ph.D. in Education from Chulalongkorn University, Thailand. He has been elected three times as a Member of Parliament and was a Member of the House of Senate. Dr. Jumsai has received royal decorations and distinguished awards in Thailand as a scientist, philosopher, and teacher. He has authored several books on human values. He is the Director of the Institute of Sathya Sai Education and the C.E.O. of the Sri Sathya Sai School in Thailand.*

Understanding Swami's Omniscience

I am always aware of the future, the past, as well as the present of every one of you. So, I am not moved so much by pity. Not that I am hard-hearted, or that I have no daya (compassion)... Since I know the past and the background, My reaction is different. If only you knew, you too will react differently.

Sri Sathya Sai Baba
November 26, 1964

All spiritual journeys have a beginning. I would like to think that mine began the first time I saw Swami, Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba. It was during Christmas 1979. My wife, my two-year-old son, Aaron, and I traveled to see Swami. We were new to the scene, and my knowledge of Swami was limited to what I learned from reading the book *Sai Baba: Man of Miracles* by Howard Murphet. I was very anxious to see Swami because, after reading the book, I felt that He was God incarnate. But there was nothing like seeing Him to get convinced of that. We arrived in Bangalore (Bengaluru today) from Atlanta, Georgia, USA, and found that Swami was stationed at Brindavan, Whitefield. So, we went to the Brindavan *ashram* and were seated in the *darshan* lines. Back in those days, there was a distance between Swami's residence and the tree under which *darshan* and *bhajans* were held. As Swami was walking toward us, I saw a glow of light around him. He was lit up so brilliantly that the sight touched me somewhere deep inside. **I knew instinctively that very moment that He was God**. **There was no doubt in my mind, and I was firmly convinced**. That was the beginning of my spiritual journey, my search.

First Experience of Omniscience

One of the first significant incidents that happened to me after this experience was when I attended a discourse that Swami delivered. Though I do not recollect the details of the discourse, the experience was transformative and revealed another facet of His divinity.

My wife suddenly became ill with dysentery. I had purchased some *vibhuti* from the *ashram,* and I wanted to get it blessed by Swami to make her better. So, in the evening, I took it with me to the venue where Swami would give the discourse. We had been going for *darshan* for many days, and I was used to seeing hundreds of people in the venue. But when I arrived, thousands and thousands of people had gathered for the discourse. I could not believe how many people were there! Luckily, the Westerners had separate seating, and therefore, I sat in a relatively prominent place. I saw Swami on stage and heard the discourse. After the discourse, as Swami exited the venue, He came toward where we were seated. I was so enamored by His presence that I forgot about the *vibhuti* that I brought for His

blessings. Swami passed by me and moved away from me, passing about eight or nine people. That was when I suddenly remembered the *vibhuti* and, in my mind, cried out, "Swami, *vibhuti!*" That very instant, Swami stopped. He turned around and made a beeline back to me. With His right hand, He lovingly blessed the *vibhuti*, turned back, and continued to walk. I was stunned and started wondering how Swami could hear or know what I was thinking among the masses of humanity. **Obviously, His omniscience was still new to me at that time! This experience did a lot to reinforce my faith in Him**.

The Second Experience of Omniscience (and Omnipotence)

After my first trip, I constantly thought about Swami. I wanted to see Him again. Since I was in real estate, I had the freedom to leave my business, travel, and pick up work again when I returned. So, I was back in India barely four months after my first visit. This time, my two-year-old son, Aaron, went with me, but not my wife. Just before we left, the last thing my wife told me was, "Be careful, and watch that Aaron doesn't get sick!"

Being the sole parent on the trip, I was very careful with what he ate for the first five weeks of the trip. When the last week arrived, I became a little lax, and I agreed to his wish to try some street food in Bangalore. I let him have cotton candy and some other stuff that he liked. As you might have already surmised, he became ill. And his situation worsened pretty quickly. With my medical background, I knew that it was something far worse than dysentery. Since Aaron was extremely sensitive to medications, I was wary of taking him to a doctor who would prescribe strong medicines, the drugs of choice in those days, that could affect his liver or kidney. However, over the next few days, the situation worsened, and I felt that it had become life-threatening.

There was mucus and blood in his stool, which was very watery, too. I was very concerned. But, I had absolute and complete faith in Swami. So, whenever it was possible to take Aaron for *darshan*, we went, and I hoped for a cure from the Lord. Swami did not do anything about it. So, it became a struggle between me as a father and me as a devotee!

It was the day of the last possible *darshan* before I had to take him to a hospital. With great concern and a feeling of utter helplessness, I went for *darshan*. I had faith that Swami would somehow do something about the situation. I was sitting in the front row, but Aaron had to run to the washroom very frequently. The bloody mucus discharge continued. It was awful.

When Swami came for *darshan*, He came toward where I was seated. He was gazing at me, and I fell on my knees and said, "Swami, my son is very, very ill. Will you please help?" His response was to push against us and speak to some Italian devotees who were seated behind us! I was holding Aaron in my arms, and Swami was pushing us back into the crowd, literally!

"*When did you come? How many of you*?" Swami asked the Italians seated behind us. I was thinking, here is Swami, chatting with the Italians when I was having a life-and-death situation in my family. He looked at me again, and I repeated, "Swami, my son is very, very ill. Will you please help?" He simply turned and walked away, and I thought, "Well, here we go with the drama!" I knew I had to go to the hospital now. Out of respect, I waited for Swami to get back to His residence. At that time, Aaron had to use the toilet again. I took him to the toilet, and wonder of wonders! He had a perfectly normal bowel movement! After that, he came out and started running about, playing as if he had never been sick!

Swami Always Does Everything for the Highest Good

It goes without saying that I was elated–both as a father and a devotee! I was overjoyed with how Swami took care of the situation.

Whatever I do is for your own good, not for Me. In fact, even the food I partake is for you only. The water I drink is for you. Thus, all the activities I undertake are for your good only. Those who realize this truth will be benefited. Their lives will be sanctified.

Sri Sathya Sai Baba
February 16, 2007

I understood that Swami's omniscience is not just about Him knowing everything but also knowing how to respond, whom to respond to, where to respond, and when to respond because He is aware of the past, present, and future.

Mr. Cosby Powell
USA

Mr. Cosby Powell *is a graduate of the University of Georgia School of Pharmacy in the USA. He practiced pharmacy for several years before working in real estate development. He came to know of Swami in 1974 after seeing a film about Him by Richard Bock. Mr. Powell first visited Swami in 1979 and returned 14 times to see Him from 1979 to 1991. Between 1981 and 1991, Mr. Powell took many pictures and videos of Swami, resulting in 8 videos on Swami and His teachings, available on YouTube and bookstores.*

Mr. Powell was fortunate to have many interactions with Swami through the years, including interviews and personal interactions.

Where is Sathya Sai Baba Now?

One day, I was in a department store, coming down the escalator, when it suddenly stopped. I fell face-down and injured my nose. Blood started flowing down my nose and stained my clothes. As I was in this difficult situation, out of nowhere, a young woman appeared. She was dressed in plain brown attire and advised me to hold my nose in a particular way to help stop the bleeding. She said, "Your nose is broken in three places. Just hold it like this until you reach the hospital." I thanked her, and she left. I reached the hospital and got first aid immediately. After a day of waiting, they finally X-rayed my head and said, "Your nose is broken in three places." Now, I wonder who could diagnose what had happened to my nose better and faster than an X-ray machine with no equipment whatsoever!

I firmly believe it was none other than Baba!

We have to remember that God can do anything. He can take any form He chooses. He has come to my aid in many ways, just like that over the years. I have had many different experiences where He has revealed who and what He is. It can be any form–He can be the stars; He can be the person next to you. He's unlimited, and we try to limit Him with our minds only because we don't know any better. **But when we find Him in our heart, then we experience unlimited love, and that is what He is to me, pure love.** But this understanding has taken time to dawn. It has arrived as a culmination of a beautiful journey.

Beginnings in the Church

I think I went regularly to Church even before I was born! As a child, missing Sunday school was not an option. Rain, snow, sleet, and storms could not stop me. Every Sunday, I was there and knew that there was a loving, protective power present. We called Him Jesus at that time. Though I was raised as a Protestant Christian, the concept of Jesus that we learned, in my opinion, was not complete. It was lacking in depth and missing His universal love, compassion, and forgiveness.

As I sat quietly and searched inward, I realized that there had to be more. I somehow always felt that we are all connected in some unique way, shape, and form. As I searched for the basis of that feeling, I, too, had the usual questions that many young people have, like "Why is there suffering? Why is there hurt and harm?" I think that is what led me to Eastern philosophies and the study of the incomprehensible law of *karma*.

The Search and Discovery

We were a small group of spiritual seekers in Brooklyn, New York, who started sincerely seeking God. We were explorers of philosophies. That was when two of our members in that group returned from India with amazing stories. They had met a 'miracle man,' and they shared their

profound experiences. As a group, we knew by then that God could be in any form, anywhere. We just had to find Him someplace on the earth. I thought, "Oh! Could this really be possible? Could Jesus have come back?"

It was divine will and providence that I laid my hands on a copy of Howard Murphet's classic book, *Sai Baba: Man of Miracles*. While reading it, an amazing miracle occurred. **I saw a little Baba and a little Jesus! Right on the book! They graciously merged into one.** It was then that I knew for sure that we were on the right track.

About that time, many more people in California came back from India with stories of a holy man who could do all kinds of things, from making sacred talismans like rings, pendants, and idols of God to raising the dead! **But what impressed me most was that He transformed the heart and did not ask for money.** I think that was one of the key distinctions, and it caught our attention. Here was a person who was giving unconditional love like Jesus did, free, at no charge!

Sai Alone Suffices

It was love at first sight when I saw Swami, and soon, we visited Swami whenever we could. In the early 1970s, when the Poornachandra Auditorium was being built, Swami taught me a profound lesson. While visiting Swami, we got the opportunity to participate in the construction of the hall. Dr. Hislop oversaw the work of the group of devotees from the USA.

That was a time when a lot of different gurus were visiting the United States, and we would visit them and attend the spiritual meetings they held. We got to know of one such guru coming to the USA after New Year's Day. I began conversing about this with Reverend Mary. Reverend Mary and her husband had come with us the first time that we went to India. But afterward, only Mary would come with our small group. Even as we were discussing this topic, suddenly, a hush fell around us. There was pin-drop silence, but at that time, the topic was so important that we leaned toward each other and continued talking in whispers!

Just as we turned around, Swami was right there! He was standing near us, resplendent in all His beauty, wearing a bright orange robe. As we focused our entire attention on Him, **He looked into our eyes and said, *"I am enough for you."*** Then, He left us and proceeded to walk over to the Australian group. Mary and I looked at each other and said," I guess that's the answer!"

See Him in All, All in Him

I held a high position at work, and unconsciously, it led to a sense of self-importance. That expressed itself in making my clients wait for me to show that I was important. When people would come in for appointments, I wouldn't see them right away; I would make them wait.

The next time I was in Prasanthi Nilayam, when we were standing outside, Swami told us to come in that morning. When we reached there on time, we were kept standing and waiting. We waited and waited for quite some time, wondering why Swami was not calling us in. After a long wait, a *sevadal* (volunteer) came and asked, "Did Swami call you?" I said, "Yes, He did!" He rushed back, and finally, Swami came to the door and called us inside. I had learned my lesson.

After that, when I got home, nobody had to wait for me anymore. If they had an appointment, I was available right away. It was another among many lessons He lovingly taught me. No reprimand, no stern action! Just by example. That is His grace for all of us!

Sathya Sai's Address Today

The last time we visited India after *Mahasamadhi*, He was kind enough to give us an experience of His omnipresence. I don't know how to describe it, but suddenly, we saw that He was in our hearts, in the trees, in the buildings, in everything around us, above us, below us, and within us. And at that moment, after knowing Him for over forty years, I finally realized what He had been telling us all along–***find Me in your heart, find Me in your heart.***

Where is Swami right now? Right at this moment, **Swami is everywhere, including my heart and yours**. Lord Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gita that He resides in the hearts of all beings *(ishvara sarvabhutanam hriddese arjuna tishthati)*. We can experience Him everywhere. There's not a time when we don't, and there is no place where He is not, no matter what the situation.

Ms. Anne Sohani
USA

Ms. Anne Sohani *first met Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba in 1973 in Whitefield. He allowed her group to follow Him to Puttaparthi a few days later. Swami permitted them to start the Brooklyn Sai Center that year. She was appointed to the American Council of the Sri Sathya Sai International Organization when the Council was formed in 1975. She served on the Council from 1975–1995. Anne held numerous SSSIO positions over the years, including serving as the first Regional President of the Mid-Atlantic Region of the SSSIO-USA. She was an SSE teacher at the Brooklyn Sai Center from 1987 to 2003. Her husband Bisu and she were blessed to stay with Swami six months a year during 2005-2010. She merged with Swami on November 15, 2019.*

Seek and You Shall Find

Until I met Sai Baba in 1984, my life had been confused–a situation I shared with many after the protests of 1968 against the establishment. My family was not particularly religious. My paternal grandmother attended church, but we never discussed spiritual matters or faith at home. So, I missed this dimension without being aware of it.

Thus, I had no strong religious affiliations during my childhood or adolescence. All my life, I had been looking for something. I did not know what it was. One day, I was attracted to the Church of Scientology. I also went to a session on transcendental meditation and paid 500 Danish Crowns (roughly 75 USD) for a mantra, but I felt nothing afterward.

The Discovery and First Experience of Sai Baba

One year, I was going on a winter vacation to the beautiful Canary Islands, which I had visited many times. Before leaving, I went to *Strubes Bookstore* and asked Mrs. Strube whether she could recommend some books to read during my vacation. She showed me a book about Sai Baba. My reaction was, "No thanks! India and gurus–that is not my cup of tea." I thought India was a dirty, poor country very far away, and gurus were money–grabbers whose only intention was to cheat others, an ill-informed notion held by many. I once saw a guru who visited Denmark and sat on a throne. People gave him money, and I felt that it was all wrong. It did not appeal to me. I bought two other books and then impulsively said, "Give me that book too." The book that Mrs. Strube had recommended was *Sai Baba Avatar* by Howard Murphet. I took it with me on my vacation. **The weather was wonderful, and I lay on the beach and read it from cover to cover in just one day. Every time I turned a page, it was as if I recognized something appealing. I had come home!**

I felt that everything I could not understand by using my brain was now becoming clear, and I knew instinctively, or somewhere in my subconsciousness or soul, that what I read was true. Instinctively, I knew that Sai Baba was true. I knew that what He stood for was true. Of course, He could perform miracles; otherwise, He would not be who He said He was. **But the words He spoke, the philosophy He espoused, and the spirituality of His speeches enthralled me. It imbued me with the realization that divinity had descended on Earth and that this divinity was Sathya Sai Baba.**

This naturally had a strong impact on me. The same evening, I went to the beach and thought about the miracle I had just experienced when suddenly Baba spoke to me telepathically! I did not see Him but recognized Him as He spoke to me. I asked Him questions, which He answered. The essence of our conversation was that Baba said that our Earth is one giant organism that breathes in and out–just like our lungs. He told me that the universe also breathes. It was not something I knew then, but I read later that scientific theory affirms the universe expands and contracts–

as if it breathes! Baba went on to say that the Earth exhales into the universe. The Earth is part of the whole, an integral unit. Baba said the breath of the Earth is so polluted that it has a detrimental impact on the universe, and this must be changed. I, Steen–like many others–would participate in this work.

It was a vision, a revelation. It was a powerful experience for an ordinary human being like me. But that was how it was. I never doubted for a second that the experience was real and that I had talked with Sathya Sai Baba.

Back in Denmark, I called Mrs. Strube to get the address of the Sai Baba Center in Copenhagen. I visited it one day to get Baba's address in India. I came too late for a meeting that had just ended; however, two people were still there. I told them my story and asked whether they wanted a ride, as I had my car outside. They declined my offer. One of them was a lady who later told me that someone like me, who had had so many supernatural experiences, was too far out. It was, in fact, so far out that she did not even want to have a ride!

The Hidden Reality

It was 1984, and I was on my way to India. I happened to travel with a woman whom Baba healed from cancer while our group was there. Later, she presented an account of her healing in a program on Danish national TV called *'The Hidden Reality.'* During her stay in the *ashram*, the lady, who suffered from a terminal illness, said that one night, a liquid flowed out of her nose. **When she returned to Denmark and was examined, there was no sign of cancer.**

Staying at the ashram was a fantastic experience for me. From the moment I stepped inside the gate, I felt very much at home. I knew that everything was as it should be. It was as if I recognized the power, energy, and spirituality in the air at Prasanthi Nilayam. It is a powerful energy, and I knew it to be true. The first two weeks felt like I was in heaven–almost floating. I was home. I do not think I have ever been so happy in my entire life. However, when I returned home, I was convinced that I would never go back to Prasanth Nilayam because I had experienced such pain at the end of my stay.

We all probably feel pain from experiences during our childhood and adolescence. I experienced much pain, which Baba made me focus on. **Looking back, I can see that it was to help me deal with pain later on so that I could be at peace with myself, which I certainly was not able to do at that time. The spiritual part of me, the love aspect that we all have, was given such a boost that it influenced me greatly and has grown ever since.**

I was again on a plane heading for India four months later. This time, Sai Baba called me in for an interview, along with a few others. I was sitting less than a foot away from Him, so close that I could touch His hand, which I did. While speaking to those present, Baba materialized *vibhuti* for the ladies and several rings. Approximately 20 minutes into the interview, He turned and, looking at me, asked, *"Where is your wife?"* I said with a wry smile that I was not married. Then Baba gave me a serious look and said, *"Too much of one thing, too much of another,"* and mentioned specifically what He referred to. *"Why don't you get married, have a wife, and have a family?"* I giggled. That thought wasn't on my mind at all. I was 38 years old and had never imagined getting married, but the moment Baba mentioned it, I knew it would become a reality.

I returned to Denmark and again met the girl at the center who refused to travel with me in the car! This girl was Inge. We became friends and started seeing each other. I knew she was the one; there was no doubt in my mind. I asked her one evening if she would marry me, and she said, "Yes! When will we get married?" I replied, "In a fortnight."

We got married, and our honeymoon was, of course, a trip to see Baba. We traveled with about 20 Danes, headed by Thorbjorn Meyer, an ardent devotee of Sai Baba. At the *ashram*, we were called for an interview. Sai Baba smiled and asked Inge, *"How are you, Sir?"* Sai Baba often addresses women as Sir, perhaps because He sees the human being, not the gender. Thorbjorn Meyer responded, saying that Inge had just got married. Baba turned around 90 degrees and said, *"I know."*

Then, looking directly at Inge, He said, *"Don't fight with him,"* and pointed at me. I can say that the marriage that Baba 'arranged' for me is consistent with my free will, if free will exists. And while I think there is only God's free will, it has been the best thing that has happened to me. I have the world's loveliest wife and cannot thank Baba enough for the blessing–and Inge never fights with me! Thank God for that!

Practicing His Teachings Instead of Preaching

Baba says that we should not proselytize. We should not tell people about Him but, instead, be an exemplar of His teachings–which I certainly was not when I returned from my first visit to Prasanthi Nilayam. I used to be quite wild. I said what was on my mind. **After my first visit to Baba, I started saying, "God is amongst us; He lives in India, and His name is Sai Baba." I thought the whole world should know.** I'll never forget the resistance I experienced. People looked at me as if I was crazy. I may have been half crazy in my joy and bliss at having met Swami, but you cannot convince other people to understand that Christ or Buddha is reborn and think they will believe it. I learned a great lesson from that experience.

After a year or so, I stopped trying to convince people to listen to me about Baba. Instead, I would do as Baba advised. When I stopped talking about Him and instead started living His message, people started asking, "Why do you go to India? What do you do there?"

I have had the opportunity to make all the mistakes that can be made and met all the obstacles and pitfalls in the spiritual path. I appreciate these experiences because they have taught me a lot. If you haven't tried it yourself, you cannot understand others who have made mistakes, empathize with them, and love them at their level, wherever they are.

Baba says, *"If you take one step toward me, I will take a hundred toward you."* That is to say that if we start on the spiritual path, make a little effort, and take small steps toward the cosmic, higher, divine consciousness, we will get answers. The proof of God's existence is that He answers your questions and prayers. He is in your life in every moment, every day, in many ways.

Mr. Steen Piculell
DENMARK

Excerpt from the book "Journeys To Love" compiled by Ms. Kirsten Pruzan Mikkelsen

***Mr. Steen Piculell** was a long-time devotee of Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba. He served in the Sri Sathya Sai International Organization (SSSIO) tirelessly for decades before merging with Swami in May 2013. He was the Chairman of Zone 8 of the SSSIO, serving Russia and adjoining countries. His exemplary leadership was of benefit to many Sai devotees in countries spanning Europe and Asia.*

I Want Liberation Now!

No one can liberate you, for no one has bound you. You hold on to the nettle of worldly pleasures, and you weep, like the kite that is pursued by the crows so long as it carries the fish in its beak. Once the kite drops the fish, immediately, it is free. Similarly, you should give up attachment to the senses; sorrow and anxiety can harass you no more, and you can be happy.

–Sri Sathya Sai Baba
March, 1965

In 1978, my husband Robert was called for an interview along with twelve Western men. It is customary that when one spouse is called for an interview by Swami, the other is also allowed. On this occasion, however, at the last moment before entering the interview room, Swami, perhaps wanting to spare the wives the emotional ordeal that was to come, sent the ladies back.

In the interview room, Swami directed His attention to a young, nineteen-year-old Westerner whose face showed severe agitation and restraint of tears. The young man cried out, "How do I get Self-realization? If I can't get it, I'm going to kill myself!"

Swami materialized a crystal *japamala* (necklace of prayer beads). Before He offered it to anyone, though, the man cried out in anguish, "I don't want rings. I don't want *japamalas*. All I want is liberation. If you don't give it to me now, I'm going to cut my wrists right here!" Rarely does one witness such an emotional outburst in Swami's presence. As a rule, people are restrained and self-controlled, as Swami's presence commands the utmost respect. Swami undoubtedly had His reasons to allow such an outburst, and perhaps Swami's lengthy reply will benefit others in a similar rush for realization. Swami calmly responded:

"Realization is not an article that you can purchase in a store. The desire for liberation is good, but the display of emotions is not correct. Self-realization is the result of steady and continuous *sadhana*. The desire for immediate realization is brought on by the urges of the lower self, anxiety, and haste. Haste is emotionalism. Haste makes waste. **Start early, go slowly, and arrive safely. Make your desire for divine union permanent, constant, and all-important, and I will give. I love all of you. Know that what I give is best for you.** There is no selfish interest in Swami.

Many come and seek an interview. They go away disappointed. Their hunger is insufficient. They are like a man who, with a plate of *chapatis* (flatbread) and potatoes in front of him, repeats over and over, "*chapati*, potato, *chapati*, potato." There is not enough hunger, not enough effort commensurate with hunger, to bring the food to the mouth. These people want only a taste, but a mere taste is a waste. They come for a few days or months and go away. If you feed a dog every day at 10:00 AM, the dog will come exactly at 10:00 AM by the tenth day. The dog is ignorance *(avidya)*. You must be like God, knowledge *(vidya)*, which comes from the opposite direction.

Be steady in your spiritual practice, and I, your higher consciousness, will come to you. Your Guru is your Self, your higher conscious-

ness. Have faith and trust in your higher consciousness, your highest inner-Self.

You say you want Self-realization. But what is that Self? You say, "You and I are one," or, "I am He." But each adds up to two. You and I are we. We is one, not two. We and we is one, not two. You must reach the consciousness that "you" are "we."

Let there be no separation in your life. Follow the four stages: work, worship, wisdom, and realization. Do all work as worship of God. Do not divide your efforts into your work and His work."

In response, another devotee asked Swami, "It appears as though there are many separate people in this room. What causes me to see diversity when you say there is only unity?" Swami replied, "There is only one moon in the sky, but the light of the moon is reflected in the water contained in one hundred pots." "Why does this illusion exist?" the devotee asked. "Without illusion, there is no desire for liberation. Why illusion? That is life! Without darkness, there is no appreciation of light," Swami explained. "Why did God create the Universe?" was the devotee's final question. Swami replied, "First, understand your Self before you try to understand the purpose behind the creation of the Universe. Now, you are at a stage where you will not be able to understand the purpose of this creation. **Seek not information; seek transformation. That is the real growth of the inner-self that Swami offers."**

After Swami gave this enlightening explanation, the young man was soothed and calmed down.

Ms. Diana Baskin
USA

Excerpt from the book "Divine Lessons from Sathya Sai Baba" (2009)

***Ms. Diana Baskin**, an ardent devotee of Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba for more than four decades, has authored two very inspirational books relating to her remarkable experiences and life transforming lessons learnt during her many close interactions with Baba. Her books titled 'Divine Memories of Sathya Sai Baba' and 'Divine Lessons from Sathya Sai Baba' have inspired many devotees around the world in their spiritual quest. In the words of Dr. John Hislop, well known and exemplary devotee of Baba, her compelling story and experiences are matchless and priceless in inspiring readers, for centuries to come.*

Seva Saves

It was 10:50 AM, July 29, 1990. The door of the interview room in Prasanthi Nilayam opened, and Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba beckoned Captain Oberoi, the officer in charge of Sathya Sai Airport, seated in the veranda, and said, *"Krishnamurthy has met with a bad accident. It happened near Chikkaballapur as he was coming here."*

The shocked devotee listened to Swami describe everything that happened to his dear friend in detail. Swami said the vehicle had flipped over four times and landed on its side. But Swami made sure everyone was safe despite the deep ditches on either side of the road and oncoming traffic. The vehicle's roof had been torn apart, but nobody was seriously injured.

Then, Swami spoke about other things before letting Captain Oberoi leave the interview room.

A Postponed Visit

Those were the good old days when Swami would entrust me with many tasks. He would get sarees, white cloth pieces, and many other items purchased from Madras (Chennai) for distribution to devotees. I was given the opportunity to get samples for Him to make the selection. On July 29, 1990, accompanied by my wife and a good friend, I was on my way to Puttaparthi with a suitcase full of items for Swami's selection.

I was at the wheel of a Maruti Omni van, about 7 kilometers from the town of Chikkaballapur. Suddenly, a buffalo ran across the van's path out of nowhere, and I instinctively slammed on the brakes. The impact was such that the van flipped over four times before coming to a halt, landing back on its wheels! The rest was precisely as Swami narrated to my friend, Captain Oberoi. I had broken my collarbone, but I was not in pain. The suitcase full of samples for Swami was safe in the van while my suitcase was open, with the contents scattered all over the road. Since the van was no longer drivable, gathering our belongings, I made alternate arrangements to return to Madras via Bangalore (Bengaluru). At Bangalore, our relatives insisted that we get examined by a doctor but I refused because we were doing Swami's work and were under His care. Unaware of the divine drama of the all-knowing Lord being played in the interview room and not wanting to communicate anything negative, I sent a telegram to Swami informing Him that I could not make it to Puttaparthi and that I would be coming soon.

Three weeks later, we were in Puttaparthi. Captain Oberoi accosted me and, seemingly anxious, asked, "How are you? Hope you have recovered from the accident...." I wondered how he knew, and he soon shared how Swami had revealed everything in detail within a few minutes of the accident! I sat on the *mandir's* veranda, awaiting Swami's *darshan*. As soon as He came out of the interview room, Swami looked at me compassionately and raised his eyebrows to ask how I was doing. I nodded to indicate I was fine with no pain, despite a broken collarbone. He smiled and moved on to give *darshan*.

Swami was leaving for the Brindavan *ashram*, Whitefield, in Bangalore the

following day. He asked me to accompany Him–45 Japanese delegates had arrived, and Swami wanted me to address them. I usually talked about the scriptures, especially the Bhagavatam, quoting Sanskrit verses and texts extensively. Knowing this, Swami told me not to discuss Sanskrit material in my talk, saying, *"Speak about your car accident!"*

SEVA Will SAVE You

I needed no further prodding. With humility, gratitude, and love pouring out, I shared the experience of the accident which happened a few weeks before and how Swami had saved me. At this point, Swami stopped me, called me close to Him, and said, *"I did not come there. I did not save you."*

"What are you saying, Swami? After everything you have revealed, how can I tell them that You did not save me?"

"But that is the Truth!" Swami retorted

"Then who saved me, Swami?"

With an understanding and a compassionate look, Swami revealed,

"Whenever you serve people, especially the poor, they express their gratitude and say 'Thanks' to you. But instead of accepting those expressions of gratitude, you tell them just to 'Thank the Lord,' saying that Swami did everything. You accumulated merit for all that. As per your prarabdha karma (results of one's past actions), you should be dead. But I encashed your accumulated merit so that you can live. But I did not do anything; I am a mere custodian."

It is not a coincidence that the word '*SEVA*' and 'SAVE' are anagrams of each other. **The *seva* (service) we render comes back to us and saves us in times of difficulties**. That is the power and blessings of service.

How Should We Do *Seva*?

Serving others is something that I learned directly from Swami, for He exemplified it throughout His life in matters small and big. My accident was a lesson to me, clarifying why *seva* must be done. But even years before, Swami had shown me how it should be done. This is an incident from the early 1980s before the Sai Shruti mandir was built in Swami's Ashram Kodaikanal. Swami was then staying in the guest house of Sri V. Srinivasan's father-in-law. His typical schedule consisted of *darshan* and interviews in the morning, which ended by 9:30 AM, after which Swami would go to His room, only to come out around 11:30 AM.

One day Swami went into His room, and we were all relaxing. I was also lying down on a sofa and resting. Suddenly, at 10:00 AM, Swami came out and said, *"Put on your shirt; let us go out."*

Within minutes, Sri V. Srinivasan, an ardent devotee of Swami, and I were sitting with Swami in the car. Radhakrishna, another ardent devotee, was at the wheel while I sat with Swami in the back seat. There was pin-drop silence before I took the courage to ask, "Where should we go, Swami?"

"Just take the road to Bangalore," was His terse reply.

After we drove for a few kilometers, Swami asked to stop the car. He got down and began to walk fast. I got down quickly and followed behind Him with His slippers. Fortunately, He accepted the slippers, wore them, and kept walking. I continued to follow Him as the other two waited in the car. Swami kept walking down the road and began to descend the hilly incline.

"Be careful, Swami," I ventured to say.

"You take care. You are not even wearing footwear," He replied lovingly.

As we descended the slope, I saw broken liquor bottles along the way and asked

Swami whether we should go in the other direction. He agreed, and we continued going down but in a different direction. However, I was still worried. There was no proper pathway, and it was a wild, overgrown hillside. I wondered what to do if we encountered any wildlife like a fox, dog, or snake; I was unprepared to fend them off. We descended about 150 feet, reaching the flat ground; Swami asked me to let go of His hand. Putting His hands on His hip, reflecting, He stood there with His eyes closed. I stood there with Him, my eyes wide open, looking in all directions to ensure no animal or insect approached Swami.

Three minutes passed.

"Swami..." I said hesitantly. He stood still with eyes closed.

"Swami..." I said again meekly. Still no response.

"SWAMI..." I was pretty loud this time.

"Emi (what)?" He asked, opening His eyes.

"Shall we go back?"

"Yes. Let us go back now."

We began the 150 feet return up the slope. When we reached the top, the car was nowhere in sight, and I panicked.

"Ay! The car is on the other side of the road, don't worry," Swami said. We reached the car and drove back.

The next day, Kodaikanal witnessed torrential rainfall. *Darshan* had to be canceled, and we remained indoors. As we sat at Swami's feet, I once again ventured to ask, "Swami, why did you do what you did yesterday?"

"Do you see how it is raining today? There is a village on the slope of the hill near where I stood yesterday. Its base is all clay. The pouring rain would have washed it away, endangering the lives of a thousand villagers and hundreds of domestic animals. I reinforced the base, and the village is safe now."

We all sat in absolute silence at this revelation. Sure enough, after two days, many villagers came to express gratitude to Swami for their good fortune in escaping all the damage from the torrential downpour! **They had no idea that Swami had blessed and protected them from destruction by His visit the previous day itself!**

And that is how service should be rendered–without publicity, display, or informing the recipient. **The left hand should not know about the help rendered by the right hand!** In this case, Swami lovingly made us aware of His service to the village people. I wonder how many such unknown miracles are happening worldwide by Swami's boundless grace and compassion! I am sure they will number in millions that we are not aware.

May we follow Swami's example and sanctify our lives through loving, selfless service to everyone.

Sri T.G. Krishnamurthy
INDIA

Sri T.G. Krishnamurthy *has served as the President of the Tamil Nadu chamber of commerce, honorary secretary and correspondent of Sri Thyagaraya educational institutions. He has served in the Sri Sathya Sai Seva Organization India as the District President of Chennai in 1976, member of the State trust in 1978, State trust convener in 1982 and as the State President of Tamil Nadu in 1995. Bhagawan on numerous occasions has blessed him to speak to devotees at Prasanthi Nilayam, Brindavan, Ooty, Kodaikanal and Chennai in His Divine Presence. He is also the author of the book "The Divine Path to the Wisdom of Sai".*

Resilience Comes from Surrender

Resilience is "the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties." However, resilience is not short-term, nor does it happen quickly. For us, Sathya Sai Baba's glorious drama placed us squarely into the fire of two major life crises. Events were about to unfold that would permanently change our lives and expand our consciousness and hearts in a way beyond our comprehension. In retrospect, events that appeared tragic, frightening, and overwhelming served to grind our lives into dust and shift us into a new paradigm. **Thus, Baba set the stage for us to hear His call.**

In March 1999, my husband Stan and I were skiing in Vail, Colorado. Stan, a physician practicing internal medicine, was attending a continuing medical education course. Unfortunately, he felt he was getting the flu while we were there. Flu-like symptoms, combined with specific physical changes in his body, were a red flag that something serious was happening.

The First Test for Stan

After a complete checkup when we returned home, we were shocked to learn Stan had Stage 4 colon cancer with metastases to the liver. Following major surgery, the prognosis was still very poor. We became vegetarians, started daily meditation, and tried to eliminate as much stress as possible. During the next two years, Stan received ongoing chemotherapy. He looked great. He exercised regularly and worked full-time in the office and at the hospitals. We thought we had dodged a bullet.

But during a routine checkup in January 2001, five tumors were discovered in his lungs. Only experimental trial chemotherapy was offered as treatment. He might survive nine months with chemotherapy but become very sick during treatment. Without chemotherapy, he might live just two months. The thoracic surgeon stated he could easily remove the tumors as they were peripheral. Stan thought he probably had micro-seeding throughout his body and did not want to go through the pain of surgery.

With death knocking at the door, I earnestly prayed to God for help and guidance. We were directed to an institute in Puerto Rico to learn about a diet of raw, vegetable foods. We would later learn it was the *Sattvic* diet that Baba recommends. We also attended a conference where Carolyn Myss, author, lecturer, and medical intuitive, spoke. [We would eventually learn she is a Sai devotee].

During a break, while browsing through books on various topics, my intuition directed me to Dr. Sandweiss' book, 'The Holy Man and the Psychiatrist.' While reading this book in a hotel room, I smelled a distinct, smoky scent. **Later, I would learn it was the smell of *Vibhuti*. We were struck by the same familiar scent when we returned home and entered our house!** These experiences prompted me to order more books about Baba and visit the Pittsburgh Sai Center in Pennsylvania.

After speaking with Dr. Brahma Sharma, the Center president at the time, we were convinced Baba was calling us. I thought we should go to see Baba in India immediately. Surely, He could perform surgery and remove these tumors, or cancel cancer, as He had done for others we read about. Dr. Sharma assured us that Baba works through doctors and advised us to have the tumors removed in Pittsburgh; we should then go to the *ashram*. After only eight weeks on the raw diet, the PET (positron emission tomography) scan showed one tumor had almost disappeared, and the other four showed less image intensity on the PET scan! Stan felt confident his body was no longer prone to cancer and decided to have the tumors surgically removed.

We Meet the Divine 'Director'

The surgery was done in May 2001, and we had our first *darshan* in August 2001. **Our family witnessed numerous miracles during our visit, convincing us Baba was indeed God. He was ours, and we were His. We completely surrendered our lives to Baba.** Our beloved Swami canceled cancer, which was a pending death sentence. Stan remains in excellent health today by His Grace, full of energy and vitality at 80!

The Pittsburgh Sai Center literally became our home. It was the framework and focus of our lives until 2016 when Baba guided us to relocate to the mountains in western North Carolina. Our greatest joy during those years was the blessing of our Sai family.

Shortly after we moved in the fall of 2016, our mountaintop residence became the home of the Asheville Sai Center. In November 2017, Stan and I were scheduled to speak at the Atlanta Sai Center. Days before the occasion, Baba had a change of plans. Once again, the Divine Director raised the curtain for a new drama to unfold like no other we could have ever fathomed. This crisis was a test–it was also every parent's worst nightmare.

The Second Test Involves Our Son, Matt

It was 10 pm. Stan and I were in bed reading when the phone rang. Our youngest son, Dane, was calling from California, where he and his older brother Matthew (Matt) lived. "Mom, Dad! Matt had a surfing accident. He has a spinal cord injury and is paralyzed from the neck down. He is going into surgery in the next ten minutes." Time stopped for me. Stan kept asking for details. "Where is he? Who is the surgeon, and what are his credentials?" I wanted to get on the next flight, but it was impossible. There were no flights to San Francisco until the next morning. As my eyes filled with tears and my anxiety began to rise rapidly, Stan stayed calm. His demeanor was steady and composed. He told me, "If I can get through metastatic cancer and survive, we will all get through this. **It is all part of Baba's play, and I assure you, everything will be okay,** Jayne. There is a reason for this too."

When we arrived the next day at the UCSF (University of California, San Francisco) hospital, the "Harvard of the West," we would learn in detail what had happened to our son. The documentary on the event, made some years later, does not even begin to capture the many miracles that took place with **Baba's perfect timing!** Matthew was surfing in the Pacific Ocean late afternoon on an overcast day. His last memory was floating face down in the ocean. He couldn't move his body. He was completely paralyzed. Realizing he was going to die, he screamed at the ocean for help. Matt described the incident, saying, "The movie stopped, and then there was darkness." From the shore, a surfer from Australia eventually spotted

what he thought was a garbage bag floating on the ocean. He swam a distance to retrieve it, only to discover what appeared to be a dead body.

This stranger who rescued Matt was tall, physically fit, and had the strength to pull Matt's 6'4" body of dead weight to the shore. A Stanford-trained nurse "happened" to be on the beach, who quickly performed CPR (Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation). Another nurse called an ambulance. Further down the shoreline, a Stanford-trained physician, who had not planned to go surfing that day, saw the commotion, ran to help, and took over to perform CPR. It appeared at that time Matt had been dead for 10 minutes, for he was pulseless, ashen grey as a corpse, and lifeless. CPR continued for at least an additional 15 minutes; just as the EMT service arrived and were about to use the defibrillator, a pulse was detected as he coughed up all the water in his lungs. He was transported to the hospital, where he was found to be a quadriplegic secondary due to a severe cervical spinal cord injury. By Swami's grace, he had a neurosurgical procedure within 3 hours. Furthermore, he happened to have the good fortune to be the first person to benefit from a new interventional procedure based on animal research that subsequently become part of the standard of care in treating such injuries.

When we walked into the intensive care unit the day after the surgery, though Matt was smiling and laughing, he was completely paralyzed. Many friends and colleagues surrounded him, and I found it challenging to get to his bed. Our son was in excruciating pain. He described the sensation as though his body was burning and a truck was sitting on his chest. The only place we could touch him was on the top of his head or his shoulder.

Living in Bliss Through Life's Challenges

Surprisingly, Matt was joyous throughout the weeks he spent in intensive care. This spirit of joy continued throughout the following weeks of rehabilitation therapy. The doctors told us he would walk again, perhaps in six or seven months. They were optimistic because the spinal cord had not been severed. Two weeks after the accident, as Matt sat in a wheelchair like a rag doll, barely able to hold a spoon, he said, "Mom, I am going to walk out of here." I wanted to believe him desperately, but his appearance told me it wasn't likely.

He had been an elite athlete before the accident. Matt received a Jeep Chrysler award for skiing and also won an Iron Man Triathlon while in medical school. He had just completed his residency at Stanford and was working as an Emergency Room (ER) physician. He previously worked one shift at the hospital, where he was now a patient. Matt knew the human body well and was determined to recover fully from his back injury. He worked hard while going through physiotherapy, determined to walk out. He was also an artist, so he converted his hospital room into an art studio. His relentless determination, combined with his joyous spirit, was an inspiration to all. The accident happened on November 17. Matt walked out of the hospital on crutches six weeks later!

During physical therapy over the next year, Matt told Stan and me that the happiest time in his life was when he was completely paralyzed. **He saw himself in the middle of a web of love. Everyone was connected to him and each other. He described himself as being in a state of 'bliss,'** a word that was not common in his vocabulary. Matt had a high IQ before the accident; after that, his IQ was even higher!

Matt continued to paint over the next year. His paintings sold in galleries on the West Coast for thousands of dollars, which generated income until he could return to practicing medicine. In less than one year after his brush with death, Matt returned to work as an ER physician.

Swami's Grace Overcomes All Adversities

Immediately following the accident, we were by Matt's side every day. I observed I had not cried about our son's tragedy. I asked Stan if I could be in shock because I wasn't feeling anything but complete happiness with every slight improvement Matt had made. Stan said he felt exactly the same way–centered, peaceful, and filled with joy with each minor sign of progress. **It was clear that Baba's Grace had removed all our fear and worry.**

The following days, weeks, and months were filled with more miracles. Baba made His love and presence known to us in a heightened state of Constant Integrated Awareness. Resilience had quietly and gently woven itself into the fabric of our lives, a serene acceptance of things that happen as ordained by God for our ultimate good. I have reflected upon a quote from Swami that spoke to us so eloquently, **"I will take everything from you until you want nothing but me."** These two significant crises we experienced felt like we were losing everything, including precious life itself, with Stan two months away from death and the near-death drowning of our son. Without Swami's Grace, the outcome of these events would have been entirely different and for the worst. These dramatic miracles, combined with a life filled with peace, joy, and laughter no matter what appears to be happening, are cherished gifts He has given us.

Surrender Only to God

Part of resilience is knowing we are never alone. **Baba is our nearest and dearest friend.** He knows our soul, and tests are inevitable to measure our progress. We navigated these difficult situations with faith, perseverance, and the security of Baba's love. He gave us signs of His presence along the way, from dreams and physical manifestations to synchronistic events and appearances of angels in the sky. The challenges became less daunting, knowing we were actors on the stage of His divine drama. What appears to be real is an illusion. **With complete surrender and a lifetime commitment to our beloved Baba, He gives everyone the strength to hang on, to have resilience over time, and the vision to see all of life's dramas as merely passing clouds.**

Mrs. Jayne Wetschler
USA

Mrs. Jayne Wetschler *is an interior designer by profession who has served as an SSE Teacher, Service Coordinator, Vice-President, and President at the Pittsburgh Sai Center, USA, spanning 15 years. Her deep interest in spirituality, nutrition, and the interconnection of the body, mind, and spirit has shifted her focus from designing home interiors to redesigning one's 'inner 'space.' Along with her husband, Dr. Stan Wetschler, she conducts Health and Wellness Programs and Workshops for people of all ages, especially cancer patients.*

Sai Baba Will Never Disappoint His Devotee

I traveled to India for the first time in January 1982 in my capacity as the Vice President of the Suddha Dharma Mandalam (a spiritual organization based on Vedanta, Raja Yoga), invited by the Master of the organization during his visit to Argentina. My plan was to stay with him for a month and learn from him. I had heard and known about Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba before I left Argentina. Within three days of reaching India, I had a burning and irrepressible desire to see Sai Baba. Fortunately, the Master understood and allowed me to go and see Sai Baba. I started off by train from Bombay to Madras (Chennai) where I was told Sai Baba would stay for a few days. The train journey in itself could be the subject of a separate article because, in those 36 hours, **I experienced numerous miracles that convinced me of Sai Baba's power of protection, even before I saw Him!**

The Heart Always Knows

When I arrived at Sundaram, Sai Baba's ashram in Madras, there were nearly 50,000 people waiting to see Him. I was escorted to the front lines, and, at that time, I thought it was because I was a foreigner. **I know today that everything in our lives is preordained by the Lord!**

There was a long wait for Baba. I sat calmly and peacefully, unaware of how my life was about to change forever! A couple of hours might have passed like this. All of a sudden, my heart began to beat fast, and I experienced palpitations. It was not unpleasant. but enjoyable anticipation! I wondered what was happening to me and why it was happening. The reason became evident moments later.

Sai Baba's car entered the gates of the *ashram*!

Swami alighted and began to walk around granting *darshan* to the assembled thousands. As He passed by me, I said, "Swami, I want to see you..."

Pat came the reply from within, *"But you are seeing me now."* I was stunned because this was my first experience of telepathy in my life! I continued, "Swami! I want an interview."

Swami just smiled and moved on.

From that day when I had my first darshan, my heart would always recognize His presence and start beating rapidly whenever Baba came for *darshan*. This is how I discovered the truth in the saying, "You have to follow the heart because it will always lead to the true goal."

My heart connected with Him and recognized the Master even before my mind did!

The Great Good Fortune of a Sai Devotee

That was my first experience with Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba in His physical proximity. During that first trip to India, I had a series of wonderful experiences relating to Baba. Practically every day I had the opportunity to come into contact with Him, whether it was by offering a letter which He usually accepted, presenting a photo for Him to bless and sign, or receiving the *Vibhuti* He materialized for me.

A few days later, a public meeting was held in Abbotsbury, a very large open-air venue in Madras (Chennai). Sai Baba was scheduled to give a discourse, after which the devotees in Madras would present a cultural program. Though the place was packed with thousands of people, I had the good fortune of getting a seat close to the stage, just a few meters from where Baba would sit after His discourse and preside over the event. When Swami finished His discourse, He sat down and waited for the cultural program to begin. Seeing Him so close, I thought this was my opportunity to formally introduce myself.

In retrospect, I realize how naive I was! My assumption was that He did not know me and needed to see my business card as an introduction. So, I simply got up and went over to where He was sitting. Amazingly, nobody stopped me, and when I was near Him, I gave my business card. He took it, looked at it, and then, affectionately slapped my hand, saying,

"You are very lucky!" Sai's remark caused me to reflect deeply, not only at that moment but even now, several decades later. What did He mean?

Today, I understand that I am very lucky to be alive as a contemporary of the Avatar of our age and to be a spiritual aspirant searching for the truth. As Swami says, among eight million four hundred thousand species of life, human birth is the most difficult to attain. It is a sign of Divine Grace and a blessing!

Those of us who have heard of the Avatar, seen Him, experienced Him, or have been chosen to be His devotees are extremely fortunate! Indeed, how lucky we are!

A Resignation and a Promise

Thirty days passed since my arrival at Sundaram, and I felt absolutely convinced of the divinity of Sai Baba. I followed him to Brindavan *ashram* in Bangalore, and then to Prasanthi Nilayam *ashram* in Puttaparthi, not wanting to miss even one *darshan*. That was the turning point, and I submitted my resignation as Vice President of the *Raja Yoga* organization, Suddha Dharma Mandalam, to fully dedicate myself to serving Bhagawan. The next morning, during *darshan*, instead of His usual routine of walking first to the women's side, Swami came straight toward me. He must have walked over 100 steps to reach me. He looked deeply into my eyes and said,

"Yes, this afternoon I will call you!" He was going to grant me an interview! The night before **I had taken one step toward Him, and He had literally taken a hundred steps toward me!** I was absolutely thrilled at the prospect of having my first interview with God. Not wanting to let go of the opportunity, I wanted to wait in front of the interview room door until the afternoon. But a *Sevadal* (volunteer) stationed outside the door told me to come back in the afternoon and if Sai Baba decided, He would call me for an interview. I felt sad. I thought, 'Why does this person not like me? What if Sai Baba forgot what He told me and I was deprived of the promised greatest blessing? And even if Swami remembered, how was He to find me among the thousands of devotees gathered?' With these discouraging thoughts, I returned to my room to wait till the evening *darshan*.

Adding to my disappointment, I got a seat in the fourth row in the evening. This was far away, and I would definitely have a lesser chance to talk to Swami, I thought. My sorrow only heightened. I was sure that my golden opportunity had slipped away.

When Swami came out of His room, He stood on the veranda, and from there, without even searching for me in the huge crowd, He simply looked up and stared at me straight in the face! From where He was standing, He called out, *"You!"* and beckoned me to come in for an interview! I approached Him and asked if the other members of the Argentinian group could come with me. He replied, *"Yes."* The best part was that all this happened even before Swami granted his routine *darshan*!

As we sat near the interview room door, Swami went around giving *darshan*. Then, He ushered us into the room. Once inside, He spoke to all of us who were sitting there. He came to me and then, in a flurry, began revealing all that I had been thinking about since the morning, including my doubts about whether He was going to remember me or find me in the *darshan* gathering of people. He described every thought of mine in detail. Then He came closer and whispered in my ear, ***"Sai Baba will never disappoint His devotee."***

This promise is etched forever in my memory because I believe that it was not just for me but for all devotees and not just for that moment but for eternity! With His Divine promise in our hearts, let us bid goodbye to disappointment and get ready for an appointment with Him to serve Him always!

Jai Sairam.

Mr. Leonardo Gutter
ARGENTINA

***Mr. Leonardo Pablo Gutter**, a psychologist by profession, has been serving in the Sri Sathya Sai International Organization (SSSIO) for over four decades. He has had many personal interactions with Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba. He started the Latin American movement of the SSSIO and previously served as the Chairman of Zone 2, Latin America. Mr. Gutter is a founding member of the Sri Sathya Sai Trust of Argentina.*

He is a Member of the Prasanthi Council, Director of the Sri Sathya Sai World Foundation, and Co-Chair of the Intellectual Property Committee. Working with the entertainment industry over the past 43 years, Mr. Gutter represents some of the largest American, European and Japanese TV and cinema studios in Latin America.

Sacrifice Alone Confers Immortality

Thyagenaike Amrutatwa Manushu

Swami's 97th Birthday Celebrations were being held in Colombo, and the annual award was announced. "This year's Niroshan Memorial Award for the best *Bal Vikas* student goes to...."

My eyes were filled with tears. My mind went blank. In a flash, the memories came rolling in, one after another, as if I was in a time machine and the years were whizzing by fast. In my mind's eye, I relived my first ever *darshan* of Sri Sathya Sai Baba in February 1982. I had traveled to Puttaparthi from the United Kingdom, where I had been introduced to Him in October 1981. **Seeing Swami, listening to His discourses, and experiencing the serene atmosphere, I knew I had found my God.**

A Child Finds His Lord

After I returned home to Colombo, I enrolled my 8-year-old son, Niroshan, into *Bal Vikas* (SSE) classes, and he took to them as a fish takes to water. He was soon singing *bhajans*, playing the *tabla* and the harmonium, much to the delight of his *Bal Vikas gurus*. In 1984, He had his first *darshan* of Swami in Puttaparthi, which changed him. **He was convinced that Swami alone was the goal of his life.** He immediately gave up eating non-vegetarian food and filled the walls of his room with Swami's photographs.

His participation in *Bal Vikas* activities increased dramatically. As his father, it was a proud moment for me when the Hon. Late Mr. J.R. Jayewardene, the second President of Sri Lanka, praised Niroshan for acting well in the role of Shirdi Baba during an annual program. For Niroshan, though, it was an opportunity to perform in the omnipresence of his Swami, which made him happy.

The Lord Blesses His Child

As a young adult, Niroshan would go to Puttaparthi and Whitefield numerous times and join the *Sevadal* (volunteers) in the canteen kitchens. During one such visit, Swami materialized *vibhuti* for him and blessed him with an interview. As his offering of love, Niroshan prayed to Swami to establish a Youth Wing in Sri Lanka. **Swami lovingly blessed him to start the Youth Wing, and he was the first Youth Wing Leader in the Colombo Sathya Sai Center.**

He wanted to adhere to Swami's maxim *'service to man is service to God'* and decided to become a doctor and serve the underprivileged as a cardiologist. He wanted to "heal hearts and fill them with Swami." However, when the results were announced, he was disappointed that he missed the qualifying cutoff for admission to medical college by just one

mark. Instead, he was offered the option to pursue dentistry. Disillusioned, yet not wanting to give up on his dream, he asked me to accompany him to Puttaparthi for the *darshan* of Swami.

A Mysterious 'Call' From Puttaparthi

When we arrived in Prasanthi Nilayam, I got another glimpse of his love for Swami. He forgot his slippers in the auto-rickshaw we had hired and ran like a mad person toward the *darshan* hall. He managed to get a seat in the front lines, and we both had close *darshan*. Swami did not speak to us, but Niroshan was very happy just seeing Him. Tears poured down his eyes at the sight of Swami. As *bhajans* were going on, I prayed to Swami to do something, so my son could pursue a medical career in Sri Lanka. That night, we left for Bangalore (Bengaluru) and returned to Sri Lanka.

A couple of weeks later, the telephone began ringing when I was fast asleep around midnight. I picked up the receiver, and the caller said, **"This is a call from Puttaparthi, India. Your son will be selected for medicine."**

The line then went blank! I knew immediately that this was a message from Swami! I woke up my son immediately and excitedly told him what had just happened. He was extremely thankful to Swami and was very jubilant with tears of joy.

Two days later, Niroshan received a letter from the medical college stating that he was selected for admission as another candidate had given up the seat!

What a miracle! It was simply the grace of our beloved Swami. Niroshan continued his service activities–organizing medical camps, visiting cancer hospitals and orphanages, and singing carols in hospitals during Christmas. He began to organize Swami's Birthday celebrations and brought about a significant change among the medical students. He motivated them to stop the practice of hazing (a form of abuse, humiliation, and harassment) first-year students and plunge into service!

The Final Call

I was fully engaged with my family practice as a physician, and life went on smoothly without any problems. Niroshan was home, preparing for his final MBBS examinations, which were to be held in October 2001. We were living in our three-storied house in Colpetty, Colombo. We celebrated Guru Poornima on July 5 and were all resting peacefully at home. On the morning of July 6, at about 3 am, our house was burglarized by two men who started wielding huge, sharp knives. They seemed high on drugs and were about to attack and stab me. Niroshan freed himself from their grasp and came running to protect me. He fought the assailants while my wife and I screamed for help. The attackers panicked, stabbed Niroshan in the chest, and made a getaway.

Niroshan leaned against the wall, which had Swami's picture, with a gentle smile of satisfaction lighting up his face. I immediately took him on my lap and tried to patch and stop the profuse bleeding. Without the slightest cry of pain or murmur of complaint, my son breathed his last on my very lap. **He had made the ultimate sacrifice for his father!**

Swami's Acknowledgement

April 10 is Niroshan's birthday. For his birthday in 2002, I wrote a book, *The Vision Of Niroshan,* outlining his life and achievements. In May 2002, I took two copies of the book to Prasanthi Nilayam. I mailed one to Swami and kept the other one on my lap during *darshan*. As Swami passed by me, **He pointed His finger at the book and said, *"He is with Me."* That made me very happy.** Niroshan was in a place he had always wanted to be–with Swami.

In my heart of hearts, I always knew that Niroshan inspired and touched many a heart by the way he lived Sai's ideals and quietly spread Swami's love and message. He left a beautiful legacy as an ideal Sai young adult. I would like to share excerpts from a letter from Dr. U. Anushka Bagga, one of his collegemates who went to the same medical college, Faculty of Medical Sciences, University of Sri Jayawardenepura, Sri Lanka. She is now working as Assistant Professor in the Surgery and Trauma Division, at Loma Linda University in California, USA. Dr. Bagga poured her heart out in the letter, sharing her lasting memories, idolizing and admiring him. This is another sign of Swami's continuing shower of grace and blessings on Niroshan.

Dr. U. Anushka Bagga sums up her memorable impressions in just two sentences, *"I knew Niroshan only for a year and a half and still grieve the loss of not having known him longer so that I could have learned to be more like him. There is no doubt he merged with Swami, and Swami used him as His instrument to teach us, mortals, how to live."* She also wrote,

> *"**Niroshan was truly the embodiment of Swami's love**. I first met him as a first-year medical student. Every year, during Buddha Poornima, the medical students would go around the wards of the cancer hospitals at Jayawardenepura and the Colombo South teaching hospital, singing Sinhalese devotional songs. I volunteered to play the flute to accompany these songs but wasn't familiar with them. Niroshan, a brilliant harmonium player and singer, spent a whole day with me to help me learn the songs. We walked, played, and sang as a group. Even when everyone was exhausted, he kept us going with his energy well after midnight until we played at every in-patient unit. Kids from the cancer hospital would be trailing behind us like he was the Pied Piper leading his happy band. Any interpersonal tensions and misunderstandings would dissolve **whenever Niroshan walked into a room, as he would infuse everyone with Swami's love and compassion**.*
>
> *Whenever we had religious events at the university, a lot of food would go to waste. Despite being sleep deprived and having to work over 100 hours a week, Niroshan would stay till the very end of every event. He would then pack his car with all the leftover food and deliver it to the homeless patients at the hospital. He never publicized his good deeds and always worked quietly, unassumingly, and tirelessly in the background. This amazing, noble person knew every patient who did not have a family and brought them food when he was on in-patient rotations. His batchmates told me how the patients would applaud and welcome him like a celebrity whenever he walked into a medical ward.*
>
> *Later, when I joined the Young Adults (YA) program in Colombo, I discovered that he had set up a nutrition project for at-risk kids in an impoverished Colombo neighborhood and brought them nutritional supplements weekly. He would track the progress of their growth and hold medical camps despite his hectic academic schedule. Every Sunday, he would go for Nagarsankeertan singing devotional songs while walking in the streets) at 5 am, and on most days, he would be the only one walking and singing! I heard from fellow YAs how he would play the harmonium and sing throughout the night and the day during Akhanda Bhajans and Maha Shivarathri. He would also be working tirelessly in the kitchen, hauling heavy pots and pans during Narayana Seva at soup kitchens.*

I don't know how a human being could do everything he did! Upon hearing that Niroshan passed away, the Professor of Pediatrics stopped his rounds in hospital wards, overwhelmed with sorrow. Busloads of people poured in from all over the country, sobbing in grief. ***This 26-year-old man positively impacted many people with his divine love, which was so profound and powerful!*** *Niroshan's Bal Vikas (SSE) Gurus and Senior Sai devotees of Colombo loved him so much that they decided to offer a 'Niroshan Memorial Award' annually to the best Bal Vikas student during Swami's Birthday celebrations." I miss my Niroshan. But whenever I look at Swami's smile in a picture, I see my Niroshan smiling. Every time a Bal Vikas student receives the annual Niroshan Memorial Award, I know that my son lives through every one of them!*

Dr. Chanmugam Srideva
SRI LANKA

Dr. Chanmugam Srideva *is a qualified Family Physician (MBBS, DCH, DFM, MCGP) practicing in Colombo, Sri Lanka since 1971. He had his first darshan of Sri Sathya Sai Baba in February 1982 and has been part of the activities of the Sai Center and the SSIO ever since.*

Journey to Self-Realization

In the fall of 1971, my life suddenly and dramatically changed. Although I had been striving for spiritual understanding for a number of years, I had little to show for it. I was eighteen years old, but I had grown up from the time I was a small child with the spiritual traditions of the East. I had read many metaphysical and spiritual teachings, but they did little to change my life or prepare me for what I was about to experience. But perhaps the unusual upbringing I experienced may have foreshadowed what would change the future course of my life.

Off to India to Buy the Taj Mahal

Let's rewind to 1955 when my mother and father packed up three children under the age of seven and moved to India for 26 months. Leaving a comfortable living near Boston, Massachusetts, they ventured out on a spiritual quest that each had long dreamed of. My mother's father was one of the two co-founders of Sheraton Hotels. So, when my father resigned from his job as Director of Advertising at Sheraton Hotels, nobody was able to believe the reason for his resignation!

My father's co-workers repeatedly pestered him for the real reason for his unusual journey. Finally, in exasperation, he confided to one particularly inquisitive co-worker, after swearing him to secrecy, "I am on a secret mission for Sheraton Hotels to speak with the Government of India about buying the Taj Mahal." Although he thought the story was too preposterous to be taken seriously, it soon leaked out to the Boston newspapers. Apparently, people at that time and in that place believed that the purchase of the Taj Mahal by a hotel company was a more plausible explanation for travel to India than going on a spiritual quest!

The Beginning

My family lived in Northern India for two years in the mid-1950s. My father was writing a book on Vedantic teachings titled *Journeys on the Razor-Edged Path* while studying with monks of the Ramakrishna Mission around Kalimpong, near the border of India, Sikkim, and Bhutan. My mother studied *Hatha Yoga* while in India. Returning to the US in the late 1950s, she began teaching and writing about yoga, health, and diet.

My early life was influenced, even if unconsciously, by the quests of my father and mother. I learned *Hatha Yoga* and astrology from my mother at an early age. I also read about the masters of the East and Theosophy. I read the teachings of the Himalayan masters, Theosophy, Alice Bailey, Ramakrishna, Ramana Maharshi, the Tibetan masters, Kabbalah, and others.

And yet, I did not feel that I had come closer to Self-understanding.

A Sudden Awakening

In 1971, I was a freshman at Pomona College in Claremont, California. I had planned to study a major in psychology since I had not found the answers that I was looking for in religion or metaphysics. However, a momentous day dawned in the fall of that year. As I stood near the inside door of my dormitory room on the ground floor of Harwood Court, thoughts went through my mind concerning service. I had never really participated in organized service

projects, but **I was beginning to recognize that service was an inescapable part of a spiritual endeavor**.

When I finally resolved to participate in a campus program to work at a mental hospital in the nearby town of Pomona, a sudden breakthrough in consciousness occurred at that very moment. As I flipped on the wall light switch, it was like I had flipped on a switch in my mind. **Instantly my consciousness shed all worries, and a blissful peace overcame me**. I was immediately energized and saw everything around me as though I was seeing it for the first time. The cares of the world slipped from my shoulders, and I felt as though all questions were answered, or more specifically, that there were no questions left unanswered.

> *"When the spiritual switch is flicked, supreme bliss can be experienced immediately. Therefore, the realization of this exalted state, described variously as Brahmanandam, Parama Sukhadam, etc., can happen instantaneously, without any apparent reason. To have this experience, you do not have to withdraw to the forest as people mistakenly imagine; it can happen to you right here."*
>
> **–Sri Sathya Sai Baba**
> Summer Showers In Brindavan, 2000

I could have been standing two inches off the floor for the buoyancy and lightness I experienced. I not only felt weightless but also filled with wonderful light. The moment stood still in time as I looked around incredulously. Nothing had outwardly changed in my environment, but everything had inwardly changed. At that moment, I knew that I was experiencing Self-realization. I recognized the characteristics of the experience from my readings, particularly in Zen Buddhism. But even in the absence of references, the experience was so powerful and 'Self' fulfilling that I was certain it could be nothing else.

In that state, there were no questions or problems, only a remarkable bliss and a lightness of being.

A Return To 'Normalcy'

Unfortunately, all too soon, the experience came to an end. It probably lasted no longer than a minute or two, but I was irrevocably changed. I became convinced of the reality of Self-realization and the possibility of sudden personal transformation. From that day, no other goal could capture my imagination. **I knew that my one goal was to recapture that bliss and equanimity. And thus began the start of a new journey**.

It has been said that a momentary experience of Self-realization might occur as the result of spiritual practices done in past lifetimes. The progress we secure in each passing lifetime is never lost; it becomes a part of our new lives as we resume our journey.

> *"Divine vision is the result of practice and of God's grace. At times, divine vision may appear to arise spontaneously, but it is because of work done by a person in a previous life."*
>
> *Conversations With Sathya Sai Baba*
> John Hislop

I did complete the volunteer work at the mental hospital in Pomona that I signed up for. But the will to serve did not reappear to any notable degree until several years later. At 18 years of age, I did not consciously possess the spirit of surrender, for I had no teacher or personal form of God to whom I felt inclined to surrender. Much work remained to be done. However, I did receive some grace from God, from some past spiritual karma, that resulted in a state of mental stillness that briefly revealed to me the *Atma*.

There are three kinds of liberation. It is experienced in one type of samadhi (mental stillness). Then, a person who is engaged in sadhana (spiritual discipline) can suddenly — like a flash of lightning — have a clear vision of the truth, but it fades and ordinary life resumes. Liberation cannot be permanent without total surrender.

My Baba and I
John Hislop

A Blockade

In 1975, I married Rose, whom I had met during a summer foreign exchange program in Germany when we were 16 years old. The following June, I graduated from Pomona College, and Rose and I moved to Tucson, Arizona. I started a job as a stockbroker at Merrill Lynch, but my focus on spiritual life did not change. I believed that holding a steady job and settling down in my own home would provide the stability I needed to concentrate further on my goal. Most of my effort was to fathom the cryptic teachings and anecdotes in John Blofeld's book, *The Zen Teachings of Huang Po*. Yet however much I tried to recapture the *satori* (enlightenment) experience that I had when I was 18 years old, I was unable to recover that bliss and inner fulfillment.

But by 1978, I seemed to have hit a wall in my spiritual practice. No effort or direction of approach appeared to bring me any closer to my goal. I no longer had excuses. I had a home, a job, the time, and silence to pursue the path. But the wall I encountered offered me no path — over, around, or underneath the obstacle of my mind. However, we become eligible for divine grace when we employ our best efforts on the spiritual path and still come up short. **The doors to spiritual progress open if we persist with effort and patience**. **I had reached that point in my journey...**

A New World

In the fall of 1978, my spiritual impasse came to an end. Although I did not recognize it immediately, my life was about to be transformed again. My mother, who had been living in Ojai, California, for about three years, came to Arizona to visit her friends, Bob and Barbara Bozzani. Their home was about a two-hour drive from our home in Tucson, so Rose and I drove up to see them on a Saturday. After a pleasant visit, as we prepared to leave, my mother handed us two books–*'The Holy Man and the Psychiatrist'* by Samuel Sandweiss and *'Sai Baba Avatar'* by Howard Murphet. Accepting the gifts, we returned to our home in Tucson.

After a couple of weeks, I decided to look at these books. I was amazed at the story told in the two books. In all my reading of metaphysical and religious texts, both popular and academic, I had never seen anything so remarkable and heart-warming. I felt compelled to follow up and explore the life and teachings of this seemingly divine master, Sathya Sai Baba. What was particularly unusual was that these books touched my heart profoundly. My heart had become dry and lifeless. My spiritual path had always been primarily an intellectual pursuit. **But the truth in these books intuitively held me spellbound**. **The experience of finding a genuine spiritual authority was new and remarkable**.

A few weeks after receiving the books, Rose and I went on a drive to the Gila wilderness of New Mexico and the White Mountains of Arizona. We spent one night in a small motel in the town of Alpine at an elevation of about 10,000 feet. I had been thinking all day about the stories of this amazing holy man, Sai Baba, and was captivated by the charming way He related to His devotees. Miraculous signs and unusual displays of grace highlighted the stories that extolled His love and sweetness. The stories were

unlike anything I had read or heard before. Throughout that night, I was unable to sleep. **The mantra "Om Sai Baba" kept on repeating in my mind for the entire night**. No other thought or word broke the spell, and yet, in the morning, I was fully refreshed.

When I got up from bed in the morning, I looked around the small motel room. The curtains, carpet, and bedspread were all orange, the color of Sai Baba's robe! Opening the entry door, I was startled by the beauty of the scene outside. I saw fresh snowfall covering the tall pines of the rural alpine setting, the roads, and the parking lot. Everything was quiet, still, and serene, wrapped in a pristine white blanket of snow. And to me, the world appeared anew. I knew with great certainty that the truth and love that I had newly experienced would transform my life. **Again, my life had been changed, this time by the love and grace of Sathya Sai Baba, on the morning of November 23, 1978**. It was Sai Baba's Birthday! Baba says that the real birthday is the day God is born in our heart. So, I count that day as my birthday too!

Proof Positive

Returning to Tucson from the White Mountains, I gained a new outlook. The faith and devotion that overwhelmed my consciousness showed me a new dimension to spiritual life. I had always believed that the essential questions in my life would succumb to the rule of reason. The new dimension that now surged from my heart opened the door to show me the closeness of God within. And so, the power of the heart started to transform my consciousness. **I had not previously felt a close relationship with God in any form, but now having tasted that sweetness, longed for more**.

Sai Baba must have looked within my nature and decided that I would need something tangible to hold on to. My nature was pragmatic and analytical. My mind demanded some proof before it would surrender its dominion. Not more than a week or two later, that proof appeared! I had cut a black and white picture of Swami out of the book, 'Sai Baba Avatar' by Howard Murphet, and placed it in a small plastic frame on my desk. It was a picture I would later learn was taken on the sacred night of Maha Shivaratri, the annual sacred night of worshipping Shiva. I was drawn to the picture because it reminded me of the images of the Himalayan Masters that my mother had on her altar when I was a child.

Within about a week of framing the picture, it seemed to have a small smattering of fine grey ash outside the glass frame. This holy ash, called *vibhuti* by Sai Baba devotees, is a symbol of Sai Baba's presence and grace. It symbolizes the end of all matter – that which cannot be reduced to any further state. It also represents the end of desire and the futility of worldly materialism. **I was amazed to see the ash on the front of the picture**. Rose too, saw the ash and, unbeknownst to me then, even tasted it to be sure it was not dust or incense ash. It was fragrant and clearly not the result of any other cause. It could only be a sign of Sai Baba's presence and grace.

Soon after, I decided I wanted a 'smiling' picture of Sai Baba in that frame. I changed the picture but saved the original. However, after about ten days, I gave away my new 'smiling' Sai Baba picture to a friend with whom I discussed my experience. So, I put the original photo back on my desk in a nicer frame. After reflecting on the experience with the *vibhuti*, it seemed only respectful to keep the picture in a beautiful frame. I purchased a new golden-colored wooden frame with non-glare glass. I acquired some dark green matte boards for the border to secure the photo and create a nicer presentation. I care-

fully brushed off the image several times. I also meticulously cleaned the frame and the glass to be sure they were spotless. If holy ash appeared again on this picture, I wanted to be sure there was no question of mistaking the sign. I placed the picture beside me on my left side as I sat on the floor. I turned to my right to cut a small piece of mat board with a box cutter. I then removed the center portion of the mat board, where the picture would be secured. Looking immediately back at the picture, I observed a small mound of loose gray ash lying on top of the photo to my left!

How could such an event take place in the seconds that I had looked away? **I was, of course, wonderstruck by this spontaneous display that I could only attribute to divine grace**. I picked up the picture and bent it slightly while tilting it to allow the ash to slide down the center of the picture into my hand. Clearly, the ash could not have been on the picture as I carried it around the house. Nor had it been there when I had set the picture down seconds before. I placed the ash in my mouth and ate it, as is customary when Sai Baba offers it to a devotee in the audience before Him in India.

This experience was undeniable proof that my rational mind could not ignore or refute. It happened before my very eyes. There had been no one else present to observe or interfere. I viewed the experience as a token of the omnipresence and grace of God, who is with us every moment. It demonstrated that He constantly sees our thoughts and actions and can immediately respond when the time is right. And indeed, if He was in me, then He was also inside everybody else. **This was a momentous revelation to me. This experience reminded me of God's immanence within all of us and, therefore, of our essential unity**. For the same God resides as the witness and motivator within each of us. This experience also proved to me the amazing grace and compassion of a loving Lord. Why would He show such compassion to a person like me? Certainly, I held no claim to saintliness or even of unusual goodness. But more was to come...

A Personal Invitation

When I told my wife Rose about the appearance of the ash, she said, "Well, that's nice. If Sai Baba sends us a personal invitation, then maybe we should go to India to visit him." The chance of someone on the opposite side of the world sending a personal invitation to someone they had never met before seemed remote to me. We had been to India in 1973 when we were in college, but we did not know about Sathya Sai Baba then. **We were soon to learn that no obstacles could come in the way of divine will.**

When all of this was happening, in the late fall of 1978, my mother began planning to take a tour group to India to visit Sai Baba's Ashram at Prasanthi Nilayam. My mother soon put together a nicely typeset invitational flyer to mail to prospects for her travel group. We received our copy shortly after the second manifestation of holy ash. On the top of the flyer's front page, it was written in bold, "This is your **personal invitation** to visit Sathya Sai Baba in India!"

But, at that time, we had other challenges in planning such a trip. We were both relatively young, just 25, and had neither the time nor the money for the trip to India. However, a commercial real estate deal suddenly came my way at the real estate office where I worked. It was a transaction to purchase 110 acres of commercial land for my employer's client. When the transaction closed escrow, I received a check for $10,500.00. That was a princely sum in 1978 and was more than enough for a trip to India. Just as I received the check, my real estate broker delivered the shocking

message, saying, "You are fired!" Apparently, he thought he could get my attention this way and motivate me. I felt, instead, now I have both the time and money to pursue the trip to India!

By the end of January 1979, Rose and I climbed aboard a Boeing 747 bound for India to the garden city of Bangalore en route to the little village of Puttaparthi, a remote hamlet in Andhra Pradesh state.

Interview and Practice

Rose and I soon reached Puttaparthi, located about 114 miles north of Bangalore. We were allotted a small room in the West Prasanthi housing block. Near the end of our visit, in mid-March 1979, we were called into the *mandir* (temple) for an interview with Sai Baba. We were in a group of about 15 to 20 people of different nationalities. During that interview, we had the opportunity to ask a few spiritual questions. I asked Sai Baba if the Self-realization experience that I had when I was 18 years old in college was the genuine state of spiritual consciousness that I was striving for. He answered, "*Yes*." Although I knew in my heart that it was the goal I was seeking, I still wanted Him to confirm it. Before leaving the *Ashram* several days later, Sai Baba came out for *darshan* and stood directly in front of me, granting me the opportunity for *padanamaskar* (saluting the Divine Feet)before leaving. That first of many trips to Swami lasted for six weeks and confirmed our hopes and beliefs in what we found.

On returning to Tucson, Arizona, I involved myself intensively with the activities of the local Sai Baba Center, participating in service activities that I understood to be key to attaining my ultimate goal. **My original Self-realization experience had arrived concurrently with the resolution to do service**. But, in the excitement and bliss of that initial experience, I had focused on the result and had forgotten the causal part service played in bringing about that state.

Soon after that first trip to India, I began serving as an officer of the Sai Baba Center, which started to meet at my home soon after. In the spring of 1979, we held the first Arizona Sai Baba retreat. In 1980, I started a writing project to provide study circle material on Sathya Sai Baba's teachings which later became the first volume of *Pathways to God*, completed in 1984 and published in 1991.

During that time, I attempted to apply myself diligently to understand Sai Baba's message and implement it in my life. I worked with intensity in the hope of regaining the Self-realization that I experienced so briefly in 1971. I was convinced of Sathya Sai Baba's divinity and was confident that His path would lead me to that goal. **I applied myself fully and intensely to serve the Sathya Sai Organization and work toward Self-transformation**. I was not trying specifically to do "service"; I was only trying to meet the needs of the devotees and the organization in any way I could.

Realization of the Goal

On January 30, 1987, Rose and I stayed in Bangalore at the Taj Hotel on Mahatma Gandhi Road. We drove back and forth from the *ashram* in Whitefield for *darshan* twice a day, morning and evening. After visiting Whitefield for *darshan* that day, we returned to the hotel. Shortly after dinner, I purchased a book in the hotel bookstore titled *'Be as You Are: The Teachings of Ramana Maharshi'* by David Godman. I read a statement in the book that suddenly struck me. And I experienced that change of consciousness that I had experienced only once before. I again felt the rush of bliss and light I had experienced as an 18-year-old college student.

More than 15 years had passed since that original experience, but the sensations

were unmistakably the same. I instantly felt as though my field of vision had widened. I felt light and bright, and time stood still. Again, it was as though I were seeing objects around me for the first time. Suddenly, my entire mental focus changed in several respects. **At once, I felt that my consciousness had shifted from being directed toward external objects to being focused within.** I could not imagine that I needed anything outside of myself.

My center of consciousness also suddenly shifted from the head to the heart. In a flash, all thoughts and desires disappeared. The observer, the act of observing, and the objects of perception became one. Furthermore, after almost constantly yearning for this liberating experience for more than 15 years, that desire too suddenly vanished! I felt connected and whole as I had never felt before. The experience was such a sudden and abrupt change of consciousness that it took my breath away.

Having briefly experienced that altered state earlier, I tried to avoid analyzing the experience too much. I did not want to relinquish the experience quickly, as I had done before. I was initially concerned that the experience would not last, but as minutes turned into hours, and hours turned into days, and days into weeks, I became stronger and more confident that the delusion had gone. **I experienced tremendous relief and peace upon attaining what I had long sought**. Delusion would not return. After more than 35 years until this day, the expanded consciousness of that state has remained with me always.

Sathya Sai Baba fulfilled my Heart's desire on that day.

Thus began a new exploration of consciousness that continues day by day. Also, the shift in consciousness to the heart opened up a new way of looking at things. Although the path of wisdom took me to the brink of my goal, the final destination was beyond its borders. **It is the heart that is our true guide and source of strength. But the opening of the heart only seemed to start in earnest at the time of spiritual awakening.** After that time, the opening of the heart was noticeably accelerated.

Several times, I have been asked how I have changed since that day in January 1987. Although little has changed externally in my life, everything has changed internally. I continue to experience progressively less agitation as time goes by. I am less and less prone to react to negative external situations. **I experience a greater sense of surrender to the divine will**. I also seem to act more and more from the heart than the head. I have also become better able to distinguish between the *Atma* and the body-mind-intellect, or *Anatma*.

It is, of course, easier to quietly enjoy the bliss of the inner Self without attracting attention to oneself. But, if one has truly learned what Sai Baba has come to teach, one must know that we are all One. I would have wanted others to share their experiences of Self-realization with me when I was so desperate to know. How could this individual not share with others in a similar situation? Hence, I offer this account of my spiritual journey to Sri Sathya Sai Baba and all the fellow spiritual pilgrims on the path to Self-Realization. The results belong to Him.

Mr. Jonathan Roof
USA

Mr. Jonathan Roof *is currently retired and living in Kailua-Kona, Hawaii. Jonathan first visited Sathya Sai Baba in India in 1979. As a result of his interactions with Sai Baba, he wrote the three volumes of Pathways to God. The first volume came out in 1991 and the third volume in 2004. Jonathan served as an SSSIO officer in many capacities for 33 years. In 2011 he led the USA pilgrimage to Prasanthi Nilayam. Mr. Roof was President of the Sathya Sai Baba Central Council USA from 2001 until 2011. He has spoken extensively at Sai conferences throughout the USA and Canada.*

Sai–Our Indweller, Guide and Protector

"Where DO you come from?" Swami asked my husband innocently in His sweet and loving voice. "Denmark, Swami" was his answer, just as he always responded to questions from Swami on innumerable occasions, ever since our first visit to Puttaparthi in 1981. We always wondered what Swami's intentions were in asking that question because He always addressed us as 'Denmark' whenever He called us for an interview.

Then, one day, Swami asked a five or six years old young schoolboy sitting next to my husband on the *mandir* veranda, *"Where do you come from?"*

His big brown eyes beamed with joy as he looked up at Swami and answered confidently, "From you, Swami."

"*Good boy!",* Swami remarked.

"Aha!" My husband thought, "this is the right answer to that question. Now, Swami, I am ready for you!" Almost the very next moment, Swami came up to him, as if He heard his thoughts, and asked, *"And where do you come from?"*

"From you, Swami!" was my husband's proud response. With a gentle smile, Swami corrected him, saying, *"No, no! From Denmark!"* Of course, everybody had a good laugh.

The way Swami teaches us is profound. He makes us wonder, reflect, and even laugh whenever He interacts with us. He enlightens us in the interview room or in the *Darshan* lines so that the lessons get ingrained in us and stay with us forever.

As we reflect on these innocent and somewhat casual remarks of Swami, we develop new understanding, and sometimes we also realize that He answers profound spiritual questions that were important and intricate, through them. Baba's simple and innocent questions, in fact, make us go within and intuitively find the answer there.

At the same time, during or after answering important spiritual questions, He would suddenly change the atmosphere and connect with us in a familiar and intimate way, sometimes as a dear family member! He would reveal to us that He had been present at our family events, and like a grandfather, He would share what had happened. With His unique humor, He would imitate the expressions and words exactly as we used them in our family setting. Thus, **He would convey that He knew everything and that He was always with us, watching over us.**

The Lord who takes Care of Everything, Big and Small

During our first visit in 1981, Swami gave my husband His robe along with His guidance to start the Sathya Sai International Organization of Denmark upon our return.

Later, in 1987, He urged us to form the first Institute of Sathya Sai Education outside India. He continuously guided and advised us, making necessary changes to our plans. To understand His directions, we had to stay alert and engaged, letting go of all expectations. Then He took care of every small detail in His own divine, enigmatic way.

For instance, in 1982, we came to visit Him with our 7-year-old son, who refused to eat the spicy food in the South Indian canteen. He would protest saying, "I do not like this!" Since there was no Western canteen at that time, in frustration, we said, "But what do you want to eat?" Prompt came his answer, "French fries," not realizing that my question was a rhetorical one. However, Swami seemed to have taken note and answered my son's innocent demand! The following day, we were amazed to see that they served French fries in the South Indian canteen! Not only that, but they continued to do so for the rest of our stay! We had never seen this happen in the South Indian canteen before, or at any time since then. Such is Swami's grace and compassion!

On another occasion, we had multiple leaks in the bathroom of our flat in Prasanthi Nilayam. I just called out, "Oh, Swami! We need a plumber!" It was a spontaneous cry for help. Before my husband could call for a plumber, within minutes, there was a knock on the door. It was a plumber! With a smile, he asked, "You called?" **This shows He hears all our prayers.**

Swami–Physician Par Excellence

Once, I had a dream where I was calling out to Swami, and He was warning me about an impending illness. I woke up with an upset stomach, with the symptoms of dysentery. At *darshan,* Swami walked past me without even looking at me. Then, suddenly, He turned around and gave me a direct, penetrating look. At the very moment when He looked into my eyes, the illness suddenly disappeared!

In 1983, just before our departure from the Ashram, our son developed a very high fever. My husband decided to take him to the hospital while I finished packing. Suddenly a volunteer (*Seva Dal)* came to our door with the message that Swami wanted to see us! We had hardly arrived at Swami's door when He came out and said, *"Denmark, come."*

Inside, Swami's first remarks were, *"Why are you going to the hospital when I am here?"* My husband started explaining, but Swami just smiled and held our son's hand, saying, *"He is fine, nothing is the matter with him. No fever. Feel it for yourself."*

Later our son told us that the moment Swami held his hand, he got well and felt cool and happy!

In another instance, due to a work-related injury, I developed a joint disease in my spine. I was confined to bed for long periods and suffered intense pain. Though it was very difficult to travel to India, I somehow managed to visit Swami many times. During one of our visits, Swami came to me quietly during *darshan* and *bhajans,* stood right before me, and looked intensely into my eyes. He stood still for quite some time, and after a while, I miraculously felt a warmth surging up my spine. When He turned around and walked away, my intense pain had completely disappeared! After returning home, X-rays showed that the cartilage between the joints had healed and improved!

On one occasion, Swami was distributing sweets to the ladies, and everybody around me stretched out their hands to receive one from His Divine hands. When He came to me, He did not give me a sweet. Instead, He looked at me sweetly and said, *"Always smile."* The disappointment of not getting a sweet from Him instantly became a

valuable lesson because His smile and the energy He transmitted to me touched my heart and lifted me up. I understood that He had something more precious to give me. I found these priceless moments of interaction immensely valuable and transformative.

He is The Indweller and Guide

Many a time, He asked us, *"What do you want?"*

It was a simple question to make us think and reflect on our desires and expectations in life so that, eventually we would realize the goal of our lives. He redirected our focus from an outer vision to an inner vision. But irrespective of our answer to His question, He blessed us to fulfill our needs at that moment. I never thought that the time would come when He would no longer move among us.

He had asked me in the later years, *"What do you want?"* I replied, "Your love, Swami." ***"My love? Why do you want my love? I am in your heart!"***

His reply reminded me that it was foolish to seek Him outside. He clearly confirmed that I would be able to find Him in my heart!

The heart is where we can find Him when we need His presence, His guidance, and His reassurance. Thus, He prepared me for the time when He would no longer be physically present among us.

Coming to Swami was the beginning of the journey that completely changed our lives. From the very first visit, He blessed us with interviews and intimate interactions. Through His loving guidance, He inspired us to walk the spiritual path. Finally, He led us to the point where we understood what He had really come to give us and why He descended on earth! ***He came to share His Selfless Love*** and to inspire us to open our hearts and embrace the world through the higher principle of Universal Love.

Mrs. Marianne Meyer
DENMARK

Mrs. Marianne Meyer *graduated from Copenhagen Business College and later continued her university studies in philosophy, psychology, and pedagogy. She and her husband, the late Thorbjorn Meyer, established the Sri Sathya Sai International Organization in Denmark and the ESSE Institute. Mrs. Meyer has served in many capacities in the SSSIO. She is a Member of the Prasanthi Council and a Director of the Sri Sathya Sai World Foundation.*

My Journey to Swami

It is difficult to express Sai Baba's omniscience and omnipotence in words since it is well beyond anyone's comprehension. Swami's miracles abound around the world.

Swami's *Vibhuti* Cures Cancer

His devotees have been witnessing *vibhuti* falling from His pictures in various places, *Kumkum* manifesting on the left side, and *vibhuti* on the right side of Swami's pictures, corresponding to the *Shakti* and *Shiva* aspects of the Avatar.

While living in Delhi, I came to know of such a place–101 Sunder Nagar, Delhi, where *vibhuti* was manifesting, and I went with my family to visit this home in Delhi. *Bhajans* were going on, and we also joined in and enjoyed them. People collected the *vibhuti* that appeared, before returning home. We stayed back to meet the lady of the house and expressed our desire to see the manifestations of *vibhuti*. She took us to their puja room where we saw a large amount of *vibhuti* on Swami's photo, some of which had fallen to the bottom. I was amazed, yet a bit skeptical, and I asked her about how she came to believe in Swami. Then she told me the story which I share below.

She said that she was suffering from cancer and was almost in the last stages. Then someone advised her to take Swami's *vibhuti* to cure her cancer. Considering that she did not have many choices left, she decided to follow this advice, took the *vibhuti,* and was completely cured. I found this story hard to believe. Furthermore, she also identified the doctor who attended her during her treatment for cancer – who was Dr. C. L. Sahani, a well-known physician. We left her home with *vibhuti*.

The following Sunday, we went to Dr. Sahani's house and his wife received us cordially as the doctor was at the clinic. Mrs. Sahani inquired about our visit, and we asked her how they started believing in Swami. Then she started narrating the story of the same cancer patient, whom we met earlier at Sunder Nagar, Delhi. She said that by the time this patient came for consultancy, her cancer was in an advanced stage. Doctor Sahani performed a biopsy and informed her that there was only a bleak chance for recovery. The lady responded, "I want to take *vibhuti*, Swami will save me." Seeing not many options, Dr. Sahani said, "Go ahead, nothing wrong with that." Thus, she started taking *vibhuti*. After about two to three months, she reported feeling very well, almost normal. **Dr. Sahani did a biopsy and found no signs of cancer! The doctor had a second biopsy performed after 2-3 days, which reconfirmed that her cancer was gone!**

The first thing that came to my rational mind after hearing this story was that it is not humanly possible! However, Swami says, "Do not believe blindly. You must see and then believe. Believing blindly sometimes leads you down the wrong path." I was always skeptical, but after hearing this unbelievable incident first-hand, I started to develop faith.

My First *Darshan* of Swami

in 1970 I heard that Swami was visiting Delhi. I was then working in Patna and I took a flight to Delhi with my family to have Swami's *darshan*. During the flight, accompanied by my wife, I thought that I have heard many stories about Swami, but will I be able to see Him from close range? I also thought, 'Is it possible to touch His feet? I know that He creates *vibhuti*, but will I be blessed to receive it?' While all these thoughts were going through my mind, the flight landed in Delhi.

The next day, arriving at the venue, I saw big *shamianas* (canopies) at the Golf Links, Delhi in order to accommodate the large gathering expected for Swami's *darshan*. The hall was almost full when we reached, and we ended up near the last row. When Swami came out, we had only a brief glimpse of Him from far away. I also remember seeing a lady seated with her child on her lap, from some distance. The child started crying and she tried to cover the child's mouth. As soon as Swami came near her, He just waved His hand and a banana appeared. He gave it to the crying child and told the mother, "She's hungry, give her this."

Soon after, the crowd dispersed. Upon learning that Swami was staying at a home next door, we went to the house where Swami was staying for *darshan*. As we were standing at the house gate, the gatekeeper kindly asked, "Do you want to come in?", and opened the gate. My heart was beating fast with anticipation and excitement. We took courage and went inside, although I was concerned that the owner of the house may turn us out as we were strangers. From the veranda, I could see that a door was partly open, and Swami was moving inside with 8 to 10 people around Him. I was in a dilemma. I thought, "I am uninvited; I did not know anyone in the house; should I enter or not?" Finally, we gathered courage and went inside. Nobody paid attention to us, as they were all engaged in conversations with Swami. **I thought how fortunate I am to see Swami at such close range!** I wondered if it was possible to get His *padanamaskar* (blessings from touching the feet). Incredibly, just then, Swami came to my wife and me–and gave us *padanamaskar*! I was stunned and in bliss, not able to comprehend what transpired. Then I thought, "Swami, if you have granted us this boon, can you also bless us by creating *vibhuti*? Not for me, but at least for my wife and my little daughter. I will be happy even if you do not give it to me." Unbelievably, once again, Swami came toward us, created *vibhuti*, and gave it to my wife and my daughter, but not to me, and went away! **I was in complete ecstasy! After this experience, how is it possible not to believe that He is God?**

My First Visit to Puttaparthi

Now I want to share the story of our first visit to Puttaparthi in 1971. Slowly my faith grew with my experiences of Swami. I first visited Puttaparthi with my wife, my three to four-year-daughter, friends, and family members from Allahabad. One of them had polio and the other had physical challenges. We reached Puttaparthi with the ladies in our group, and found there was no accommodation, no electricity, and no water. We all sat at the gate on the sands in front of Swami's house. On the way from Bangalore to Puttaparthi, we experienced a heavy downpour of rain which stopped only a few kilometers from Puttaparthi, but heavy clouds still remained. Hence, I wondered why everybody was sleeping under trees, in case there was a sudden and heavy deluge.

We arrived on 22nd November 1971, the day before Swami's Birthday on 23rd November. When I reached Puttaparthi, I could

not even find a place to spread our bed. There were seven people in our group, and I was not sure where we could sleep at night as we reached late in the evening. Someone said, "Sometimes Swami passes by the verandah on the first floor of His residence. Enjoy His *darshan*." We stayed near the gate and Swami came and blessed everyone with His *darshan* and left.

As I was wondering about our accommodations for the night, **I smelled the fragrance of incense which is believed to indicate Swami's presence.** Rays of hope lit up my mind upon smelling the fragrance. Within a minute or two, a young boy came and asked me, "Are you from the family of K. L. Misra?" That was my father's name, and we hailed from Allahabad which was far away. I do not know how he knew my father's name in that remote village in South India. The boy came straight to us in that large crowd and asked me, "Are you searching for a place to stay?" We said, "Yes, yes, can we get a place?" He said, "Follow me." We followed him as he led us to a place just behind the present *ashram*, where there were tall, fully grown eucalyptus trees. Below one tree, there was enough room for seven or more persons to sleep. He said, "This is your place to stay for tonight." I wondered how this spot was still available despite the entire area being packed with visitors. But we encountered yet another problem. There were ladies in our group, and there were no restrooms for them to answer nature's call, and no electricity or water.

As I was wondering what to do, I remembered that a lady from Allahabad had informed me earlier that she lived in Puttaparthi. I thought maybe she still lived here and I asked the boy if he knew that lady. The boy said simply, "Follow me." I was surprised at his reply but followed him. The boy took me straight to the lady I wanted to meet. Upon seeing me, she immediately said, "Oh Misraji, when did you come?" I was much relieved to see her, and she made all other arrangements for our stay for the next day. Then, I looked around for the boy to thank him, but he was nowhere to be found! I searched everywhere and also asked the lady from Allahabad about this boy. She replied, "Don't worry. This is Swami's grace. You can see it everywhere. Since you were very uncomfortable, Swami made all the arrangements for you to have a comfortable stay."

At that time, I was relatively a new devotee of Swami and did not know much about His miracles. **Later, I saw for the first time how a polio patient was cured by Swami. The person who went limping to Him, carried by others, actually walked back home on his own!**

My First Interview with Swami

Let me relate the experience of my first interview with Swami. Although I never asked for anything from Swami yet I had a desire in the back of my mind. Since He was Shiva-Shakti Avatar, I thought it would be an exalted blessing to receive a Shiva Lingam from Swami, who was Shiva Himself. I would relish such a blessed gift throughout my life. When I went into the interview room, He was talking with everyone present. During my very first interview, He created a Shiva Lingam and gave it to me! He asked me to worship it every day and do *abhishekam* (ceremonial sacred bathing) by pouring water on the Shiva Lingam and drink the consecrated water. This incident happened in 1990, and even today, **I enjoy worshipping the Shiva Lingam, a precious blessing from Swami. I never asked Swami for this, although I had inner cravings. How can one doubt His Omniscience?**

The Omnipresent Swami

In Puttaparthi, once we met a couple from Canada in the *ashram*. My daughter earlier

saw the couple being called by Swami for an interview and wanted me to ask them about the interview. I told my daughter never to ask anyone about what Swami told them because it was their personal matter. But on my daughter's persistence, I relented and requested the couple if they would be kind enough to share their experiences with Swami, without specifically asking about the interview. The lady agreed to do so and shared the following experience.

As we well know, Swami never asked anyone to change their religion or their chosen form of God. This couple were followers of Christianity and came to see Swami during the Christmas celebration. Swami called them for an interview and said, **"This is your God's Day. Ask me for anything, and I will give it to you."** They replied, "Swami, you have given us everything. We don't want anything more." Swami insisted that they ask for a boon since they were with Him on their God's Day. Finally, the lady said, "Swami, we have only one son and he lives in Canada. Please bless him." That was the only thing she asked for and the matter ended there. It was a simple request.

When they returned to Canada, their son came to receive them at the airport, visibly excited. He said, "You know, Swami came and blessed me here!" The couple said, "You must be dreaming. How is it possible?" The son responded, "No, no, I was on duty at my station in the Canadian Air Force. I was not dreaming." Then the couple asked their son on which day this happened. The son responded that it was on Christmas day. The couple said, "No, no, on that day Swami was in Puttaparthi." But **the son was quite adamant that Swami had indeed visited him and blessed him. When the couple enquired about the time of Swami's visit, they realized that it matched exactly with the time when the wife had requested Swami to bless their son in Canada!**

Hence, Swami was physically present both in Puttaparthi and in Canada at the same time. This is a true account of a devotee and not a dream. Such is the Omnipresence of Lord Sai!

Justice A. P. Misra
INDIA

Honorable Justice Ajay Prakash Misra *has been an ardent devotee of Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba for many decades. He served as a Justice of the Supreme Court of India and the Chief Justice of the Delhi High Court. He also served as the Chairman of the Human Rights Commission (Uttar Pradesh). A prolific and erudite speaker who has addressed many social and religious congregations, he was awarded the Mahatma Gandhi Peace Visionary Award on 12th December 2014 by the President of the Republic of Croatia.*

He has served as a trustee of the Sri Sathya Sai Central Trust and as a member of the Education Trust of the Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning.

The Goal of Spiritual Life

I am very happy to be here in this beautiful country of yours, New Zealand, and especially happy to be here with Sai devotees.

The Only Reality

I would like to explain to you that although we say about Sai that He is here with us, the fact is–He *is* here. To illustrate, we are all sitting here in this room, separate from one another. To a stranger coming into the room, it would seem that this is a room full of individuals, each one unique and separate from the other. The fact is that Swami is the only reality that exists. He is the *only* reality. Everything else is *maya,* it is not truly real; it is transient and it does not last.

The only reality is Swami; and in every person here, Swami is the only reality. Therefore, when we look at each other, we should realize that we are looking directly at the Lord, directly at Swami. We should look right through the transient personality, pay no attention to the beauty or lack of beauty in the person, pay no attention to the personality–whether it is pleasant or obnoxious. We simply look right through that person and see that God is the only reality in that person.

Therefore, we can, when we look at another person, quietly to ourselves, secretly–because it is a secret between God and ourselves–we can say, "Dearest Lord, I love You." Immediately, there will be a flash of happiness across your heart. The person you are talking to should not know. That is a secret between you and the Lord. You continue treating the person according to his actions and his status. If it is a taxicab driver, do not invite him into the house and bring out your checkbook, sign it and tell him to fill in the amount. You treat him as a taxicab driver. He does not know.

The Story of the Crucifix

I must tell you one more story and that is the story of the crucifix–the crucifix that Swami created. Some folks here in New Zealand telephoned me in California and asked me if I would please bring the crucifix. I had rarely taken the crucifix anyplace before. I said, "All right. For New Zealand, I will bring the crucifix." So, it is there on the altar and after the meeting, if you would like to come up and look at it, you are quite welcome to do so.

The Story of the *Lingam*

Now, the story of the crucifix. For many years, Swami brought a *lingam* (ellipsoid-shaped stone worshipped as the symbol of creation) up from His stomach during Mahashivarathri (Hindu festival, literally "the night of Shiva"). In Prasanthi Nilayam, He would sit on the platform and the audience would be out in front of Him and they would start to sing *bhajans*. After a while, Swami would look uneasy, He would move and look as if He was suffering a bit. When that started, the *bhajans* would start to go faster and faster, until finally Swami would put His hand near His face, and out of His mouth would come a flash of light and a great big *lingam*.

I was sitting close to Him one time and I saw it, and what landed in His hand was a *lingam* sitting on a stand with three legs. How that came up out of Swami's throat and out of His mouth, I cannot imagine. What I saw was a flash of light, and then I saw the object in His hand. So, I do not know if the flash of light comes out first and then coalesces into the object. As far as I know, Swami has never said.

Every time He produced the *lingam,* it would be a different *lingam*. Sometimes the *lingam* would have a flame inside of it. You could see the flame inside the *lingam*. The *lingam* would be passed around and looked at by the devotees. Sometimes Swami gives *lingams* to some of His devotees. I believe here in Auckland, some people have received *lingams* from Swami.

Swami finally stopped doing the Shivarathri *lingam* ceremony. So, the next year, at the time of Mahashivarathri, He said to me, "Hislop, have a taxi ready at five o'clock in the morning and tell no one because we are going to go on an expedition." We were going up to the Bandipur Forest in Mysore State.

We were there to do the *lingam* ceremony out of the sight of the general public. We drove around the forest, and Swami was looking for a good place to have the ceremony. We passed over a wooden bridge and there was a dry riverbed underneath and Swami said, "*This will do.*"

We came back a couple of hours later and prepared for the ceremony. We were walking toward the edge of the riverbank when Swami reached over and pulled two little twigs off a tree and He crossed them on the palm of his hand and said, *"What's that, Hislop?"* So, I said, "Well, it's a cross, Swami." Then He put the two little twigs in His hands and blew for quite a few seconds. When He opened His hands, there was the crucifix–this extraordinary, gorgeous sculpture of Christ on the cross. I think it must be the greatest sculpture of the figure in the history of the world. It is simply outstanding.

I did not know what to say. There was a hole near the top of the cross and so I said, "Swami, what is that hole there for?" He said, *"Contrary to popular belief, the cross was not put into the ground, it was hung on a peg on a standard."* I said then, "Swami, what are all these broken places on the body?" These were especially evident after the first photographs were taken. Swami explained that not one inch of Christ's body was left uninjured. Every square inch had been beaten and bruised, with blood coagulating under the skin. The blood coagulated and made a series of little bumps all over the body. So that is the story of the crucifix.

The Power of the Crucifix

It is a very powerful thing, that crucifix. I do not know if you remember Mrs. Cowan, she had the first Sai Bookstore in America. She wanted to have pictures of the crucifix for sale in the Sai Bookstore, so we asked Swami if it would be all right and He said, yes, that could be done. So, she sent a commercial photographer to take the photographs; and about a week later he came to my home with the prints.

The photographer, my wife and I, were sitting at the table, studying these gorgeous prints of the crucifix. At the time, we were living in Mexico where we had a big house with long French windows facing the ocean. Typically, in Baja, California, the sky is very, very clear. This was a typical Baja, California day with not a cloud in the sky. As we sat looking at the photographs and studying the crucifix itself, suddenly, we heard a tremendous peal of thunder. We looked out the window at what, just

a moment before, had been a perfectly clear sky to see a black cloud with flashes of lightning coming from it. Then a terrific wind arose and banged all the doors in the house and blew all the curtains aside. We were stunned. We wondered what was happening here.

Then my wife remembered. She said, "It tells about it in the Bible." So, she went and got the Bible and found the passage where it describes what happened at the death of Christ. High winds came and wrecked the curtains of the temple, and so on.

Swami Corroborates the Story

Dr. Fanibunda wanted to know about the crucifix. You know of Dr. Fanibunda who wrote *Vision of the Divine;* you are familiar with that. He is a dentist in Bombay. He wanted an account for his book. So, I wrote down the account of exactly what had happened and sent it to him. He had it sitting beside his typewriter when Swami came to Bombay.

When Swami comes to Bombay, He usually stops at Fanibunda's house because Fanibunda is an old-time devotee. Baba stopped there, and beside the typewriter He saw my paper sitting there. Fanibunda asked, "Swami, is that right?" Swami looked at it and said, *"Yes, what Hislop says is correct. That was a recapitulation of the death of Christ."*

Miracle in El Salvador

Devotees wanted me to go to El Salvador to talk at the Center there. So, to honor their wish, I took the crucifix with me. The head of the organization there is a chap who runs an American corporation in El Salvador. All the devotees were there, the crucifix was on the table, and they were looking at it. It was a nice bright day, and suddenly, it started to rain and thunder and winds came and blew the windows of his house open and banged all the doors in his house, too.

The Earth Shakes

When we were back in Baja, some chap up in Northern California sent a telegram saying that he would like to stop by the house and see the crucifix, and we agreed. He came and was sitting looking at it–and we were looking at it with him–when the whole house started to shake as in an earthquake. I thought it was an earthquake. After it was over and the man had gone, I went to our neighbor and said, "That was quite an earthquake, did you have any damage?" and she said, "What quake, what quake are you talking about? There was no earthquake."

So that crucifix is a tremendously powerful symbol of the Lord. It is here, and you are welcome to look at it after the meeting.

How to Merge with God

It is my duty and my pleasure too, when I talk to Sai devotees, to tell them what Sai says as to how every devotee can realize his dearest dream–that dream being: to unite with God, to merge with God, and to realize his own true nature. What I think you might *need* to hear may be quite different from what you believe you would *like* to hear. Therefore, I will tell you what Swami has said, for a while, and then I will ask you to tell me what you would like to know.

Since I have been with Swami for many years, I have heard many talks and had many conversations with Him, I can remember what He has said to just about any question that you might ask. When I answer your question, you can be sure it will be what Swami has said about that question or a very similar question.

The Goal of Spiritual Life

Why are we here–not at home watching television or a movie or something like that? It is because we have an interest in spiritual life. Most people do not have an interest in spiritual life. Swami said that if you take an ordinary worldly person and sit him down quietly and explain to him in the clearest possible language what spiritual life is, what the goal of spiritual life is, and how one proceeds to lead a spiritual life, that person would not have the slightest interest in what you are saying. No interest whatsoever.

That is why Swami tells us, *"Do not talk about Me to anybody who is not already My devotee."*

You might reply, "I am supposed to help people. I help people by telling them about Swami." Not true. You help people, you help everybody–all of humanity–by achieving liberation yourself. The first goal of devotees should be to achieve liberation, to find out–"who am I?"

Dr. John S. Hislop
MT. EDEN CENTER, NEW ZEALAND
October 21, 1993

Dr. John Hislop *was a long-time devotee of Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba who lived in California, USA. He started his spiritual journey at age 16 and came to Swami in 1968. He was a noble instrument of Bhagawan Baba, who worked tirelessly in the divine mission. He is the author of many books about Swami. In 1975, Swami appointed him as the founding President of the Sri Sathya Sai Central Council of the USA. He also served as the President of the Sathya Sai Society of America.*

Swami and the Picture of Jesus Christ

Before I met Sri Sathya Sai Baba, I was a member of the Youth Group of a Catholic Church. I remember very well a day in the late 1980s when I was on my knees in church praying to Jesus, saying how I wish I lived during His time, so that I could be with Him and hear His sweet loving words.

To my surprise and happiness, about six months after this incident, I learned through a friend that God had indeed incarnated in India. My first reaction was to think he was crazy. But, when he later shared inspiring messages from Sai, I felt a total connection with Him and I surrendered to Him at once.

It was wonderful to see how the message of Sri Sathya Sai was the same as Jesus' message of love and compassion that had touched my heart. Swami said that Jesus exhorted people by precept and example to cultivate the divine qualities of charity, compassion, tolerance, love and faith. It was beautiful to have the opportunity to experience the very source of divinity, to see the very love personified, walking among us. I would like to share an interesting incident from the time I first learned about Sri Sathya Sai Baba. Swami has said that He did not want blind acceptance, He even exhorted us to test Him to have personal conviction and develop faith.

My elder brother who was a devout Christian did not believe in Swami. Before starting my second trip to Prasanthi Nilayam, I asked him what he wanted from Swami. I further added that he could ask for anything, as I had faith that Swami would grant my sincere wish. My brother replied, "Ask Him for an authentic picture of Jesus Christ." I agreed.

During my next visit to see Swami, I spent 15 days in the Ashram, but I completely forgot about my brother's request. Before returning to Brazil, I visited a longtime devotee of Swami, in Canada.

After a few days at his house, it was time to return to Brazil. Before leaving for the airport, I saw a small picture of Jesus Christ on his altar and asked him about it. He replied, "Don't you know the story about this picture?"

Then he started to narrate, "I took along a color picture of Jesus Christ to get it blessed by Sai Baba during *darshan*. One day, Swami stopped in front of me, and I held out the picture for Swami to bless. Swami pointed to the picture and asked, "who is this person?" I replied that it was Jesus Christ. Then Swami responded saying that Jesus did not look anything like that. When I asked what Jesus looked like, Swami ran his hand over the color picture and changed it into a black and white picture with a different appearance of Jesus from the original. He once again waved His hand over the picture and it turned into a color picture. This is a copy of the picture that Swami had transformed." Then he picked up the picture from his altar and gave it to me saying, "Here, it is all

yours!" I was hesitant to accept the picture as it was his precious possession. But he insisted, saying that it is a copy of the one that Swami had blessed and I could have it as he can get additional copies made.

It was only then that I remembered the request from my brother in Brazil, which I had completely forgotten. But **Swami doesn't forget anything! Swami came to my rescue and fulfilled my prayer**. He gifted me an authentic picture of Jesus Christ through this devotee of His from Canada. I felt elated and grateful thinking about this divine play that enabled me to fulfill the promise I had made to my elder brother. Swami is omniscient and His love and compassion for His devotees is truly boundless.

In 2009, Swami granted me another wonderful, divine experience.

It was the time of Guru Poornima, and nearly 300 Brazilian devotees were gathered in Prasanthi Nilayam on a pilgrimage. We were scheduled to sing in the divine presence and I had the blessed opportunity to show Swami a draft of the program folder we planned to distribute in Sai Kulwant Hall.

In this folder the opening page had a photo of Christ the Redeemer, which is a famous monument located in the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. When Swami saw this picture, He asked me, *"Who is this?"* and I replied, "Jesus Christ, Swami!" Then He told me that Jesus did not look like the figure of the statue. I told Him that I would replace it with a photo of Swami before distribution.

Immediately, I recalled the story I had narrated earlier about a similar incident I heard from the Canadian devotee–even Swami's words were similar. I had forgotten how He had gifted me a realistic picture of Jesus over 13 years earlier. Thus, He reminded me how He responded to my brother's challenge, demonstrating His Omnipresence, Omniscience and Omnipotence. **He is with us all the time, ready to help us, if only we call out to Him with all our heart**.

We are very fortunate to be contemporaries of the Avatar, and even more so, to be able to recognize Him, by His grace. In His infinite love, Swami created this sacred Organization called SSSIO, so that we can have an ideal environment to work for our spiritual progress. Let us make use of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and let us always be ready to serve Him with love and gratitude.

Jai Sai Ram!

Mr. Sergio Espindola
BRAZIL

Mr. Sergio Espindola *is the Chairman of Zone 2B of SSSIO in South America, which includes Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela. He has held various positions in the SSSIO for over 30 years. Mr. Espindola has a degree in Telecommunications Engineering.*

Faith and Gayatri

One winter evening in the late nineties, when my wife Birgitte and I were working independently on an SSSIO project for the Sai Center in Copenhagen, Birgitte suddenly shouted out loudly, "Mother is lying on the floor, she cannot get up. We must drive to Vordingborg and help her." I replied, "Wait! How can you be sure of this?" She said, "I was looking at Baba's picture next to the computer. Suddenly I had a feeling that my mother is lying down on the floor! We have to drive there now!" I knew inside that it was true, even though I said, "That is not possible. We are 105 km away; there is a violent snowstorm going on, and there is no roadside assistance should something go wrong. Let us first call the homecare facility, as they are in the same city. They have a key to your mother's apartment." We called the people at the homecare, who agreed to drive to my mother-in-law's home right away. After about 30 minutes the phone rang. Birgitte was right, and they said that my mother-in-law lay cold and exhausted on the stairs since the golden bracelet in her hand was caught in the railing. They helped to move her to the bed and called the doctor on call.

Birgitte and I decided to drive the long distance to Vordingborg, where my mother-in-law lived, even though there was a heavy snowstorm and a warning not to drive because of hazardous road conditions. We started driving over roads covered with about 20 cm of snow. When we reached the highway, as we reached the ramp, I told Birgitte, "Now Baba has to drive the car, this is too dangerous for me." I stepped on the accelerator and moved into the outer lane of the road and let go of the steering wheel. The speed slowly reached 110 km per hour. The snow was everywhere, with visibility below 50 meters. The snow swirled into the windscreen, and it was impossible to see anything. **We both began continuously chanting the Gayatri Mantra**. I knew that we did not have enough gasoline for the drive, but we had enough to reach the next gas station about 40 km ahead, where we could refuel. Several times I thought, "It is crazy, that I am not holding the steering wheel!" But every time I grabbed the steering wheel, the car started to swerve and skid, and I could not steer the car. "Sorry, Swami!"–I called out loudly. I refueled at the next stop and entered the shop to pay. Two men from the roadside assistance team looked at me, and I asked them about the highway condition ahead. They replied that everything was closed, with no roadside help and no snow removal, and the Police strongly discouraged us to be on the road. I got back into the car and told Birgitte, what I just heard about the road conditions ahead. I started the car and drove back on the highway, moved to the outer lane, and released the steering wheel. Then I stepped on the accelerator and said to Swami, "You steer the car, I will step on the accelerator."

Later we saw the red taillights of other cars. They were driving at a very slow speed in the inner lane. I blinked my headlights to warn them that a fast-moving car is approaching. Some cars appeared to be station-

ary, while we drove past, as we were going so fast! Again, I thought: "It is crazy, that I am not holding the steering wheel of the car, and the speed is too high. But again, whenever I touch the steering wheel, the car starts swerving and I cannot steer the car." When I released the steering wheel again, the car straightened up and continued driving smoothly through 15-20 cm of snow, with occasional higher snowdrifts. **We were constantly chanting the Gayatri and praying for Swami's help. It was evident, that He was steering our car!**

After an hour and ten minutes, we arrived at Birgitte's mother's home. At the same time, another car pulled up ahead of us. We figured that it might be the doctor on duty, as he had a medical bag and walked to the front door.

All of us entered the first floor, where my mother-in-law lived. After the doctor had examined my mother-in-law, he said, that she only got cold from lying on the stairs, and it was not a major illness. He asked us, where we came from, and we told him, that we lived in Copenhagen about 105 km away. He said, "You must have been on the road for several hours." I said, "No, only about an hour." Then, he replied, "I drove 15 km, from Praesto to here, and it took me one and half hours to get here!" We had nothing further to say.

How can anyone explain Swami's miracles of love?

Mr. Stig Meincke
DENMARK

Mr. Stig Meincke *was a manager of two companies and conducted seminars and courses on communication and human values. He was a facilitator for children, adolescents, and adults with various types of learning disabilities. He is a member of the SSSIO of Denmark since 1983 and served in many capacities as a Sathya Sai Education in Human Values Teacher, President of the SSSIO center, national devotional coordinator, National Council President of SSSIO Denmark, and coordinator of the Sri Sathya Sai Center in Copenhagen. He is the coordinator for SSSIO books and publications in Denmark.*

Swami, the Giver of Life

In the 1970s, I got many opportunities to escort Swami to Madras (Chennai now). Swami visited Madras every year, usually in January. Upon receiving an intimation from Him, I would go to Brindavan, Whitefield, in Bangalore (Bengaluru today) with three or four cars and drive Swami back to Madras in a convoy.

Swami was always very meticulous in His planning. He instructed us to have all the diabetic patients in the entourage in one car and provide savories for snacks, but we were not to pack any sweets for them. He guided us to keep all the elderly devotees in another vehicle, instructing the driver to make regular stops at hotels along the way so they could visit the restroom. He had me keep track of all vehicles to ensure everyone reached the destination safely. He attended to every little detail before we set out on the journey.

The story I am about to narrate happened during Swami's visit to Madras in 1978. It began as usual, with me going to Bangalore and returning with Swami to Sundaram in Madras. There was only a small *mandir* back then. The beautiful edifice of Sundaram we see today was inaugurated by Swami only later on January 19, 1981.

The Drive Protocol

At that time, Major Rayanangar was the State President of the Sri Sathya Sai Seva Organizations of Tamil Nadu, and I served as the District President for Madras. During Swami's stay in Madras, He would bless many devotees with visits to their homes. The homes and venues to be visited would be decided the previous day by Swami, and Major Rayanangar would give me the details to take Swami for the scheduled visits in Madras, as I was familiar with the city.

Whenever Swami went around in Madras, there would be motorcycle escorts. I was told to use the signal lights in the car to alert the motorcycle escorts in case Swami made any changes to the route while driving. It was a well-understood protocol. On that particular day in January 1978, Swami surprised everyone, including myself!

Major Rayanangar said that Swami had not given him any specific destination for the day. He advised me to ask Swami for this information myself. Swami told me that He would tell me the destination on the way. Even when we started, I had no clue where we would be going. It was just the two of us in the car, and Swami told me to take a right turn at a signal. I switched on the right indicator lamp, and the piloting motorcycles ahead clearly saw it in their rear-view mirrors. But even as they turned to the right, Swami quickly instructed me to turn left! Though I changed the indicator quickly, it was too late, and now all the motorcycle escorts were headed in the opposite direction!

Hospital Hospitality

I was confident that the motorcycle escorts would soon turn around and catch up.

However, Swami had directed me to turn very quickly. After that, He guided me through a series of right and left turns in quick succession, and I was convinced that there was no way that our escorts would find us. Swami led me to Lady Wellington Nursing Home, a well-known hospital established in 1932 at 31 Greams Lane in the heart of the city. We reached the hospital at 11:10 PM. I knew the timings of this famous hospital, and I told Swami that visitors would not be allowed between 11 AM and 4 PM. But Swami would have none of it. He told me to drive to the foyer, where He got out. As I began to open my car door, He told me to stay put. Surprisingly, the gate wasn't locked that day! He went into the hospital alone and returned after 10-15 minutes. On the way back, He casually mentioned, *"Parvathamma had died two hours ago. I brought her back to life. She is fine now."*

My jaw just dropped open! Mrs. Parvathamma was the wife of Mr. Hanumantha Rao, the Transport Commissioner of the State of Madras. He was also the person who issued Swami's driving license as He used to drive the two-door Morris Minor car! The couple were ardent devotees of Swami, and Swami visited their home on many occasions. Swami continued, "*When I brought her back to life, she opened her eyes and asked for water. I suggested coffee would be better for her. She agreed, and so I gave her some coffee.*"

"How did You get her coffee, Swami," I ventured to ask, "You had not taken any flask with You...."

He smiled. *"I put my little finger to her mouth, and she drank her coffee from it." Swami continued, "She has to take over as chairperson of the Andhra Mahila Sabha (Ladies' Wing) and do a lot of service. I told her to leave the hospital in the evening."*

Confirmation of Miracle

After Swami retired to His room, I was reprimanded by the State President and others about how I had given wrong signals while driving. I quickly explained to them that I was following Swami's command and excused myself. Getting into the car, I rushed back to the Lady Wellington Hospital. It was now around 12:30 PM.

As I stopped the car at the hospital, a security guard came to me and said that I could visit patients only after 4 pm. I explained that I had come to the hospital just an hour ago, and a 'person' had indeed gone inside to meet a patient at 11:10 am. The guard was convinced that I was lying and got angry. Luckily, just then, a doctor who knew me well came by, and I requested him to take me inside. I discovered that the hospital staff had thought Mrs. Parvathamma had passed away, and her death certificate was being prepared. But then, she had suddenly revived and asked to be discharged in the evening! I rushed to the place where Mrs. Parvathamma was in the hospital. She was oblivious to the fact that she had reportedly passed away! But she was beaming with joy at having Swami's *darshan*. Her narrative matched Swami's description to the last detail! "How did Swami give you coffee?" I asked. "Oh! He held His little finger to my mouth, and I drank the coffee!"

His Divine Word is a Command

Dazed, I returned to Sundaram to be in time for the afternoon *darshan* at 3:00 PM. Swami summoned me to His room. He asked me, *"Ay! Where did you go after you left Me?"* I had to tell Him the truth.

Swami responded, *"So, you did not believe what I said and went back to verify?"* I just fell at His feet, asking for forgiveness.

Swami then told me, *"Do not share this with anyone else. Keep it to yourself."* I nodded in loving obedience.

It is unbelievable that for 20 years after that incident, I did not even have any recollection of this stupendous and awe-inspiring miracle! One fine day in 1998, in Brindavan, when Swami beckoned me to give a talk, He told me to speak about Mrs. Parvathamma! In an instant, all the memories came rushing back, and I took that as Swami's permission to share this miraculous episode from then on.

It also gave me a glimpse into another facet of His reality. **When He wills, our mind goes blank; and when He wills, it is activated! Similarly, when He wills, our body becomes lifeless; and when He wills, it is brought back to life!**

Sri T.G. Krishnamurthy
INDIA

Sri T.G. Krishnamurthy *has served as the President of the Tamil Nadu chamber of commerce, honorary secretary and correspondent of Sri Thyagaraya educational institutions. He has served in the Sri Sathya Sai Seva Organization India as the District President of Chennai in 1976, member of the State trust in 1978, State trust convener in 1982 and as the State President of Tamil Nadu in 1995. Bhagawan on numerous occasions has blessed him to speak to devotees at Prasanthi Nilayam, Brindavan, Ooty, Kodaikanal and Chennai in His Divine Presence. He is also the author of the book "The Divine Path to the Wisdom of Sai".*

God, My Loving Savior

I am originally from Sri Lanka and moved with my family to California, USA in January 1990. Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba came into my life in early 1998. After experiencing the love of Baba, my savior, I am now sharing my story. I am a Buddhist by birth. Buddhism does not talk of God! When I was 47 years old, I was partially paralyzed with a serious illness. I could not walk, talk, or keep my eye lids open. I was very depressed and frustrated as I had been a busy and active person all my life. The doctors diagnosed my condition as myasthenia gravis. The only possible treatment for this disease was to remove the thymus gland, which would give some relief, but the surgery had some potential risks. My family and friends were praying for me and that is the time that God almighty came into my life.

Buddha saved many sick people and for me it was Swami who came to my rescue just as Buddha did, centuries ago. After going through many obstacles, by His grace the date for my surgery was scheduled. After taking X-rays and CAT scans, the doctors located the thymus gland next to my heart and they decided to perform the surgery, called "thymectomy," where my ribcage had to be opened, similar to a by-pass heart surgery. I was very weak and due to the critical condition my family was informed that I may not recover after surgery. Surgery was completed but the post-surgery pain was unbearable. I cried out for help from God. By His amazing grace, Swami gave me a clear vision. He appeared in His physical form at my bedside in the UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles) Hospital, and blessed me. When I look back at my life, I can't imagine how God forgave my past sins and showered His unconditional love on me. The first lesson Swami taught me while in the hospital was to pray for all beings as millions were suffering, much more than me. Praying for myself was selfish. He taught me to pray for all with unconditional love and comforted me with words "Hold My hand and walk with Me while you are paying off your past *karma*."

As a Buddhist, I knew that I was reaping the fruits of my own past *karma*. It is hard to accept that I hurt others so badly in my past lives to undergo such unbearable suffering. But by His grace and guidance, I started praying for all beings and became a vegetarian. I started putting into practice Swami's teaching, "Love All–Serve All." By His infinite grace, I even travelled to Prasanthi Nilayam with the aid of a wheelchair and after two weeks of blissful visit, I was well enough to return to California walking, without the use of a wheelchair.

However, unfortunately, I was not cured completely, and, on several occasions, I had to be admitted to intensive care unit because of paralysis, affecting the respiratory muscles. Also, on several occasions, I was placed on life-support with a breathing machine (ventilator) and had to be fed by a nasogastric tube.

Swami knew that I had to endure my illness for many more years, and so He started to guide and transform me little by little – as the saying goes, "Man's adversity is God's

opportunity." Then, I started praying for others and practiced *vipassana* meditation. Little by little, my mind calmed down, and in the depth of silence, Swami started talking to me and guided me to live righteously. He showed me that we all belong to Him, He is everywhere and everything, and He is the supreme consciousness. Even though my physical body was very frail and weak, my mind became stronger and stronger, and I started to learn to accept and live with the pain. I started to follow His commands and became detached from the material world. This made me feel free and happy.

The real life-threatening challenge came in July 2014 when I developed internal hemorrhage in the stomach and inside my intestines, which could not be controlled. I was put on a life-support measure as I was literally bleeding to death. All my vital signs were critical and later I learned that the attending doctors gave up all hope and advised the family to brace for the worst.

The decision was made to remove my life-support system since there were no vital signs. I later learned also that many Sai devotees were visiting me at the hospital. Some of them were doctors and they reluctantly agreed with the decision to remove my life-support system. My family was devastated as they were not prepared for this sudden turn of events.

The only thing that could be done at that moment was to chant the *Gayatri Mantra,* which few of them did around me. But who knew that Swami's miracle was about to unfold? After they turned off my life-support, my vital signs improved miraculously! While in coma, I remembered following a bright blue light far away in the sky. The next thing I recollected was that Swami came to me and guided me back into my frail body. When I woke up from the coma, four days later, I could vividly see Him standing at the foot of my hospital bed. With a big smile, He was blessing me with upraised hands *(abhaya-hasta)* and once again, He exhorted me to continue to unconditionally love and serve all beings.

Our beloved Swami said that He has come to take us home and give us *moksha* (Self-realization). Suffering makes a person understand that we are born in this world to experience life, to go within, inquire, and to find our way back to God. These challenges in my life have made me develop equanimity, try to better serve others, and develop faith in Swami as my guardian, guide, and true savior.

My beloved Swami, almighty Lord, You are my Divine mother, father, teacher, and God. I have no words to thank You for transforming me. By Your grace, I am now peaceful, accepting every moment of my life as a blessing from You. I love You!

May all the worlds be happy!

Jai Sai Ram.

Mrs. Semali Balasuriya
USA

Mrs. Semali Balasuriya *lives in California, USA and hails from Sri Lanka. She was a schoolteacher, specializing in Montessori teaching. After moving to the USA, Semali graduated from the Early Childhood Development Program at University of California, Los Angeles and taught at the Oneonta Montessori school, California.*

The Power of the Name

I grew up in a very small town in the province of Cordoba in the center of Argentina. When I was in my twenties, my mother, two sisters and I were living a kind of "*ashram* life" in a simple house with a prayer hall.

We would wake up daily before 6 AM and spend more than two hours chanting *Omkar, Suprabhatam*, meditating, singing *bhajans*, and practicing yoga *asanas*. Then, we would meet before lunch for an hour-long session of reading and contemplating upon Swami's teachings. We would end the day just after sunset with another *bhajan* session and meditation. The rest of the day was dedicated to working, cooking, and household duties. Personal time was usually less than two hours.

Thus, most of our day was filled with conversations about Swami, listening only to *bhajans*–especially those in Swami's golden voice. We would read Swami's teachings and discourses. We would in essence see Sai, breathe Sai, eat Sai, and live with Sai the entire day.

Several years ago, I had read about Swami's description about the moment of death. He said that during the moment of death, our last thoughts should be of God alone so we can merge with Him. He also said that this is something that cannot be done by mere wishing. It can happen only if we think of Him constantly throughout our lives. In that sense, our daily routine seemed to be well oriented to purify our lives.

For many years, I prayed for a most cherished experience: to travel to India and have Swami's *darshan* in His physical form. That opportunity finally came, and Swami blessed me with His *darshan*, *sparshan* and *sambhashan* (auspicious sight of a divine being, touch and conversation with) in Prasanthi Nilayam. During that visit, I was also fortunate to meet with the Principal of the secondary school established by Swami. He described to me the daily routine of the students. It was quite similar to our way of life at our home in Argentina. I was very grateful to Swami for guiding us to lead our lives similar to that of Sai students.

One day, I had to repair something in the roof of our house in Argentina. For doing this, I had to climb the wooden structure that supported the roof. I was hanging like a monkey holding on to a cable which was about four meters above the ground. I was facing the sky with my hands and legs wrapped around the cable. Suddenly, the most unexpected happened. My fingers accidently touched a live electrical wire that was stuck to the cable from which I was hanging. At that moment, I had a stunning experience. I did not feel my body any longer. I did not see my surroundings, nor was I concerned about hanging from a cable at such a height. All I could see was a bright light and experience a pleasant silence. I was not scared, worried, or wanting to do anything. I was just floating

in that non-physical dimension with no worries and no pains related to the body. At times, I felt a smooth vibration that came from nowhere which I realized could have been the electricity that had knocked me out of body consciousness.

After some time, I thought: "This could be my last moment of this life". Although I thought this way, I was not worried, nor could I do anything about it. I had no control on the situation, let alone over my body. Then, I felt a burst of energy coming from somewhere that was neither inside nor outside me. It ended with a big and loud "Om Sai Ram'' that resonated in all that illuminated emptiness.

This was repeated, and another powerful burst of energy and "Om Sai Ram" reverberated through me.

Then, for the third time and with more energy the "Om Sai Ram" roared all around me. I heard an explosion and I fell. Below me there was an open door that could have broken my back as my fall would have landed me on top of the edge of the door. Miraculously, as I fell that open door closed by itself. Not only that, but my body which was facing the sky, turned over so that my face and hands were pointing down and I landed on the floor, on my hands and feet. My head also turned so that it touched the soft earth and not the cement floor where I should have normally landed.

At the crucial moment when I received a shock from the electricity, I couldn't say His name. But His name reverberated through me. I couldn't control my body, but it was His name that twisted and turned my body so that I did not suffer any injury.

How did it happen? Why did it happen? I do not think I can understand all that. I can only follow His words and practice them as truly as I can. I know He will fulfill all His promises and all His assertions will come true.

Jai Sai Ram

Mr. Pablo Tristan
ARGENTINA

Mr. Pablo Tristan Poggio *is a Primary School Teacher and Software Analyst living in Argentina. He develops and markets software for internet communications. For nearly 35 years, he has been an active member in the Sri Sathya Sai Organization. He has served as National Youth Coordinator, regional representative of the Institute of Sathya Sai Education in Human Values of Argentina, co-chair of the international Public Outreach Committee, Deputy and Central Coordinator of Region 23, Zone 2B.*

Finding My Eternal Companion

When people ask how I came to Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba, I always say it is a long story and I would prefer to tell it when you have time to listen. This is especially true for Sai devotees who have a natural and genuine curiosity to know how one came into Swami's fold. I first heard of Swami from my sister back in the nineteen eighties. She had a big picture of Swami in her dining room, which I mistook for American musician, Jimi Hendrix. Funny, I thought, Jimi had moved on, years ago. So, who is this person?

My sister explained the concept of the Avatar (God in human form). Having read Paramahamsa Yogananda's book, *"Autobiography of a Yogi,"* it was not an unfamiliar concept. I thought, if God wants to incarnate, who can stop Him? Then she said that Sai Baba is God. Somehow, I did not find this impossible–not that I believed it. God can come on earth any time He wants, in any way He wants. So, it did not shock me to hear that Baba is God but at the same time, deep inside, my attitude was to wait and see. I thought that perhaps in days to come, I will have a better understanding.

That is how I came to know about Baba. In my late teens, a friend who had been attending lectures on meditation asked me to join him for spiritual initiation from a guru. It was about 3:00 AM in the morning when we drove out to visit the guru. As an incentive to get up so early in the morning, my friend promised that the guru will also teach me and initiate me in the spiritual path. It was a short drive, and I was soon seated in front of this man, who was his guru.

The man enquired who I was and the purpose of my visit. I learned that initiation is only for those who attended the preparatory lectures. I had no idea this was necessary to receive initiation. However, I was persistent, and appealed, "But my friend promised that you would initiate me." For reasons unknown to me, the guru finally agreed to teach me about the spiritual path. He advised me to sit in *padmasana*, the lotus position, and close my eyes. Then he instructed me to think that I am in the presence of God and repeat the word "Baba." He also taught me how to meditate.

I had never experienced the presence of God before, even though I was born in a devout Catholic family and spent many years studying in a Jesuit school in Asia. At that point in my young life, I could not conjure an image of God. Instead, while meditating, I saw the image of a tall iron gate–it was a large main entrance with iron grills that opened to a path leading to an even larger complex. I could not see Him in my mind, but I knew God was in there, somewhere.

I held on to this thought for a while. Not satisfied, as I have an active and creative imagination, I tried to picture God again. This time, I saw myself floating over a city. I could see rooftops and it looked like I was in a foreign country. I thought I was in Jerusalem, looking down on rooftops in the land of Jesus. I concluded that I was in the abode of God, mentally. For many years after that, I continued to meditate and try to visualize this image in my mind.

Nearly 30 years later, I was in India, in Prasanthi Nilayam. It did not dawn on me right away, but I soon realized that the iron gate I saw in meditation was the Ganesha Gate of Prasanthi Nilayam. I also found that to get *darshan* of Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba, one needs to go past the Ganesha Gate and enter the *mandir*. Savoring my realization, I went up the hill to see the *kalpavriksha* (wish-fulfilling) tree, and on climbing up further, I could see all of Puttaparthi. It was a pleasant surprise to realize that I saw those very rooftops during my meditation. I also recalled the guru's instructions: Repeat the word "Baba," while meditating. Today, I realize that I had been given a mantra, but back then in the ignorance of my youth, it was just a word which did not mean anything to me.

However, I hung on to that precious word, Baba, over the years, and even today it is my constant companion–The true Eternal Companion! As Swami says, the name of God is all you need to cross this ocean of *samsara* (worldly life) and reach the shores of *Vaikuntha* (eternal abode of God).

Jai Sai Ram

Mr. Al Macasaet
PHILIPPINES

Mr. Aguedo "Al" Macasaet *was born in the Philippines and now resides in the USA. He has completed a Master of Science in Accounting at the Roosevelt University, Chicago and is a retired Financial Controller. He has been an active member of Sri Sathya Sai International Organization since 1996.*

Be Ever Ready for God

In 1989, I had traveled to India for just three weeks to see Swami, and my wife stayed back to look after our home and the Sai Center, which was operating in our home, where 75 to 100 devotees joined the *satsang* every week. When I arrived in India on February 28, Swami was staying in the Whitefield *ashram*. One evening, I was invited to the coveted Trayee session with the students at Swami's residence, and to my surprise Swami asked me to speak to the students. This caught me by surprise, but also taught me an important lesson–always be ready for the divine call. In my shock, I even failed to ask Swami to help me to speak, and I ended up probably giving the worst talk of my life.

Love My Uncertainty

When it was time to return to El Salvador, I called the airline to reconfirm my reservation, and the lady replied saying, "what reservation?" She said that my name is not on the list of passengers, and there are no more seats available on that flight–so she asked me whether I wanted to be on a waiting list. Totally confused, I told her I would call back later. When I went for *darshan* in the afternoon, Swami asked me when I was leaving, and I told him that my reservation was cancelled, and I did not know exactly when I could get a reservation.

Swami gave me that jovial look when He is playing a joke on you, and said, *"I know, Swami will tell you when to leave."* I thought "Fine, I will take a few more days of vacation." I called my employer in New York and informed them that I would be returning a few days late. This was a multinational company, and I was the manager for their operation in El Salvador with over 350 employees.

After a few days, I learned that Swami was going to Chennai. So, I asked Swami if I should join, hoping that He would tell me to go home. But He said, *"Yes, come to Chennai."* So, I went along with many other devotees to Chennai, where we had darshan at Abbotsbury and Sundaram. The *nagasankirtan* had over 10,000 devotees participating, and special traffic *sevadals* were helping the local police to keep the crowd in order. After a few days we returned to Whitefield, and Swami still gave me no word about my return date. So, I sent a telegram to the company saying that I was still delayed.

Next, I heard that Swami was going to Kodaikanal. So again, I asked Swami if I should come to Kodaikanal, thinking this time He would surely tell me to go home. By this time, it was already April, and I was having a difficult time explaining to my boss in New York that God would tell me when I could return. However, Swami said *"Yes, come to Kodaikanal."* I had been to Kodaikanal twice before, in 1984 and 1985, but this time it was totally a different experience.

Living with God

I was invited into Swami's home at night to hear Swami's wonderful stories and listen to students' *satsangs* every night. We were in Kodaikanal for 6 weeks. Because the *bhajan* hall was being expanded, we worked after morning *darshan* everyday excavating the mountainside to make room for the larger hall. Swami would stop by occasionally and supervise the work, then give packages of milkshake to everyone. I had five interviews with Him, and on every occasion, I would ask Swami about my returning home. He would respond only with an evasive answer, such as, *"I will see you tomorrow,"* or *"Wait,"* or He would adroitly change the subject. It was already May when our stay in Kodaikanal came to an end, and it was time to return to Whitefield via Ooty. I was still wondering what Swami had in mind for me. Does He want me to stay and teach business management in His University? Or does He want me to quit my job in this "fool company" (I worked for a large multinational food company) as He called it? A few days after we reached Whitefield, I received a telegram from the company informing me that I could stay in India as long as I wanted, because I no longer had a job. It was already June 1. I tried to show the wire to Swami, but by now our warm relationship seems to have dissolved and I no longer seemed to exist for Him! However, I still had the privilege of attending the Trayee sessions at night. One evening, Swami told a story about how Avatars don't always tell their devotees what to do but communicate by a sign. The devotee must be sufficiently astute to recognize and understand the message.

A Sign from God

After the session adjourned, I was standing outside Swami's door praying, hoping that He would give me a sign, and help me be sufficiently astute to recognize the sign and interpret it correctly. When I opened my eyes, there was a 5-paisa coin near my feet. I picked it up, not because of its value, but because I was thinking what a strange thing to find a coin outside of Swami's door where the *sevadals* regularly sweep the floors. I was tossing the coin in the air while walking back to my room, and all of a sudden it hit me that the number 5 on the coin could be an indication of the date of my departure. The 5th of June was coming up. I called the airline next morning and was told that there was a long waiting list for the flight on the 5th of June. As it turned out, on 5th of June Swami was leaving for Prasanthi Nilayam, and all the students had lined up on either side of Swami's car as He left. I too got in the line. When Swami came up to me, I asked him if I should leave that day. He did not answer immediately but turned to give *padnamaskar* to the other line of students. Then I heard Him say, *"Yes, yes, yes."* One does not know if He is answering your question or talking with someone else, but He did say it thrice. I decided to take a chance and went to the domestic airport where I boarded the local flight to Delhi. With my visa expired and my non-endorsable 45-day international ticket in hand, would I have the same luck? The lady at the reservation desk gave us the bad news that the flight was oversold. After all the passengers boarded the flight, there were about 25 of us standing around and wait-listed. Then another lady at the counter announced that all the waiting passengers will be put on an Air India flight to Schiphol Airport, in Amsterdam, which was the next connecting location. Thus, my non-endorsable, expired ticket got me to Europe, and then on to the ongoing connecting flight home. I called my boss from Europe and told him that I was on my way home, and I will drop by the office on Monday to collect my final paycheck.

He just said OK and said that we will talk on Monday.

Shower of Divine Grace

When I arrived at the office on Monday, the employees were all happy to see me. There was no replacement sitting at my desk. I looked at the financial results while I was away and noticed that they were even better than when I left. I called my boss and asked what he wanted me to do. He said that they have been discussing my case in New York (headquarters) and they decided to give me a 25% salary increase! Incredulously, I asked, "How much?" I thought I had misunderstood him. He further said that I will receive pay for the full time I was away in India, as paid vacation. Perplexed, I said "What?" Then he explained that when the company analyzed the present results compared to the previous year, it clearly showed another year of excellent performance. Therefore, I would also receive a bonus. It was literally raining money on me, or shall I say God's Grace? Such were the showers of divine grace from Swami!

Jai Sai Ram.

Mr. John Behner
EL SALVADOR

Mr. John Behner *came to Sri Sathya Sai Baba in 1979. He has served in the Sri Sathya Sai International Organization as Center President, Central Council President, Zone Chairman of Latin America, and Co-Chairman, Humanitarian Relief Committee – to name a few. He is the President of the Sai Foundation of El Salvador since 1989. He was a successful businessman owning the first frozen food company in Central America and worked for 20 years as the executive in-charge of a country of a multinational food company.*

God's Delays Are Not Denials

It all happened when I was studying for my degree at Tunku Abdul Rahman College, Kuala Lumpur. Unlike others, I used to sit in the back row of my class, away from the commanding gaze of lecturers and was too shy to come forward to participate in activities. One day, I reluctantly joined my friends, who persuaded me to attend a talk at my college on Hinduism by a senior leader from the Sathya Sai Organization. I was comfortably sitting at the back of the auditorium, where I was silently plotting my escape as soon as the talk commenced. However, the charisma of the speaker, the humorous anecdotes, and the simple manner of conveying a deep complex subject mesmerized me. He had an aura of positivity, which was inspiring. This deepened my curiosity to find out more about where he came from. One thing led to another, and on a Vinayaka Chaturthi day, I found myself at the Bangsar Sai Center for the first time, singing *bhajans* along with other devotees. That was how Bhagawan, in His unique, mysterious way, pulled me into His fold.

I was also attracted to His devotees in this Sai Center. They also reflected the same aura of positivity, which encouraged me to frequent the center more often. I was very impressed with the energy, dynamism, and overall commitment of the members of this Center. However, at that time, I was not really attracted to Swami. I was only curious about Him because of the devotion and reverence He commanded from these beautiful people.

Travel to See Sathya Sai Baba

It was this curiosity that led me to answer, "Bangalore," when my father, who worked in an airline, asked me whether I wished to travel on a free ticket to any place I wanted, a privilege reserved for airline employees. From Bangalore, I took my first 6-hour bus journey and landed in Prasanthi Nilayam in 1986.

Before leaving Malaysia, the Bangsar Center President gave me some books he had written to get them blessed by Swami. By His grace, I was seated in the very first row during my first-ever *darshan*. All this was very new to me and I had no clue about what happens during these sessions. As Swami arrived, walking gently on the sand, I saw people offering letters to Him, touching His feet, and craning their necks to see Him for an extra moment! I was lost in thinking how I should address Him.

"Devotees have told me to address Him as Swami. But His name is Sai Baba. Should I call Him 'Sai' or 'Baba' or the complete 'Sai Baba'? Maybe it is best that I address Him by His full name, Sathya Sai Baba..."

Though I had decided to call Him by His name and mentally even rehearsed it a few times, when He finally came near me, I got on my knees and spontaneously said, "Swami, here are books from Malaysia. The author wanted me to get them blessed by You..."

"I know... I know..." He said and placed His hand on the books I was holding. **Automatically, I bowed down and touched His feet**

to receive my first *padanamaskar*. Swami then moved on.

What is an Interview?

After that, somehow, I found myself seated in the first row for the next 3-4 *darshan* sessions, even when we went by the general token lines. So, every day, I would be blessed to receive *padanamaskar*. Seeing my good fortune, three Malaysian ladies who had come earlier to Prasanthi Nilayam came over to me and said, "Swami seems to bless you daily. Why don't you ask Him for an interview?"

"What is an interview?" I asked

"Swami will take us into a separate room and materialize rings and chains for us!"

"Oh! He gives them to everybody?"

"Not everybody, but the chance of getting them from Him is high during an interview."

"So, what should I ask?"

"Ask Swami for an interview, and He will probably ask how many are there in the group. Say four... it's four of us."

I reluctantly said OK, dismissing the possibility that this would ever take place.

Then, I went to give the books to the administrators of the University. They asked me if I was here for the first time. I said yes.

They then asked a *sevadal* to escort me and give me a guided tour of the University Administrative Block, the stadium, Swami's pet elephant Sai Gita, the planetarium, etc. I assumed that this was a courtesy extended to all visitors. Only much later did I realize that this was also due to His divine grace.

Then, slowly, the Master scriptwriter unfolded His play.

A gentleman of Chinese origin, who we will call Chan, wearing a red T-shirt with the words "Drink Anchor Beer" approached me. I began chatting with him and learned that he was also a first-timer at the place. He had come as a tourist and simply wanted to know "what on earth was happening here?"

Then, I narrated what the Malaysian ladies told me and urged him to ask for an interview.

He replied, "What is an interview?"

I took the opportunity to educate him and told him that in such situations, Swami would give him chains and rings. I added, "When He asks how many people are there, say it's five of us. I shall do the same if I get the chance..."

The deal was made. It was all so casual, never realizing what was to happen. I never, for one moment, thought that the divine, in His own way, was orchestrating a deep, incisive surgery on my ego for my spiritual advancement.

An Interview is an Inner View

It was a Sunday, and it appeared that the whole world had come for *darshan*. There was not an inch of space available because, taking advantage of the Sunday, an overwhelming crowd had come to feast their eyes on their beloved Lord. I guess my luck ran out that day for this particular *darshan* as I got a seat at the back of Sai Kulwant hall, with my back leaning against the compound wall and a sea of humanity separating me from Swami.

Suddenly, my eyes fell on Chan seated precisely in the first row.

The stage was set. Swami appeared. There was a hushed silence. Every neck was craning to get a glimpse of Him as He walked past. From where I was seated, Swami appeared small and distant.

Then Swami suddenly stopped where Chan was seated. I heard Swami ask, "*How many?*"

I heard him reply, "Five."

Swami said, "*Come*."

Then, Chan stood up and started waving to me! I waved back and stood up, making my way toward the front. As I was walking, saying, "Sairam! Swami is calling Malaysia,"

the sea of humanity in front of me parted as the Red Sea parted for Moses!

I am quite tall, and Swami also saw me walking. Swami was now signing someone's book, but I knew He saw me getting up. I reached the elevated dais area, and with a few more steps, I would be in the world's most desired 'heaven,' the interview room. Chan had already happily sailed into the interview room.

For some reason, which I still do not know, something made me turn back to see Swami. What made me turn? Who made me turn, and why? Till today my mind cannot fathom this.

Swami was standing only a few meters away. Simultaneously, as I turned back to see Swami, He lifted his gaze from the book to stare at me. No other director could have planned this drama with such incredible timing and synchronous movement other than the divine director Himself.

Our eyes met. The pin-drop silence in the hall was shattered by Swami's question,

"Hey, you! Where are you going?"

"Swami, interview..."

"Not you! Sit down."

I took one step forward and said, "...five... group of five...Malaysia," referring to His conversation with Chan. I was now deeply troubled and feeling very embarrassed.

Swami said sharply, *"...Not all Malaysians get an interview. Sit down!"*

I thought that Swami was not aware of my conversation and the deal with Chan. So I tried explaining, "Swami, that man said five... I am one of..."

"SIT DOWN!" interrupted Swami.

The whole hall witnessed this dress-down. The Malaysian ladies who got up to go for the interview, after witnessing the calamity befalling me, quietly sat down in their respective places.

I took two more steps toward Swami, thinking of explaining myself.

"SIT DOWN," Swami said and His eyes seemed ablaze now. A few *sevadal* (volunteers) quickly rushed to escort me to my place. I sat down in the space vacated by Chan in the first row.

The humiliation I felt at that moment was so painful that I wished the earth would swallow me up! As I sat and tried to analyze what had happened, a thousand thoughts flooded my mind. Why me? I did not deserve this. I never wanted an interview. Swami had seen me getting up. But why pull me to the front and 'smash' me in front of thousands? Why Swami? Why? That, too, was my first visit. Uncontrollable tears kept gushing from my eyes. The pain got aggravated when devotees sitting near me tried comforting me. It was like oil being poured over fire.

But that was it. Chan from our 'Group of Five' went in alone.

Many long minutes passed, and then, the *bhajans* began. That was when Chan walked out of the interview room. His face seemed red, and profuse tears were running down his cheeks. Something had obviously happened inside! A few minutes later, Swami came out and walked straight to me.

"When are you leaving?"

"Swami, this Wednesday...Three more days..."

"Ah! You have got time. Why do you worry?"

He was trying to comfort me, but I was beyond consolation. In fact, it took me a couple of years to share this whole episode with my family back in Malaysia.

The next day, when I met Chan, he was a completely transformed being, as evidenced by what he was wearing and how he spoke with love and humility. I marveled at his transformation. I, too, had a transformation. **I felt that spirituality is not for the casual and the complacent.** The surgical incision Swami did was painful, but the experience **empowered me to have a deeper and more**

serious perspective on spirituality. I felt my inhibitions were stripped. I decided I would simply plunge into the activities of the Sai Center.

That gift of an interview indeed had provided Chan with an inner view, while the denial of the same interview gave me an inner view also.

Interview at Last

After that 'interview-denial,' I plunged into different activities at my Sai Center. Strangely, the more active I became at the Sai Center, the more my love for Swami grew. Sai activities became an obsession. Though I was a research student completing my master's and PhD at different Universities, 80% of my time was spent at the Sai Center.

My father was worried. So were many of my relatives. Their advice to me was the same, "Stop spending so much time in this Sai Center. Focus on your education and career…"

I did not mind their well-intentioned advice. But I was helpless. The love I felt toward Swami and His work was simply unstoppable.

Swami had told me during that first trip that I had time. That time turned out to be 12 years! Yes, I got my first interview, along with my wife, after a full 12 years! During this time period, one of the activities I was deeply involved in was scripting dramas to be presented to Swami in Prasanthi Nilayam. I was blessed to be involved in 12 drama productions, all of which Swami watched and enjoyed.

Swami took me and my wife into the inner interview room. When I saw Him there, so close and available to me, I broke down. I began shedding profuse tears. **I felt like a river that had reached the sea. Love emanated in surging waves from my heart, and as I laid my head on His lap**, I cried happy tears like I had never done in my life before.

"Ay! My gown is getting wet!" Swami said.

I was unable to speak, and my wife spoke on my behalf.

"Swami, he loves you a lot…"

Swami smiled. He patted me on my head. I felt salvation. I felt blessed. But every interview is an inner view. **Swami is a perfectionist and is constantly striving for our evolution.**

He said, *"Emotion is one thing. Devotion is another. Emotion is important, but devotion is most important."*

I understood that while emotions overwhelm us momentarily, devotion is a lifelong commitment. **Devotion means placing Swami as the ideal and ensuring that every action we take pleases Him.** That is the message of my first interview with Swami, which I carry in my heart to this day–*Sarva Karma Bhagavad Preethyartham.*

Dr. Suresh Govind
MALAYSIA

Dr. Suresh Govind *is a former professor and Head of the Department of Parasitology, Faculty of Medicine, University of Malaya. He has received many awards, including the prestigious Malaysian Toray Science Award. Dr. Suresh Govind has served in the Sri Sathya Sai International Organization (SSSIO) for over three decades in various positions, including the National Council President of Malaysia. Dr. Suresh Govind serves as a member of the Prasanthi Council, chair of the Sri Sathya Sai Scriptural Studies Committee of the SSSIO, and leads the SAI 100 program, which has picked up momentum in several countries.*

How I Got the Dream Job of My Life

I first saw Swami, Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba, in 1996 when I visited the Brindavan ashram with my cousin's wedding party. The man she married was a Sai devotee who insisted on getting Swami's blessings first after the marriage. Swami came and stood in front of me, and the person beside me prompted me into taking my first *padanamaskar*. It felt very good. **I also felt an irresistible attraction for Sai bhajans, inspiring me to spend more time with Swami and the Sai Organization back home.** Within a couple of years, I found myself spending all my spare time in the Sai Centers in Colombo. I literally grew up there and had little time to socialize with my school or college friends.

The Heart is the Seat of God

Professionally, my heart led me toward the media field, though everyone thought I should become an IT engineer. Everyone discouraged me from pursuing the media field because, in Sri Lanka, the term 'media' was generally associated with video professionals chasing 'wedding coverage.' But I followed my heart. At that critical juncture, Swami appeared in my dream. In the dream, I was doing *padaseva* to Him, telling Him that I liked the media field despite all the discouragement from my well-wishers. He smiled and replied (in Tamil), *"It is a beautiful field you have selected. You will go to Australia and study for two years. My blessings are with you..."*

I woke up with joy and clarity of purpose. However, despite my best efforts to study in Australia, my visa application for Australia was rejected every time. This was a time of severe ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, and my background probably matched that of a potential asylum-seeker, not a student! I was disheartened and started complaining to Swami in my heart, "You said I would be going to Australia. That is just not happening." I started working in media in Sri Lanka as per Swami's directive. **In 2007, I got the opportunity to serve Swami with my media skills during the World Youth Conference held in Prasanthi Nilayam. I felt fulfilled.**

I got married in 2009. By Swami's grace, my wife Vasuki also gave priority to Swami. I felt blessed to have a partner on my journey to God.

Experiences in the 'Beautiful Field'

I served as a video editor for a famous movie director in Sri Lanka. In September 2010, I joined the youth of Sri Lanka to perform a drama in Swami's divine presence. I sought leave from work from the director. To my surprise, after confirming the dates with me, he immediately called his travel agent to book two tickets! He told me that he would accompany me to Puttaparthi!

After the first *darshan*, he held my hand and said, "Sanjeevan, I have so many challenges in life, and that is why I came along with you. Now I understand why you keep visiting Swami. Just seeing Him made me

feel so good and relaxed! **There is something in His eyes. Once your eyes fall on Him and His eyes fall on you, you are redeemed–you need nothing else in life!"**

This struck a deep chord within me–even those at the pinnacle of professional excellence would give up everything for the 'Swami experience!'

Every visit to Puttaparthi made me envy the special band of talented and dedicated youth, known as 'Swami's boys,' working in the erstwhile Radiosai under Prof. G. Venkataraman. I wished I could use my passion for media and my acquired skills to serve Swami like these boys. The Omniscient Lord gave me the opportunity to do just that for ten days during the 85th Birthday celebrations in November 2010! The icing on the cake came most unexpectedly.

I felt sick just before 23rd November and could not even get out of bed. The kind brothers at Radiosai told me to rest and said they would pick me up in a vehicle the next morning. At 7 AM. the next morning, I was in the Sri Sathya Sai Vidyagiri Stadium, the program venue, though I did not know exactly where. Brother Sai Prakash asked me, "Sanjeevan, can you please do a quick edit of the live program to be given to media persons immediately after the morning program?"

I agreed. I noticed many senior and well-known devotees and important guests walking past me. **Only when Swami arrived did I realize I was in Shanti Vedika, sharing the stage with Swami!** As I enjoyed a wonderful *darshan* with tears welling up in my eyes, Swami smiled at me as if to say, *"I told you! Media is a beautiful field. It is beautiful because it will bring you close to Me."*

Surely there are a million photographers, camerapeople, and video editors in the world better than me. But Swami's love had brought me from far away to His lotus feet on what was to be the Avatar's last Birthday in His physical form! I am still overwhelmed when I think of His blessing.

The Lord's Timing is Perfect

In December 2010, Vasuki got a 'Skill-migration' visa to Australia. As her spouse, I too got mine! She told me that since Swami had indicated in my dream that I would do a course for two years, I should enroll in one. I suddenly realized that had my earlier attempts to get an Australian visa succeeded, I would have been paying higher fees as an international student. Now, as a permanent resident I did not have to pay the higher fees!

The University I applied to called me for an interview with the Dean, asking me to submit a portfolio of my media projects for evaluation. I had nothing with me besides a documentary video on a cancer hospice in Sri Lanka that the SSSIO supported. I submitted it and went for the interview with the Dean. It went as usual until he learned that I was the candidate who had submitted just a single video in place of a portfolio!

"Wonderful! I was waiting and looking out for you. I am very impressed with the work and the service there," he said. Then, he enquired about me, my passions, and my convictions. "This is a two-year program, but if you are ready to work hard and follow my advice, you can finish it in a year. What do you say?" As a married man who could not afford to be out of work for long, this was music to my ears! I agreed immediately. The Dean was so happy that he planned, customized, and personalized the curriculum to suit my needs. Thus, after a year, I was a working professional in the media field in Australia. Within 75 days after starting work, I got promoted and was given even a company vehicle! Swami's grace is boundless.

When Dreams Turn into Nightmares

In 2014, when everything was going smoothly along professional and personal fronts, Swami came into my dream and told me to return to Sri Lanka! This was a bolt out

of the blue. I shared the dream with my wife and other members of my family. Everyone told me to stay put in Australia and not be foolish in pursuing a 'dream' that could end up a 'nightmare.' I kept thinking about what to do until I suffered 'analysis paralysis' and continued the *status quo*.

Then, in March 2017, Swami appeared in my dream again. This time, He seemed very upset and had a stern look. "*Come back right now to Sri Lanka,"* He said sternly. This time, I didn't ask anyone. I told Vasuki we would be moving back to Sri Lanka at any cost. Since Swami is her priority too, she readily agreed. We packed up everything, abandoning our plans to purchase a home in Australia, and moved back to Sri Lanka within two months!

We were both jobless, and our two sons needed to attend school. Everyone in the family was convinced that I had gone mad. I was accused of being extremely selfish, for I had just thrown away a good life to fulfill a 'crazy dream!' We had to start from ground zero now. We rented a house and found an affordable school for the children. But for nine months, every effort to find a job turned hopeless for me. I was heartbroken, frustrated, and angry.

Holding Swami's picture, I lamented, "Swami, I have done as You told me. Why are You troubling us like this now? Where have I failed You that You are failing me?" In my anger, I threw His picture on the ground but my son came and picked it up quickly. I realized that I had indeed turned mad in bitterness. But I felt so helpless and angry that my Swami had abandoned me.

The Promised 'Dream' Job

The very next day, I was contacted by some of my Sai brothers to do video editing for the SSSIO. In my heart, I said, "Swami, I want work that pays." I didn't realize that His master plan was just about to unfold.

I was dumbstruck when the SSSIO asked me whether I would be available to do video editing work as a full-time professional!

I realized how the 'Divine Master Puppeteer' had perfectly pulled the strings, fulfilling all my dreams–working in media, getting a professional degree from Australia, and working ONLY for Swami.

Today, I understand the reason for the 'crazy' steps my heart told me to take, for each step led me closer to the sacred goal, Swami!

Mr. Sanjeevan Maheswaran
SRI LANKA

Mr. Sanjeevan Maheswaran *came into Swami's fold in 1996 and has been involved in the SSSIO and Sai Center activities since then. He holds a bachelor's degree in Film and Television from Swinburne University of Technology, Australia. After working under a professional media director in Australia, Sanjeevan returned to Sri Lanka to serve Swami. He is the secretary of the SSSIO of Sri Lanka and a member of the SSSIO's international media team. He has participated in cultural programs in the divine presence of Swami in Brindavan and Puttaparthi.*

The Journey to the Sai Within

Our Eternal Companion

I was in my 20s when I was awakened by a deeply spiritual experience. My upbringing had given me a solid moral foundation, but I knew nothing about spirituality. I had an abstract understanding that the objective world was unreal and non-existent, but I knew nothing about God or had anything else to believe in. I was carefree and content, but also rudderless.

One day, while crossing a road, I had a peculiar sensation that I had stopped breathing. I stood frozen in the middle of the road yet felt no fear for my personal safety. My mind concluded I was dead. The mind, still functioning, walked the body across the road, and sat it on a bench. I recall seeing a field of grass across the road with an alley of poplar trees at a distance and felt it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. My mind stood still while my heart felt a sense of peace and profound love.

Then the breathing returned. But the mind was in a state of stillness as if its engine had stopped. For about a week, I remained in that state. The body neither needed sleep nor food, though it went through the motions out of habit rather than need. I would wake up after about 2 hours of sleep and study or listen to music until I had to leave for work. Eventually, things went back to "normal." But I never forgot that time–a sense of "no-mind" and feeling content, peaceful, and happy. I was still able to carry out my daily routine during this period of transformed awareness. Everything went on perfectly, without my planning, control, and worry.

But alas, "normal" life no longer satisfied me. I became aware of how meaningless my life was. I felt that if I stopped existing, there would be no loss. I decided I needed a teacher who could guide me to find meaning in it all. I visited many churches; I enjoyed the peace they offered. I visited a Zen meditation center and felt at home. I received a picture of Shakyamuni Buddha and started to meditate in front of this picture daily. I once happened to visit a person who had on his wall a picture of a man with an orange robe and an Afro hairstyle. I was curious and inquired if there were any albums available by that Soul Musician. The owner laughed and informed me that the "Soul Musician" was Sri Sathya Sai Baba. He invited me to visit the Sri Sathya Sai Centre. It was a strange experience–it seemed they were just repeating some rituals without much understanding. But I felt content, peaceful, and relaxed. I kept going back.

Then, I read *'The Holy Man and the Psychiatrist,'* by Dr. Samuel Sandweiss and I immediately knew everything recounted in it was true. I learned the Gayatri mantra and started reciting it before meditation and throughout the day. I still held Buddha as my teacher and guide. Until one day, while I sat in peace, enjoying the beautiful image of the Shakyamuni Buddha and having an internal conversation with him, I had a moment of insight. I could see a very clear image of a Buddha, alive at this very moment, that I could visit in Prasanthi Nilayam. **I became firmly convinced that**

Sri Sathya Sai was Buddha Himself. It was so absolutely clear.

Strong Scent of Jasmine

I did not have the money to go to India. I attended a Sai Youth Summer camp in south Europe instead. When the camp was over, I stayed behind to help clean up. While walking down a road leading to a parking lot, with large fields of grass on the sides of the road and an alley of majestic trees, I felt a strong scent of jasmine. It could not have come from the incense sticks in the hall, and there were no children around playing a prank on me. The smell was steady in its intensity and did not alter with the gusts of wind. I finally understood that scent was not an external stimulus, coming through the senses. It arose from within, bypassing the senses, and experienced through the heart-to-heart connection that I sought to maintain with my Sai teacher.

When I arrived in Prasanthi Nilayam later that year, I learned that it was customary to desire an interview with Sri Sathya Sai. I tried to develop such a desire, but I just could not. After my experience of smelling jasmine directly from within, I developed my own way of connecting with Swami and communicating all my doubts and questions directly to Him. He would answer them by providing an insight immediately and a fuller understanding of the issue eventually.

Reward for Service

The daily *darshans* provided me with intense experiences of love and extreme bliss from being able to witness the material manifestation of my Teacher. One day, a service opportunity at the Chaitanya Jyoti Museum arose. I volunteered to help but it meant sacrificing afternoon *darshans*. During the first week of serving in the Museum, as a reward for sacrificing afternoon *darshans* with Sathya Sai, I was provided spiritual guidance and invaluable lessons through various incidents with the visitors I served. Swami granted me these experiences, navigated me through them, and became a guide in my spiritual journey. It has been like this ever since. **He truly is my 'Eternal Companion.'**

My first visit lasted about a month from early December 2000 to mid-January 2001. I did not know what to ask from the Lord. I prayed for the well-being of one member of our family, and I was grateful for His guidance through my experiences. And then I realized that the way of life I had led before due to my ignorance had probably generated karmic consequences. So, I prayed fervently that He would help me leave the old life behind so I could be His instrument without the burden of my past deeds. I prayed for this intensively, not understanding what I was seeking.

Near-Death Experience

The next day I was given a laddu, an Indian sweet, as *prasad*. Within hours of eating, I got so sick I had to leave my post at the Museum. I could barely walk and took almost 2 hours to get to the shed where I was staying. I vomited and had diarrhea all night. The next day was worse and then at night, I had a near-death experience. I felt I was at death's doorstep. I remember all the thoughts that crossed my mind– what my mother would say, the unfinished projects at work, and so on. I had no power to suppress these thoughts. All I could do was witness the thoughts overwhelming my mind, becoming stronger and more intense each minute, and the overpowering emotions they triggered. Silly things I had done, thinking no one would notice or care, came back to haunt me, but now with a painful understanding of their adverse effect. Mostly, I could make no sense of it. I had no control. It felt like I was being pulled into a maelstrom of memories of my past. Whilst I knew we are advised to think of God during our

last moments, I could not. I was a helpless passenger swept along in a flash storm of everything that had happened before. And then I lost consciousness. When I woke up, I felt like the insides of me were emptied and cleaned out, like I was just the outer skin of some object with nothing inside. Someone brought me water and I was able to build up strength over the next few days.

Ever since this experience, I have kept that Prince of Death as a friend and guide. Sometimes I would sit down and ask Him to sit with me while I reflected on my situation. Am I ready to go tomorrow? Am I ready to go right now? What luggage am I still hanging on to which I cannot take with me when the time comes to drop the body?

If I should sum up my interactions with Sathya Sai, he took two letters, one from me and another for which I was a messenger. His robe touched me once when He was passing by me while I was in the first row. And He looked at me. It was the first *darshan* where I got to sit in the first row, near one of the columns in the Sai Kulwant Hall. He came out from around the corner, stopped, turned his head towards me, and looked in my eyes...about two or three thousand years went by when I realized I was still sitting there with my mouth wide open while He had already moved on, interacting with the people sitting across the aisle.

He has taught me many lessons including one key principle–not just for me but for all. **All will be free. Every single one will be liberated or enlightened, call it what you will. The goal of the journey is guaranteed**. The date of our ascension has been written down and stored in the divine archive ages ago. It is inevitable! The wise, the righteous, the devotees, those who hate God, the sinners, the ignorant, the scoundrels, the rich, the poor, the tall, the short, the obese, the psychic, the wicked–every single one will be liberated. Maybe today, maybe tomorrow, maybe in 10 years, and maybe in one of the next lives, but the goal will surely be reached. So then, why fear when He is here? While the goal is guaranteed, how we are going to spend the journey will be a reflection of our thoughts, words and deeds, and we will reap the joy and suffering they bring.

However, if we stay in that awareness that our liberation is inevitable, it will become our reality in the now, and we can partake in glimpses of it. Yet, the liberation we can achieve in the now is temporary as the impurities will prevent it from being permanent. But even then, the impurities relate to the body and why worry about the body and its impurities when we can stay in the awareness of the impending liberation. **The impurities will take care of themselves if we can hold on to our 'Eternal Companion' and remain firmly convinced that liberation is guaranteed**.

Mr. Jiri Blazek
CZECH REPUBLIC

Mr. Jiri Blazek *is the Central Coordinator of Zone 7, Region 71 which includes Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic, and Hungary. He has held number of positions in the SSSIO over more than 20 years, and is a member of the SSSIO Media Committee. He was a designer of the Zone 7 Newsletter magazine and Zone 7 Media Coordinator. Mr. Blazek graduated from the Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic, where he teaches as a guest lecturer. He works as a Management Consultant.*

The Blessings of Pain

I would call myself a rebel and a bit of a daredevil from Barranquilla, Colombia, in South America. I have been that way since childhood. I always questioned everything and needed a logical explanation to convince myself of anything. Becoming a mechanical engineer made my approach even more 'scientific' and 'logical.' I was never a devotee, nor had I worshiped any form of God, unlike my mother, who has always been very religious and devoted to God.

I once played rugby and also coached rugby teams. My club, Panteras Rugby Club, is the second oldest women's club in Colombia. I had my fair share of injuries from the game that included damage to my spine. Then came a car accident that exacerbated the injury. My intervertebral disc herniated, and some vertebrae got dislocated. They began to press on my nerves, which hurt me an awful lot! I would get cramps that would last for weeks! People usually get painful cramps for a few minutes, but my agony was a thousand times that. **The pain was a terrible daily struggle, and nothing could relieve it.**

Overcoming Physical Pain

As an engineer, I designed and created intervertebral discs from functionally graded material. I even published academic papers on it. While the work gave me intellectual fulfillment, my physical pain did not abate at all. I could not even take a step without support. I spent a lot of time seeing doctors and seeking solutions. But the answer to my problem did not seem to exist.

It was sometime in 2011 when my mother stepped in and suggested that I see a doctor who had apparently helped me before by saving my life when I was a little kid. When I learned that she was into alternative medicine, I became very skeptical and hesitated to make an appointment to consult her. But my mother persisted and persuaded me to try her services. I finally yielded and went to her for alternative therapy. At the end of the session, I felt a miracle had happened. I had no pain! Usually, on rare occasions when I was pain-free, I would be happy for a few minutes, then the pain would return. Minutes turned into an hour, and I had no pain. I was ecstatic. I asked my mother, "How much do you have to pay for this treatment?" "You don't worry," she said. "It is all covered." **"No, no!" I replied. "Every penny in my pocket is reserved for this lady because she gave me an hour of living without pain!"**

Overcoming Mental Aversion

That very night, I had an interesting dream. Let me first give the background. From birth, I have had many skin issues. It took a while to get over them, and I developed a disgust for people with skin diseases. If

I saw anyone with skin disease, I would be repulsed.

In my dream, I saw dozens of people with terrible skin diseases coming to hug me! I was disgusted and tried to run but found no escape. It was a real nightmare! After all my efforts to escape failed, I finally gave up, thinking, "Maybe if I let go and hug the first person, they will stop coming after me..." I did that in the dream, and soon, there was a queue of such people with skin afflictions, and I hugged every one of them. As I did that, I seemed to overcome my revulsion toward them and could feel amazing love flowing from me. As I rejoiced, the queue ended.

The last person was a man wearing an orange gown with a curly mop of thick afro-style hair. Today, I know this beautiful form as 'Swami.' But in my dream, He was just a wonderful person without any skin problems. He radiated much warmth, love, and peace as I embraced Him. **It was an indescribable feeling that flooded me with joy as I hugged Him.**

When I woke up the next morning, I was not only healthy but also very happy! The blessing of painlessness had grown into the blessing of great happiness.

Sai Dreams are Always True

After a very long time, I did not have pain, and I was elated. I didn't know how long the painless feeling would last, but I walked without support! So, I decided to go to my favorite place, the beach, and enjoy the day. I took the bus to one of Barranquilla's many beautiful beaches. Imagine my wonder when a person with severe skin problems sat down next to me. I smiled within myself since I did not feel any repulsion. I began to speak with him, and it was such an enjoyable conversation. In the end, I hugged him as I got off the bus at my stop, **and I realized that I had been cured of another lifelong affliction–aversion to people with skin issues!**

I walked around and spent the whole day at the beach. It was the happiest day of my life so far. I continued to see the doctor for follow-up appointments. My recovery was so good that I started to train for rugby again! Soon, I also began to play with the same vigor and vitality as before. I also got into kitesurfing, venturing all by myself into the vast open sea among the waves and tides.

When God Enters Your Life

One day, as I got ready to go out, my mother presented me with a proposal. "Why don't you attend this event, a Sathya Sai retreat, that is happening soon? I, too, will be attending." I told her I was busy and didn't want to attend anything, not knowing that the man I had seen in my beautiful dream was Sathya Sai Baba! But my mother can be very persuasive if she feels something is good for her daughter. This event was happening in the capital city of Bogotá, she said. I finally yielded and canceled my rugby engagements. However, since the retreat was scheduled during the holiday season, I had a change of heart and decided to visit Bogotá for vacation instead of attending the retreat.

A day or two after my mother left to prepare for the retreat, I flew to Bogotá to enjoy my vacation. I had no plans when I landed and decided to go with the flow as I always did. I walked to the bus station and got into a bus. I decided to chat with a random stranger and travel to wherever that person was headed. This is the way I have always been–a strong believer in living in the moment–and my experiences with crippling pain had made me adhere even more to that philosophy of life.

I felt drawn toward one lady and felt she would be my 'travel companion.' I walked up to her and asked, "Do you know where

I can eat something?" She looked at me, a bit puzzled, and said, "There are many restaurants here..."

I continued, "Oh yes! But you see, I am vegetarian, and there are no options for me..."

Now, she seemed to warm up and said, "I am a vegetarian myself. If it is okay with you, I can share my burger..."

As we shared the burger, we began to have a conversation. When I asked her where she was headed, she replied she was going to Chinauta, a corregimiento (administrative division) of the municipality of Fusagasugá in the state/province of Cundinamarca.

As we talked more, I found out that she was headed to the Sathya Sai retreat! I was stunned! I felt this was my calling. I called my mother and asked her whether I could still register for the retreat. She asked me where I was. "I am on a bus, an hour from the retreat venue..." I replied. My mother was simply thrilled. She told me to just come to the venue, and she would take care of the registration, accommodation–everything!

There were more surprises for me as I reached the venue. The doctor who had gifted my life back to me turned out to be Ms. Nazly Utria Guzman, who was then the President of the Sri Sathya Sai International Organization of Colombia! Needless to say, I was not aware of it till then. **The biggest and most thrilling revelation came when I saw the picture of Swami and realized that He was the person hugging me in my dream! My life felt like a movie at that point, a movie so beautifully directed by the supreme being.** I now understood why I felt so happy after that dream. God had come to me!

The Eternal Companion

That retreat turned out to be a life-changer for me. I cannot even begin to explain all the transformations of my heart. It was my first Sai retreat, and after that, I have NEVER missed a single Sai retreat. There was no looking back. I found out that Swami had just taken Mahasamadhi, but I could not believe He was gone. How can He be gone when I feel His presence so strongly in my life, in Colombia? **In my opinion, Swami is more present right now than ever before. Before, devotees were possibly attached more to His form, but now, they are more attached to His presence and His teachings.**

Swami kept giving me more and more blessings. Soon, I was appointed as the Young Adult Coordinator and I was very happy for the blessed privilege to be part of Swami's glorious mission. I also had the opportunity to travel to Nairobi, Kenya, for the Sri Sathya Sai International Conference in June 2024. How that happened is another beautiful story, which could be the subject of a future article. I am just grateful to Swami for His presence, His grace, and His blessings in my life. **And I am convinced that my pains were also His blessings because they brought Swami, my God, into my life.**

Ms. Karine Paola Angulo Ramos
COLOMBIA

Ms. Karine Paola Angulo Ramos *was born in Barranquilla, Colombia, in South America. She is a Mechanical Engineer who works in industrial engineering. She and her family have been devotees of Swami since 2011. She has been the Young Adults program coordinator in Colombia since 2023.*

I Will Always Be With You

"What do you want?" Baba asked as I sat quietly, unsure of what to say.

"What do you want?" Baba asked me again, but I remained quiet.

"Why is hair so big?" Swami further enquired, and I still kept quiet.

"Youth, what do you want?" asked Baba for the third time.

"You, Baba, I want you, Baba," I finally ventured to reply. In between these questions that Baba asked me, He was also talking to others in the interview room and had already materialized a beautiful ring for Pundit Jadunanan Mishra, a Shiva *lingam* for someone, a *japamala* for another lady, and a pendant for a Western devotee. I had seen so many miracles in such a short period that I was able to quickly elevate my opinion of Baba from Saint, Prophet, and Avatar to that of Supreme Being on earth. It was then possible for me to repeat my reply to Baba, and **I said, "Baba, I want you," being fully convinced of His divinity and Avatarhood.**

"Take me," said Swami, extending out both hands. I did *padanamaskar*, and Swami gently lifted me, rested my upper body on His lap, patted my head, and said, ***"I will always be with you."***

I was moved to tears and remained happy but wonderstruck at my good fortune to be in the Divine presence, and conversing with the God of all the worlds, the Supreme Master, Lord Sai. During the entire interview, Swami watched Pundit Mishra continue to cry emotionally. Baba went into the inner interview room and returned. Pundit Mishra told Baba that he had been conducting a spiritual class for youth who were training to become pundits. **Baba said, *"My blessings will be there."*** At that point, Baba called me to the inner room. Not knowing what to expect, I was a bit anxious. As He sat in His chair He spoke to me very lovingly and softly. *"You have a lot to contribute to society. I will be there to guide you."* Swami then ushered the rest of the devotees from Trinidad into the inner room.

This interview was granted to us on the third day of our visit to Baba's *ashram* in December 1981. Before the actual journey, we had a discussion. In October 1981, the wife of Pundit Seereram Jadunanan Mishra, Dharmarani (Rani), whom I endearingly called 'Mamee,' told me that she and the pundit were going on a pilgrimage to Bhagawan Baba. They invited me to join them. I told her that I could not afford to pay for such a wonderful pilgrimage, although I dearly wanted to see Baba. Mamee responded confidently, **"With Baba's grace, it will happen. Don't worry, you will join us."**

Pundit Mishra was my guru, teacher, mentor, and spiritual guide, and his wife was like a mother to me, so I would implicitly follow any words of blessing from her lips. I was

a practicing *purohit* or Hindu priest, and the income derived from that vocation was barely enough, so I felt it was impossible to go to India. Soon it seemed that there was a dramatic shift in my economic fortunes as religious work just kept coming in my direction. In a short period, I had enough money for my travel tickets and expenses. Mamee's words came true as always, and I was on my way to see Baba in December 1981. That was the first time in my life that I was traveling outside of Trinidad and my yearning to visit India, my ancestral home, had become a reality. We journeyed via our national airline to London, then took other international and internal flights to Dubai, New Delhi, Mumbai, and Bangalore. From Bangalore, we took a taxi to travel to Puttaparthi and the *ashram* of Baba, Prasanthi Nilayam.

We arrived in time for the afternoon *darshan*. Swami came out and began to move ever so slowly and gracefully in front of the seated crowd near the ladies' section. I realized that at age twenty-one, I was the youngest member of the Trinidad group. So I just followed the instructions dutifully.

On the third day of our visit, we were seated in the darshan lines when Swami spoke to someone in our group, and we all were ushered into the interview room. Baba came in last and bolted the door, then proceeded to have all of us seated in two sections, men and women separately. Pundit Mishra and I sat close to Swami's feet. There were a few Westerners in the room. I was amazed at the ease and fluency with which Baba spoke Dutch, Hindi, Bengali, and English so that everyone could understand Him. **Suddenly He said, *"Trouble, trouble, trouble everywhere, everyone bringing trouble, but no one is leaving it here; they are carrying it back."***

Swami's message was very clear: He told us to renounce all evils and follow His path of truth and human values. Baba turned to Pundit Mishra and said, *"You have a good heart but too much temper."* As Baba spoke those words, He waved His delicate hand in a circle and materialized a beautiful golden ring embossed with an enamel image of Swami. Baba placed the ring on Pundit's finger, and it was a perfect fit.

"This will help you to keep calm Dharmarani. I know the big photograph of Shirdi Baba in your hall." With those sweet words, Swami gave her a beautiful *japamala* (a necklace of prayer beads) and gracefully demonstrated for all to see, the proper way of using it for *japa* (repetition of the holy name). He also discussed the significance of and benefits to be derived from the practice.

During the entire interview, my Guru Pundit Mishra was crying, and Swami invited some of us into the inner room. There Baba patted Pundit's head and me on my shoulders. He turned to me and said, *"You will come back with a wife. When you get married, come back with your wife."* He then distributed handfuls of *vibhuti* packets to us. We all left the interview room, feeling uplifted in spirit, and a Divine euphoria lasted for several days. The next day during morning *darshan,* Baba looked at my Guru, Pundit Mishra, and asked, "Who is this?" Pundit Mishra said, "This is my *shishya*" (disciple) and Baba continued walking slowly. He suddenly stopped and spoke to a Sri Lankan boy who was seated next to me. The boy told us earlier that Swami had instructed him to stop smoking and that he had stopped. Baba came close, gave the boy vibhuti, and asked him in a stern voice that all of us could hear clearly, *"Do you still smoke?"*

"No," said the boy.

At that point, Swami stepped back and produced a photograph that showed the boy smoking. The boy took the photograph, held it to his heart, and began to cry. All of us were struck with spiritual wonder, and now I was convinced that Swami was always everywhere seeing everything that we did.

The rest of our stay was quite eventful as we busied ourselves in the daily disciplines of early rising, meditation, *bhajans*, and listening to lectures by Shri. N. Kasturi and other prominent spiritual followers of Swami. We spent a total of three weeks in India, and six of those days were spent in Baba's physical presence in the *ashram*, where we had many blessings and two precious interviews.

I was born in a very poor family to parents Dharamraj and Etwaria Maharaj in Ghandi Village, La Fortune, Woodland, in South Trinidad. My mother led a very pious life. She attended every class in Srimad Bhagavad Gita at the Motidass Temple in Debe, and classes in Valmiki Ramayana, Vishnu Puran, and the Mahabharata at the Krishna Mandir in San Fernando. With such deep spiritual yearning, my mother wished very deeply to have a son who would become a pundit, and she prayed to God, day and night, for that heavenly gift. Six days following my birth she had a dream in which someone wearing a white robe told her, *"Call this child Aum Aum Aum."*

My mother named me Aum, and everyone called me by that name. Strangely, whenever my mother read the Srimad Bhagavad Gita out loud, whatever she read stuck in my childhood memory. It was later that I discovered that I was reciting the *slokas* from that holy book. My friend and a few relatives tried to persuade me to consume *tamasic,* nonvegetarian food and beverages, but Swami had blessed me and made sure that I never once tasted meat, alcohol, or tobacco in, any form. Baba, it seemed, was always guiding and protecting me along the road leading to Him.

After that beautiful visit to Baba with my Guru Pundit Mishra in 1981, I returned home with an overwhelming zeal to accomplish a lot in too short a time. My mother invested some funds in a business making us prosperous, but I was soon overcome with the poisonous serpent called ego. Later, some misfortunes crept into my life. By 1984, I had suffered a nervous breakdown. When my Guru returned from a visit to Swami in 1984, he visited me, and I felt better. I was at that time continuously singing certain words in a particular tune, and I did not know their source. It went like this:

"Honay toe hotay rahey,
an- honey na hoi
Jhako rakhay Sayiyan,
mara sakeyna koi"

"Whatever will be, will be. Whatever befalls thee, O Man, with Sai as the protector, none can ever bring hurt to you."

I had no ability to compose, and I had no idea how these lines and the tune came to my mind.

My Guru, Pundit Mishra, together with the guiding hand of Bhagawan Baba, restored my mental, physical, and spiritual life once again. I gradually returned to productive pursuits as a pundit, farmer, and driving instructor.

In February 1988, I was married in a beautiful Hindu ceremony. In December, my Guru, Pundit Mishra, Mrs. Gopaul, her daughter Princess, my wife Roshni, and I went on a memorable pilgrimage to Baba in what we called our "honeymoon visit." We arrived at the *ashram* on December 6 and were blessed with an interview on December 9, my wife's birthday.

I said to Baba in Hindi, "Baba, *Ye hamara dharma patni hai*," or "Baba, this is my wife, my life's companion," to which He gave the most surprising reply, *"I knew her before you."*

"What work are you doing?" asked Baba.

"I am a driving instructor," I said.

"You must be a teacher of character," **Baba said,** and everyone smiled at Swami's searching questions and comments.

Our journey to Sai began long before our births, and we are happy to have been

granted human births in this age so that we are blessed to see, touch, and speak with the Avatar of the Kaliyuga, Bhagawan Baba.

We feel blessed and transformed because we have, as a family under Swami's umbrella, dedicated all our actions to Service and Love–*seva, seva, seva*, and *prema, prema, prema*.

May all of us be blessed by the Supreme Master to have His *darshan* (holy sight), *sparshan* (holy touch), and *sambhashan* (holy conversation), and may we dwell together in unity as one family with Unity, Purity, and Divinity.

JAI SAI RAM.

Pundit Aum Karamchand Maharaj
TRINIDAD

Pundit Aum Karamchand Maharaj *of Trinidad also known as Pundit Aum was born on December 1, 1959. He was trained from the age of 10 to become a Hindu priest. He was later introduced to Shri Sathya Sai Baba by his Guru, and they both became devotees of Swami. He visited Prasanthi Nilayam several times, starting in 1981 and with his wife Roshini Maharaj in 1988. He and his wife hosted Satsang at their home 23rd of every month for many years to thank Swami until he passed away.*

How Ecuador Came to Love Sathya Sai

It was the last day of my first trip to India–a most fruitful one, for I was blessed to experience the Divine Love of Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba! I had arrived from Argentina in January 1982 and it was already March 1982. When I left India in March 1982, I had a strong urge to return as soon as possible. I prayed to Swami to bring me back by September. It was a wishful prayer because I had just started working with a new company and had already spent all my savings. I did not have the financial means to return anytime soon. Still, as I bid goodbye to the people I had met at the Ashram, I told them I would be back in September!

An Irresistible Divine Urge

A few months after returning to Argentina, a live show producer came to my licensing company with a proposal to produce a children's play in Ecuador with the characters that my company represented. The company owners approved the proposal, and soon, I was on my way to Ecuador with a 30-day-valid return ticket bought by the live show company. We toured Ecuador for 29 days, performing a play with Marvel Comic characters and action superheroes such as Spider-Man and The Incredible Hulk. On the twenty-ninth day, the tour ended, and the next day I had a flight booked to return to Argentina. At that moment, it struck me that nobody in Ecuador knew about Sai Baba, and **I had an irresistible urge to share the enormous joy of experiencing a remarkable encounter with God (Avatar) living in India**.

So, I rushed to the airline's office to request to change my ticket for a later flight. By Swami's grace, I paid just USD 100 as a fee to get an open ticket valid for an entire year! I was thrilled that Swami had granted me my wish.

When Sai Gives a Task, He Makes You Achieve It

I soon realized that talking about Sai Baba in Guayaquil was not easy. I did not know anyone locally, and I could not just go to a park, stand on a bench, and talk about Sai Baba. As I prayed to Swami for guidance, I remembered that an old friend, Claudio Duran, lived in Quito, Ecuador. He had earlier introduced me to the Suddha Dharma Mandalam, the Raja Yoga organization where I had been vice president. He was presently a musician who composed jingles for advertising campaigns.

So, I called him and laid bare my thoughts and plans to spread the news about Sai Baba in Ecuador. He advised me, "Look, the only way I can help you is if you come to Quito, where, at least, there will be two of us trying." So, I took a flight to Quito. Three days after I was initially scheduled to return to Argentina, I was at the headquarters of a Hatha Yoga organization run by a Catholic priest, delightedly sharing the story of Sai Baba with the attendees. The hall was full of people, and I spoke for almost an hour about my experiences with Sai Baba and

His message. When I finished my talk, the Catholic priest was quite impressed and told me that if I wrote an article about Sai Baba, he would include it in their monthly magazine.

Moreover, if I had a photograph of Sai Baba, it would be featured on the magazine's cover! My heart jumped with joy and gratitude. In just a few days, Swami resolved my dilemma–from wondering how to speak about Sai Baba in Ecuador, an article was going to be published in a magazine distributed throughout Ecuador! I was so happy that I could touch the sky with my hands!

The Master's Plan is the Masterplan

Claudio invited me the next day, Saturday, to go to a classical music concert. My flight back to Argentina was scheduled for the following Tuesday, so I went to the concert with him. After the concert, Claudio met with an important client for whom he was creating an advertising campaign. Since it was cold at night and the discussion was not completed, the client invited us to visit him the next day, Sunday, for a lunch meeting to continue the conversation. Though I had no intention of participating in a working lunch, Claudio insisted on my attendance, saying that it would be impolite for me not to attend and that it would also embarrass him. So, I reluctantly agreed, mainly not to let Claudio down.

Claudio's client, Dr. Teodoro Crespo, was a prominent industrialist in Ecuador who had also served as his country's ambassador to Israel. During lunch, he asked me why I was visiting Ecuador, and I told him about my memorable trip to India and my life-changing meeting and experiences with Sai Baba. I spoke enthusiastically nonstop for ten minutes about Sai Baba. Dr. Crespo suddenly interrupted me and asked, "Sir, would you mind going to India with me?" Surprised and happy at the same time, I replied that it would be no trouble at all! He said, "Well then, tomorrow, Monday, I'll wait for you at 10 am at a travel agency at this address to buy our tickets to India."

When I returned to the hotel, I thought the invitation to go to India was probably a joke. But on Monday, suddenly, it occurred to me, what if it's not a joke, but true and genuine? I was torn between my incredulous rational mind and the possibility that it was a sign from Sai Baba. So I called a taxi and went to the address of the travel agency. A travel agency was indeed located there, and Teodoro had already bought two tickets to India!

Thus, on September 2, 1982, I entered Sai Baba's Ashram in Whitefield, South India, accompanied by Dr. Teodoro Crespo. This incident reminded me of Swami's assurance, ***"Take one step toward Me, and I will take a hundred steps towards you."***

It was the first day of our stay at Whitefield *ashram* near Bangalore. We were waiting expectantly to have the first *darshan* when Baba came out of His house, about a hundred meters from where we were sitting. Then I heard His voice echoing clearly in my head for the second time in my life, saying, *"Didn't you want to be here in September? Here you are!"* What a miracle!

Cancer Canceled and a Heart Overjoyed

During the long journey to India, Teodoro shared with me the reason for his impromptu decision to visit Sai Baba with me. A short time ago, he was told that he had a tumor on his palate, and the subsequent biopsy revealed that it was malignant. Within a few days of the diagnosis, my chance arrival at his house and my story of Sai Baba and His miraculous powers piqued his interest. With nothing to lose, Teodoro felt an inner prompting to go to India to see Sai Baba.

Teodoro, at that time, was a relatively well-built man, accustomed to a comfortable life surrounded by luxury. The austerities of the *ashram* were difficult for him to endure, and he would complain constantly. In those days, Sai Baba gave darshan in Whitefield every morning, and on Thursdays and Sundays, He gave *darshan* both in the morning and the afternoon. Many devotees who came for morning *darshan* would stay seated till the afternoon *darshan*. On one of those days, Teodoro decided to sit and wait for the afternoon darshan while listening to *bhajans* being sung. I left after morning *darshan*. When I returned in the afternoon, I found him sobbing uncontrollably, like a child.

When I asked him what was going on, Teodoro told me, between sobs, that Baba had just come to his side. He told him to open his mouth, and then He put his hand into his mouth, extracted something, and said, ***"Cancer has been canceled."*** No one around him physically saw Swami, but Teodoro had that unforgettable miraculous experience of Swami curing him.

Soon after, we followed Swami to Prasanthi Nilayam, the primary *ashram* of Baba, to spend a few days there before returning to Ecuador. After returning to Argentina, I learned later that Teodoro saw his doctor and then came for a check-up at the Texas Cancer Center, where they performed a biopsy. The results showed no trace of any malignant tumor on his palate, and he was completely cured of cancer.

Still stunned by this miraculous experience, Teodoro published a magazine with his experience with Sai Baba. He illustrated the story with the photos he had taken at the *ashram*, printed 10,000 copies, and distributed them throughout Ecuador for free.

Inspiration is the Divine Voice Within

What started as an irresistible urge within me to share Sai Baba's glory and universal message with the good people in Ecuador later turned into a much bigger movement. The talk I gave at the Hatha Yoga Center about Sai Baba was published as an article in the magazine run by the Catholic priest. In addition, Teodoro Crespo shared his incredible healing experience in the magazine he published only for that purpose, which had a circulation of about 10,000.

Today, there are two Sathya Sai Schools in Ecuador, several Sathya Sai centers, and many Sathya Sai devotees throughout the country. Many years after he was cured of cancer by the grace of Sathya Sai Baba, Teodoro Crespo visited Buenos Aires to share his experience with the Argentinian devotees. Along with several family members, Teodoro Crespo remained till his death some years ago as an ardent devotee of Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba.

Mr. Leonardo Gutter
ARGENTINA

***Mr. Leonardo Pablo Gutter**, a psychologist by profession, has been serving in the Sri Sathya Sai International Organization (SSSIO) for over four decades. He has had many personal interactions with Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba. He started the Latin American movement of the SSSIO and previously served as the Chairman of Zone 2, Latin America. Mr. Gutter is a founding member of the Sri Sathya Sai Trust of Argentina.*

He is a Member of the Prasanthi Council, Director of the Sri Sathya Sai World Foundation, and Co-Chair of the Intellectual Property Committee. Working with the entertainment industry over the past 43 years, Mr. Gutter represents some of the largest American, European and Japanese TV and cinema studios in Latin America.

Interviews and Inner Views with Sathya Sai

I grew up in a small farming community in the Midwest, USA. I knew nothing of the concept of ''Avatar." I only knew about Jesus Christ and, at a young age I had an 'intense spiritual 'experience.' I don't know how else to explain it. I heard a divine voice that said, "I am a messenger from the Father in heaven. I have come because of your dedication to truth and love. I have come to bring you immortality."

It was startling, to say the least. I was sure nobody would believe me if I shared what I had experienced. So, I kept it all to myself. But I was totally convinced that it was time for the second coming of Christ. This would be the Father of Christ, and I felt that I had to find my Lord. I started my search by reading whatever spiritual books I could find. There were very few books back in those days! And then, it happened.

Somebody knew someone in California who sent a book to a friend in St. Louis, Missouri, where I lived, who gave it to me. **It was *Dhyana Vahini* (a book on meditation) by Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba. I opened it, read a couple of paragraphs, and then closed the book. "This is exactly who 'I've been looking for!" I said to myself, partly in excitement and partly in relief.** I was so convinced that even before I physically saw Him, I became one of the founding members of the Sai Baba Center in St. Louis, Missouri in 1973!

Responding to His Call I traveled to India all by myself in my 20s, in 1976, knowing only three names–a hotel, an *ashram*, and a driver! Even as I landed in India, Swami came in my dream exclaiming, *"Oh! You have come!"* I had my first *darshan* in Brindavan (*ashram* near Bengaluru). Swami went back to Prasanthi Nilayam the very next day. While I was totally in love with Baba, I still wondered whether God would accept me and love me. Nothing happened for the first three days at Puttaparthi other than I got an upset stomach from the food. Swami didn't even come toward where the ladies were seated. He said later, *"The ladies are running; indiscipline!"* **The first lesson I learned was that discipline is essential to get closer to God.**

The next *darshan*, He came near me and called me in for an interview, saying, *"You! Go in..."* I got up unsteadily and nervously, unsure whether the saree I had just learned to wrap around myself would stay in place. The first thing Swami did in the interview room was to switch on the fan. I felt that was how He switched on my spiritual journey, too! In the private inner interview room, He asked, *"What do you want?"* I just put my hands together in prayer. He said, *"Don't worry. I will help you."* He put His hand on my head, blessing me. Then, He revealed, *"Your stomach is not good..."* He knew my condition! But at a deeper level, I felt He indicated the region of my

solar plexus, the seat of all emotions, as not being good. That also, He knew!

Finally, He said, *"You stay for more days."* Obeying His loving command, I stayed on. When He traveled to Brindavan, I followed Him and shifted base. During *darshan*, He came up to me and asked, *"How are you?"* Before I could reply, He continued, *"Happy, happy, happy!"* This was the message I received from Swami near the conclusion of my first trip.

His Vision for My Life Mission

It was after a period of intense *sadhana* (spiritual practice) that I took a second trip to see Swami. Once, when I was out of the *ashram* to make some sundry purchases, a man walked up to me and said, "Tomorrow, Swami is going to call you and tell you about your life's 'work.'" I was taken aback. When I returned to my room, my roommate, who was a fellow teacher in the school where I taught, told me, "A man came here with a message that Swami wants to see you tomorrow morning at 8..."

Wow! That was no coincidence! Swami called us in for an interview the next day, and He asked me, *"Oh! You are a teacher? Where do you teach?"*

"Swami, East Saint Louis..."

"East Saint Louis! Teach about Jesus and spirituality."

"*Bal Vikas*, Swami?"

Swami did not respond to that but said that He would call us for an interview again. I wondered how on earth I was going to incorporate 'Jesus and spirituality' in my lesson plans. **But when Swami gives a task, He gives the strength and resources needed to accomplish it as well. With His grace, I became instrumental in introducing EHV (Education in Human Values) and 3HV (Unity of Head, Heart, and Hand) in my school.**

Achieve Peace of Mind Before Seeking Liberation

We were blessed with a second interview in the afternoon of the same day.

During that session, with a wave of His hand, Swami materialized a medallion and put it around my neck. He also materialized a small 'calling card,' complete with His name and address! He said, *"Keep this in your purse."* Then, we were taken into the private interview room. Once inside, Swami lovingly held my folded palms and gently rocked them. He then asked me what I wanted. I replied that I wanted liberation. He seemed to brush aside my words with His hand and said, ***"First, find peace of mind. Liberation comes later."*** **I was thinking how to get peace of mind, then I remembered what He told me in my first interview, *"Stay away from anger. Stay away from desires. Stay away from doubt."***

Continuing to hold my hand, He said, "*I am going to come and give you darshan every Thursday.*" I sat dumbstruck, wondering how He would do that. Would He manifest Himself in the United States? Today, I know clearly in my heart that He is perfectly capable of doing that. But Swami's statement was also a reference to attending the Sai Center. **It was a reminder to reconnect with Him every Thursday at the Center. That is what He used to say back in those days: *"worship me every Thursday."* We have to do this till our devotion grows and we begin to connect with Him every day, till it happens every moment**.

So, liberation, my ultimate goal, was conditional on achieving the goal of 'peace of mind.' It was a task He gave me, advised me on how to do it, and gifted me the means to achieve it. During another interview, Swami materialized a gold ring for me with three white diamonds. Later on, I noticed that it had a slight bend. But it

was beautiful, and I was in love with it. I somehow felt that Swami would change it the next time I was in India. And amazingly, that is precisely what happened! In a couple of months, we were in Puttaparthi for Swami's Birthday when He called us in for an interview.

He asked me for my ring, and when I gave it to Him, He said, *"It is bent!"*

"Swami, it came out like that only when you materialized it for me!"

"Oh! Do you like this ring?" He asked.

"I like whatever You give me, Swami."

"Do you want green or white?"

"Swami, I want whatever **You** give me."

He passed the ring around the interview room. All those assembled there held the ring in their hands before passing it on. Finally, the ring went back to Swami. Now, He held it up and slowly brought it close toward His mouth. He blew on it thrice. And with the third breath, in everyone's plain sight, the ring changed, the setting changed, and the stone changed! It was now a green emerald ring, and it fit my finger perfectly.

"*See, size perfect*," Swami said.

"Yes! Sai's perfect," I played on His words.

He beamed a broad smile at me and said that the ring was for my peace of mind.

Wedding and Divine Experiences in the Interview Room

It was Swami who arranged my marriage in December 1983. I traveled to India for a *Balvikas* (Sathya Sai Education) conference in Puttaparthi. I was part of the group that came for teacher training. There was also a man in the group whom I knew from my Sai Center back in the USA, John Schiermann. We had not spoken much more than greeting each other with 'Sai Ram' or 'How are you' and 'Goodbye.' When Swami called the group in for an interview, He started talking to me about marriage. I knew He was serious about it when the same conversation continued in the private interview room, too. Even as I was coming to terms with what was happening, Swami shared some of His powerful energy to make sure that I understood that He was arranging this marriage.

Today, I know that my husband, too, experienced that same energy back then. This most incredible divine energy became stronger and stronger till neither of us could look at Swami anymore! He was the source of such incredible power that I could feel He was writing my life for me, and I was glad for that. I found myself absolutely calm and was in total acceptance of my marriage to this man about whom I knew almost nothing!

Years later, Swami called my husband and me for an interview in Brindavan. As we sat in the private interview room, Swami looked at me and then my husband and said, "*See! Not mistake*..." He was the proud father, happy that He had brought the two of us together. Sitting at His feet, we looked at His feet. His robe and *dhoti* had been specially arranged in what we felt was a divine formation. And then, it happened!

We could both see divine light emerging from that arrangement of His robe and His feet. Having enjoyed this special *darshan*, we walked out of the interview, exclaiming together, "Oh my goodness! Did you see that miracle?" Since that day, I have had a partner to walk along with me in my journey to liberation.

The Journey to Liberation

There have been many more interviews after that, with Swami being the constant and loving guide. He also took my son under His divine umbrella as a student in His educational institutions. He has further ensured that at all times, everywhere, we have been constantly evolving spiritually.

Everything that has happened in my life–starting from the voice I heard as a youth till experiencing Swami's presence now in every moment of my life–has convinced me of the journey to liberation or God. It has been beautifully summarized by Swami in His words mentioned below.

The first stage is to be a messenger of God like Jesus was. This is the stage of "I am in the light." The second stage is to be the child of God, as Jesus said, "I am the Son of God." This is the stage of "The Light is in me." Then, we move to the final stage to become one with God or liberated. Jesus stated this as, "I and my Father are One." This is the stage of "I am the Light."

With Swami's grace and blessings, may we always be in the light and achieve our ultimate goal of being the light.

Ms. Creta Schiermann
USA

Ms. Creta Schiermann *is a nationally certified Family & Consumer Scientist. Retired with 40 years of teaching experience, she currently mentors middle and high school teachers for the Missouri Department of Elementary & Secondary Education. She is a founding member of the Sri Sathya Sai Center of St. Louis, Missouri, in 1973. With her wealth of personal experiences with Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba, she initiated Sai Spiritual Education (Bal Vikas) programs in the USA in 1977.*

She has served in the SSSIO–USA as the president of Region 4, regional SSE coordinator, and a teacher trainer. She is the coordinator for SSSIO-USA Region 4's adopted Community Envirocare project at the World Bird Sanctuary, Valley Park, Missouri, USA, which awarded the Marlin Perkins Award to the SSSIO–USA for outstanding Envirocare in 2020/2021.

Love Travels Full Circle

I never thought that glancing through a fashion magazine could rearrange the pages of my life's history book! I was soaring in my career as a fashion designer in Montreal, Canada when my world overturned for the good. Browsing through the December 1975 issue of Vogue magazine to see the latest fashions, my eyes noticed a black and white picture of a charismatic man with Afro-hair. His name was spelled in bold letters, SATHYA SAI BABA–a name I had never heard of, but the word Baba caught my attention. In my native language, Hungarian, Baba means doll, and I always loved dolls. The article appeared in the magazine's travel section, written by an Englishman who had spent four months in Prasanthi Nilayam, Sai Baba's *ashram* in Puttaparthi, South India. I felt an immediate magnetic attraction, looking at the page, and began reading it (which I seldom did as I was only interested in the latest fashion). Soon, I was devouring each word written by the author who was evidently an ardent follower of Sai Baba. He concluded that Sai Baba is the Embodiment of Pure Love. That statement mesmerized me and within moments I decided to meet this person to see Him for myself. All my life I was looking for pure love but never found it. Guided by a strong intuition, I made plans and without any references, guidance, or address set out for South India in September 1976.

An Unwelcome Welcome

I just carried a backpack, traveling 13,000 kilometers not knowing exactly what awaited me. But I was carrying huge emotional baggage that even I was not aware of. As a Jew and a child survivor of the Holocaust, I had been traumatized in a manner that only those who have endured it can understand. My heart and soul sought healing love so desperately that the very thought of meeting the Embodiment of Pure Love was enough to undertake the trip to the unknown. After a long flight with a number of delays and a long journey by road, I reached Prasanthi Nilayam on a sweltering afternoon to find that Sai Baba had left the *ashram* that morning. My hopes of finding a sympathetic welcome were soon dashed. First, the Accommodation Office refused to let me stay for longer than a week. They said that I was not serious but someone who went from *ashram* to *ashram*. Next, the room I was given was nothing more than a concrete cube with no furniture and a primitive bathroom.

But these hardships did not deter me. I prayed to God to lead me to where He wants me to be. I wrapped myself as best as I could in an Indian saree and went out to look at the temple and the compound. An old lady rudely rebuked me for walking with my sandals on the sacred ground, and then pulled me aside and started re-wrapping the saree the proper way. Shortly after this, when I went to the Canteen to have

lunch, a Western lady devotee told me that Swami had left the *ashram* that morning for Anantapur.

A Dramatic Change of Plans

Staying in the *ashram*, I began to follow the routine, waking up at 3:30 AM for morning devotional program of *Omkaram*, *Suprabhatam*, and meditation. As I sat in the Mandir, I was struck by a sense of *deja vu* that I had seen this place many times in my dreams about heaven. Experiencing it now convinced me that it was true. My German roommate, who had been at the *ashram* before, guided me in everything, including wearing a saree properly. She heard that Swami would be coming back for the Dasara festival.

One day I was seated in the *mandir* during morning *bhajans* when all of a sudden there was a collective gasp of excited anticipation. The most beautiful and captivating being I had ever seen in my life floated into the *bhajan* hall! It was my first *darshan* of Sai Baba. I waited with bated breath for Him to recognize me and give me a welcome look. But there was absolutely no sign that He saw me. Yet Sai Baba seemed very familiar to me, like seeing my father or my beloved uncle.

The next day I was walking to the room, passing an open door at the back of the Poornachandra Auditorium, when I saw Sai Baba standing there. He looked at me as if He had known me for ages. There was a smile on His face and His eyes seemed to be radiating joy–I had received my welcome from Baba Himself!

My Life Takes a New Turn

Dasara festival began and one day, Swami walked down the aisle between the ladies and gents in the Poornachandra Hall. When Swami was nearby, a lady from England sitting next to me asked Him for an interview. Her group was leaving soon. Swami agreed to see them. Then looking at me, He asked, *"Are you leaving too?"*

"No Swami..."

"Don't go. Stay here."

All I could utter was, "Yes, Swami "

Swami continued walking all the way to the back of the hall but I was shaken by uncontrollable sobbing as if all the pain I suffered in this life had erupted. The Indian lady sitting next to me patted me gently and told me to stop crying because Sai Baba does not like to see tears. I managed to stop sobbing but there were surely telltale signs when Swami approached me on His way back. He stopped near me and with the sweetest, knowing, compassionate smile pointed to His feet and I managed to do my first awkward *padanamaskar*.

Floating on clouds, I went to the Accommodation Office and told them that Sai Baba had asked me to stay. The person in charge meekly nodded and gave me an extension. I am sure that even he did not have the slightest idea that the extension would last for a full 24 years–from 1976 to 2000!

Loving God Becomes the Sole Goal

I started reading all the books available on Swami. Yet I always doubted that God could have a form because in my Jewish faith God is considered formless.

One day during *darshan*, I was seated in the second row. Swami walked by without looking at me but after going forward two steps, He looked back directly into my eyes. That very moment I felt my inner consciousness unravel like a ball of wool, soaring into the Cosmos, leaving the body behind. Was it seconds or minutes? I lost count of time. After what seemed like an eternity, I had to avert my eyes. **In an instant, I knew that I was in the presence of the Universal Power–God. When the**

doubts vanished came the realization that Loving Him and receiving His Love were the goals of my life. I had a desire to receive an Indian name instead of Suzan. A lady devotee suggested that 'Parvati' was a good choice. My mother's name started with P, so I liked the idea, but Swami had to give His permission. I wrote and gave a letter to Swami, and as He took it, I saw a smile of approval. Amazingly, the special confirmation came sometime later when Swami called me for an interview and addressed me, *"Parvati...Parvati...Parvati."*

Later in the day, Prof. Kasturi, the chosen biographer of Swami, recited the story of the Himalayan Princess, Parvati, who with her perseverance and unswerving faith and devotion to Lord Shiva became Goddess Parvati. From then on, she was my inspiration.

Swami Gifts Me a New Career

Years rolled by with daily *darshan*, *bhajan*, and *sadhana*. I would follow with other devotees wherever Swami went, Puttaparthi, Whitefield, or Kodaikanal. One day quite early on, I had the idea to paint Sai Baba from the first photograph I have seen. After days of painting, finally, the 1m x 1m canvas was completed. I carried the painting with me to *darshan* and set it so that Swami could see it, but He consistently ignored it. Finally, at Brindavan Ashram in Bangalore, He looked at it and asked who painted this.

"I did Swami"

"Very good, lifelike. You will paint many photos of Swami." I did not understand the importance of Swami's statement till He began to assign me the task of painting His photos for hostels, schools, colleges, and hospitals! They were blessed tasks that I enjoyed even though I was often frustrated in striving to capture Swami's Divine beauty. I always prayed, "Swami, You do the work, I only hold the brush."

One memorable event occurred when the standing, life-sized, oil painting of Swami in the Bhajan Hall altar got damaged and was sent to me to "Fix." There was a gaping hole in the canvas at the position of the lotus feet. I was overwhelmed at His trust and confidence in me but I knew that only Swami's miracle can do the repair. I followed the inner guidance, working almost in a trance. As the repair progressed, with layers of new paint, the hole was covered and the painting was fully restored.

Swami was pleased and soon began calling me *"Painter Parvati."* When devotees brought paintings of Swami as offerings, He would say, *"Send it to Parvati. She knows how to paint Swami's hair and nose."* I retouched the paintings and Swami was happy.

But He never expressed it to me in person or in public. I would hear about the praise from others. Swami only pointed out errors and mistakes to me in a nice way. I did not mind this, but my heart still craved His love and appreciation. It is only later that I understood that **Swami expressed His Love in ways that did not create jealousy and negative thoughts that could be harmful**.

Farewell and Lessons Learnt

In the year 2000, after 24 years at His divine lotus feet, Swami communicated to me in silent ways that it was time to leave the *ashram*. I had a dream where I was sitting on the floor of a dry swimming pool and I clearly understood that the pain and suffering carried from the childhood trauma of the Holocaust had all dried up and I was breathing again.

- During *darshan*, as Swami passed me, I felt as if two enormous wings were growing on my back and I was ready to fly.

- The next vision was a bird's nest, where the mother bird was gently prodding and pushing the fledglings to fly away. I realized the messages were meant for me and I wrote a letter to Swami with three questions. He passed me in *darshan*, at a distance, with a little smile on His face, not taking the letter, but said, *"Yes, yes, yes!"*

The place that drew me was Israel where I spent my student days at the University of Fine Arts. One summer, years ago, I had asked for permission to travel there, and now Swami sent a message, "Tell Parvati she can go to Israel!"

It was the year 2000. An amazing sequence of events unfolded in Israel. Since I had not yet turned 60, I was accepted into academic work, and as a result, I could retire with a pension that is still sufficient to sustain me happily. I had gone to Sai Baba in quest of pure love. I realize now that I traveled from Montreal to Puttaparthi to Tel Aviv, to find that love in my own heart! It was a full circle. Swami, the master goldsmith, had hammered, burned, and removed the impurities, till my heart was pure enough to reflect Him, making me His *Bangaru* (gold) as He used to call us endearingly.

Love is an ocean, there is no 'His love or my love.' When ego, anger, and jealousy are gone we become that Love–One with Him–and the nectar of Pure Love never stops flowing.

Ms. Suzie Parvati Reeves
ISRAEL

***Ms. Suzie Parvati Reeves**, one of Canada's celebrated fashion designers, set out on a quest to find The Embodiment of Pure Love. She arrived in Prasanthi Nilayam intending to stay only until Sai Baba calls her for a private interview. Soon after, Swami told her to stay in the Ashram, which she did for 24 years. She served Baba with love and devotion, painting His portrait and teaching. At the age of 58, in 2000, Swami inspired her to return to Israel, where she presently lives.*

Paradise Lost and Regained

In 1972, my mother had a health crisis. She became sick after major surgery, and despite the best treatment by the specialists, she showed no signs of recovery. During one of those hospital visits, she heard the distant soothing sounds of bhajans emanating from the local Sathya Sai Center. She felt comforted by the *bhajans* and soon asked my father, Prof. Anil Kumar Kamaraju, to take her to Puttaparthi.

My father came from a *Brahmo Samaj* background. The *Brahmo Samaj* is a reform movement with beliefs based on the teachings of the Vedas, the ancient Indian scriptures. It is focused on monotheism and rejects the caste system and the traditional Hindu practices of idol worship. So, accepting 'man' as God and the concept of 'Avatar' was anathema to him, but he kept aside his beliefs for my mother's sake. Cutting a long story short, **the family pilgrimage to Puttaparthi did wonders for my mother's health. She was not only cured but transformed** and filled with energy and enthusiasm. She would cook food for over 100 people every Thursday and serve it to the homeless on the streets of Guntur, our hometown in the state of Andhra Pradesh, India. She also inspired others to join in the service activities. Seeing the phenomenal change in my mother's health, my dad also gravitated toward Swami and His teachings, and soon joined the Sathya Sai Organization, beginning a lifelong spiritual journey dedicated to Swami.

An Unforgettable Interview

As young children playing on the sands of the *mandir*, we experienced Swami's limitless love in many ways. We especially looked forward to our visits to Swami. However, after experiencing 'Mother's Love' in Swami for years, we experienced 'Father's Discipline' for the first time when He called just the four of us siblings for an interview as we were on the verge of entering college. Swami told us sternly, *"I know what happens in colleges these days. You go in as individuals, and you come out as couples! Why do you need such distractions? If you think that no one is watching you, you are wrong.* ***God is always watching. I am always watching you****."*

We were stunned at this unexpected admonishment. Swami continued, *"Your parents have trusted you and given you freedom. I want you to get a good name for your family and Swami."*

Exhorting us to focus only on our studies and God, He said, *"When things are going well, and your father holds a position, people will come to you. But when things go wrong, no one will come to help you except God.* ***God alone is your best friend****."*

Finally, He called me aside and told me about my future, *"I will find a suitable husband for you. Come to Puttaparthi*

when I call you." I panicked and responded, "But I want to study and work, Swami."

"You may do all of that later. But when I call, just come."

There was a tone of finality in His voice, and I nodded in agreement.

The Gift of Paradise

A few months later, we received a telegram from Swami calling us to come to Prasanthi Nilayam. He introduced us to Shyam Kanagala's family; Shyam and I were married in the divine presence on July 6, 1988. Swami showered us with pearls of wisdom in the interviews following the wedding. He showed us His 'empty' hand and said, *"Everything is in this hand. You ask me, and I shall give you."*

Shyam was quick to respond, "Swami, we want to be near and dear to You...."

"What do you mean by being near?" Swami asked.

"To be in Your proximity, Swami...."

"What do you mean by being dear?"

"To please You at all times, Swami...."

Swami smiled and narrated a beautiful analogy. He said that there is a lake filled with lotuses. The bees come from far away and enjoy the nectar in the flowers. But the frogs which keep hopping nearby are not even aware of the existence of nectar in the flowers!

"Distance does not matter. You become near to God when you are dear to God." He also added, ***"You will be dear to me."*** These words took deep root in my heart.

With Swami's blessings, we settled in a lovely home in Bengaluru. Shyam had an excellent job. We constantly received Swami's guidance and assurance–either directly or indirectly. Our parents were around to help us to bring up our son. Life was smooth and beautiful!

Paradise Lost

Avatars or incarnations do not come to help settle us comfortably in worldly life. We are mistaken if we think this way. Swami came to ignite the divine spark in each of us so that we realize our oneness with Him through Self-knowledge. This can occur only when we are removed from our worldly comfort zones.

In 1994, we moved to the Texas A&M University campus, Commerce, Texas, USA. Our life, which had been beautiful so far, got shattered quickly! Shyam, who had been a manager in India, became a student with two dependents in a foreign land. He was working two part-time jobs while studying full-time to support the family. The degrees and job experiences we had gathered so far were of little value in the new land, and we had to start all over again. We were also deprived of Swami's reassuring physical presence and our parents' support which we had taken for granted so far. The university campus was a very lonely place, and I was on the verge of a physical and mental breakdown.

Sai is a Call Away

One day, I was exhausted and poured my heart out to Swami. I wondered whether He still remembers us as His children. If He did so, I sought His presence in my life. It was an outburst of emotions that I forgot about soon. Then I went about my daily routine. Later that day, I received a phone call from my father in India. He said, "I am just back from *darshan* in Whitefield. When I was leaving, Swami inquired about all of you. He asked me how you, Shyam, and my grandson were doing. He also gave *vibhuti* to be sent to you."

This message was so timely and reassuring. It infused me with the strength to go on. That was when I remembered His words that **God alone would be with us as our best friend when things are not going well**.

Things began to improve as we continued life with His name on our lips and His form in our hearts. We moved to Dallas, Texas, and Swami introduced us to a loving Sai Center. We began participating in the Center activities enthusiastically, especially the community outreach events. This made me happy once again.

Swami called us for an interview when we went to Puttaparthi in 1998. During the interview, Swami showered us with motherly love and *padanamaskar* and told Shyam, *"You thought you were separated from me, and I was away from you. You even packed your bags and wanted to return, right? I have always been with you. I even saved your life when you met with a head-on collision."*

How can we ever forget that fateful night when Swami saved Shyam from the jaws of death? We are eternally grateful to Him. One night Shyam was returning late from work, around 1:30 AM, as there were deadlines to be met on his project. As he was driving home, he felt rather sleepy, so he pulled over to the side of the road to rest for a few minutes before continuing. As he was resting, a drunken driver slammed his SUV from behind, and Shyam's car was "crumpled" all the way to the area behind the driver. The car was flung to the slope and changed direction. Shyam immediately lost consciousness. After some time, paramedics came and extricated him from the wreckage by cutting open the driver's side door, which was severely damaged. Shyam was hospitalized. Fortunately, by Swami's Grace, he had only a minor fracture of the collarbone from the restraining seat belt. Swami assured us, ***"Don't ever forget that Swami is always with you."***

In His omniscience, Swami shared details about the talks we gave about Swami and His teachings. He spoke about the different activities we were undertaking. With His encouragement, we also shared details of the activities at the Dallas Sai Center. Swami was happy, and He gave us *vibhuti* to be distributed to Center members. He also conveyed His blessings to my sister and said, *"Tell her to take care of her health. If she, as a doctor, neglects her health, how can she take care of others?"*

The interview was full of assurance and love. Overwhelmed, I prayed, "Swami, please shower us with more opportunities to serve...."

Swami's reply surprised me. He said, *"Yes! Service is necessary, and you must serve. But from now on, you should make efforts to keep your heart pure."* I must say that I was disappointed when I heard this. I felt my heart was always pure, and I expected Swami's guidance to do more service activities. But no word of Swami is casual or in vain–knowing this, I kept quiet.

Swami then told me to visit my grandfather before leaving for the USA. However, we had a flight to catch, and there was no time. So I told Him I would not be able to do it this time. He kept quiet, and the interview was over.

Paradise Lost–Again

Slowly but surely, the meaning and import of all of Swami's words began to dawn on me. In a couple of weeks, my grandfather passed away. I felt guilty and repentant that I had not met him despite Swami's advice. But that was just the beginning, and drastic changes began to disrupt our lives again.

Shyam was relocated to another workplace, and the new place did not suit us. Soon, I was forced to quit my job. At the same time, I began to face health challenges. It was a tough time compounded by financial challenges. In these circumstances, the friends we considered very close to us chose to distance themselves. Instead of supporting us in those trying times, they did not even want to be asso-

ciated with us! Today, I do not find this surprising because this is the nature of the world. But back then, I was shocked. I was at crossroads yet again. A constant dialogue in my mind about these misfortunes took a toll on my physical and mental health. I desperately needed inner peace, and I pleaded with Swami to help me experience it again.

Pleasure is an Interval Between Two Pains

My inner balance was severely disturbed when I went through all this external turbulence. That is when I realized what Swami was referring to when He said that I must try to keep my heart pure. I had to let go of my expectations, conditions, and judgment. Only when I dropped this baggage could I become light and free. Till then, I would be stuck in the endless, vicious cycle of pleasure and pain. It was at this time that Swami led me to meditation. I slowly learned how to tune out the restlessness and noise while tuning into inner stillness.

All these answers came from the Swami within me. I understood that I needed to hold on to the temple in my heart. I know that Swami continues to guide me and work with me on my spiritual journey.

Mrs. Sarojini Kanagala
U.S.A.

Mrs. Sarojini Kanagala *is a longtime devotee of Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba and enthusiastically shares Swami's love and message through her inspiring talks and books. She is married to Mr. Shyam Kanagala who serves as the Regional President of Region 10 of SSSIO, USA. Swami graciously performed their wedding in the year 1988 at Puttaparthi. Mrs. Kanagala authored a book in Telugu titled "Sai Spandana" (Sai's Divine Response) for Swami's 85th Birthday and co-authored a book with her husband, titled "Faith, Hope, and Love" for Swami's 90th Birthday. She is the eldest daughter of Prof. Anil Kumar Kamaraju who translated many of Swami's Discourses.*

Transformation Through Motherhood

I want to share the power of motherhood that led to my transformation. I heard of Sathya Sai Baba in 1986, and shortly afterward, I joined the SSSIO in my local area–a small rural community in Australia. I was immediately drawn to His teachings, especially the truth that divinity is in all, including myself. **I believe that the yearning to experience my innate divinity drew me to Sathya Sai Baba**. Soon after I started to practice His teachings, He gave me a blissful experience, filling me with divine love. Upon reflection, I believe He gave me this precious gift for my spiritual transformation to experience the divinity within.

Since becoming an adult, I felt privileged to have been born a woman, and I remember the day my son Anthony was born, it brought indescribable joy to me, I had never experienced such love for another human being, which was entirely unexpected. I felt a great responsibility towards this little being who was dependent upon me, and my only wish was for him to lead a happy life and realize his destiny. My son Anthony was eight years old when I became a Sai devotee.

Developing the Qualities of Motherhood

In my mid-thirties, I heard of a spiritual teacher in India, Sathya Sai In those early years, I experienced a personal transformation. I developed patience, understanding, and tolerance. I did not have much family support as my husband worked long hours, and my mother worked full-time. I chose to be a "stay-at-home" mom until Anthony completed primary school when I went back to work.

One of the most important lessons for me as a mother was letting go of attachment to my son as he grew up. My goal was to nurture him as an independent and capable person, which required me to give up my role as a caregiver and allow him to care for himself so that he would develop self-confidence. I was full of admiration for the strengths and qualities of my son. He developed into a child who had compassion for his peers and who helped the children in need. He was brimming with happiness and had confidence which I had not experienced as a child.

Anthony attended SSE (Sai Spiritual Education) Classes for several years which reinforced, his natural qualities and the values we encouraged at home. During his secondary school years, he played many sports (very popular in Australia!). He had a great sense of humor (also an Aussie attribute) with a reputation as a raconteur. He also developed a love for writing and reading poetry. At 17, he went to live away from home on the other side of the country to

pursue his dream of becoming a professional athlete. This was challenging for me to trust in his ability to lead his own life and let go of my attachment.

Discovering Transformation through Loss

At 22, Anthony returned home and lived independently in a cottage on our property, working in a nearby town. When he was 26, he had a fatal car accident driving home from work and passed away. Subsequently, I found that the years of healing from this loss of his physical form and coming to terms with ending this important relationship accelerated my spiritual transformation. **The teachings of Swami were my lifeline**, and I do not know how parents meet such challenges without a spiritual foundation and understanding.

> *It is not possible for anyone to hold on to the physical body forever. It remains so long as it is destined to be. It will perish at its predestined time. Nobody has any control over death. It is decided at the time of birth itself. The date of departure is imperceptibly written on the body when it comes into the world.*
>
> –Sri Sathya Sai Baba
> October 19, 2004

It was essential for me to recognize that our time in this body is set at the time of our birth. In the months after my loss, I have dived deep into Sai's teachings, which were my sole support, apart from friends and family. I collaborated with another Sai mother who too lost her son and together we compiled a collection of Sathya Sai Baba's teachings on life, death, grief, and loss in a booklet titled *"Children of Immortality."*

Detach from the World and Attach to God

My great lesson and the transformative experience was giving up attachment to my son. I believe that the attachment of the mother is the greatest of all as it is a natural bond that ensures the survival of the child and is the most difficult attachment to give up. However, **I discovered it was possible to let go of my son and attach to God**. Life took on a very different perspective as I reviewed my priorities and the need to constantly keep in mind the reason for our existence–to realize our inherent divinity. In fact, I believe that letting go of attachment is crucial to the role of the mother and one of the most beautiful opportunities for transformation.

In the months when I experienced significant pain, I also occasionally experienced the stillness and deep peace of the *Atma*–an island of joy amidst the pain. I realized that Anthony had fulfilled his destiny and that this was also part of my destiny. I experienced wisdom and strength in the following words of Baba:

> *Look with an equal mind on good fortune and misfortune, on happiness and sorrow, loss and gain. These are products of nature like heat and cold, summer and winter. They have their purposes to serve. Similarly, the ups and downs of life have lessons to teach us. In fact, without reverses in life, we shall not be able to experience divinity. Without darkness, we cannot value light. Without experiencing difficulties, we will not enjoy benefits. It is the lack of peace of mind which compels us to seek the means to realize enduring peace.*
>
> –Sri Sathya Sai Baba
> April 6, 1983

Shortly after Anthony's death, I sought opportunities to connect with him in spirit. which I saw as part of a natural desire to know that my son was safe and well. About eighteen months later, I experienced a profound connection with Swami when he conveyed to me internally *"Anthony is Me. You are Me. We are One."*

Since then, I ceased wanting to connect with Anthony as I realized that we are One in Sai. I understood the importance of Sai cautioning us that all earthly relationships are transient. I know that all belong to God and that as parents, we are trustees of our children–truly, they belong to Him. I feel truly blessed for having experienced motherhood and being given the joy of having a wonderful son. I believe that along with its sacred duties, **motherhood is an excellent opportunity for transformation to help us experience ourselves as the divine beings we really are**.

Ms. Jenny Monson
AUSTRALIA

Ms. Jenny Monson *has been a member of SSSIO since 1986 when she first heard about Sri Sathya Sai Baba and was transformed by His teachings. She is currently the Central Coordinator for Zone 3 and has served in many positions, including National Council President for Australia. In her professional work, Jenny worked as a counsellor and has specialized in palliative care. She chairs the board of a community Hospice in Western Australia.*

Women as Instruments of the Divine Mission

On November 19, 1995, Swami said: "*As today is A sacred day dedicated to women, they should change themselves and help to change the men and the children. They should develop the qualities of sympathy, compassion, love, and sacrifice…I desire that you should take up the reins of leadership and bring peace and prosperity to the nation by living ideal lives.*"

In one of my very first interviews, Swami looked at me and said: ***"Remember 3 principles: Love God, Fear Sin and Practice Morality in Society."*** He repeated it twice, patting my head firmly, as if He wanted to fix them in my brain! Then, to ensure I had understood and memorized His advice, like a schoolteacher, He said: "*Repeat!*"

If we follow these three main principles, all-round progress is guaranteed.

So I kept His words as my key guidelines, trying to analyze and fully understand the teachings behind them.

To love God is easy; we all love Swami, however Baba spoke many times about 'Oneness'–that we all are One with God, that God is in each one of us and each living creature, that God and the Creation are One.

Serving in the SSSIO I have noticed many times how similar ego and attachment are. These are the real obstacles to unity and divinity. We are attached to our habits, traditions, cultures, ideas, and our own likes and dislikes. These attachments give rise to the 3 F's: Frictions, Fractions and Factions that destroy unity and are detrimental. To achieve Unity, I have learned that we must forget what the 'I' thinks and wants, and focus on what pleases God. Unity is the ideal that we must strive to attain. Any task can be accomplished through unity.

The SSSIO has an immense potential, with its presence all over the world. Working together with unity, we can effectively change the world–making this planet a better place to live in.

The first time I came to Prasanthi Nilayam, over 30 years ago, I was overwhelmed and deeply touched by the energy and vibration of Love I felt when Swami walked into the Sai Kulwant Hall–a feeling that has never left me. I stayed only for a couple of days, but it was enough for me to realize that I had found what I was looking for. It was enough for me to wish to be part of His divine mission.

So I am very grateful to Swami for having fulfilled my desire by giving me the opportunity to serve Him in many roles within SSSIO. Our duty as Sai officers is to be good examples, by working hard with dedication and diligence. Swami says, *"serve all and be nothing."* We should let go the attachment to our desires, so that we may learn to serve in the "Sai way." **We should never forget that the ultimate goal of every officer is self-transformation**.

If we want to be excellent examples of Swami's teaching, we must remember, in all our actions, to follow our heart but also to use our fundamental discrimination. SSSIO officers undergo many tests; these

tests serve an important purpose and so should not be a reason to give up. Tests cause us to open our minds and hearts to listen to the views of others. They teach patience and perseverance, and build fortitude. They teach us that all happens at the right time and by His will alone.

It is worth reminding ourselves, from time to time, that Baba tells us never to leave His Organization, particularly when disappointments or disagreements surface, as they inevitably will.

We can only call ourselves Sai followers when we put into action the principle of Sai–that is, the principle of Love. This is easy to say, but not easy to follow. Personally, I focus my efforts to Love All, Serve All and See God in All.

SSSIO serves in many countries with different languages, traditions, cultures, and faiths. But it is Sai Love that brings us together to formulate programs, projects, activities, to support one other, so that we can speak with one 'voice' to the world. This is the 'voice of Love.'

Swami says that the very purpose for the existence of an organization bearing His Name is to see Him in each and every person and serve all with a spirit of dedication and veneration. This is a very important point. Often, we do not pay attention to Swami's words, and since we do not fully understand the message behind it, we fail in achieving our goal.

I have learned in all these years serving in the SSSIO that **when I am asked to do something, I should respond as if the request came from Swami Himself**. In this way, whatever I do, I do it for Swami and I do my very best, because nothing less can be offered to Him. You would also give the work in the SSSIO the highest priority, if you knew that the assignment came from Swami Himself.

We must always remember that Love is the source, path, and goal of the Sai Organization.

Ms. Alida Parkes
ITALY

Ms. Alida Parkes *serves as the Chair of Zone 6, SSSIO, which consists of fourteen countries in Europe. She is the Chair of Public Outreach Committee and member of Media Committee. She came to Swami over 30 years ago and has been serving in the Organization for several decades.*

Alida Parkes was the founder and general manager of a Media Production company. She also published a monthly magazine focused on media and produced TV program and organised events in Italy.

My Divine Music Teacher

I was a little girl of five and a half years old when I joined the first-grade class at Swami's Primary School in Puttaparthi in 1990. Besides academics, we had a host of extra-curricular activities to select. I decided to join the music class. We could choose from two types of music–Hindustani (North Indian classical) or Carnatic (South Indian classical).

But in reality, there wasn't much of a choice for the students. The teachers assigned the child based on his/her mother tongue. Since my parents were South Indians, I was logically placed in the Carnatic music class. Since we had been residents of Bombay (Mumbai today) for several years, I spoke Marathi and Hindi at home, more aligned with Hindustani music. I wasn't familiar with the tongue-twisting lyrics of most Southern classical music.

Facing the Music While Learning Music

The first day of music class was one that I can never forget! The class was conducted in a natural setting, under the trees in the school compound. The teacher sang each line of a song and asked the students, six girls and four boys, to repeat it. Because of the language barrier, I was struggling with the lyrics of the songs. As the teacher started reprimanding me for not being able to repeat even a single line without stuttering, Swami's car entered the school premises from the General Hospital gate!

Seeing us under the tree, He stopped His car, quickly got down, and walked toward us. None of us tried to approach Him and acted like we were 'absorbed' in our music class. The teacher started teaching the song again from the beginning, but I failed to follow even a single line again because of the difficulty in pronouncing the words. And Swami was watching! I was single-handedly ruining the performance of the class.

The teacher was now exasperated and stopped the other children from following and singing the lines. She asked me to repeat the words after her. I was very nervous, so even though she sang the words slowly, I couldn't repeat more than two words. The teacher gave up, looked at Swami, and said, "Swami, we will move her from the Carnatic group to the Hindustani group because she is unable to cope in this class."

Hearing that, I started crying. Knowing that Swami showed a lot of interest in Carnatic music, I wanted to be part of this 'popular' group. I also felt that though I was a good singer, I was being punished for not being able to pronounce the words. As I kept crying, the teacher was at her wit's end about what to do.

With God by My Side...

Swami came near me, lovingly patted my head, and said, "Give the child a few days. She will learn and sing nicely."

My tears dried up instantly. I was so relieved and happy. In one moment, with one loving sentence, Swami lifted me from a hopeless abyss to a joyful zenith. From feeling that I was at the bottom of the class, I now felt at the top because I had His backing. I began to put all my efforts into practicing and pronouncing the difficult

words. **His love motivated a six-year-old child to practice for hours on end! In two days, when we had the next music class, I doled out all the lines to perfection, to the teacher's complete satisfaction and utter amazement.** The Lord enters at the right moment. When the world gives up on you, God is the only one who lovingly supports you, for He knows you and your heart! I felt that with God by my side, there was nothing I could not achieve.

Divine Management

When I was in 3rd grade, our Carnatic music teacher got married and left Puttaparthi. We were all worried because we were without a teacher. I wrote a letter to Swami sharing everything that was going on in my mind and heart. I prayed to Swami to send us another music teacher soon.

During *darshan* that Sunday, Swami walked straight to me and took the letter. Even as I smiled gratefully, He opened the letter and read the contents. Then He asked, *"You want another teacher now? How many more teachers do you want?"*

When I did not respond, He asked, *"How many teachers are there now in the school?"* I didn't know and looked back pleadingly at the teachers for help. Some of them mumbled a figure, and I meekly repeated it to Swami. He then smiled and lovingly patted my head, saying that we should all join the Hindustani music group and that 'Keya Aunty' would henceforth teach us music. Thus, both groups were merged, and then we all started learning Hindustani music.

Though I always wanted to learn Carnatic music, I was ready to change to Hindustani music the moment I knew Swami wanted it that way.

Never Pray for Other's Downfall

When I was in the 7th grade, toward the end of the academic year, I suffered from a severe throat infection when the music competition was to be held. I prided myself on winning the first prize in music every year and the privilege of receiving the prize from Swami, along with a coveted *padanamaskar*. I wanted to win the first prize again. But I could barely even whisper a few words without coughing! I was feeling very bad, but what was I to do? I decided to seek help from my Swami.

As we were seated in the Mandir that Thursday morning, I tore a sheet of paper and quickly wrote a letter to Swami. I explained to Him about my sore throat condition, the competition, and my apprehension that I would surely be disqualified. I feared the other students, who may not be as good singers as me, would eventually get the prizes. I lamented to Him that it would be embarrassing for me if this happened. As my disappointment grew, I became more desperate. I prayed that the music teacher, who also served as the judge for the competition, should get sick that day! Then, the competition would have to be postponed for a few days, giving me a chance to recover and participate.

Swami came for *darshan* and walked toward me with a knowing smile. I felt hopeful and raised myself to offer the letter to Him. He took the letter, blessed me with *padanamaskar,* and walked away, to my great joy and exuberance! But then, even as I was smiling, Swami took a few more steps and dropped my letter into the lap of my music teacher herself! I was petrified! What was I to do now?

The teacher was very happy because Swami granted her *padanamskar*. I shuddered within, thinking of the consequences once she opened the letter and read it. I had freely shared my feelings and thoughts with Swami, and now, I thought He had 'broken' the sacred pact of secrecy between us! How could He do that?

Swami went in, and after a while, the *bhajans* started. An idea struck me. My music teacher would close her eyes through the *bhajans* every day. I thought I could sneak to her during the *bhajans* and steal the letter from her lap! However, to my dismay, she was so filled with the joy of getting Swami's blessings that she didn't close her eyes at all! She also held the letter in her hands all the while! Now, I lost all hope of retrieving the letter. I began to worry about everything that would happen once we returned to school after *darshan*. The teacher would possibly show the letter to the headmistress and the warden. Everyone would learn of my selfish and mean-spirited prayer, wishing the teacher would fall sick! I was now upset at myself for making such a prayer and thought that maybe Swami had put me on the spot to teach me a lesson.

The Messenger Vanishes Once the Lesson is Learned

Swami always taught us to pray for everyone's good, and I had made this stupid prayer out of selfishness and jealousy. I was remorseful and promised Swami that I would never do this again. But I was also angry at Swami because He had betrayed my trust. And now, though I had learned my lesson, I would still be exposed for my mistake! I felt that perhaps Swami didn't care so much about me.

The *bhajans* ended. Swami came out, and instead of taking His usual route back to His residence, He changed direction and came toward me! I started fighting with Him in my mind, "Swami, you may be enjoying this whole drama, but You have really put me in a very difficult situation. All I asked was for a little help, and you did this to expose me!"

Swami walked to my music teacher and asked for the letter in her folded palms. It was my letter that He had dropped into her lap earlier! I saw a flicker of hope and prayed, **"Swami, please set it right again. I have learned from my mistake. Please, just help me this time."**

The teacher gave the letter to Him, and He innocently smiled and asked her, *"This is for me, isn't it?"* Even though I was seated four feet away, I shouted, "Yes, Swami, that is for you."

He smiled, took the letter, and walked on. I heaved a sigh of relief. My music teacher seemed transported into an even higher plane of happiness. She had a smile on her face as she left the Mandir because she had been doubly blessed. But that was not the end of His drama.

All's Well That Ends Well

Later that day, it was time for the music competition, but I could barely speak. I walked up to the teacher and said I wouldn't be able to sing due to the throat infection. To my surprise, she said, "This year onward, it is a year-round continuous assessment. It will not be based on a single competition." My jaw dropped as I listened to her congratulating me on standing first in the class! I was so overjoyed that tears flowed down my eyes. Silently, I thanked Swami and felt grateful that I have such a wonderful Lord to whom I can rush with every little problem. **He resolves all problems in a manner that is good for everyone.**

Swami is my music teacher. He also taught me the greatest lessons of my life through music.

Mrs. Pooja Digumarti
INDIA

Mrs. Pooja DigumartI *lives in India and has been a devotee of Bhagawan SrI Sathya SaI Baba since childhood. She is the third generation of SaI devotees in her family and studied from Grades 1 to 12 at the Sathya SaI Primary School at Puttaparthi. She graduated with a B.Com (Hons) from the Anantapur Campus of the SrI Sathya SaI Institute of Higher Learning. She is an investment banking professional and is currently working with a financial advisory firm.*

Lost and Found

As the embodiment of love, Sri Sathya Sai Baba is more than a Guru or God for me. He is a friend who has my best interests at heart and a guide to motivate me toward the path of right living *(dharma)*. Regardless of my situation or the circumstances around me, I've always believed and witnessed Swami's magic in leading me through any hindrance. In 2010, I was blessed to see Swami in His beautiful form before He took Mahasamadhi in 2011. Though I was only five years old then, I can still picture looking at Swami giving *darshan* in Kulwant Hall. **His orange robe and loving smile still live in my head and heart.** I did not realize it then, but I was blessed to see God! I know that now because **although He left His physical form, Swami always protects me**. I just need to recognize this fact with gratitude.

The Special Boat Ride

During Christmas 2019, our SSE (Sai Spiritual Education) teacher at the Glendale Sai Center, in California, USA, Mr. Srinivas Manthripragada, reached out to my younger sister and I to participate in a Christmas play at Prasanthi Nilayam. Considering it a wonderful opportunity to express our love and gratitude to Swami, we readily agreed and enthusiastically prepared for the play with other actors. Thanks to Swami, the play went well. It was a great joy to offer Swami such a memorable performance.

While returning to America, I was flying with my mother and sister as my father had to leave a week prior for work. During our trip, we had an eight-hour layover in Bangkok, Thailand. Instead of sitting idle at the airport, we decided to fulfill our sightseeing aspirations by taking a day trip through Bangkok, visiting the city's key attractions. So, we negotiated with a travel agency at the airport that organized a driver to take us around the city to visit two Buddha temples and then go on a fun boat ride on the Chao Phraya River. They drove us around and waited with the vehicle until we finished sightseeing.

When we arrived at the boat ride, we hopped on the boat at a dock by the entrance of the attraction. As we all sat peacefully in the boat, the helmsman calmly began rowing. The boat picked up more people along the way. It was a beautiful experience to be in nature on this 'hop-on, hop-off' boat. We got the opportunity to witness the vibrant Thai culture during this pleasant trip.

Lost in Bangkok!

We were so mesmerized by this experience that we stayed on the boat for a very long time. Eventually, the helmsman dropped us off at a dock, which we thought was the same place we had boarded. But we were actually on the other side of the river! After wandering around and searching for our taxi driver, we realized that we were lost.

Instantly, panic set in, my adrenaline started rushing, and my heart started pounding. We had a flight to catch, and our luggage was in the taxi we had hired. We could not take any other taxi to the airport! My mom, sister, and I tried asking for help, but no one spoke English. We thought we could call the driver as we

had his phone number, but there was no signal. It was pure stress that the three of us were experiencing.

For about twenty minutes, we were frantically trying to figure out how to locate the taxi in this foreign country. Walking up to a row of shops, we went down the line, asking each shop owner for help. However, each response was either "no" or "what?" About halfway through the row of shops, we started to lose hope because no one seemed to understand what we were asking.

In desperation, we started praying to Swami for help.

Sathya Sai, The Eternal Companion

Within a few minutes, to our surprise, we heard the chant, *"Om, Om, Om."* We had no clue where the sound was coming from, but we started following it until we realized that there was a loudspeaker at the last shop at the end of the row, playing *"Om, Om, Om."* And right there, in front of us, was the beautiful form of our dear Swami! There was a picture of Swami right next to an idol of Lord Ganesha. **Immediately, we all felt relieved that Swami was with us.**

We asked the shopkeeper if he could help us. Since our phones had no signal, he took the driver's phone number from us and immediately dialed him, giving him directions to where we were. Within ten minutes, the driver pulled up in front of the shop, and we safely made it to the airport to board our flight to Los Angeles. All the way to the airport, **we thought about Swami's timely response and rescue, thanking Him with gratitude.**

Swami is Just a Prayer Away

Stuck in Bangkok, I was sure we would miss our flight. We were all by ourselves with nobody to help us. But when we called on Swami for help, everything was quickly sorted out! **Swami definitely takes more than a thousand steps toward us when we take one step toward Him.** I have learned now that Swami is everywhere. He is omnipresent. **No matter where I go, He will always be there to protect me, guide me, and show me the way.** It is up to me to connect with Swami and keep Him in my heart for He is forever my guardian. **I am fortunate to know Swami in this lifetime and even more blessed to grow up in His garden as an SSE student.** I pray to Swami for the continued opportunity to participate in His mission of spreading love and serving others.

Ms. Anvitha Marlapati
USA

Ms. Anvitha Marlapati *was born in a family dedicated to Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba. She resides in California and is a student at the University of California, Berkeley. She attended Sai Spiritual Education (SSE) in Southern California and regularly attended the Arcadia Center. Anvitha participated in many SSSIO–USA pilgrimage trips to India. In 2019, she had the opportunity to participate in a Christmas play offered by Sai devotees from the USA. Inspired by Swami's mission of "Love All, Serve All," Anvitha sincerely practices Swami's teachings and participates in the activities of the SSSIO.*

A Train of Thoughts and Experiences in Life With God

Our whole family was in Bombay (Mumbai today) for a wedding in 1990. After the wedding, we had our return tickets booked to Madras (Chennai today) via the Bombay Express train. After the wedding festivities, we were all chatting when a member of the extended family said that they would be returning home to Trivandrum (Thiruvananthapuram today) via the Bombay Express.

"Oh! That's simply impossible because we are taking that train to Madras. You are wrong", I said confidently. My father added in support, "I asked my nephews to book these tickets to Madras precisely for this day because I have an important work-related meeting there. You better check your tickets lest you end up on the West Coast of India instead of the East Coast!" We all laughed aloud. But the gentleman was gentle and insistent, "No! I am pretty sure that the Bombay Express is going to Trivandrum tomorrow."

"As if it goes to different places on different days!" I mocked him.

"Indeed, it does! On most days of the week, it goes to Madras, but some days, it goes to Trivandrum."

Panic Mode

There was silence now as we digested this new piece of information. A quick check revealed that the gentleman was right and we were wrong. The Bombay Express was indeed going to Trivandrum the next day. It would be leaving for Madras in a few hours, but we had tickets only for the next day's train! My cousins had overlooked this in booking the trip, and we were in panic mode now.

My mother was the only one who remained calm. She told my father, who didn't believe in Swami back then, "Pray to Him, and He will make a way to ensure that you attend your important meeting." Father was very tense and sat frozen while the rest of us prayed to Swami. Again, it was my mother who said, "We should just go to the station. Swami in my heart says so."

"And do what?" my father asked, continuing, "We don't have tickets for today's train."

Nevertheless, with no better idea, we packed up and left in a hurry to the railway station. We tried to get some tickets, at least in the 'unreserved' compartment of the train. But all our efforts were in vain. That was when a Muslim gentleman wearing a cap came to us and introduced himself as 'Shahul Hamid.' With nothing to lose, we told him of our predicament. Thinking for a moment, he reassured us, "Don't worry. I know all the ticket collectors on all trains. I can get you in."

Tickets and Much More

We got suspicious that he may be a cheat. Once again, it was my mother who prevailed. She strongly felt Swami's hand guiding everything and asked Him what we should do. He asked for 300 Rupees (a big sum those days) promising to fetch tickets

for us. He fixed a rendezvous point for all of us to meet in the next fifteen minutes. The train was due to leave very soon, and we agreed. My father handed over the money to Hamid, and he left in a hurry. We walked to the rendezvous point, repeating *'Sai Ram, Sai Ram.'* The minutes ticked by, but there was no sign of the gentleman. Then, my mother started singing *bhajans*. My concerned cousins were also there, tensed about the possible outcome. There was barely a minute left before the train would depart, and I was convinced that we had been taken for a ride!

As my mother revealed later, at this point, she prayed to Swami, "Dear Lord! If the train leaves and we are standing on the platform, I don't know what face I will show my husband. He does not believe in you, but I do. This is a moment which I can use to bring You into his heart." Just as the train was about to start, Hamid came rushing out of nowhere. He thrust the tickets into our hands, along with an envelope, and started to load our luggage onto the train. "Hurry up and get in," he urged. We boarded the train in a hurry and wanted to offer some money to him in gratitude. "You simply get in now," he said. "I shall take what is due from these boys." My cousins nodded, and we hopped onto the train.

Amazingly, we got reserved seats on the train, and after reaching our destination, my father made it to his all-important meeting. We opened the envelope that the gentleman had given us. It contained the entire 300 Rupees that we had given him! When we called up my cousins in Bombay, they said that once we left, the man also disappeared, and they could not even get the chance to thank Him! Yes, I use the capital 'H' for 'Him' because I know that **Swami came to board us on the train to Madras that day, just like He was there to ensure that my father boarded the train of faith and devotion toward Him!**

The Changeless Constant in Storms of Life

From that day onward, we were regular in our adoration and worship of Swami. My father was convinced of His divinity and love. In fact, on many occasions, he would remind my mother of Swami's ways when she got worried! It was wonderful to see my parents move as co-travelers in their journey toward Him. **Their life situation kept changing, but not their commitment and devotion to Swami.**

Almost 25 years after Shahul Hamid rescued us in Bombay, my parents were in Austin, Minnesota, in the USA, where they managed a property. My sister lived with her family in Winona, about 80 miles away from them. My parents would regularly visit her in their blue hatchback car and spend happy time with the grandchildren.

One day, as they were returning from my sister's place, they got caught in a storm. Bhajans were playing in the car, and my parents continued to drive, unruffled. After all, they were on I-90, the longest interstate highway in the United States–more than 3,000 miles long! But then, it happened!

On the way, a flash flood suddenly hit them, and the car got pushed across the west lanes in the opposite direction! The flood carried the vehicle into a big ditch, and water began to fill the car from the front. The doors, unfortunately, got jammed and would not open, not even budge! The car engine completely shut down and there was no way to even roll the windows down! My parents unbuckled their seat belts and moved to the back seats, which were at a relatively higher level. But the car was filling up fast with water, and there was nobody in sight.

As the water hit their ankles, my mother lamented, "Oh! I think this is it. Our lives are ending. How I wish our kids at least knew that this is happening to us..." She was completely calm, though. My father replied,

"We are all sparks of the divine. **If this is our time to go, we should do so by focusing on Swami. We should use this opportunity in contemplation of Swami.** Let us not worry about it and rise above it from within..."

Keeping calm, smiling at each other, they began to chant loudly, "Sai Ram, Sai Ram." Even as they continued to chant, they felt the joy filling their hearts and rising along with the water levels in the car. It was a crazy scene, and my parents might have gone mad. But then, as Swami says, **"Of all the madnesses that afflict man, God-madness is the least harmful and most beneficial." They were blissful in their madness for Swami.**

Life With God

Suddenly, a face appeared at the window. It was a police officer. He asked my parents to move back and wielded his baton with great strength to break the window and force open the door. He got my parents out of the car just before the car completely went underwater.

"How did you get here?" My mother asked the police officer who had come from the opposite direction. He replied that something just prompted him to come and look at this stretch of the highway. My parents looked at each other, and they knew that 'Shahul Hamid' had come again—in the form of a cop, this time!

The next day, the local newspaper headlined a story titled, "Miracle Saves Immigrant Couple on I-90." The world read about it and acknowledged this miracle of our Swami, our Eternal Companion.

Indeed, life without God is a hopeless end. But life with God is an endless hope!

Mr. Sunil Kasturi
USA

Mr. Sunil Kasturi *lives in Oakland, California. He has been active with the Sai organization in Chennai growing up, and across three regions in the United States. Sunil emphasizes the power of uniting our voices in singing His praise. Sunil served as the director of a children's play that was offered in Swami's Divine presence as part of the USA National pilgrimage in 2010. This play had 100+ SSE kids from all 10 regions of the United States. He's also led unison singing offerings at Prashanthi Nilayam as part of the USA pilgrimage in 2017. He is a management consultant and leads a boutique consulting firm, Propeller, with offices across the country.*

If You Need Me You Deserve Me

I was born in 1990 into a family that worshipped Sri Sathya Sai Baba. So, I saw His pictures at home and accepted Him as God, just as I accepted the other deities on the altar. It was in the late nineties that I got the chance to visit Puttaparthi and Whitefield (Bengaluru) and realize that **Swami was a unique God–walking, talking, and giving *darshan* to His devotees!** When I had my first close *darshan* of Swami in Whitefield, my eyes locked with His eyes and welled up with tears. Though it was just a split second, **I felt time had come to a standstill, and I could feel Swami's love permeating me**.

After that first darshan, apart from occasional visits to Swami's *ashrams*: Prasanthi Nilayam (in Puttaparthi); Brindavan (in Bengaluru); and Shivam (in Hyderabad), my family's connection with Swami was limited. At home, there were many books on Swami on the shelf, where I found a fascinating children's book on His life. I also remember using pens with Swami's image on them. But that was about it. As the years passed and I moved from my teens to my twenties, I drifted farther away from Swami. I made a few bad choices and kept bad company. As life threw one curveball after another, I even became an atheist, considering divinity and God all a big sham that I had foolishly bought into in the past. Looking back, I feel remorseful and ashamed.

Drifting Into Deeper Waters

My next visit to Puttaparthi was in 2011, when I was on my way to Bengaluru to enroll in a business school. At the time, Swami's Mahasamadhi structure was still under construction. I remember feeling nothing whatsoever in my heart. I felt disconnected from God in general and Swami, especially. I did not know that the next ten years of my life would be completely disconnected from Swami! The disconnect was to last another ten years–that was my karma. **Reflecting on those ten years, now I can say how lifeless they were, how purposeless and painful they were, and how 'Sai-less' they were.**

The next decade of my life was turbulent, and nothing seemed to be going my way! Being 'Sai-less,' I also felt purposeless and lifeless. I wasn't happy professionally and was frustrated at not finding a life partner. My parents, too, were exhausted by their search, as nothing seemed to come to fruition. I genuinely felt that I was cursed or written off by the universe or God if such a being existed!

A 'Swimming' Companion

Then COVID-19 happened! Lockdowns and remote work became the norm, making groom-hunting all the more difficult. One night, my father came across the profile of a man he felt was perfect for me. He asked me to get in touch with the man from Sydney and talk with him. I flatly

refused at first because, thanks to the pandemic, I was finding it challenging even to speak to or meet people within India. I spoke to 'Abhi' just to get my father off my back. But as we got to know each other, a ten-month-long remote courtship ensued. We discussed everything under the sun, but the topics of religion and spirituality came up only once. We both shared that we were 'loosely religious' as we had a respectful tolerance toward rituals for the sake of our parents. This long-distance communication ultimately culminated in our decision to get married. A couple of weeks before the wedding, Abhi was to fly to India amid the lockdown and travel restrictions. My family got busy with all the wedding preparations in India.

The Prodigal Daughter Welcomed

Just as the wedding cards were printed, my mother received a phone call from her sister who lived in Mysuru (Karnataka). My aunt said that when she was reading the Shirdi Sai Satcharitra in Mysuru, **she suddenly heard a voice say in Telugu, *"Card pettali; card na deggara pettali (Place the card; place the card near me)"*** "What card?" she wondered as she kept hearing the same message over and over again. Clueless, she looked at the book she was holding and **an image of Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba formed on the Shirdi Satcharitra she was holding in her hand**. Since we were the only 'Sathya Sai devotees' in the family that she knew, she felt that she had to convey to her sister that the first wedding card was to be offered to Swami.

When she relayed this incident to my parents, they were elated. I was in a state of shock because I had not connected with Swami for more than a decade. But I also felt a strange sense of elation and anticipation in my heart. After picking up the wedding cards, we headed straight to the Shivam mandir in Hyderabad to place the first card at the altar. I wrote "To Swami" and asked my father whether it was right. My father struck off the 'to' and wrote, "Placed At The Divine Lotus Feet Of Swami" in its place.

The bhajans were in progress when we arrived. It was my first *bhajan* session in ten years! It was such a cathartic and joyous experience. **The COVID-19 mask I wore was drenched with both tears of joy and remorse.** My mother, too, had a beautiful *darshan* experience during the *bhajans*. She saw a beautiful picture of Swami in a yellow robe, smiling at her with *abhayahasta* (blessing hand). She assumed that the picture was placed near her like the many other pictures of Swami in Shivam. However, after a moment of distraction, when she looked up again, that picture was no longer there!

After the *bhajans*, as we wondered where to place the wedding card, a *Sevadal* (volunteer) told us to go past the barricade and place it at the main altar. Not surprisingly, the central picture was a full-size standing picture of Swami, and **I ended up placing the card literally at His lotus feet! In an instant, I felt connected to Him, and the seed of love that He had planted years ago sprouted into a strong sapling of devotion!**

Faster than the Speed of Thought...

Though I had rediscovered my God, I wondered how I would explain all this to my partner. He wasn't even aware of Sri Sathya Sai Baba, and I wanted him connected with Swami, as well. I went ahead and mentioned Swami and His *leelas* to my husband and his family. They didn't have much of a reaction and behaved just like someone unfamiliar with Swami would. I was grateful that at least they did not react negatively, and desperately hoped that Swami would do something to draw him into His fold.

After the wedding, we visited my husband's maternal grandmother in Tuni, Andhra Pradesh, to seek her blessings. On the first day, after a bath, I decided to say a prayer and perform worship at her altar. The altar had many deities, but my heart had been pledged to Swami. Focusing on the picture of Shirdi Sai Baba, I thought, "Swami! You are not here. So, I will look at Shirdi Baba and pray to You as You both are the same anyway..."

It was just a casual thought. But no sooner did I have the thought, **I looked up and there He was! My very own, my best friend, my Swami! It was indeed a large picture of Swami sitting in a chair.** The picture was faded and had gathered considerable dust from neglect. It felt so symbolic to me, and I immediately dusted off the picture and cleaned it. I could not believe my eyes and was convinced that I was hallucinating! I called out to Abhi loudly and he came running. Unable to gather any words, I simply pointed at the picture. He seemed as shocked as I was. We later learned that the picture had been on the wall since the 1950s. Someone had given it to Abhi's grandfather, and he had just placed it there! **I was both thrilled and amused by this experience, and my connection with Swami only grew stronger**.

Swami Does an Encore

Deep down, I wondered whether this discovery could be sufficient to pique Abhi's interest in Swami. In hindsight, I realize the utter foolishness of my thoughts and fears back then. If Swami can connect me to Him in a moment, can't He do the same for someone else?

When I moved to Australia, the first thing I discovered was a very active Sai Center just minutes away from our home. At first, Abhi would drop me off at the Center and drive away. Within months, Abhi started coming to the Center on festival days. He fell in love with the Sai philosophy and teachings. Then, in 2023, Abhi had three dreams of Swami, in three successive months. They turned out to be very meaningful and special for him personally and that was a turning point for his relationship with Swami.

We have since been on this journey to Sai together, trying to understand and practice Swami's teachings. We have Swami in our hearts and have conversations with Him every single day. We truly believe that Swami brought us together to walk with Him and toward Him.

Mrs. Akhila Anupuri
AUSTRALIA

Mrs. Akhila Anupuri *was born in Hyderabad, India into a family of Sai devotees. She completed her MBA and was working as a Human Resources professional in Bengaluru for a decade. After getting married, she moved to Sydney to join her husband, Abhishek. By Swami's grace and experiences, she now spends most of her time learning Swami's teachings and trying to implement them in daily life, participating in service activities and singing bhajans. Akhila and Abhishek truly believe that their union was no coincidence but a delightful Sai-incidence that was meant for them to walk together towards Swami.*

King Meets The King of Kings

The first time our family met with Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba was in 1953 at Ameerpet (Hyderabad). Swami was on His way from Puttaparthi to visit the famous Ajanta and Ellora caves in Maharashtra. He was being hosted by three brothers from Suryapet in Nalgonda district–Venkata Rama Rao, Rama Rao, and Krishna Rao who rented the palace of Suryajung Bahadur for Swami's stopover.

My mother's cousin informed us about the arrival of a "Sai Baba." I had just returned from school, and my mother told me to get ready because we were going to see this special person. We had just heard of Shirdi Sai Baba from my mother's friend, Ms. Padma Acharya, who is the daughter of the Chincholi Rani (queen of the kingdom of Chincholi). **The Chincholi Rani was a devotee of both Shirdi Baba and, later, of Sathya Sai Baba after the latter revealed to her beyond doubt that He is the same Baba come again.**

As we reached the palace where Swami was staying, I, a car aficionado, was impressed with the blue-gray Plymouth station wagon that was parked outside. Swami welcomed us as if we were His long-time acquaintances. I was expecting to see someone looking like Shirdi Baba, so I was taken aback by His appearance. He lovingly enquired whether we had a comfortable journey and if we had to wait long. Then He blessed us by materializing *vibhuti* (sacred ash) and gave us His photograph. He also gave all of us *prasadam* and blessed me with advice to study well. He was leaving soon but promised that He would visit again. Little did we realize the true meaning of that statement back then.

The Loving Head of the Family

Sure enough, after about seven or eight months, Swami came again. This time He stayed at the bungalow of Sri Visnur Ramchandra Reddy (Deshmukh of Visnur) at Mallampet. My mother was very eager to visit Him as soon as possible. She had pledged her heart to Him, and He had already become her personal God. My father, Sri Raja Omapathi Rao, also came along to see Swami. Swami graciously blessed us with an interview during which my parents invited Him to bless us by gracing our home. *"Today, I will be meeting many people. Come tomorrow to pick me up. We shall go to your home."*

We were staying in a rented bungalow at Himayat Nagar (Hyderabad), having shifted out of our 50-room palace at Nampally (Hyderabad). Swami came as promised, and He was so comfortable that it felt as if He was hosting us at our own home. He sat on the floor and dined with us, spoke to us, and endeared Himself also to the extended family that had come.

"This house is small, Omapathi," said Swami, *"you should build a bigger one. See, your other house is so big!"*

"Yes, Swami, but..."

"What? Don't you have money?"

My parents remained silent, and Swami smiled. He nodded to reassure us that all would come in time. Sure enough, by 1955, we built another house next to the

Nampally palace. That house was blessed by our dear Swami, who visited us dozens of times. Later, as advised by Swami, an additional story was also added to accommodate more visitors.

Naturally, we were also drawn to visit Swami at Puttaparthi regularly. We couldn't stay away for long without having His *darshan*.

The Greatest Treasure of the Domakonda Family

We are descendants of the Domakonda Kamineni family. Our ancestors were *Jagirdars* (noble revenue collectors) of the Nizam (Ruler) of Hyderabad, administering and ruling a large tract of land as the Nizam's trusted officials. My grandfather, Sri Venkat Rama Reddy (maternal uncle to my father), was the Deshmukh (Ruler) of Dubbak. **He had suffered a severe paralytic stroke but was finally cured by Swami miraculously!** Witnessing this was amazing for me, and needless to say, Swami became my beloved God, just like He had become for my parents.

After the government took away the feudal lands, my father was inducted into government service under the 'Jagirdar Batch' quota. Back then, it was called the Hyderabad Civil Services (HCS) and later became part of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS). He used all the influence and power that came with the IAS designation to serve his beloved SAI. In fact, when he saw that the locals of Puttaparthi constantly pestered Swami in various ways out of envy and jealousy, he prayed to Swami to make Prasanthi Nilayam a separate township. He also did everything in his power to pursue it and finally achieved it. He had great faith in Swami, and Swami, too, had great trust in him.

After independence, when India became a republic, and the privy purse was abolished, we seemingly lost much of our wealth. **But we gained the most precious treasure in our Bhagawan, and so, I consider us the wealthiest members of our family!** It was literally Swami's advice at every step that protected our family in every way imaginable, even averting a financial disaster.

Story of Latha Talkies

In 1950, India became a glorious republic. Hundreds of kingdoms and princely states were integrated into India. At that time, all royal families had to relinquish their kingdoms so that the great nation could be built. In honor and respect for this sacrifice and in recognition of the wonderful service done to the people for so many years, the government of India granted what is called the 'privy purse'–a nominal amount of money given on a monthly and annual basis for the sustenance and lifestyle maintenance of the past royalty. We continued to receive it until it was repealed by the Constitution (Twenty-sixth Amendment) Act in 1971 under the government of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. At that time it was Swami who helped us in the most beautiful and dignified manner to transition from being rulers to being citizens of the country.

Swami predicted the loss of our privy purses much before it happened and suggested that we start some business to earn an income. Though He didn't suggest it, we decided to build a movie theater, and He was compassionate enough to readily bless us to start it. Officially, the theater was inaugurated on September 4, 1968. But the actual opening was done by the divine hands nearly a month before, upon Swami's return from His visit to East Africa.

At that time, the theater was not fully ready. The movie screen had not yet been erected, and seats in the theater had also not been installed. Swami stayed at our home and said that He did not like inaugurating movie theaters but would do so out of His love for us. He instructed us to conduct a 24-hour *Akhanda Bhajan* to sanctify the inaugural ceremony. Sri Raja Reddy, an ardent devotee, had come along

with Swami. There was also a *bhajan* group from Bombay (present Mumbai), which included Sri Panduranga Dixit, a renowned singer, to sing the *bhajans*. Swami inaugurated 'Latha Talkies,' the theater named after my mother, and the *bhajan* session was well attended. Swami spent most of the time at the *bhajans*, taking only short, minimal breaks in between. **He granted *darshan* and blessed many devotees with *vibhuti*. Many miracles of healing took place during that single blessed session.**

When our privy purses were abolished, the theater turned out to be a lifeline indeed. After some years, we diversified into other businesses and closed the theater. It was Swami again who stepped in and instructed the Managing Director, Dr. Bhattacharya, of the State Bank of Hyderabad, to assist us with the business venture. Whatever we are today is entirely and literally a result of Swami's love and kindness. I am so grateful to Swami for going out of His way out of love and compassion to help us in time.

Gathering the Intellectuals for the Spiritual Mission

In later years, Swami would conduct the Prasanthi Vidwan Mahasabha (grand congregation of scholars) during the Dussera celebrations, where great scholars and eminent speakers would present discourses on spirituality. The precursor to this was the first Vidwan Mahasabha held in Hyderabad in the early 1960s, which my father had the blessed privilege of organizing.

A huge pandal was erected, and pundits, scholars, and people of eminence were present. In attendance were Sri Burgula Ramakrishna Rao, the former Governor of Kerala and Uttar Pradesh, and Sri P.V. Narasimha Rao, who would later become the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh and then the Prime Minister of India. The three-day event went very well, and Swami spoke on all three days following talks by other erudite speakers. Despite the hectic schedule, Swami continued to bless the devotees with *darshan* and interviews.

I am ever grateful to Swami for all the blessings and opportunities He granted.

Miracles Galore

It is difficult to share all the miracles that I witnessed and experienced in those days. However, as an example, let me share a medical miracle and an 'out-of-body' experience that I personally witnessed.

I was active in athletics and games at school. One day, as I was doing a pole vault jump, I felt a sharp shooting pain in my stomach. It became so intense that I could not participate in any further events, including javelin throw and discus throw. Nothing that the doctors did could relieve the pain, and my mother decided that we should go to the Vellore hospital, near the city of Madras (Chennai today). We were staying at a relative's house in Madras when we learned that Swami was also in Madras, at Sri Venkatamuni's home.

We rushed for Swami's *darshan*. When Swami saw us, He scolded us for staying so far away from Him. He sent His personal car to pick us up with our baggage so that we could stay with Him at Sri Venkatamuni's home! We were staying in an anteroom and, we did not realize our great good fortune. We were so lucky to be with our beloved Swami. Two days passed, and though I was happy to be with Swami, the pain was unbearable and seemed incurable. On the third day, Swami called me upstairs. He told me to remove my undershirt and shirt and move close to Him. Waving His hand, He materialized a thin and flat blade made of gold.

"Don't get scared. Look up," Swami said.

He placed the blade on my navel and just pushed it in. The blade went through, and the pain was gone. I was stunned. There was not even a drop of blood! I had a strange sensation in my stomach for a while, but by night, I was completely cured and well.

What a divine way to heal! Baba, the great surgeon!

The second miracle involves Swami going into a trance. My first experience of witnessing Swami go into a trance was at Horsley Hills, a resort near Madanapalle (Andhra Pradesh). Swami had taken all of us there for a memorable divine 'vacation'. But the one I remember most vividly was when He went into a trance at our home in Nampally when I was about 18 years of age.

Prof. Kasturi (an ardent devotee and Swami's biographer), Sri Apparao, and Sri Raja Reddy were all with Swami at our home, and Swami was in His upstairs room. Swami completed His bath and was coming out of the bathroom when He just tumbled and collapsed. His body began to shiver and shake, quiver and quake! Sri Raja Reddy came rushing and held Swami's head on his lap. He began to rub Swami's palms. But suddenly, Swami clenched His palms into a very tight fist. After that, it was impossible for anyone to open them. Froth began to appear on His mouth, and the atmosphere became very tense. We all sat around Swami and just waited for Him to come out of the trance.

After a while, Swami came out of the trance. He opened His palms, and we were stunned. There was a magazine of bullets from a revolver in each of His palms! The branding on them said 'Webley and Scott'. Swami later revealed that He had traveled to save a devotee who was in the Indian Army somewhere in Kashmir. His family was far away in Punjab, and he was lonely and dejected. He wanted to end his life and had shot himself in the head. **That was when Swami went to him and saved him from death. To prevent him from attempting suicide again, Swami had to remove and bring the magazines with Him–one of them was even missing two bullets!**

The Greatest Blessing

Miracles are natural to our Swami, and I have witnessed many more. After a while, they probably did not elicit the same awe and wonder in me because I knew there was nothing impossible for our dear Swami. But even now, when I just think of the nearness and dearness that God bestowed on us, it thrills me, inspires me, and touches my heart. When I think of the love that Swami showers selflessly and compassionately, I am struck with awe and wonder. **This love is His greatest miracle, and when we offer our hearts to Him, we experience His love even today.**

I do not travel much anywhere these days. I stay at home and experience His omnipresence every day. All the wealth, associations, people, and other possessions will leave me one day or the other, but **I know that Swami will be with me forever in my heart. That is His greatest miracle and greatest blessing for me.**

Sri Kamineni Rajeshwar Rao
INDIA

Sri Kamineni Rajeshwar Rao *is a member of the royal Domakonda family, which administered a large estate of land as Jagirdars under the Nawab of Hyderabad in India in the past. After graduating from the prestigious Nizam College, he gave up a lucrative commercial pilot career when Swami instructed his parents, Raja Omapathi Rao and Rani Lalitha Devi, that he should take care of the commercial real-estate family business that Swami Himself had laid the foundation and inaugurated.*

His family was blessed to frequently host Swami at their homes in Hyderabad since 1953. Both his parents were actively engaged in Sathya Sai Organizational activities. His father was the founder member of Sri Sathya Sai State Trust (Andhra Pradesh), and his mother headed the Sathya Sai Mahila Vibhag (Women's wing) and Sathya Sai Bal Vikas (SSE) at the state level.

Sri Rajeshwar Rao spends his retirement passionately spreading Swami's life story and message through the Sathya Sai International organization, sharing hundreds of letters written to the family by Bhagawan and thousands of rare, memorable photographs. He has been featured in the 'Raja Meets Maharaja' special series on SSSIO's YouTube channel.

The Calling and the Calling Card

I have always been a curious person, be it in my academic or spiritual pursuits. My bachelor's and post-graduate studies were in physics, and I got a doctorate in Physics in 1973. However, when I did not get a job at one of the national laboratories in the U.S.A., I became interested in medical school. I applied and was accepted to the fifth largest medical center in the United States, a 1200-bed hospital, at the University of Texas in Galveston. After receiving my M.D. in 1977, I completed an internship and residency in psychiatry at the University of Texas, Galveston. My background in plasma physics, along with my medical studies, inspired me to look for research opportunities. The U.S. Navy was interested in recruiting me as a researcher, and in 1983, I accepted a commission in the U.S. Navy as a Lt. Commander in the Navy Medical Corps and was assigned to duty at the prestigious Naval Health Research Center in San Diego.

The story has been quite similar in my spiritual quest as well.

Introduction to the Holy Man and the Psychiatrist

Even as I was finishing my psychiatry residency, both my wife (Carol) and I got interested in Yoga. I read two books by Swami Rama (a renowned saint), 'Yoga and Psychotherapy,' and 'Living with the Himalayan Masters.' I even had the good fortune of meeting Swami Rama in Honesdale, Pennsylvania, where he had established the Himalayan Institute. Carol and I would frequently travel to Houston to buy books on Yoga, philosophy, and spirituality. In 1978, when I was at the bookstore, a customer asked me whether I had heard of Sathya Sai Baba. When I said that I had never heard of Him, the gentleman said that Sai Baba is a man of miracles in India from where he had just returned. He encouraged me to buy a book about Sai Baba. I moved to the section in the shop where they had books about Swami, and I was naturally attracted to the book *Sai Baba: The Holy Man and The Psychiatrist* by Dr. Samuel Sandweiss.

Picking up the book, I saw from the picture that Swami appeared to be a handsome, strong, and good-looking Westerner! It was my curiosity that made me pick up the book and add it to the pile that I had already selected for purchase. When it was time to leave, Carol told me that I should put back some of the books and not carry such a large pile home. Strangely, I put back Swami's book on the top shelf, along with a few others. **As I just turned to leave, one book literally flew off the shelf and struck me on the head. It was the book on Swami by Dr. Sandweiss! It had to be Swami, I thought! Carol immediately said, "You better buy that book!"**

I was soon reading the book voraciously.

Our Plan and His Masterplan

In the beginning, it was our fascination with Yoga that drew us to India, particularly to Rishikesh and the northern regions where many Yogis are known to reside. Reading *'Autobiography of a Yogi'* by Paramahamsa Yogananda (a renowned saint) further fueled our curiosity.

During this time, after I had accepted my commission in the Navy, Carol and I along with our son moved to San Diego. Our unsold home in Galveston was left in the hands of our realtor. During the summer of 1983, Hurricane Alicia ravaged our home in Galveston, leaving the bottom floor submerged under five feet of water. With the help of our realtor, we managed to have it restored and then sell it. We were pleasantly surprised when we found there was enough money left over from insurance and the sale of our house for a trip to India! We planned this trip for the summer of 1984. My wife, Carol, meticulously crafted our itinerary, charting a course from Bombay (Mumbai today) through Udaipur and Jaipur to Agra, Delhi, and Kathmandu before returning to Calcutta (Kolkata today) on our way to Bangalore (Bengaluru today) and Madras (Chennai today) in the South for our return trip home.

During this planning phase of our trip, I remembered the holy man mentioned in the book we bought in Houston. Intrigued, we resolved to seek out His whereabouts to see how we might see Him before leaving India. That's when I sifted through the book and saw a divine masterplan in place. I was staying very close to Dr. Samuel Sandweiss! I soon got his phone number and called him. He invited me to come over to his home, and he would share how I could see Sai Baba. The next evening, we went to his house. Others had also gathered there, and a speech had been arranged. **The guest speaker was Mrs. Elsie Cowan, who narrated a most extraordinary experience, describing how her husband had been resurrected from the dead by Baba.** However, I did not venture to talk about Swami with the host or any of the others who gathered there. I wanted to learn about Him directly from my own experience.Thus, in 1984, we traveled to India as planned.

The Strike on The Plan

We loved our trip from Bombay across northern India to Delhi and then to Kathmandu. From Kathmandu, we were supposed to travel to Calcutta. However, we were delayed in leaving Kathmandu because we had only gotten single-entry visas for India, and we used that single entry when we flew into Bombay! Thus we were not allowed to leave Kathmandu until we could get new visas. Over the next three days, our Sherpa guide helped us get a new visa and a new flight out of Kathmandu. Thus, we finally arrived in Calcutta three days late. We had missed our original flight to Bangalore. We then learned that India, particularly Andhra Pradesh, had been experiencing a general strike for the previous four weeks. The Governor of Andhra Pradesh had been removed by the Parliament, which upset the people and led to the strike. There were long waiting lists for flights from Calcutta to Bangalore. On the second day of waiting for a flight to Bangalore, while standing in a tourist shop, we suddenly realized that we might not get to see Swami. Our time in India was coming to a close for this trip. It was a revelation. Tears came to our eyes as we felt very sad. We felt a very strong desire to see Swami! Later that day, Swami blessed us with a flight to Bangalore!

We arrived at our hotel in Bangalore and found out that the *ashram* was closed, and no taxis or buses were traveling to Puttaparthi. Despite the odds, our longing to see Swami drove us forward. We sought advice from the concierge. Imagine our joy to learn that bus service had just resumed that day! We thanked our stars! We hurried to the bus station, only to find that the bus was absolutely packed with eager travelers after the prolonged hiatus.

However, we were determined to reach our destination, and our taxi driver proposed his brother's vehicle as an alternative transport to take us to Puttaparthi. But there was

one condition: we had to leave immediately! It was an old Ambassador car, and its tires were threadbare. But we were determined to get to the *ashram* and did not want to leave India without seeing Swami. So, we left Bangalore with only the clothes we were wearing and some small traveler's checks I was carrying.

The Journey to God

I was already beginning to realize that the journey to God is not an easy one. It requires patience, perseverance, and endurance. We were barely five minutes into the journey when we ran out of gas! My son and I pushed the car to the nearest fuel station and, after refueling, started back on our journey. All along the way, there were many roadblocks with large stones, reminders of the just-concluded strike. We stopped at all these roadblocks, and I had to get out of the car to clear the stones. Finally, when we reached Prasanthi Nilayam in Puttaparthi, I realized we were almost the first to arrive after the strike.

When we arrived at the *ashram*, afternoon *darshan* was just over, and Swami had returned to His room. Our driver told us he would spend the night in the *ashram* and that we had to leave just after morning *darshan*. We were to have one *darshan* of Swami. But what a blessing that would be! At the Accommodations Office, we were given a space in a shed. This was particularly difficult for Carol, who does not enjoy anything like camping! We went to the village and got mattresses, bedding, some utensils, and water, and we had some appropriate clothing made for us. Carol used the water and stainless steel cups to soak her contact lens overnight and then more water to moisten the lens before putting them in her eyes the next morning! It was a new experience, and we were really roughing it because **we were determined to see Swami at any cost whatsoever.**

Darshan

The next morning, we finally had Swami's darshan. There were barely about 30 or 40 people. That's all! From a situational perspective, it was the aftermath of the strike. But I knew He blessed us to have an intimate *darshan*.

For me, the *darshan* was a mystical experience. Swami seemed to be transparent and simply gliding across the ground. It was so beautiful. We all left the *ashram* deeply feeling His divinity. It was a life-changing event for us.

His Calling Card

We didn't have time to stay longer. After just one *darshan*, we had to return to our hotel in Bangalore. But our driver persuaded us to travel to Srirangapatna, near Mysore, where a devotee by the name of Mr. Halagappa had set up a temple for Swami. All of the pictures there were covered with *vibhuti*. Mr. Halagappa showed us the medallions of Shirdi Baba and Sathya Sai Baba. They were copper-clad enamel pictures and exuded a sweet liquid called *amrith* (divine nectar).

As a physicist trained in pure sciences, I was hard-pressed to believe anything that couldn't be readily replicated in a laboratory. But what I saw was simply fascinating. These medallions were oozing *amrith* at the rate of a drop every 10 to 15 seconds! There were no tubes attached, and the liquid was coming out of nowhere. It was a miracle in plain sight! Energy was being transmuted into matter!

I was shocked to witness such a thing for the very first time in my life. Although I have always been a firm believer in God, I was mainly focused on the intellectual aspect until that point. But that was the beginning of my focus on purely spiritual perspective. We returned to San Diego, and I went back to work and my regular routine, but I was convinced that I would be read-

ing and learning more about Swami and visiting Him more frequently.

Indeed, **I had received Swami's calling card!**

The First Interview

In 1987, the United States State Department tasked me with exploring the potential for transferring medical technology between the USA and India. I enthusiastically accepted the assignment and headed to Bombay (now Mumbai), where I collaborated with King Edward Memorial Hospital and other healthcare institutions. After completing my work, I embarked on a planned trip to Bangalore with the primary goal of visiting Swami. Arriving in Bangalore, I learned Swami was returning to Whitefield from Prasanthi Nilayam in two days. I found accommodation close to the *ashram* and eagerly awaited His arrival. When Swami finally arrived and I saw Him, I felt like I was being totally ignored! I also noticed people were handing letters and notes to Swami written by them. We also saw a presentation by a devotee from Africa, who was reading out the poetry he had written. So I thought, "I, too, will write a little poem, and I will pray to Swami for an interview." That evening, I wrote a poem:

Father,
Although I am far from home
I never feel alone.
You are the Dweller in my heart
And we will never part
Will you please hear my plea
And grant an interview with Thee

and when Swami came out for *darshan,* I offered Him an envelope with the letter and my poem in it. When He came out for *darshan*, He went around, took my little letter, and said, *"Go!"* So, I went into the compound of Swami's residence and had my memorable first interview with Swami in 1987.

After briefly talking to all the devotees called in for an interview in the outer room, Baba called each person for a private interview in an inner room. Finally, He came out and said to me, *"You are next!"* He then called me inside. I was carrying a *japamala* (rosary) and a quartz egg that looked like a Shivalinga, and I wanted Swami to bless them for me. At first, He said, *"You worry too much! You worry about the past, the future, and your family, and you worry about your job! I will worry about all those for you. You just worry about the present!"* **And then He pointed His fingers toward Himself, swept them up and down, and said, "The Omnipresent!"**

He looked at the items I was carrying, picked up the quartz egg, and said, "*This isn't a Shivalinga. I will make you a real Shivalinga tomorrow; be ready!*"

He talked to me about some personal matters, after which we returned to the outer interview room. He continued seeing others, and at the end, He gave each person a handful of *vibhuti* packets as we left the sacred room! I was the last person leaving the room, and I noticed someone had dropped a packet of *vibhuti*. As I reached down to pick it up, He laughed and said, *"You want some more?"* I turned around and said, "Sure!" So He gave me another big handful of *vibhuti* packets.

The Miracle *Linga*

So I left the interview room with everyone else, and later that night, I was wondering, What did He mean when He said "*be ready?"* That evening, I didn't want to talk to anyone. I just wanted to focus on remembering Swami and thinking about the memorable interview with Him. The next day, during *darshan*, He looked at me again and said: *"Go!"* So I went to the waiting area outside His residence. Soon, everyone who was called gathered in the interview room. After a while, He motioned

for me to come forward and give Him the quartz egg I had been carrying.

"What is this?" He held it up so everyone could see it, but nobody answered Him. He then said, *"This is glass; it's only glass. I am going to make it a real Shivalinga."* He held the quartz egg in the palm of His right hand. Then, with the open palm facing up so everyone could see it, He gently blew on it several times without moving His hand. **The reticulated quartz egg turned into a solid black Shivalinga, to the amazement of everyone!**

He held it up and said: *"This is a real Shivalinga."* He continued, *"It is made of the five elements."* He stopped and looked at me, asking, *"Who does this belong to?"* I looked up to Him and said, "To You, Swami." He smiled, nodded yes, and pulled a silk handkerchief out of my pocket. He wrapped the Shivalinga in the silk handkerchief and put it in my shirt pocket. Then He said to me, *"Immerse it in water every night and drink that sanctified water. It will help to calm your mind."* I have been carrying "His Shivalinga" with me ever since, and I faithfully place it in water every night as per Swami's directive. But I believe that the Shivalinga is on loan from Swami. It still belongs to Swami.

I carry the sacred *linga* with me wherever I travel. As I mentioned, I have traveled far and wide, and consequently, I have been exposed to many unpredictable and precarious situations. **Whether it was a German police barricade at Frankfurt airport or a bomb scare for my family at Heathrow airport, I truly believe that we have come through these situations with flying colors because of the blessed *linga*!**

I can go on and on about personal experiences. But based on my lifelong experience, **I am convinced that if we follow Swami's teachings, we can develop better spiritual understanding and progress spiritually. To love Him above all and to love our fellow beings as ourselves are the most meaningful learnings of my life.** I believe the same transformational miracle can happen to others, too, when we have an outpouring of love and practice His teaching that love transforms whomever we interact with.

Dr. Mike Congleton
USA

Dr. Michael Congleton *holds an M.D. in Psychiatry and a Ph.D. in Plasma Physics. He came to Swami in 1984 and has served Him with devotion as an officer in the SSSIO for several decades. Swami blessed him with several miracles and interviews.*

Dr. Congleton served as the President of the Sathya Sai Baba Society of America, established in 1978 with Bhagawan's blessings and guidance. He was also the National Council President and the Central Coordinator of the SSSIO–USA.

This Small Planet Earth

In 1995, Sathya Sai Baba told Dr. John Hislop, *"This small planet Earth is very special.* ***It is unique in the Universe. This is a very important topic.*** *It is of very great significance."*

Since the early stages of my adult life, I have been concerned with the fate of nature as it suffers under the weight of modern civilization. Neither my involvement in environmental organizations, my education in environmental science, nor my career in government environmental policy slackened the dread I felt that nothing could stop the inevitable disordering of Earth's natural systems and the negative impacts of this on all beings, including ourselves. My deepest sense was that real and lasting change could only occur with a spiritual transformation resulting in a new worldview.

I felt that if we understood that all of nature embodies the same divine spirit and all are interdependent and connected, it would be wrong to treat other beings, such as trees, merely as objects to meet our self-interested desires. But until our morals became grounded in such a belief, there could be no fundamental change–any actions would be no more than band-aid solutions. Major surgery is what is in order.

Sai Baba's descent into my life in 1995 provided the ultimate hope and inspiration that such a spiritual revolution could indeed occur, even in America. In His March 3, 1965 discourse, Swami explained, *"Many hesitate to believe that things will improve, that life will be happy for all and full of joy, and that the golden age will recur. Let me assure you that this divine form embodying righteousness* (dharma-swarupa) *has not come in vain. It will succeed in averting the crisis that has come upon humanity."* Years later, we have come closer to the brink of environmental catastrophe, but we have also come closer to the fulfillment of the Avatar's Divine mission (in all respects). Obstacles appear most formidable before victory is gained, but, as Swami says in the *Ramakatha Rasa Vahini*, *"Dharma has to win: Victory is the inevitable concomitant of righteousness."*

The era of Sathya Sai Baba's incarnation has been a time of incredible witnessing. We have witnessed a major world war with its ultimate devastating end–the dropping of the first atomic bomb and then another. We have seen an explosion in the manufacturing and distribution of goods worldwide, with its dramatic looting of nature's bounty. We have witnessed the first human-caused mass extinction of flora and fauna. **Although this has been an age of great achievements, it has also been an age of great human selfishness.** Swami tells us, *"Despite the striking progress in the fields of science and technology, there has been deterioration in morals and social behavior because of the growth of selfishness. Self-interest is predominant in every action."* (Divine Discourse, June 24, 1989).

The Western world, especially the United States of America, has placed demands on people and nature in the name of

economic growth and progress. In the years following World War II, we intensively cut vast areas of ancient forests. The trees were felled indiscriminately as objects to provide lumber for building homes for a booming population. They were felled in the name of progress and motivated by the money to be gained. Swami says we can no longer afford to do this: *"...because there is deforestation to an alarming extent, the extent of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere has considerably increased. Therefore, the remedy for this situation is intensive afforestation, growing more trees everywhere and protecting the existing trees without destroying them for other purposes."* (Divine Discourse, January 21, 1993).

These magnificent old trees, which had given so much to the atmosphere, soil, birds, mammals, and humans, were not prayed to before the chainsaws began cutting. They were not asked for permission, as the indigenous people of this land (USA) would have done. No offerings were left in their place, and no words of gratitude were spoken. Swami explains that *"nature is not anyone's private property. It belongs to God."* (Divine Discourse, June 21, 1989). The indigenous people understood and lived this precept.

The indigenous people have long lived the belief expressed by Swami that *"Nature is the vesture of God."* (Divine Discourse, February 10, 1990). God is in every creature. All are related and interconnected. **All aspects of creation are endowed with spirit and have different roles to perform, as bestowed by the creator.**

A feeling of sadness creeps over me as I consider what humanity has done to creation and the people who cared for it so well, in such a short time. They lived as caretakers, understanding that land does not belong to any one person; it belongs to all. One can no more own land than one can own a piece of the sky or their mother. In fact, we have only responsibilities, not rights, to use the land well with care. Swami says, *"It is because nature ceaselessly performs its duty that the world is able to derive so many sacred benefits. The secret and mystery of Creation lies in the due performance of one's duty with earnestness and sincerity."* (Divine Discourse, May 28, 1990). Many elders of America's remaining indigenous cultures continue to carry the light and wisdom of their ancestors.

Swami tells us, *"Prakriti (Nature) is in essence divinity itself... All this is divine... So, tread softly, use reverentially, and utilize gratefully."* (Divine Discourse, October 15, 1966). Are we heeding Swami's advice? When it comes to addressing the environmental crisis, we still put much of our faith in science and technology–the frontier America turned to when new territories of land ran out. But unbridled science and technology have been largely to blame for our present state of affairs. Science does not yet account for the whole of nature. It cannot measure the divine spirit; therefore, science does not acknowledge its existence. Swami explains that the difference lies in whether one places faith in creation or the creator: *"The scientist is the one who enquires into the Nature of Creation. The saint is the one who seeks to know the Creator... Once you understand the Creator, you can understand the whole of Creation."* (Divine Discourse, May 6, 1988).

Nonetheless, science and technology of the 20th and 21st centuries have proceeded at an ever-quickening pace without adequate thought of its consequences. Swami warned Prof. Kasturi, as recorded in the book, *Loving God,* that science was *"robbing Prakrithi (Nature) from her Master...exploiting Nature and proud that it has conquered Her."* Amer-

ica has fostered many great voices that have warned about the indiscriminate development of science. Still, the drums of economic growth and the belief in 'more is better' drown them out. Consider the poetry and prose of just a few such passionate Americans: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Black Elk, John Burroughs, Aldo Leopold, Chief Joseph, Robert Frost, Rachel Carson, Helen Caldicott, Winona LaDuke, and Wendell Berry or the warnings of scientists such as George Perkins Marsh, Albert Einstein, Linus and Eva Pauling, or James Hansen.

The invasive weeds of selfishness, greed, and exploitation that have taken root cannot thrive for long. Swami's Divine loving hand will soften the soil and loosen their grip. He can then plant a new seed, but we must help by fostering it with our Dharmic behavior and watering it with our commitment to Truth, Love, Nonviolence, and Peace. Western-based science and technology will transform in kind to imbibe a humbler spirit, which understands nature is divine and belongs to God, not man. Swami says, *"It is only when science is linked to spirituality that the results of science can be fully harnessed for the good and elevation of mankind."* (Divine Discourse, January 26, 1985).

When we truly understand the universal law that all are related, not separate; all are interdependent, not independent; all are divine, not merely matter; and that cooperation yields far better results than competition, then we will realize we have arrived. **Nature works through a loving interdependency, and the so-called 'survival of the fittest' is ultimately the survival of those seeking unity.** Swami provides the ultimate hope that this worldview can be re-established and that modern humankind will deserve that name. Swami tells us that these modern times especially call for restraints, as recorded by Prof. Anil Kumar in the book, *Pearls of Wisdom 2*, *"Modernity [means] making use of natural resources in a limited way, without disfiguring them or without killing them altogether."*

Although humans have generally strayed further and further from the *dharmic* path, He has patiently advised and consoled all who ask and would listen. *"Nature is more progressive than Man, and to protect Nature, Man has to make use of it within limits. When Man tampers with nature recklessly, it reacts adversely, and trouble arises. In order to protect Nature, Man has to practice Ceiling on Desires."* (Divine Discourse, January 21, 1993). This hard-hitting message constitutes the core of Swami's advice on Nature to His followers**. If we are to be part of fulfilling His Divine mission, it is up to us to follow His message implicitly and sincerely.**

Dearest Swami, Your carbon footprint is ever so slight, but Your divine footprint covers all. May our steps match Yours, and may our hearts expand to embrace all creation so that we may do as You so lovingly ask us to, namely, *"promote love, sympathy, and compassion toward all beings. God is present in every one of them. It is your duty to revere God in each of them."* (Divine Discourse, March 1972).

Ms. Tina Schweickert
USA

Ms. Tina Schweickert *writes about environmental history and manages a wildlife sanctuary on her family farm near Silverton, Oregon. Since Sai Baba came into her life in 1995, she has been active in Sai Centers in the SSSIO-USA, Region 6. Her research on Sai Baba's environmental message led to her writing the book Tread Softly: Sathya Sai Baba's Teachings on Nature and the Environment (2005).*

Sathya Sai Baba Never Disappoints

It was the 25th of December, 1971. The taxi lumbered along the streets of Madras (Chennai today). It was a quiet residential neighborhood with large houses surrounded by high compound walls. Occasionally, we would pass a cow or two grazing alongside the road. Inside the taxi, there was an electric air of excitement. We were going to see Sathya Sai Baba.

Michelle Kaplowitz, an ardent devotee of Swami from the USA, was prodding the driver along as she looked keenly out the window, trying to recognize the house Swami was visiting. She had been there the year before, so she was confident she could find it. I was anxious. I was to fly back to the USA at 6 PM, and this would be my last chance to get the coveted interview I desperately wanted.

Five years had passed since my first experience with LSD (a potent psychedelic drug) in San Francisco, and four of those years were spent in India, with visits to Nepal and Sri Lanka. **The last two years were spent with Sathya Sai Baba, who I now believe to be God incarnated on earth.**

Finding Sai Baba

My mind raced along. I thought of the many wonderful experiences I had had with Sai Baba during the past two years. He was everything to me: my mother, father, Guru, guide, confidant, and friend. I was going back to the USA after nearly four years in India. I closed my eyes for a minute and prayed for Sai Baba to give me a talisman to "protect me in America." Suddenly, Michelle cried out, "There it is! That's the house." Everyone in the taxi became excited. My heart started fluttering, and I took a deep breath. We got out of the taxi and went onto the verandah of the house. Several Indian people were waiting there.

As if out of nowhere, without warning, Sai Baba appeared. He moved gracefully and swiftly across the verandah toward us. He greeted Michelle with a big, loving smile. *"How are you, Sir?"* He asked her as she melted away. Then He turned toward me with a more serious look and said, *"I'm going to the hospital to see Walter Cowan. I'll be back in one hour. You wait here."* He had told me the very same thing early in the morning and then disappeared, only to turn up at this house in the late afternoon. It took skilled detective work, a sixth sense, and a keen memory on the part of Michelle to find Him. In those days, she always found out where Sai Baba was going and when. Even if nobody else knew His whereabouts, she would find Him. **It was a gift He gave her because of her intense love and devotion toward Him.**

The Divine Dance

It was a very long hour, to say the least, but this time He did return. After about twenty minutes, He called all the "foreigners" into a separate room. We gathered in a semicircle around Him. **He looked at all of us and then began to tell us about how He had just resurrected Walter Cowan from the dead that morning.** After He finished His narration, Leela, a dear friend and travel companion of mine, spoke up.

"Swami," she said, her voice choking, "my mother had her leg amputated due to diabetes." *"Yes, Yes, I know,"* was Sai Baba's gentle, comforting reply. Then He looked at her arm. It had been injured due to an accident at her birth. *"Now,"* Sai Baba began in a mischievous tone, *"she has one leg, you have one arm, you can do a dance."* Leela, not knowing whether to laugh or cry, said, "But Swami, I have you."

"Yes," He replied, *"you can use my arms and legs, I'm always ready."* He waved His hand and materialized a small silver coin out of nowhere. *"Here, this is for your mother,"* He said as He handed it to Leela.

Interview–Inner View

Then He turned and looked at me. I had watched Him make the coin for Leela's mother with a tinge of jealousy. *"You have dirty thoughts and doubts,"* He said to me, with a look that combined disapproval, love, and compassion. He moved His hand in a circular motion, and in a flash, a small silver coin materialized. He walked over to me and put it in my shirt pocket. *"Carry this with you in America,"* He said lovingly as He patted my chest.

He made some remarks and responded to questions from others assembled in the room. Then, He called us individually to a smaller room for the private interviews. Finally, it was my turn. I stood face to face, all alone with Him at last. *"You thought Swamiji was going to disappoint you,"* He said lovingly. ***"But I never disappoint."***

I discussed with Swami about my relationship with my parents. I asked Him if my parents would ever come to Him. His reply was, *"Your parents don't know anything about Swamiji. You go tell them something and see. Between you and your father, no connection. Between mother and son, there is only some natural connection."* He patted me lovingly on the head and added, *"Don't do marriage; lead a free, unattached life."* It was true I had never really connected with my father.

Then, I talked to Swami about my visa problem and my spiritual practices. He patted me on the head and said, *"Don't worry, I'm giving some help."* He told me regarding my visa, *"When you come back, register in Anantapur. They're all my devotees now. If you always give my address, you'll never have any difficulties."*

"But Swami," I said, "If I give your address, they'll want a letter from You..."

"I'll give." was His reply.

"But last time I asked You, You said 'No,'" I reminded Him. He held both my hands and reassuringly said, *"I'll give. I'll give."*

I bent down to the floor and kissed His feet. He helped me get up and gently but swiftly led me to the outer room where the others were waiting. It's hard to describe how I felt. **It was as if I had been opened and filled with love from head to toe.**

In the taxi on the way back to the hotel, I took the small silver coin out of my pocket. On one side, it had an image of Shirdi Sai Baba. On the reverse side was a hand in the position of blessing or protection. Around the hand was inscribed the message, **"Why fear when I am here"** in Tamil (Tamil and Telugu are two of the languages spoken in South India.) It was the talisman I had prayed for in the taxi on the way there!

Mr. Howard Levin
USA

Mr. Howard Levin *was an interior designer in New York and San Francisco who took on the life of a hippie, hitchhiking his way to India, where he met Sai Baba. He is one of the original "Sai Hippies," a group of young people who visited the ashram and had the privilege of spending precious time with Sri Sathya Sai Baba in the 1970s. On the second day after meeting Him at Whitefield, Bangalore, Swami invited him to stay at His residence. He was also involved in setting up the planetarium at Puttaparthi. Mr. Levin is the author of two books on Sri Sathya Sai Baba: "Heart to Heart" and "Good Chances." He has been the manager at the Feathered Pipe Ranch in Montana, USA, for more than 20 years.*

Discovering Sathya Sai Baba

It's nothing short of a miracle how Sri Sathya Sai Baba has reached people from all walks of life in the farthest corners of our planet. Growing up in a suburb of Amsterdam in the Netherlands and moving to Santa Barbara, California, for studies, **I became one of those people "in the farthest corners of our planet" to be captivated by His miracles, His teachings, and His unconditional Love.**

Two Significant Dreams

The mother of my very close friend and college roommate, Greg Slee, first introduced us to Sri Sathya Sai Baba and His teachings. Newly arrived in sunny Santa Barbara, spiritual matters were not on my mind at all and I was very skeptical about the existence of God in human form living in faraway India. However, Swami quickly transformed me by appearing in my dreams with profound experiences, messages, and guidance. These dreams led me to explore and put His teachings into practice. **The first sign of His presence was the distinct fragrance of jasmine flowers that sometimes emerged when thinking about doing service (Seva).**

In my first dream with Baba, which felt more real than reality itself, He appeared before me, holding His hand, palm up, right before my eyes. All of a sudden, the most stunning red, blue, green, and diamond-like crystal clear stones appeared out of nowhere in the palm of His open hand. As these stones materialized in my dream, I could hear the most beautiful celestial chimes. The brightness and colors of those stones and the sound of those chimes were out of this world and beyond anything I had ever seen or heard before! Indescribable! I fell to the ground, full length, face down, prostrating before Him, exclaiming fervently: "YOU ARE GOD, YOU ARE GOD, YOU ARE GOD!"

Through these profound experiences, I grew increasingly interested in Him and His teachings. I started doing volunteer work and eventually visited the Sri Sathya Sai Baba Center of Santa Barbara. After my initial visit to the Sai Center, I felt conflicted as worshipping God in this way felt foreign to me. The following day, as I came to a stop at a traffic light while driving, I ended up reflecting on the night before at the Sai Center, thinking to myself that "maybe this stuff with Sai Baba and God is not for me..." That very instant, **I noticed the car's license plate in front of me. It read: *"GOD IS 4 U,"* a direct response to my thoughts.**

The picture below depicts the exact setting of a subsequent 'Baba dream.' A large crowd surrounded us.

In the dream, when Swami looked at me, I mentally asked Him what it's like to be in heaven. He stretched out His hand, and when I reached out and held His hand, what I experienced was truly indescribable. Labeling it as an "experience" doesn't do it justice. It was beyond what we refer to as "experience." Although I knew it happened, and I felt the experience, it was erased instantly from my awareness upon waking up, making it that much more difficult to describe. Eventually, I realized that if this "experience" had not been erased from my awareness, it might have been challenging for me to have any interest in worldly life, so the removal of this experience from my awareness was for my own protection. **I realized that this "experience" could only have come from God.**

"Man has to be Unmade and Remade" (Baba)

As I continued to grow closer to Swami, different aspects of my life started to unwind! Among other things, suddenly, orders for the business I had started years earlier began drying up. Big orders that had seemed secure somehow ended up falling through. Things became dire. I had to sell my car and ended up riding a bicycle given to me by a friend who felt sorry for me. I'd ride this bike to the Santa Barbara Rescue Mission to teach English and Math to homeless kids. I sometimes had fleeting thoughts like, "What on earth am I doing here? I should be working on my business..." But somehow, I sensed that Swami had my back. I could sense the importance of sticking to His teachings and doing *seva* as much as possible. He instilled confidence in me that no matter what, all would turn out OK. And eventually, it did.

But first, I still had some more unmaking to go through. In 1995, a massive rainstorm flooded whole sections of Santa Barbara, and most of the contents in my office ended up submerged under water. I remember wading through waist-deep water on my way to my office, attempting to salvage whatever I could. I said to Swami, **"OK, Lord, I am all Yours. Thy Will be done. Do with me as You please." It was a surrender that left me feeling free and relieved, and I was happy to surrender to Him!** It was at that point that things turned around. Not long after that rainstorm, I ended up moving to Los Angeles for a work opportunity. This brought me close to the Sri Sathya Sai Center of Hollywood, which became the Sai Center where I took a more active role as part of the SSSIO.

First *Darshan* and Many More

I first visited Prasanthi Nilayam in 1997 for His *darshan* and to participate in the first-ever Young Adult World Conference. This was followed by numerous trips with the Sai Center of Hollywood. It would be impossible to share everything that transpired during those wonderful trips, but let me share just a couple of relevant and significant experiences.

In 2000, members of the Sai Center of Hollywood were blessed to receive several interviews with Swami. One day, Swami informed us that He would see us the following day, so I had the chance to prepare a list of questions. At the start of our first interview the following morning, Swami pointed at me seated in the back, and without me having said a word, He answered the very first question on my list in such a way that no one else in the interview room understood the nature of my somewhat personal question! During the interview, Swami materialized several items for different people, including a relatively large cup filled with *vibuthi*. Then He gestured to me to come forward and sit at His feet. He started waving His hand, and a beautiful *Navaratna* (nine gems) ring decked with nine beautifully colored stones popped from His hand. It included the same stunning stones I had seen Him materialize in my first Baba dream. Before placing the ring on my finger, He said, "*Perfect fit!*" And it turned out to be precisely that. Only God can know the size of my ring finger like that! Then, He explained that the ring is *"protection from the negative influences of the nine planets!"* **It felt like having come full circle since that first Baba dream I had more than ten years ago.**

At another point during the interview, Swami stood up, looked at me, and asked, *"Do you want marriage?"* I replied, "Whatever is Your will, Swami." Then, after a brief pause, He again asked, more sternly this time and pointing His finger at me: *"No, but do YOU want marriage?!"* To which I blurted out something along the lines of "I think that would be a good thing at some point, Swami...." Approximately one year later, my future wife, Tarini, started attending the Sai Center of Hollywood. She had a dream in which Swami showered us with *vibhuti*,

which was her experience of Him blessing our marriage. Shortly thereafter, in 2002, I went to India, and He took my letter asking Him to bless our marriage. Later, in 2002, we got married in the Shiva temple where Swami was born, and we have two kids.

At the end of a subsequent interview during that same trip in 2000, I said to Him, "Swami, I have so many questions..." He looked at me and sweetly replied: *"ASK!"* Of all the questions I had, I began describing the dream about Heaven (described above) to confirm the authenticity of my experience in that dream. As I was struggling to describe the dream, He interrupted me and asked, *"Where's heaven?"* When I was not able to answer, **He said, *"Heaven is in the heart."* He proceeded to add, "Hell is in the head."** Even though He did not directly address the dream itself, I realized there was no need for Him to affirm the dream as I knew in my heart of hearts the significance, meaning, and value of that dream. I found His answer to be so profound and meaningful that nothing more needed to be said.

The Greatest Blessing of Working for Swami

When I first started discovering Swami, I remember reading the following quote from Him: ***"...I have come for all. Those who stray away will come again to Me; do not doubt this. I shall beckon them back to Me. ...If you cut this contact and get away, a time will come when you will weep outside the gates clamoring for entry."*** Years later, during a busy festival day in Prasanthi, I found myself outside the *mandir*, seeing Swami seated before the massive crowds inside the *mandir*. All the entryways had been closed, and no one else could get inside. Large crowds had gathered outside the walls surrounding the *mandir*, and I was among them.

I remember thinking, "Oh my goodness, Swami! I'm standing outside the gates, clamoring for entry!" I felt so disillusioned, and I felt crushed. Then, out of the blue, someone tapped me on my left shoulder. I looked to my left and noticed that the person who had tapped me on my shoulder was a *sevadal*, someone I had never seen before. He motioned for me to follow him, which I did. Through the large crowds, he guided me to the side entry, where the VIPs enter the mandir. He walked me right through that entry and motioned me to sit wherever I wanted inside the mandir. Then he walked off and disappeared into the crowds outside. This surreal loving gesture by our all-knowing Lord left me standing there, stunned, amazed, and overwhelmed with gratitude. **After the license plate experience described earlier, this was the second time a mere thought led to an instant response from Him.**

Baba has said that it takes tremendous effort, penance, and grace over countless lifetimes to be born during the advent of the *Poorna Avatar*. It takes even more effort, penance, and grace over many more lifetimes to hear His name mentioned just once. **Imagine the grace bestowed upon us, being immersed in His teachings and being part of His mission daily!** Swami has said that this triple Incarnation of Shirdi Sai, Sathya Sai, and Prema Sai has never happened before and will never happen again. We, indeed, are the most fortunate, blessed souls ever to have incarnated. Thank You, my dearest Swami, for all Thy grace!!!

Mr. Maarten Wagener
USA

Mr. Maarten Wagener *was first introduced to the teachings of Sri Sathya Sai Baba in the late eighties. Swami's presence, teachings, and unconditional love have been the guiding light in his personal, professional and spiritual journey and the foundation of Maarten's life ever since. Maarten has made numerous trips to Prasanthi Nilayam. In the USA, he became involved with the Young Adults program and with the Sathya Sai Baba Center of Hollywood where he served as President (1999-2003) and in other leadership roles. In 2001 he met his wife, Tarini, with whom he has two children. Currently Maarten serves as the YA advisor for the SSSIO–USA, Region 8 Young Adults. Maarten Wagener is a real estate investor by profession.*

Memories of Summer Course

BRAHMAN AND BHARAT (AND BIRTHDAY CAKE!)

A new life began for me in May of 1973 when I traveled from New York City to India to be in the divine presence of Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba. By His grace, at my first *darshan* in Brindavan, Baba looked into my eyes; I felt I had known Him forever. The trip that was planned for one month lasted 2 years and 8 months by Baba's direct guidance in interviews and by my wonderful mother's patient, loving support. This was a time of true healing and joy for me.

In early May of 1974, Swami traveled from Prasanthi Nilayam to Brindavan for the Summer Course in Indian Culture and Spirituality, which began later that month. A few ladies from overseas countries had been talking together about their hopes and prayers of attending. One day at *darshan*, Swami paused in front of me, giving me the chance to ask, "Swami, permission for the western ladies to attend Summer Course?" With a slight smile, He replied, *"May 20th, not now."*

For days, I pondered the meaning of those words and wondered if I had been too bold in asking Him! **Swami's seeming uncertainty keeps us surrendered and ever with Him in the present moment.**

At *darshan* several days later, Baba walked towards me with Dr. V.K. Gokak and asked, *"How many passes?"* I replied with the number, and Dr. Gokak gave me the passes for the group. He gave us observer passes, which allowed us to attend Baba's evening discourses as well as class lectures without the requirement of grading. We saw Baba's caring attention to every detail and felt overjoyed and so grateful!

The theme of the Summer Course that year was "Brahman and Bharat." **In the first series of discourses on Brahman (Supreme Consciousness), Swami focused on the oneness of the omnipresent divine and the divine within.** In the series on Bharat (India), we learned about the universal aspects of the scriptures and sacred traditions of India. Swami spoke on the timeless wisdom of the Vedas. He explained the inner meaning of these teachings in simple ways that we can apply in our daily lives with our varied beliefs and backgrounds. These precious discourses are published as *Summer Showers in Brindavan 1974* and available on the SSSIO website.

Our mornings began with devotional singing while walking through surrounding villages *(nagar sankeertan)*. The bhajans ended with *arati* being offered to Baba at dawn as He stood on the balcony of His Brindavan residence. The sun rose in our hearts as we sang to our Lord at the start of each day. The daily program of classes ended with Swami's evening discourses, occasional cultural performances, and final *arati* in the hall.

Unexpected Blessings

After *darshan* on a breezy sunlit morning in mid-June, I went to Bangalore with a friend to take care of errands in preparation for our upcoming return to Prasanthi Nilayam. When we met for lunch, my friend surprised me with a small cake decorated with the

'Om' symbol; it was my 26th birthday. We thought of sharing it with others after Baba's evening discourse. Like a soft whisper, the thought came to mind that Baba might bless it during afternoon *darshan*!

As we entered the Brindavan ashram compound, we chose an inconspicuous place near the end of the *darshan* line. I sat holding the cake and a newly framed photo of Baba on my lap. Baba walked slowly along the entire *darshan* line, smiling and filling hearts with delight. As He came close, I shyly lifted the cake with one hand and the photo with the other! Baba touched both, sprinkling them with *vibhuti* He had just materialized. After walking on a few steps, He turned back and asked, *"Birthday?"* I answered, "Yes, Swami." He then asked, *"Your birthday?"* I whispered, "Yes." Baba turned back and blessed both again, saying, *"Good. Eat it!"* The day ended with Baba's divine discourse. Afterward, we gathered in the OM SAI RAM shed around the tree. We shared cake *prasad* under the Brindavan moonlight.

It is a pure delight to recall the innocence of those times. Even now, decades later, these recollections fill me with gratitude and awe. **There may be difficult times in life when we face challenges and feel alone; it is the love of our Lord Sai that sustains us. Our memories help keep that love fresh and alive.**

A Rare Discourse

On the day before graduation, **Baba gave a discourse titled, "Who Is Sathya Sai Baba?"** We felt Swami's all-encompassing love as He spoke with a sense of urgency as if imploring us to realize the immeasurable grace in our midst. **In this discourse, Swami spoke of the themes of His Incarnation, including the unity of faiths and the one religion of love, which He defined in this way:**

> *"It is the common harmonized content of all different religions of the universe. In all these components the same kind of healthy blood must flow. It is true to say that prema, or love, is the blood flowing through all the religions of the world. There is essentially only one religion and that is the religion of love. This love flows as a stream through all the religions, and this is the essence of all the religions."*
>
> **–Summer Showers in Brindavan 1974**
> p. 279

Swami closed this special talk with the message:

> *"Keep the aspect of Sai in your heart. I wished to convey to you some aspects of Sai which many people want to know, although it is not possible for anyone to understand or fathom the depths of Sai. This is the background of My wanting to talk of Myself. I wished to convey to you some things which others cannot convey. From tomorrow, try to put all these into practice and enjoy the divine bliss and become one with divinity. Do not fill your head with mere information and knowledge. Fill your hearts with prema. I am hoping you will thus fill your hearts with the essential content of my discourses and prepare yourselves for meeting the future lives."*
>
> **–Summer Showers in Brindavan 1974**
> p. 290

A Sublime Graduation Day

Rain was falling as the procession began from Baba's residence. An umbrella was held above Baba, yet when He reached the platform, His hair and robe were wet. He sat on a chair beneath a canopy of garlands as we sang *bhajans*. Soon, He motioned for the presentation of student honors and speeches to begin. He presented every award and stood for photos with the recipients. As a blind student came up to speak, Baba helped him onto the stage and guided his hands to take *padnamaskar* (touching the divine feet).

We had been well-doused with rain, followed by a cool breeze. From the direction of the Krishna statue, a beam of afternoon sunlight

shone through the trees, creating a circle of golden ethereal light around Baba. Radiating from Him, the light seemed magnified and warmed us all. **I felt I was in the most sacred place on earth. Surely Gods and angels were watching with adoration the Lord's exquisite play, His outpouring of grace.**

Several honors went to students of Brindavan College. One boy said that the rain was like the tears in their hearts at leaving Baba but that their tears would create a flood. In closing, he said, "If this life is only play, I leave my heart and take my body away." As Baba sat in His chair, the sunlight dried His robe and caused the raindrops in His hair to glisten like tiny diamonds. Two full rainbows formed above us.

In Baba's commencement discourse, He spoke about the practice of *dharma* and gave strong, loving, motherly guidance to the students returning to their places in the world. **He showered blessings and assurances of His constant presence and guidance.** Baba closed the talk with the following message:

> *"Students! You have now reconditioned the car of your body, and having reconditioned the car you must also drive it well. Because you are not good drivers, the cars were frequently out of order. The car is not kept in good condition unless you have a good driver.* ***Having now reconditioned your cars, take Sai as your good driver who will drive your car for the rest of your lives!*** *Then the car of your lives will not be spoilt. You have heard many good things. There is no need for me to keep on repeating these things again and again. I am hoping that you will constantly think of what you have learned here and put it into practice."*
>
> **–Summer Showers in Brindavan 1974**
> p. 296

In closing, Baba playfully led us in singing *Love Is My Form*. He then sang the *Asatoma Sat Gamaya* prayer and the *bhajans: Govinda Krishna Jai* and *Subramanyam*. During the final *Arathi*, He allowed several enormous garlands to be placed around His neck.

We made our return trip to Prasanthi Nilayam in the following days, cherishing Baba's gift of this month of learning and light.

Ms. Faith Braverman Hollander
USA

Ms. Faith Braverman Hollander *has been a grateful devotee of Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba for five decades. In 1975, at the time of His 50th Birthday and the Second World Conference of the SSSIO, Swami told her to return to New York City and start the center known as the Sri Sathya Sai Center of Manhattan. Faith has served in various center roles, including president and SSE teacher. In 1976, Swami gave her the role of co-chair of the National Bhajan Committee. Throughout the years, Swami answered her prayers for service in many wonderful and surprising ways both in the US and in Prasanthi Nilayam, including giving the blessing of serving as a Prasanthi Nilayam Seva Dal from 1975–1985!*

Fix Your Mind on Swami

Let me take you back to Toronto, Canada in the late nineties. It was a time of grunge, flannel shirts, amazing dance music, the East Coast-West Coast hip-hop rivalry, skater boys, and general angst. We listened to Pearl Jam, Nirvana, Snoop Dogg, the Beastie Boys, and A Tribe Called Quest.

There I was, a high school dropout with an identity crisis, using alcohol, cigarettes, and psychedelics to navigate my confusion and frustration with life. I was looking for a way to transcend my pain and couldn't find one. I was in an unhealthy relationship, struggled with severe insomnia, and had depression and anger issues. My relationship with my parents was strained, to say the least.

Although I was raised in the Sathya Sai Organization, I left it when I was about 13. So, in addition to being a high school dropout, I was also a *Bal Vikas* (Sai Spiritual Education) dropout. In fact, if I could have excommunicated myself from the organization, I certainly would have. Only due to my mother's insistence did I keep a photo of Swami in my bedroom. I swore that I would never go back to my former life.

A Future Tense with Flimsy Friendships

One Halloween, about a month before my eighteenth birthday, my friends and I were in line to see the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* in downtown Toronto. We were sneaking alcohol into the theatre. I had finally gotten out of my bad relationship, and as my eighteenth birthday loomed, I started to reflect seriously about my life. Standing in my drag queen costume and platform heels, bottle in one hand, cigarette in the other, I decided that I'd had enough. I was sober from that day onwards.

The funny thing about sobriety was that I suddenly had no social life. I was no 'fun' anymore. I was then in a weird transitional period, as I knew I couldn't return to my old life, but I didn't know what was ahead. At the time, I was enrolled in a third high school. My attendance was spotty, my performance was lacking, and I was on the brink of getting kicked out. It was possibly my last chance.

I knew I had to become a better person, but I didn't know how.

Nightmare Turns into a Dream

My parents suggested that I choose an *Ishta Devata* (personal deity), a form of God to focus on. This didn't seem like the worst idea in the world. So, I started thinking of Krishna, Durga, or Lakshmi as the top three candidates to be my *Ishta Devata*. I was in no hurry to choose one. What was the rush?

One night, around the spring of 1999, I was fast asleep (for once), dreaming of my friends and I hanging out in a park. The dream was suddenly interrupted by a blaze of light. **All that was visible was a figure in an orange robe, sporting an afro, with the left hand raised. This figure communicated a telepathic message to me and departed.**

I woke up startled. It was about 3:00 AM in the morning. I said aloud to my empty room, "I think I just had a dream about Swami!"

It was Wednesday morning. I was in a state of shock for the next two days. I attended my classes and came home without speaking

to a soul. By Friday morning, I had calmed down enough for the message to settle into my consciousness. **I told my parents that Swami had appeared to me in a dream and said, *"Fixate your mind on Me. I will take care of the rest."***

In that direct experience, I saw the mercy and compassion of God! I had just taken one step towards the temple, and the Lord Himself came out to meet me in the street where I stood.

A Journey of a Thousand Miles Begins With a Single Step

Thus began the great love story of my life. Things began to turn around for me. I started to put myself in places where it was easy to think of God. I began singing *bhajans* and participating in (even leading!) service projects. I performed in a nonprofit musical band. I finally got some new friends who didn't mind that I was sober.

I graduated from high school as the class valedictorian and got admitted to the university of my choice. It was a new life for me, with my loving parents supporting me every step of the way.

Now, I would love to tell you that since then, I've been an exemplary devotee, and everything has gone smoothly and beautifully. But I realized, to my great surprise, that being a devotee does not mean being exempt from the trials and tribulations of life.

I also learned that transformation is not about the flashy moments; it's about incremental progress, facing yourself day by day, week by week, month by month. Two steps forward, one step back.

I used to have so much shame about my past. I often wondered what my life would have been had I not slipped so early. But I had to experience that dark night of the soul in order to be redeemed.

Swami Vivekananda says, "Life is the unfoldment and development of a being under circumstances tending to press it down."

I have had many dark times since, as recently as last year (2023). But the difference is that now, I have the courage to face my demons. **I have the army of God behind me. The name and the form are my sword and shield.** I don't need to cower and hide in consumption, distraction, alcohol, illicit substances, or shallow relationships. I can do battle with my inner enemies and win the war.

The Miracle of Transformation

Looking back, I can't believe how far I've come from the person I was 20 years ago or even a year ago. **This is the promise God has made to each one of us: that we all have a fighting chance of living up to our divine nature.**

> *"Man (manava) has to become God (Madhava); that is one's destiny, the plan and purpose of one's being armed, as no other animal is, with the sword of discrimination and the shield of renunciation."*
>
> **–Sri Sathya Sai Baba**
> January 25, 1963

Finally, I would like to say that if you had told my jaded teenage self that she would one day be sharing her story with you in this manner, she would have laughed in your face. And yet here we are. For me, this is the greatest miracle.

Ms. Ellesha Wanigasekera
USA

Ms. Ellesha Wanigasekera *was born in Toronto, Canada, but spent her early childhood in Trinidad and Tobago, where her family was first introduced to Swami by the book "Sai Baba Avatar" by Howard Murphet. She was raised by the vibrant Trinidadian Sai family before migrating back to Toronto and finding her faith there. Ellesha moved to the San Francisco Area in the USA in 2018. She has subsequently served the SSSIO at the center, regional, national, and international levels, mainly in her capacity as a writer and editor. She holds a degree in English but is a CPA by profession, working in public accounting.*

My First Darshan

I was drawn to Sathya Sai Baba through service, and He soon became my 'Swami.' Though I accepted Swami as my Guru and Guide, my family and friends did not. Coming from a humble Muslim family background, I had many factors to consider.

I was reprimanded for breaking rules, traditions, and beliefs, which sank my heart. I wasn't allowed to have any altar or physical pictures of Swami, and He has been formless for me ever since. **He has resided within me, around me, and is omnipresent. As a result, I have never needed Swami's presence in a physical form in my life.**

Over the years, I have had many remarks hurled at me, which were tantamount to bullying, and I have been teased for my beliefs. However, Swami and His teachings always kept my faith stronger than my doubts.

A significant turning point in my life was in 2001 when I had my first personal experience of *darshan* (seeing a holy person).

My First *Darshan*

It was in Prasanthi Nilayam, Puttaparthi, that I saw Swami physically for the first time. Interestingly, I didn't even know what the word *'darshan'* meant during my first *darshan* of Swami.

I was seated in the first row, just along the entrance gate that Swami entered, not sure what happens during *darshan*. When Swami walked in gracefully, my fellow Sai sisters, seated beside me, nudged me to look right. I looked up, and I looked right. There, I saw Swami approaching us swiftly. I just stared. I didn't move. I didn't budge.

However, I noticed everyone around me fidgeting, moving, and raising their hands with palms put together in a *'vanakkam'* (Tamil word for *'Namaskar'* or palms put together in respect) position in salutation.

Swami approached and was five steps away from me. I was in tears, which were rolling down my cheeks uncontrollably. No! I was not crying in sorrow, nor were they tears of joy. Yet I had tears flowing, along with a strange sense of calm. I felt at peace as Swami walked past me. **I felt I had conquered the world's tallest mountain at that moment, and I experienced that contentment for the very first time.**

By the time I experienced all these emotions, it was time for Swami to return to His residence. As He came out of the interview room, I hoped Swami would walk past us again. This time, I was told to put my hands in the *vanakkam* prayer pose and hand over some letters to Swami from devotees behind me. As I was mentally preparing my course of action, Swami was already standing before me. I looked up. I could sense my lips moving but couldn't hear myself speak. Suddenly, I felt a nudge. The Sai sister seated on my left whispered,"Tell Swami, Tell Swami, He is talking to you only..." That was when I realized Swami was asking me, *"Where are you from?"* As I was gathering my courage and energy to reply, "Swami, Singaaaaapoooreeee Swami," He reached for the letters in my hand and gently touched them. No, he did not take the letters from me, but instead, He turned away for a moment, turned back, and answered the question I had written in my letter to Him.

I took a deep breath and held it till the music stopped in the *darshan* hall. Phew, then I let out a deep breath! I sat there frozen. I couldn't comprehend what had just happened. I was recalling every moment when I suddenly realized that my Sai sisters were slowly leaving the hall and told me to stop daydreaming. I quickly got up, took my cushion, and started walking back to my room. As I started walking back to my room, everyone kept asking about what Swami had said to me. But I was still absorbing all that transpired during those precious moments.

Lost & Found

Since then, Swami has become my Guide, my Mentor, and my Inner Voice. I have heard many stories about how devotees have come to know of or found Swami. I always tell myself that Swami actually found me. Swami came into my life when I felt alone and was at my lowest point, looking for the purpose of my life. When my life seemed like an ultimate failure, Swami found me at the "Lost and Found counter." **He decided to walk into my life and stay to guide and guard me. I've strayed away from Him many times and have given up on Him many times, but He has always found a way to get back to me and be a part of my life.**

Becoming a Better Muslim, Becoming a Better Person

My learning about Swami's teachings and practicing the five values, *Sathya, Dharma, Shanti, Prema,* and *Ahimsa*, worried many people around me. Many thought I was part of some cult. Many people remarked that I was being influenced into becoming someone else, which was not true. Sadly, even today, some of them continue to think that way! What no one realized was the positive changes happening in me. I had everything in place for a good life: a good education, a respectable job, and the ability and stability to do *seva* all around the world. I was, in fact, becoming a better and more well-versed Muslim. But most importantly, I was becoming a much better human being.

Swami always says,

If you are a Christian,
become a better Christian.

If you are a Muslim,
become a better Muslim.

If you are a Hindu,
become a better Hindu.

And that was precisely what I was becoming. **Swami's teachings made me read and learn more intensely about Islam. I went back to learning the Quran properly and with meaning, and I even started sharing verses and chapters of the Quran with my Sai family.** It cannot be any more beautiful than this.

22 Years and Counting

Since I met Swami, I have always internalized everything. My happiness, bitterness, joy, and sense of contentment were all kept within me. In the same way, Swami was also kept internalized. But during the recent trip to Sri Lanka for the SSSIO International Conference, I spoke for the very first time about my experiences with Swami to Aravind Balasubramanya when he asked me about my first *darshan*. During the sharing, I realized how beautiful my life has become! How much good work Swami had exposed me to, like doing *grama seva* (village service) in different countries! Swami taught me the value of teamwork by involving me in Sai Center activities. Swami taught me to follow discipline, which has brought me far. Swami also made me realize that I needed an ultimate purpose and goal in life.

The Ultimate Purpose

For me, realizing my purpose in life took 'forever.' I now take every breath with a purpose, and that purpose became evident when I was busy with Swami's work.

In February 2023, I was doing *grama seva* in India when a ten-year-old girl came up

to me and said, “When I grow up, I want to be like you, serving others. Can I take a picture of you and get it printed so I can see myself in you?” My heart leaped with joy! It might have been a simple statement, which I later realized it was not, but her words took me by surprise. I realized how service from the heart can have a ripple effect and leave a significant impression on others.

I had always thought my purpose was to get a good job, earn more money, own a big home, provide for my family, buy big cars, and travel around the world. **But that day, that ten-year-old made me realize what I was meant to do. *Seva*! Yes, I’ve realized that I was made to serve. Seva is my purpose–that magnificent, inexplicable contentment I realize today.** Again, I am not sure how, when, and with whom I will continue my journey, but I am confident that Swami will guide me, direct me, and make me His instrument since I was born to serve. I am pretty sure Swami will make me His instrument of service.

Love All, Serve All.

Ms. Habidah Shah
SINGAPORE

Ms. Habidah Shah *hails from Singapore and came to Swami at an early age. Her first darshan of Bhagawan was in 2001. She graduated from Edith Cowan University, Western Australia, majoring in Accounting and Business Law, and spent eight years practicing law. Habidah also holds a postgraduate diploma in Law - Mediation Studies from the University of Western Australia. She volunteers pro bono to help Tamil migrant workers in Singapore. She presently works as a Financial Consultant. Habidah actively advocates for social causes on media and social media platforms.*

The Gift of Yearning

I first saw Sai Baba when I was a young man of 24. I had the privilege of spending much of 1977 at His lotus feet and visited Him annually for the following eleven years. **Around a thousand or so darshans later, in 1997, I still had no group or personal interview**. When I stated this fact, it elicited strong and varied responses from Sai devotees. Such responses included sympathy, confusion, questions about what I may or may not have done in this life or the previous one, gratitude for one's good fortune, anxiety about one's future prospects of physical contact with the Avatar, and so forth.

Swami! Interview Pleeeeeease!

All these reactions have gone through my mind as well. Despite my best efforts, the coveted interview eluded me. When my father and I visited Swami, my father received an interview alone on the first day. I took a group to Puttaparthi once, and only a few members were selected for interviews–but not me. I was the president of a local Sai Center for four years. I attended every *darshan* possible during my visits and joined several groups at the *ashram*. And I begged...

It would be unfair to say that Swami ignored me during those ten years. I attended two Summer Courses, and He spoke to me occasionally in the *darshan* lines. Once, He tossed me a plum from the *Prasad* tray in Whitefield. He blessed my marriage by sprinkling *vibhuti* on our wedding rings, and He let my wife and I become donors for a room in the *ashram,* which assured us accommodation throughout our lives. **From a distance, He blessed me with health, wealth, love, and good work**. **But mostly, His sacred gift was a burning yearning in my heart for Him**.

However, the unspoken precondition in my heart for a lifetime of devotion to Swami was an interview.

A Change of Guru?

Eleven years after my first *darshan* in 1988, I stopped visiting Puttaparthi and became closely associated with another spiritual teacher living in India. The physical attention I received was a balm for my aching heart. I thought that perhaps my *sadguru* was not Sathya Sai Baba because He kept me at arm's length. I put the entire dilemma at Swami's feet. During the next ten years, when I was with the other teacher, Swami kept coming into my dreams at critical moments, and I felt guided by His invisible hand. I learned much in the university of life.

In December 1997, I received a book on the life of Krishna and found myself reading it passionately and wanting to see Swami again. **The life of Krishna and the life of Sai felt so similar to me**. I unconsciously avoided reading books on Sai during those ten years because of the painful yearning in my heart. I read how Krishna sent Uddhava to the Gopis to alleviate their anguish by teaching them about Krishna's universal presence in their hearts. Something clicked in my mind. Maybe there was a solution to my suffering, but it was not

the interview. I resolved to visit Sai Baba the following month.

Invitation to The Heart

However, this was not going to be an easy trip. The unfamiliar heat in India, low-grade flu, and loneliness set in. The discipline of silence increased the pressure. I tried to move up my departure date from India, but the airline refused to cooperate. I was *caught in the clutches* of the Avatar! Swami provided timely compensation for my suffering by giving me glances, taking my letters, letting me touch His robe, showering sacred turmeric rice, and other gifts of grace. I read a book a day from among the many writings of senior devotees relating their inspiring experiences with Sai. I called my wife every two days from the new long-distance phones in the *ashram*.

The emotional dam broke after two weeks when my sore throat robbed me of two nights' sleep. I went to *darshan* dispirited, secured a corner, front-row spot, and sat. Swami came by and glanced at my face, chest, and again at my face. From that moment onward, I had no more throat pain. **This miracle of love burst through my consciousness and made me feel that perhaps Swami loved me and was doing the needful all along**, despite His seeming preoccupation with everything and everyone but me.

With two days left before returning home to the USA, I made a final appeal for an interview. I had a corner spot on the front row again. The man beside me, a resident of the *ashram*, told me he heard Swami say to another *ashram* resident: *Those who will have an interview with this Avatar have been selected before the beginning of time!* Undaunted, I prepared my speech. Swami made a wide arc around my spot, and I said, "Leaving in two days, Swami!" when He returned to the line. Swami simply said, *"Yes, yes."* I was crushed. I returned to my room and wept. I felt I was wasting my precious time with Swami in this fruitless pursuit. It would have been so easy for Him, just once in a thousand *darshans*, to give me an interview. I wrote a note to Swami and put it on my altar with the following wish: "Please do not let me leave Prasanthi Nilayam with this unhappy experience in my mind. After ten years of wandering, please bind my heart to You. Somehow, please stay permanently in my heart." Internally, I had given up the interview as a condition for a lifetime of devotion.

Two *darshans* passed. On the morning of the final day of my stay, I was ninth in the token line and, miraculously, the second *darshan* row. Then Swami selected a group for an interview, including the man seated before me. I slipped into the front line. **As Swami walked toward my spot, I wept and silently cried out, "Please stay permanently in my heart! Please stay permanently in my heart!"** Swami stopped in front of me, placed both feet by my knees, and I held His feet and wept into His robe. The person beside me began to seize the same *padnamaskar* opportunity, but Swami discouraged him, giving me full attention. This was Swami's goodbye blessing and the beginning of a new, deeper relationship with Him.

The Blessing of Inner View

Beautiful things have happened since that visit. I occasionally hear the voice of the Lord, the *antarvani*, in my mind. In the threshold between sleeping and waking, I sometimes see His form. Meditation has also become a lot easier. **When my mind wanders to worldly matters, I remind myself that there is nothing I would rather do than see His form or hear His name**. Sometimes, I remember that holy *padnamaskar* on my last day in Prasanthi Nilayam. Though I never got the coveted

interview, through my anguish, I was bestowed with an inner view.

Swami has repeatedly promised us that this Avatar will give us *devotion, vitality,* and *liberation*. This is an incredible blessing. **Once we have the grace of knowing Him in this lifetime, we can surrender to His way. His pull is enormous. The terrible ache in the heart finds relief in inner devotion where nothing else matters.** Therefore, may we look first to Him, surrender to His plans for us without preconditions, and receive His gifts of grace.

Postscript:
Penned September 22, 2023

I am very grateful to Phil Gosselin, a dear friend, for finding this essay from 1998 in which I had written about my yearning for the interview. It contained many details which I had mostly forgotten. The article triggered a flood of emotions, especially the yearning, which is as strong today as it was back then. I am a clinical psychologist, and my last 25 years have been dedicated to bringing the profound contemplative wisdom of India into modern, scientific psychology. To do that, I immersed myself in Buddhist psychology, which is non-theistic and an easy fit with modern science. Serving Swami in this way felt like my *swadharma*, my personal *dharma*, and Swami made it all happen in wonderful and surprising ways. However, my heartache for Swami continued undiminished.

In 2021, just before I turned 69, I was awakened in the middle of the night by a profoundly loving and deep inner voice that said, "You have done your work; now be free." From that day onward, my life changed. I lost interest in most worldly preoccupations and was catapulted into *vanaprastha* (life of a recluse or retirement stage of life). Although I still work in the afternoons, I love to get up in the morning, read Swami's beautiful words, and then meditate on His divine name and form. That is when the heart can finally rest. **More than ever, I have come to regard the intense yearning that Swami planted in my heart years ago, and in millions of other hearts just like mine, as the greatest gift of all. It is a pain for which the only medicine is to surrender every shred of selfhood at the feet of the Lord.**

May Swami keep us all in His unconditional, pristine, and abiding divine love.

Jai Sai Ram!

Dr. Chris Germer
USA

Dr. Chris Germer *came to Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba over 45 years ago. He is a clinical psychologist and lecturer on psychiatry (part-time) at Harvard Medical School. Chris co-developed the Mindful Self-Compassion training program that has been taught to over 250,000 people worldwide. He has authored or co-authored several landmark books on mindfulness and self-compassion. Dr. Germer is a founding faculty member of the Institute for Meditation and Psychotherapy, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the Center for Mindfulness and Compassion, Harvard Medical School. He still maintains a small online psychotherapy practice.*

Oh Mind! Do not Seek Anything

On multiple occasions, in His discourses, Swami sings a poem:

Adugakuve O Manasa!
Adugu Koladi Adi Adugunu Padunani
Adugakunna Pani Vadigaanagunani
Adugani Sabarini Aadarinchade!

Do not ask, O Mind! The more you ask, it is placed at the bottom. Without asking, the task proceeds quickly. Sabari (an ardent devotee of Sri Rama), who never asked, was showered with grace!

If you wish to ask for anything from God, pray to Him thus, "Oh Lord! Let me have You alone." Once we have secured the Lord, we will get everything we need. That was why Meera sang: "Oh heart, drink the nectar of divine love."

In His discourse on October 9, 1989, Swami said, *"When you can have divine love, to crave for anything else is like asking for coffee powder (a trivial request) from the Kalpataru! (The Wish-fulfilling Tree)"*

For many years, this question of asking or not asking, Swami puzzled me. If not Him, whom else could I ask? In a discussion with a *Sai brother*, I shared this dilemma. He said that when you are in that state of Oneness with Swami–during meditation, in the bliss of bhajans, etc.–experiencing that you and Swami are not different, there is no need to ask. However, when you identify with the body and see Swami as separate from you, you might want to ask Him. I sought the answer from Swami Himself during my meditation. **His reply was, *"Do not ask Me for anything. I know what is best for your spiritual evolution."*** Since then, I resolved to stop asking Swami for anything, worldly or spiritual.

Test is His Taste

My resolve was put to the test when I was diagnosed with prostate cancer after an MRI in August 2018. I was due for a biopsy and asked my urologist if it could be postponed till after my visit to Puttaparthi in November 2018. and He gave me permission. Throughout that visit to Prasanthi Nilayam, I would offer my salutations to Swami but never asked Him for a cure.

On my return, the biopsy was done, and it was confirmed that I would need surgery. My urologist recommended robotic surgery instead of regular procedures. This was not available locally in Trinidad and Tobago or at the Super Specialty Hospital in Puttaparthi. It was available in the USA, but at an exorbitant cost which my health insurance would not cover!

An idea suddenly came to me to contact an old medical school classmate of mine from New Delhi. Within one week, I had an appointment to have surgery at the Rajiv Gandhi Cancer Research Centre in New Delhi. When Swami gives an idea, He takes care of its implementation too! Despite a strike by British Airways, my wife and I traveled via London and arrived in Delhi in time for the surgery.

During my first visit to the hospital, the crowds were huge, and I spent the entire day in pre-surgical preparation. At the end of the day, anxiety, jet lag, and exhaustion set in, and I started to have second thoughts

about undergoing surgery in a place so far away from my family and home. Swami, in His usual style, stepped in to allay my fears!

"Why Fear When I am Here"

While sitting with the physician in his office as he reviewed the results of my investigations, I received a phone call from one of my former SSE students who was now working in New Delhi. As I finished the call saying *Sai Ram*, the doctor reviewing my files looked up at me and asked, "Doctor, did you just say Sai Ram on your call?"

"Yes, I did…"

He then said, "Doctor, I am a Sai devotee, my parents are Sai devotees, and I want to tell you that the surgeon assigned to your case is the best robotic surgeon in Southeast Asia! Have no fear; you are in good hands; Swami is looking after you." **When he shared this with me, I suddenly realized that our loving Lord was looking after all my needs. I felt at ease all at once!**

With His grace, the surgery was completed without complications. As of now, in 2023, I have been cancer free for almost five years!

The story does not end there.

Prasanthi Nilayam is Where and When You Think of Me

This trip to India was the first time after visiting India 10 times that my wife and I did not have a chance to visit Puttaparthi. Thus, we felt very sad. A few days before our return home, my former SSE student invited us to attend a program at the International Sai Centre in New Delhi for the installation of *Sai Padukas* (holy footwear of Sai).

A large contingent of students from Puttaparthi had joined the program for Veda chanting, *bhajans*, and *satsang* (spiritual discussions) that lasted nearly four hours. We experienced the supreme peace of Prasanthi Nilayam without having to be physically there!

It was now time to return home. After surgery, I would be incontinent for twelve weeks, needing to wear adult diapers, and I viewed with trepidation the 20-hour flight back home. Again, Swami stepped in, and the airline gave us free upgrades to business class without any request. Needless to say, I had a comfortable journey back home! I never asked Him, but our loving Swami still took care of all my needs.

Beloved Baba, we know that You are with us every moment of our lives, loving us, guiding us, supporting us, and encouraging us to have faith in You and faith in ourselves. **Please give us the wisdom and faith to understand that whatever happens in our lives is for our own spiritual growth. Sweet Lord, we love You and put our trust in You.**

Sai Ram.

Dr. Gautam Tewari
TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

Dr. Gautam Tewari *holds a diploma in Family Medicine. He is a retired physician who practiced family medicine for 41 years. He also served as an Associate Lecturer at the University of the West Indies Medical School. Dr. Tewari came to Swami in 1987 and has served the SSSIO for over three decades. He has held various positions in devotional, educational, and service Wings of the SSSIO West Indies. He is a Central Coordinator of SSSIO Zone 1 for Aruba, Barbados, Curacao, Guyana, Jamaica, St. Kitts, St. Lucia, St. Maarten, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago.*

Making the Inner Connection with Swami

Swami had called all of us students to His residence Trayee at Brindavan, Whitefield, Bangalore. We sat around the ornate swing where He was seated. The most coveted Trayee Session was about to begin. Swami began the session with a profound question, *"Who is Swami?"*

Many answers came tumbling out.

"You are our divine mother and father...."

"You are the *Sadguru*!"

"Swami is the Supreme *Brahman*."

"You are the one who has the love of a million mothers."

Sitting a few rows from His lotus feet, something stirred within me. Raising my hand and my voice, I blurted out, **"Swami, You are the conscience, the indweller."**

Swami's eyes immediately lit up, and He nodded in agreement. He praised me, saying, *"Look, this little boy has got the right answer.* ***Swami is your indweller, your conscience."***

I felt a surge of indescribable joy and pride within. I had just joined the 11th grade in Swami's school at Puttaparthi. Most importantly, I got the answer right when nobody else did, and I also won accolades from Swami Himself!

Swami continued His discourse and, now and then, referred to the concept of conscience, prefacing it with, *"As this little boy said...."* I continued to be on *cloud nine*, elated with joy and pride. After about half an hour, He turned to me and asked, ***"If you truly believe Swami to be your conscience, will you do the things that you are doing?"***

From being on *cloud nine*, I came crashing down to earth!

Graduating From His School to His College

A couple of years later, I was an undergraduate student at the Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning. Keen to join the music group, I participated in the MAT (Music Aptitude Test). In the evening, the warden apprised Swami about the students' performance in MAT. He had index cards of each participating student and their status–selection or rejection. When he came to my card, he told Swami I had been placed in the University Brass Band. Swami immediately said it was good that I wasn't in the *bhajan* group and said, *"His parents always encouraged him to sing, but he kept shying away. He cannot sing, and it is good that he is in the band."*

Again, I was smiling and happy because it did not matter what Swami said about my limitations as long as He talked about me! But then came a hard blow. Swami said, *"He will not be able to sing because he lacks inner connection with me."*

When I heard that, I felt devastated. Everything Swami had said about me shying away from singing was true. Swami is the embodiment of Truth. This meant that I genuinely lacked an inner connection with Him! **I decided then and there that I had to make that inner connection with Him and work to strengthen it.** Yet again, my answer to His question from a few years ago was proven to be theoretical knowledge only–I had to connect with my conscience.

Connect With Swami Internally, Not Just in Body and Mind

When I was a sophomore in college, I suffered a ligament tear in my ankle. Hobbling around, I wasn't even able to go for *darshan*. That made me very sad and feel low in spirits. That's why I felt elated when a senior student came running into my room in the hostel one afternoon, saying that Swami was asking for me in the *mandir*. I thought this was my '*cancer cancelled*' moment (where Bhagawan has instantly cured cancer by just saying "cancer cancelled") when Swami would instantly cure me. I was sure He would give me *vibhuti* and make me good again.

I quickly got ready, took the crutches, and rushed to the mandir on a bike. A couple of my classmates were there to greet me and to help me sit on a chair in the *mandir*. Again, unconsciously, I was enjoying being the center of attention as I continued to be treated like a VIP. But that feeling evaporated as soon as Swami came near us during *darshan*. He did not speak to me. Instead, He asked the two students who were assisting me, *"How did he break his leg?"*

When they explained everything to Him, He shook His head and responded that it wasn't surprising that I had a fall because I had my eyes on the top of my head!

"Too much ego... He does not see where he is going!"

The fact that He ignored me completely was rubbing salt into my wounds. At the same time, He discussed my condition in detail with Dr. Safaya, the Director of the Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Medical Sciences. I got the best medical treatment available, no doubt, but the *silent treatment* by Swami hurt me more than undergoing the medical treatment itself. For the next two months, Swami completely ignored me and didn't speak to me.

The ligament tear got worse, and I had to undergo surgery. I became very sad and thought Swami didn't care for me. Swami surely knew that I wasn't getting the point. A couple of days before my surgery, He came to me and asked, *"How are you doing?"*

"Swami, I am fine, but it hurts..."

"Does it hurt when you walk? Does it hurt in the mornings more or in the evenings?"

Ah! I was getting His attention but not the point He was making. So, putting on an act as best as I could, I began laying it on *thick*,

"Swami, it is so difficult even with the crutches... It always pains."

I was still hoping for a *cancer-canceled* moment. But then, Swami said, *"If that leg hurts so much, just cut it off and throw it in the Chitravati river!"*

He playfully slapped my cheek and walked away.

Swami rarely says anything without an inner meaning. As I pondered on His lighthearted remark delivered so profoundly, I realized that I had become so focused on my injury and myself that I had utterly forgotten Swami. I was thinking that He was ignoring me while, in reality, it was I who was ignoring Him. **Giving attention to Swami is not about going to the *mandir* and sitting there alone. It is more about making the inner connection with Him and not focusing on the body!** No wonder Swami says, *"Don't listen to the body. Don't listen to the mind. Listen to your conscience."*

Why it is Essential and Beneficial to Develop the Inner Connection

After I left Prasanthi Nilayam, I attended graduate school in Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA. I lived in the uptown area and drove to the University daily. Once, I was driving back after completing my work for the day. I am typically a defensive driver, and I drive very conservatively. But that day, as the traffic light was yellow and about to turn red, I instinctively began to slow down. Then, I distinctly heard a voice from within telling me, *"Go faster! Step on the accelerator."*

So persuasive was the voice that I immediately stepped on the gas and rushed through the intersection. I reached home with a strange feeling.

"Why did I do that? That is not me...."

To clear my unsettling feeling, I decided to go for a run along the beautiful Lake Cajun to burn off the *strange* sensation and feel better. Afterward, I noticed on my phone that I had received more than 20 missed calls from family and friends! I wondered what was up, and I called my mother first. She said, "Thank God you called! I was so worried! How are you?"

"What happened, Mom? Why were you worried?"

"Don't you know? The Interstate 35W bridge over the Mississippi River near downtown Minneapolis collapsed, taking with it more than 100 vehicles! Many people died, and hundreds have been injured..."

I had been driving on that bridge 20 minutes before the accident! I ran back home and checked the news on the television. The bridge collapsed at 6:05 PM. I crossed it at 6:04 PM! My heart welled up in gratitude to Swami. It was yet another act of Swami's grace and benevolence that He spoke through my inner voice to save me and show me how potent and powerful it can be. **It made me realize that connecting with Him within was not only essential but also supremely beneficial.**

It saved my life. It can surely redeem my life, too!

Dr. Ajay Yekkirala
USA

Dr. Ajay Yekkirala *graduated from the Sri Sathya Sai Higher Secondary School and obtained a Bachelor of Science in Biosciences at the Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning (SSSIHL). He was part of the SSSIHL Brass Band as a percussionist and guitarist and has performed several times in Swami's divine presence. He holds a Ph.D. in Pharmacology from the University of Minnesota, USA, and finished his research fellowship in neurology at Harvard Medical School, USA. Dr. Yekkirala is also an entrepreneur who has founded biotech companies to tackle various diseases. He is the President of the Norwood Sai Center in Massachusetts, USA. He and his wife teach Sai Spiritual Education (SSE) to Group 4 and Group 3 children, respectively.*

The Ultimate Gift of Sai Baba

It was midnight, December 31, 1988. The plane heading toward India flew into a New Year, and its passengers excitedly raised their glasses to announce "Happy 1989!" Hours later, after a nervous and long wait at the Bombay (Mumbai) airport, I was on a flight to Bangalore (the city now called Bengaluru). As I secured a taxi to Puttaparthi for the following morning, I suddenly burst into tears, wondering why I had come to India! The next day I reached the *ashram* of Sathya Sai Baba and was welcomed by a group of Italian devotees. Thus, a new experience began.

Strange Dreams

For a year, I had intriguing dreams that were more than "mere dreams." There was one in which I was standing in the middle of an open field atop a vast hill. A man beside me told me, "Never forget to look for the *Big in the Small*," making me appreciate the majesty of my surroundings and the size of the blades of grass–taller than me. There was another dream where many American Indians were running in a circle around me, shooting arrows at me. I was mentally repeating, "My *shakti* will protect me." I had no clue what *"shakti"* meant, but none of the arrows hit me! This is the dream I shared with my friend 'E.'

When I shared this '*shakti'* dream with my friend, 'E,' his face lit up with a beautiful smile. He ran into his room and returned with a picture. It showed a group of Indian men (not the American Indians I saw in my dream), all dressed in orange clothes, and he told me they were spiritual masters. The picture was taken in India during the *All-Guru Conference*. "Your dream may mean that one of these teachers is trying to contact you," he said. "Relax, you have nothing to fear. If you are lucky, one of them will reach out to you. If you are very lucky, He will contact you," pointing to the man in the center of the picture. I didn't know who the man was and didn't ask. Nor did 'E' tell me anything else. Instead, he put some gray powder in the palm of my hand and said, "Trust me. It isn't a drug; you can taste it."

That night I had another dream. I was walking next to the man in the center of the picture in the assembly of spiritual teachers. We were talking like old friends. I told him, "Yes, I want to come, but now I can't. I have too much work to do. As soon as I can, I will come." The following morning, I brushed it aside as a weird dream. I thought my mind was playing tricks on me!

An Unexpected Break

I was working like crazy on the project of developing the first-ever English course for Italian children. It was to be distributed by the most renowned publisher in Italy and sold in the newspaper kiosks in 36-weekly series. This was a wonderful opportunity for any illustrator-author, especially as I was early in my career. I created everything from scratch–the characters, the stories, the didactics–filling the project with simple rhymes later put to music by 'G,' a profes-

sional musician. I knew the importance of my responsibility as it would potentially reach thousands of children. In fact, the first two issues sold 200,000 copies each! In my heart, I yearned to create something of lasting value–something light and happy, inspiring the children and equipping them with tools to make their journey through life easier and more fulfilling.

In the middle of this hectic project, the head of the editorial team told me that the publisher needed time to evaluate a gadget to accompany the project. So, she wanted me to take a break from work for a month. Somehow, at precisely that time, the promise I had made to that 'man' in my dream surfaced. And then, the phone rang. It was 'E' calling to wish me Merry Christmas! He was leaving for India a few days later. Learning that I had unexpectedly been relieved of my workload, he suggested I join him. Though a bit scared, I intuited a Power, a "Push," an extraordinary Presence that was out of my control.

It was impossible to fly to India with his group, as bookings were not available. However, he instructed me in detail over the phone, concluding with, "And don't let anything distract you when you reach the *ashram*. Just focus on Him." (It was valuable advice I passed on to many others later.)

Considering everything, I made my decision. I would definitely go, "If not this year, next year." I had thought this meant next Christmas, but a few weeks later, on January 1, I landed in Bombay. I still asked myself, "Why am I here?" when I reached the *ashram*. "Ask Him," said 'E,' who magically met my taxi when it entered the compound! Less than an hour later, I was sitting on the floor with other newcomers for an orientation about the *ashram's* dress code and rules.

"Many of you are probably asking yourself why you are here…" the person began.

"Hey, that's my question!" I thought, leaning forward attentively to listen to the answer.

"…You are here for spiritual training."

It was as simple as that, and it felt good. I felt happy and satisfied.

First *Darshan* and Interview

Though everyone described incredible things that happened during *darshan*, I had no memorable experience. I respected my surroundings and appreciated the silence at daybreak and the simplicity of the daily routine. While visiting the bookshop, I came across *"The Vision of the Divine"* by Fanibunda. Reading the book, I learned the first key to the fundamental Truth I will never forget: "Most people who see Sai Baba identify Him with His crown of hair and orange gown. This is a mistake. **You need to realize that He embodies the Divine Principle**. You must move beyond the form and grasp the Principle." These words resonated deeply within me, and I was excited.

While patiently waiting during the next *darshan*, I said silently, "Please don't misunderstand me, and please don't take this personally… but I am not interested in YOU; I am interested in *the Principle*." That day as Swami came walking, I looked at Him without looking "at Him," and that day, He looked back!

I read the 'Thought for the Day,' which emphasized, *"Remember, the time allotted to you is very short. Make good use of it."* I felt that the 'time allotted' referred to not only my 'lifetime' but also my time in the *ashram*. I resolved not to miss out on anything during the remaining seven days. Despite feeling awkward and uncomfortable during *bhajans*, I prayed to Baba to help me sing for Him.

The day before I had to leave, 'G,' the professional musician from Italy, was called for an interview. She and her husband had just

joined our group, so I also went in. It was my first interview. I was the group's translator and interpreter and cried my heart out many times, overwhelmed by what was happening. 'G' asked Swami if the Italians could sing for Him in the Mandir. He turned to me and asked, "When are you leaving?"

After three nudges from a friend, I finally answered, "I'm leaving tomorrow morning, Swami."

"You can sing this afternoon," He said to 'G,' leaving her in a state of glee.

But she just had a few hours to train the entire group of Italian devotees to sing. I didn't understand why 'G' thanked me after the interview until years later when I realized that Swami 'materialized' that opportunity as an answer to my prayer to sing for Him and my reply that I was leaving the next day.

During the interview, Swami spoke to me thrice in a language I did not understand. Each time He concluded by saying, *"Tell them"* in clear English. I was humbled, not understanding what I had to tell the group. But we know how deep Swami's messages are, with many layers of meaning to grasp. This understanding happens gradually over the years, and even today, I often pray, "Dear Swami, what is it that I have to tell, and to whom?" After the interview ended, Swami blessed us by giving out small packets of *vibhuti*, and my heart started beating fast. I thought, "I must talk to Him. This can't be ending now before I speak to Him."

I instinctively spoke to Him from within my heart, "You know that I would like to speak to you," I said, "and if my wish is right, You will call me." Again, I felt that maybe I should ask Him in humility. Right then, Swami was looking at me, handing me *vibhuti*. I rose on my knees and folded my hands, "May I see you?" I asked. He nodded, "*Yes, I will see you*." He sat back on His chair and looked at me intensely and, after what seemed like ages, told me to go into the private interview room with an elderly lady. The interview was the most beautiful time for me, and **Swami's loving words, guidance, and divine assurance have accompanied me ever since.**

Test is His Taste

The following summer, I was back in Prasanthi Nilayam. I realized His grace in giving me so much attention during the last visit. Our relationship had taken shape over the year. I felt close to Him as if we were "always together." I had learned a few chords on my guitar and would speak/pray to Him 'in music.' These moments were fulfilling and intense, and nothing could match them. That's why I didn't expect to be called for an interview again, but I did expect a sign of acknowledgment from Him. But after what I thought was a wave of His hand at me on the first day, He totally ignored me throughout my stay!

During my last *darshan* of that stay, He walked by me without even turning His head to say "goodbye." I was downcast and very disappointed, and I shed tears when He left the hall. I cried leaving the *ashram* that night, although I told myself repeatedly that Swami had given me my share of His time and that others deserved His attention. But I was still hurt.

Back home, my sister called me from Rome, saying she had seen me in a dream. "You were very angry with Swami because He wasn't calling you," she said. I replied that she was mistaken and that there was no way I could be "angry" with Swami! But she insisted that I was VERY ANGRY. When I put down the phone, the tension exploded. Sobbing my heart out, I told Swami, "I am angry with you, Swami! You didn't call me or even look at me!"

And then, I suddenly grasped the meaning of it all and the immensity of His Grace. I felt the sensation of tearing apart

the "umbilical cord" of attachment from the last *darshan*. I had 'fallen' so much in love with Swami over the first year that He wanted to raise me beyond attachment to His form. By deliberately ignoring me, He guided and encouraged me to always stay connected to the fundamental Truth, to "***Sathya Sai***"–***The Principle.***

His Greatest Gift to Me

"Did Swami create anything for you?" is a recurrent question when we share our experiences. Since my very first trip, I have always replied, "Yes. He materialized my Faith. My Faith in the Essence, in the Highest, in the Principle of Truth that underlies and upholds all the rest!"

I tell people that Swami empowered the values I had always believed in by giving shape to them and bringing them to life. I tell them **He gave me all the tools I needed for my spiritual training and upliftment to help me stay on track.** These five jewels–Truth, Right Conduct, Peace, Love, and Nonviolence–are the pillars of the Sathya Sai Education in Human Values program. This life-long learning process was later defined by Swami Himself as **Educare** to highlight how the inherent wisdom, "the fundamental Truth," is already present in every child. It only has to be drawn out.

Words cannot convey the depth of "spiritual training" gifted by Swami–the experience, the awakening, the growing awareness, the delight, the love–and the immense sense of gratitude that flows with it.

Ms. Suzanne Palermo
SWITZERLAND

Ms. Suzanne Palermo *is the vice-director of ISSE SE and has contributed to the development of the EduCare magazines and the Institute's Handbook and has participated in many seminars in South Europe. She completed her studies at the Academy of Fine Arts of Rome and later moved to Milan where she worked in the editorial field for children as illustrator and project designer. Suzanne is the author of the book, "The Story of Marty, a Journey on Planet Earth."*

My Divine Parent

In 1968, one of my father's clients told him that God had incarnated on earth. My father, a Chartered Accountant in Kolkata, burst out laughing at first, but the client politely convinced him to visit the house of a particular 'Madhuri Amma' where he could witness the miracles of this God. My father was convinced that some magic or trickery was involved, but to please the client, he went to the particular house with my mother.

Experiencing God

Entering the place, they saw a large photo of Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba, covered in a fine, fluffy, grey ash called *vibhuti*. Right before their eyes, the *vibhuti* kept falling from the picture. My skeptical father was taken aback. But the more profound experience was the peace and joy he felt. He found himself becoming reverential toward Baba. However, my mother was still having doubts. Suddenly, she felt two flames emerge from Baba's eyes and enter her own–she fainted from that experience!

She regained consciousness and also gained faith in Swami, fully convinced of His divinity. **That day, my parents returned home with a picture of Swami and announced, "He is Sai Baba, the Kalki Avatar."** I was just five years old and straightaway believed what my parents said. Swami instantly became my God. However, my elder brother, who was 15 years old, was not convinced.

While my brother's doubts still lingered for years, in 1970, my father sent him to Puttaparthi. Those days it took a long and arduous journey from Kolkata to reach Prasanthi Nilayam. But my father felt it would be worthwhile if it could help my brother's journey from doubt to faith. My skeptical brother had prepared a long list of questions to ask Baba and scrutinize Him. If Baba called him for an interview, he felt he would sort out things finally. That is precisely what happened, but not as my brother had assumed. **Swami came to him directly and, with a smile, asked about me, *"Kaho Deepa Kaisi Hai?"* (Tell me, how is Deepa?). That single act of omniscience convinced him of Swami's omnipresence, omnipotence, and divinity**. Tears rolled down his cheeks, and he realized his father's declaration was verily true. Baba spoke to him for a while, guiding him for further studies and winning his heart.

Accepting Me as His Daughter

In 1971, while praying and meditating, my mother felt Swami telling her, *"Come to Prasanthi Nilayam with Deepa."* Upon enquiring, she discovered that a few devotees were traveling by train from Kolkata to Puttaparthi. But their tickets had already been booked. My father informed Madhuri Amma, the trip organizer, about Swami's instructions to my mother. To his surprise, that very day, two devotees canceled their tickets–which were purchased for us!

The next day, during her meditation, my mother felt Swami instructing her, *"Bring your other two daughters also."* Unbelievably, the same cycle repeated again, with my father informing Madhuri Amma and two devotees canceling their tickets! Thus, the four of us traveled together in the same train compartment from Kolkata to Puttaparthi.

We reached Puttaparthi, rented a room outside, and enjoyed multiple *darshans*

daily. We didn't realize how a week sped by. After a week, the group was about to return to Kolkata. My mother sought Swami's permission to return, but He said, *"Kuchho Amma"* (Sit, Lady). The group returned home, but we stayed on. Days turned into weeks; weeks turned into months. Though our finances were exhausted within a week, we enjoyed a beautiful golden period of our lives for another three months. We would stay under a tree inside the Ashram, sleeping on a bed sheet spread on the sand in the shade. We would go to the Chitravati River for our baths, ablutions, and also to play. Father would send money for our stay every week by money order. After some time, my mother began volunteering to clean the *ashram*. As if a reward for her *seva*, we were allowed to sleep inside the *mandir* itself!

My father fell sick in Kolkata during that time and had severe asthma attacks. We were not aware of it as he didn't tell us. One night when the suffering became unbearable, he sat up and cried, "Sai Maa, I cannot bear this pain anymore. Either give me relief or take away my life!" Within moments, Sai Maa appeared to him in a white saree, blessed him, and vanished. The very next day, my father recovered! He immediately traveled to Puttaparthi and joined us.

It was all part of Swami's master plan as He called my mother and us, the three daughters, for an interview. He told my mother that she worried a lot about her daughters' wedding, assuring her that He would look after us. Then He said, *"You wanted Deepak, but Baba gave you Deepa."* (Both *'Deepak'* and *'Deepa'* mean light in Sanskrit. While *'Deepak'* is a boy's name, *'Deepa'* is a girl's name.)

Then, He called for me. My mother gestured to me to touch His feet. I fell at His feet and held on to them firmly. Finally, Swami had to bend down and lift me up. He asked me to take the *vibhuti* packets He was giving. I stretched out my hands, but He said, *"Your hands are too small; hold up your frock."* I held up my dress, and He filled it with *vibhuti* packets.

Swami called my father in for an interview the next day and asked, *"Is Deepa **your** daughter?"*

I understood that Swami is my divine parent, and I am His daughter. It made me feel that I had some connection with Swami in my previous births as well.

After three months of stay, we returned to Kolkata and started daily *bhajans* at home. We also held *Akhanda Bhajan* four times a year. **Our home became a heaven by Swami's blessings. Swami took care of every need**. In due course, I married Manoj, who, by Swami's grace, was transformed from an *atheist* to *a theist*! I pray to Swami that He keeps showering His blessings on all of us, always.

Mrs. Deepa Singh
THAILAND

Mrs. Deepa Singh *grew up in Kolkata, India, and lives in Thailand. She comes from a family devoted to Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba for over five decades. Deepa holds a bachelor's degree in commerce and a diploma in Teachers Training from the Institute of Sathya Sai Education (ISSE) in Thailand. Mrs. Singh is committed to Sathya Sai Education and has organized many educational, environmental, and service projects over several decades in Thailand. In 2020, she was honored by the Indian Embassy for selfless service during the COVID-19 pandemic and by the Viswa Hindu Parishad—Thailand for providing free education to children. She is the National Council President of SSSIO of Thailand.*

From Atheist to a Theist!

I was an atheist. I found it hard to believe in the existence of God after seeing poverty, diseases, and other human suffering. I felt that 'God' was created by the human mind to escape responsibilities and avoid rational thought. But, ironically, it was my life's destiny that I married into a staunch Sai-devotee family!

My father-in-law was very eager for me to accept his God, so he gave me many books on Baba to read. I accepted these books, only to oblige him, and returned them a few days later, totally unread! However, although an atheist, I had a spiritual mindset. I would read the books by Swami Vivekananda and be inspired by his message. I felt Baba's writings and talks were too simplistic, and therefore He could not be God. Whenever anyone told me that Sai Baba was God incarnate, I silenced them by questioning why He had not cured all the sick in the world, why wars continued to take place, and why qualities like hatred and jealousy thrived.

Real Life in A Drama

In 1993, we moved to Thailand, and my wife, Deepa, connected with the Sathya Sai organization in Bangkok. In a couple of years, my children also joined the **SSE (Sai Spiritual Education) classes, which provide a spiritual grounding to the child without proselytizing.**

In 1995, Deepa persuaded me to travel with her and our four-year-old son to Puttaparthi. I reluctantly agreed to go for my first visit. Once we were there, I found it very hard sitting for long hours in the scorching heat for Swami's *darshan*. I did not want to go for *darshan*, yet I was expected to go twice daily! On the second day, as I walked past the North Indian canteen in the *ashram* with my son, a Malaysian devotee approached me. He asked if my son could participate in a drama that would be staged in five days in front of Swami. Since it involved afternoon practices which would help me avoid *darshan*, I readily accepted the offer. Thus, my son joined the drama program.

Two days later, seeing me simply sitting during the practice sessions, the drama director asked me if I could play the role of an atheist! For the act, I needed to cover my face with black cloth and use a rope to pull back people from going to worship. I agreed to the role. The very next day, the director told me my role had changed. I was now to play the role of a transformed man with complete faith in God!

Was my life playing out before me through phases of my drama roles?

During our last practice at the Poornachandra Hall, Swami arrived from His residence! There was pin-drop silence as everyone stayed still. Swami came and stood right in front of me. He glanced at me from top to bottom and quipped, *"Is it Bal Vikas (education for children) or Vriddha Vikas (education for the elderly)?"*

Something stirred within me. I felt that participating in the drama was a step in the spiritual progress of both my son and me!

I felt that I had to grow spiritually to get the answers to my burning questions about God.

After the drama was presented, we received thunderous applause for our performance. I decided to visit Puttaparthi more frequently and learn more about Swami.

Impact of Service

One day, while coming out of the men's toilet at the *ashram*, I saw a *Seva Dal* (volunteer) cleaning the floor. Out of curiosity, I enquired where he was from and what he did for a livelihood. I was surprised to find out that he was a successful businessman from Chennai, and he came twice a year to serve at the *ashram*! I was amazed to see the spirit of selfless service.

On subsequent visits, I met many doctors, engineers, government officials, and other professionals who served at the *ashram* as *Seva Dal* with great humility. This made me believe that **something far more rewarding than power, position, and money drew people to Swami to do this *seva*. That was the pivotal point in my journey to Swami.** I decided to become more involved in service activities in the Sri Sathya Sai International Organization (SSSIO) in Thailand.

Lost And Found

Once, my wife, Deepa, was at Puttaparthi with our son for an event with ISSSE (Institute of Sathya Sai Education) students from Brazil and the USA. I did not travel with them. A play was being staged at the Poornachandra Auditorium. My son was older now and wasn't allowed by the *Seva Dal* to enter the hall from the ladies' entrance. Swami was expected to arrive anytime soon. So, my wife left our son with an acquaintance, an American gentleman, who lived in Thailand.

After the program ended, my wife and daughter waited for the American devotee to return with our son. But he came rushing in panic and told her the boy was missing. They had searched everywhere in vain. My wife was sad, but she kept her calm. In fact, she began consoling everyone, telling them not to worry. She said, "My son is Swami's gift, and He will surely look after him!"

A few minutes later, my son walked out of the hall, rubbing his eyes. When the *Seva Dals* were about to close the shutters of the auditorium, they found him sleeping near the entrance below the TV screen! My son could not bear the heat inside, so he sat down near the TV screen in a cooler area to watch the program.

After returning to Bangkok, my wife did not tell me about this incident. I learned about it a few months later from other devotees who attended the event. I reflected on the incident and felt that I would have panicked in her situation. So, how could she maintain her calm? I got the answer from reading Swami's book that day, where He said, ***"Faith and surrender give the strength to face difficult situations boldly."*** I realized, just like the incident with my son, my faith in God was not lost but was asleep. Swami was giving me multiple wake-up calls.

Faith Exists; Fear Exits

I seriously began to read Swami's books regularly. All my doubts started getting slowly resolved. About this time, my mother-in-law gifted me a ring with Swami's picture, and I always felt Swami's presence in it. I worked as a marine engineer on a ship and always wore the ring during my assignment. I began noticing that whenever there was an issue or problem, it would get miraculously and promptly resolved. These personal experiences further bolstered my faith in Swami.

We were once transporting 35,000 tons of explosive chemicals on the ship. Suddenly, there was a fire on the deck. All the crew members panicked. They put on their life jackets and got ready to abandon the ship. I, too, probably would have done the same

if it were not for Swami's ring on my finger! I felt compelled to rush down to the engine room, start the fire pump to cool the decks, and keep the main engines ready. I dashed down ten floors to the bottom of the ship and started the pump. As a result, a major explosion was avoided, and a major disaster was averted. While everyone congratulated me for the timely action, in my heart, I expressed deep gratitude to Swami for triggering my action. **At that critical moment, I did not have any fear of death because I felt Swami was there to protect me.**

Faith in Swami has made me confident to face many challenging situations with courage. I was a bit short-tempered in my early years and often landed up in fights. However, my anger and anxiety have diminished today due to Swami's presence in my life. My journey with Swami continues, and I am sure that everything I am today is because of His grace.

Mr. Manoj Kumar Singh
THAILAND

Mr. Manoj Singh *is a professional marine engineer and has 25 years of ship management experience. He served as Assistant Vice President of a large shipping company in Thailand before retirement. Mr. Manoj Singh has served in various positions in the SSSIO of Zone 4 (Southeast Asia) since 1998. He has addressed many public forums/conferences in India, Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore, Laos, Myanmar, Peru, the UK, and the USA on human values and spiritual topics. He is the Chairman of SSSIO Zone 4, serving the countries of Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, India, Indonesia, Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Vietnam since 2019.*

Sincere Prayer and Divine Grace for a Miraculous Cure

In 2017 I received a phone call from my brother. After the usual greetings and conversations, he said he had some bad news for me. He had a relapse of aplastic anemia, and his blood count was extremely low! Aplastic anemia is a rare and serious medical condition that affects the bone marrow and significantly impairs its ability to produce an adequate amount of red blood cells, white blood cells, and platelets. Apart from fatigue, weakness, pale skin, shortness of breath, recurrent infections, easy bruising or bleeding, and prolonged bleeding from minor cuts, aplastic anemia can result in a quick death! I was just dumbfounded hearing the sad news. Still, I did my best to comfort him, and we agreed that I would convey this news to our mother as he didn't know how to break it to her. I broke down in tears as memories from our childhood flooded my mind, and I remembered the pain our family had gone through with his illness back then. Now, it had resurfaced! I eventually told my mother. She, too, was speechless.

The Only Support

I consider myself very fortunate to have grown up in a family whose members are long-standing devotees of Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba. **While growing up, I had no doubt about Him being the Avatar, as I was mesmerized by His miracles and awe-struck by His unique, loving form.** When I watched Bhagawan, He seemed to be floating in the air and did not belong to the earth like us! His way of moving itself matched the quote, "Be in the world but do not let the world be in you."

We were brought up with Swami's teachings of human values through *Bal Vikas* classes (Sai Spiritual Education for children). So profound were these lessons that I endeavored to instill these values in my son too, from a very early age. I believe that these teachings have helped him immensely, especially when he entered his teenage years.

It is natural for all of us to turn to Swami during the challenging times of our lives. We all cried uncontrollably, praying to Swami and sharing our grief. All we could do was call my brother to give him the moral support and the love he very much needed.

A Rollercoaster Journey

My brother needed regular blood transfusions, and my mother flew to Florida to assist him and be by his side during this ordeal. My son was in college then, and I had work commitments, so I could not be there in person. However, along with the other family members, I kept in touch with him through video calls. We prayed to Swami incessantly, asking for His grace and blessings for his relief.

There would be times when his blood would stabilize, and then came times when the count would go extremely low again! His condition fluctuated and carried us up and down the emotional rollercoaster. The news soon spread to his close friends

and family in Trinidad and Tobago. They, too, joined in the prayers and kept sending love to him. Each one prayed in their own way to their chosen form of God, and their prayers were from different religious backgrounds too. My brother did his share of praying as well.

I sincerely prayed to Swami in our *puja* (prayer) room, talking to Him in my own way. I would break down weeping and pleading with Swami to be there and cure him just as He had done so lovingly in the past when my brother was young.

The Transplantation Option and a Miracle

My brother was told that he would need a bone marrow transplant, and the hospital requested to find a close family member to be a donor for the transplant. After the tests, it was determined that my sister was the best match to be the bone marrow donor. She immediately agreed, and now my brother needed to be prepared for the surgery.

Amazingly, after a couple more blood transfusions, days of a healthy diet, and being mentally strong, my brother started to see a gradual improvement. Soon, even without the transplant, he started to show signs of phenomenal progress! The doctors told him he did not need the bone marrow transplant anymore! They also said he does not even have to go to the hospital often! This was unbelievably good news which uplifted everyone's spirits. In fact, he could be on his own very soon, so my mother headed back to Trinidad & Tobago!

In 2019, we had a 'Thank You' *satsang* expressing our deepest gratitude to Swami for curing my brother. My parents also celebrated their wedding anniversary at our home. But we never stopped praying. My brother not only stopped having blood transfusions but was off some of the medications as well!

Power of Prayer

I firmly believe it all happened because of Swami's Grace alone. **It is miraculous and proves that our Lord listens to our sincere and heartfelt prayers.** No one can predict when the Lord will shower His grace, but we know for sure that not even a blade of grass will move without His will.

The power of sincere prayer, healing *vibhuti*, silent sitting/meditation, and faith in our Lord can bring miraculous cures. Believing in God and praying with all our heart makes the impossible possible.

"Prayer must emanate from the heart, where God resides, and not from the head where doctrines and doubts clash."

Our thoughts and vibrations can travel thousands of miles to the person we are thinking about.

Swami has personally helped me throughout my life in many different ways. I have learned to have that faith, patience, ceiling on my desires, be positive and grateful for the smallest things in life, be humble, and work on my ego. In life, we must have such equanimity. Swami is my breath, my soul, my life. No one can understand the ways of the Lord. No one can explain or understand His divinity. We must leave everything to His will. **"Let Thy will be done." We must explicitly trust in the Lord that whatever happens, it happens for our own good.**

Jai Sai Ram

Ms. Vedeya Deo
TRINIDAD

Ms. Vedeya Deo *hails from San Fernando, Trinidad. She is the National Educational Coordinator for the SSSIO, Trinidad & Tobago. Vedeya is a member of the Sathya Sai Institute of Education, West Indies (SSIEWI). She also manages the bookshop at the Sai Nilayam in Trinidad and has taught SSE and SSEHV classes for many years.*

My Journey to God: Divine Memories with Sathya Sai Baba

My wife and I once decided to attend a seminar titled *"Men and Women."* I was 32 years old and had been married for ten years. Though we had no spiritual background, my wife and I felt strongly that we belonged together and would reach the goal of our lives together. And yet, it was a time when difficulties darkened the skies of our mundane worldly lives. We hoped to get answers through that seminar.

To my surprise, the facilitator of the seminar was a disabled lady, not much older than me. She had been born without arms and with hands attached directly to her shoulders! But she appeared to be full of joy and strength with an aura of confidence. During the lunch break on the first day of the seminar, I could not resist asking her about the source of her energy that allowed her to lead a life of joy despite her challenges. **She answered, "Oh, I have found my teacher for life–He is a holy man living in India–and I gain the courage to face life through Him**. It is indeed a stroke of luck that I have a videotape of His work with me. If you are interested, I can show it to you in the evening."

We gathered in the living room to watch the video at the end of the first day. But something extraordinary happened. When the facilitator played the tape, my wife and I fell asleep immediately! Regrettably, the video was over when we woke up, and we did not see even a single frame! We did not think much about it and assumed we had dozed off, exhausted from the long day attending the seminar. This incident happened during the spring of 1989.

In the autumn of the same year, we attended a follow-up seminar with the same lady as the facilitator. During the lunch break, another participant asked her the same question I had asked before, and she gave him the same answer. She offered to show him the video in the evening. "Second chance," my wife and I said to each other and eagerly gathered in the living room at the end of the day. Again, the unbelievable happened! We fell asleep exactly when the start button was pressed, waking up only when the video ended. We felt strange this time but didn't worry too much about it.

The participants gathered in a large conference room at the end of that seminar. The men were seated on one side and the women on the other. After discussions and cordial goodbyes, the facilitator said, "Oh, by the way, I will be traveling to India during Christmas and New Year this year to see my guru. I always take a group of people with me, and there are still some spots that remain vacant. So, if any one of you is interested...." At that moment, my wife and I raised our hands simultaneously and said at the same time, "I will join you!" Then, looking at each other, we said, "Did you just say you would join her?"

We had never been to India, nor had we ever thought of going there. But weeks later, we found ourselves in the Prasanthi Nilayam *ashram* at the lotus feet of Sri Sathya Sai

Baba. **Today we are convinced the Lord Himself invited us to start a lifelong spiritual journey!**

The Awakening and Another Decision

In 1989, there were no direct flights to Bangalore. One had to fly to Delhi or Bombay and then take a connecting flight to Bangalore. When we landed in Bangalore, an adventurous taxi driver in an old Ambassador car took us to Prasanthi Nilayam. There, a yellow, light blue, and rose color building welcomed us. It was early morning, and we sat on our suitcases in front of the accommodation office, which was not yet open. Our guide told us we would have to wait until the end of the morning *darshan* (the sight of a holy person) to get a room for our stay. At that time, I had no idea what *darshan* meant.

A stream of people was passing by us, and suddenly, my wife joined the women's group and disappeared into the crowd! I wondered what she was thinking, but I was too tired to pay attention. But when she returned about two hours later, she clasped my arms, sobbing like a child, **"I think I have finally found what I have always sought. This is my real home!"** I began to wonder whether my wife had suddenly lost her mind!

"You should have been with me during *darshan*." she continued, **"When this person in the orange robe with a crown of black hair appeared, I was suddenly overwhelmed with energy, and He seemed to radiate a constant stream of love."** I was not sure what to make of it and what had transpired. In addition to my wife's strange behavior, I learned that we would share accommodation with 300 other people in a shed. This was a far cry from the hotel room accommodation I had hoped for.

But I was open to the experience of a new continent and what this special place had to offer. After a scorching day, I missed the evening *darshan,* sleeping on an old mattress, and had a restless night with almost no sleep due to the strange surroundings of smells and noises. In the morning, I joined the devotees lining up on the sands in front of the *mandir* for *darshan*. Sitting there in the early morning hours was a unique and wonderful experience. Everyone was quietly praying. An elderly man was going to the front of each line and letting the first man in every row pick a token out of a small bag. This was a lottery to determine the sequence in which the lines would be let into the *mandir* for orderly seating.

Then, beautiful soothing music started as we took our seats on the ground in front of the *mandir*. Soon Swami emerged from the *mandir*, walking slowly from the women's side towards us. I will never forget the moment when **He first looked in my direction, and I felt He was looking straight into my heart!**

That memorable first *darshan* made us change our travel plans in India and stay a little longer in the *ashram* of this extraordinary man who willed our stay according to His plans!

The Interview and Inner View

Our guide, the seminar facilitator who had invited us, insisted on having a short meeting every day to inform us about the routine in the *ashram* and the rules to follow. One of the most important instructions was to go for *darshan* as a group to increase the chances of being called for an 'interview' by Swami. We were a group of nine, and I was happy that my best friend, Michael, had also come with his wife. Since the men and women assembled separately, Michael and I were always together like twins!

On our third day, we were sitting together in the morning *darshan* when something happened unexpectedly. The women of our group stood up after Swami passed them and began walking towards the *mandir*, although *darshan* was not over. It took us a while to realize that Swami had called our group for an interview! We also got up and

joined the others who were seated in front of the 'interview room.' I tried recollecting all the questions I wanted to ask Swami (for example, whether He is really God), but suddenly they all seemed utterly irrelevant. I also felt a constant stream of tears filling my eyes, which I could not stop. It felt like I was weeping away all my grief over the past 32 years!

After *darshan*, Swami invited a second group, including my wife, me, and Michael, into the inner interview room. Michael was the first to enter so that he could sit directly next to Swami on the men's side. I was beside him. After some general questions such as, *"Where are you from?"* and "*How long are you going to stay?"*, Swami turned to Michael and asked him, *"What do you want?"*

Michael had told me before that Swami should prove He is God by materializing a ring for him. Therefore, he answered, "A ring, Swami!" Swami moved His right upturned palm in circles, and a moment later, a gold nine-gem ring appeared between His fingers. He threw it into Michael's lap. As he glanced at it, Swami asked, *"Do you like it?"*

"Oh yes, Swami!"

"Then pass it around!"

The ring made its way through the hands of everyone in the room before it came back to Swami. He looked at it, then turned again to Michael and asked him, "*Do you really like it?*"

"Swami, I would like a Christian ring even more!"

Swami put the ring in front of His lips, blew on it, and immediately it became a silver ring with a golden cross, and once again, it landed in Michael's lap. Swami again asked him to pass the ring around. When it finally came back to Swami, He asked Michael, *"Do you still like it?"*

"Oh yes, Swami!"

But then Swami blew on the ring again, and it was gone!

Much later, we realized that Swami had fulfilled Michael's wish precisely–He had materialized a ring for him–but there was no discussion about wanting to keep the ring! **That day, I learned an important lesson: we must be very clear in our prayers about what we want from God.**

Mr. Manfred Müller-Gransee
GERMANY

Mr. Manfred Müeller-Gransee *came to Swami in 1989. Since then, he has been a member of the SSSIO and has served in different positions. Since 2018, he has been the Chair of Zone 7, Northern Europe. In addition, he is the Chairman of the SaiCare Foundation in Germany.*

Manfred graduated from the University of Brunswick in 1981. He worked in education before starting an institution for management training and consulting in 1988. Since 2005, he has run a recycling company for electronic waste.

The Invisible Presence

As far as my memory goes, I have always been a 'devotee' of God–visiting temples from childhood and participating in ritualistic worship. I accepted and worshipped all deities without the slightest trace of doubt. However, I had serious reservations about Swami, Sathya Sai Baba. I was exposed to Swami because the Sai Center was just three homes away on the same street where we lived in Chennai, India. I often made fun of Swami–from His hair to His miracles.

Swami Enters My Life and My Home

Swami decided it was time for Him to have some fun with me. He shaped my destiny so that I married Lalitha, His devout follower! And thus, **Swami became an integral and inescapable part of my life.** Lalitha was keen to attend *bhajans* regularly, and I was okay with that as long as I did not have to attend those sessions. I was so obstinate that even when I waited for my wife to finish attending the *bhajan* session, I would sit outside or in a back room! After a while, the family that hosted the *bhajans* at their home moved out of town. In an ironic twist of fate, they presented us with a photograph of Swami's feet and requested us to host the *bhajans* regularly at our residence! They were such lovely people that I reluctantly agreed. Though Swami had not yet gotten into my heart, He was surely in my hearth now!

The Three Challenges to Swami

I slowly began to enjoy the devotional aspect of the *bhajans* now that I was forced to participate in them. But my heart was still reluctant to embrace Swami. So, I challenged him by asking, "If You are divine, show me clearly that you are the same as Shirdi Baba." That very night I had a dream where I saw Shirdi Sai and Parthi Sai, and they slowly merged into one form. Swami had answered my question immediately. I was taken aback but not yet thoroughly convinced.

Later, I heard of *vibhuti* manifestations in the homes of devotees. For the second time, I challenged Swami, asking, "If You want me to have faith in You, materialize *vibhuti* in our home." Soon, showers of *vibhuti* began. First, vibhuti began to manifest in a picture of Swami. Then one by one, every image of God in our home began to pour out *vibhuti*. Swami took it to the extreme when He began manifesting the holy ash even on bookmarks with His name or teachings!

Any time I had a doubt or question, He would visit me in my dreams and provide precise answers! I developed a strong desire to visit Puttaparthi and have His darshan during His 80th Birthday celebrations. But critical deadlines at work made it impossible for me to get leave. That was when I challenged Swami a third time. I prayed, "Swami, clear the path for me to come to Puttaparthi for Your 80th Birthday." Sure enough, a few weeks later, my manager told me that if I really wanted to go to Puttaparthi, I could go as long as I got the work done. Swami had done it again and listened to my heartfelt prayer!

My first *darshan* of Swami in Sai Kulwant hall was very special as there were no bounds to the joy welling up in my heart. **For the first time, I realized what true bliss or *ananda* meant.** I have had that feeling

only a few times since then, but I can never forget that particular experience. Even today, I try to relive that blissful experience over and over again in my mind and heart. Tears well up every time I think of those experiences with Swami. I felt that I had tested Swami enough. It was now time for me to accept Him and strengthen my faith. As I decided this, however, I realized that Swami's had decided to test me. It is fair, after all, for Him to test us before accepting us as devotees!

Swami's Challenge to Us and His Loving Guidance

We had settled down in Knoxville, Tennessee, and were doing well. Lalitha and I had good jobs, our kids enjoyed their school, and we had a lovely Sai Center with SSE classes. That was when my boss asked me to move to Saudi Arabia for a few years on a challenging assignment. I politely declined, not wanting a drastic relocation and being negatively influenced by the media about Saudi Arabia. Yet, my manager was insistent and persistent!

If we moved, Lalitha and the kids would live 3.5 hours away (by car) from where I would work and live, and I would see them only on weekends. I would take on a significant leadership role at work, but there were cultural challenges due to my ethnicity. Not knowing what to do, Lalitha and I prayed to Swami for His guidance. It was as if He was waiting for our call to step in.

For the next ten days consecutively, He appeared in my dream, telling me to move to Saudi Arabia. Whenever I discussed the topic with Lalitha, we sensed the distinct fragrance of jasmine or vibhuti! But Lalitha had no dreams about Swami and was not convinced to make a move. That day, Swami manifested honey on our cactus plant at home. This was another hint for us to move to the desert, i.e., Saudi Arabia! At this point, Lalitha asked Swami why He was not answering her. That night, we both had dreams of Swami almost simultaneously. I woke up right after the dream, around 3 AM, and saw her sitting on the bed as she had just awakened from her dream too! Both our dreams guided us to go to Saudi Arabia!

The next day, while leaving work, I turned the radio on, which I hardly did. A Christian pastor came on the air and talked about how God gives us tests but guides us. The pastor specifically gave an example of someone getting a job opportunity they were considering. Instead of thinking about it, he said they should follow God's guidance and take that job without hesitation. That is how I took up the stint in Saudi Arabia. **Swami says that tests are His taste.**

Swami Is Our Eternal Companion

Earlier, as a non-believer, I considered Swami's miracles mere coincidences. Now, I take every coincidence and, in fact, every incidence, too, as His miracle! **Challenges in life keep coming like waves in an ocean. But His omnipresence reminds us to focus on the limitless ocean of love and compassion that He is.** We must constantly pay attention to His invisible and constant presence in our lives.

Mr. Nandakumar Srinivasan
USA

(Adapted from an article in the 25th Anniversary Memory Book, Sri Sathya Sai Center, Pittsburgh, USA, 2022)

***Mr. Nandakumar Srinivasan** was born and raised in India by devout parents. He moved to the USA in 1993. After completing his MBA, he has lived and worked in several countries, including China, Australia, Saudi Arabia, and the USA. He has served as devotional coordinator of the SSSIO in Australia and president of Sri Sathya Sai Center in Quad Cities, Iowa (USA). Nandakumar lives in Pittsburgh, USA, with his wife and two daughters, who are devout followers of Swami. He and his family actively participate in center activities.*

See Everyone as Divine: Practice Die-Mind

As the musical offering by Northern European devotees ended, a visibly delighted Bhagawan motioned for the *Arati* song to be sung. I was thrilled at the opportunity to wave the flame, lit with camphor, to the Lord, and I trembled with joy. Even as I offered *arati* to Swami, **I prayed that my life should be like that of the camphor–pure, white, fragrant, and burning out to glorify God**. He seemed to acknowledge my prayers with a smile and raised His hands in blessing. What a perfect end to a perfect evening!

The 7th of August 2010, the day when Sri Sathya Sai Baba blessed the devotees from Northern Europe with the opportunity to sing 15 songs in His presence, was also my last *darshan* of Him physically. But **I know that Swami has always been with me, eternally**–even before I knew Him during His earthly sojourn and after His *'Mahasamadhi!'*

Human Values in Business

Today, I see Swami's hand in my life, even in my motivations, from an early age. When I was a child, I realized that the world was in a bad state, and all I wanted to do was to make it better. I decided to prepare well for life and studied at an American business school.

My first job was with a supermarket chain store in the Netherlands. At that time, I noticed how old and used glass was disposed of in landfills, and it piqued my conscience to imagine the harm we were doing to the planet. **God (today, I know it is Swami) inspired me with an idea to solve this issue** while it also helped to boost profits for the company. Back then, recycling glass was not in vogue, and I found that melting existing glass required much less energy than producing virgin glass in a furnace from sand and soda. It was a win-win solution: we segregated the glass and made money by selling it to glass companies; the companies also saved a lot of money in raw material costs. Thus, the Netherlands became the first European country to set up glass recycling containers to collect waste glass. The initiative was a huge success and spread across Europe like wildfire. I worked in this company for two years until it was acquired by a big firm.

I never patented this idea, and I am grateful to Swami for inspiring me to do it as a selfless service. I found a new marketing job with the country's biggest provider of school supplies. However, I learned that this company was deceiving customers with sub-standard quality products. I protested, but no one supported me, and my words fell on deaf ears. I left that company and started a foundation with a health food store and a vegetarian restaurant. We also organized classes on healthy lifestyles and vegetarian food for thousands. It was a resounding success. Simultaneously I managed a publishing firm, producing stationery from recycled paper. This initiative, too, turned out to be a great success. In the meantime, despite its large size, the dishonest school supplies company went bankrupt. This reminds us of Swami's message that commerce without morality is not only useless but positively dangerous.

Lasting Happiness Comes Only From Swami

I was about thirty years old when, one day, I found myself on my knees praying, "Oh Lord, thank you for your great creation and for all the opportunities you have given me! But there is one thing missing in your creation– lasting happiness. So, please take back this creation and give me one with lasting happiness."

Though God had always been a part of my life, I decided to start looking for God. I started reading about great spiritual masters like Paramahamsa Yogananda, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, Sri Aurobindo, and Lord Buddha and took some classes. The teacher mentioned the name 'Sai Baba' in my Buddhism class. I asked, "Who is Sai Baba?" The teacher answered, **"He is God on Earth."** If that was the case, I wondered what are we all doing here and that we should all visit Him.

It was 1979, and I immediately joined the local Sai Baba Center. Within a few months, I was invited to join a group visiting Swami. I told them, "Well, I just got married. I don't have the money to travel, and I don't know how to explain my plans to travel to India to my wife! But if Swami can resolve these challenges, I will be glad to go with you."

Swami indeed arranged for both! My accountant had erroneously filed my tax returns, showing that I owed taxes; in reality, a tax refund was due to me. After two weeks, a large sum of money was credited to my bank account, which was more than enough to pay for the trip to India. My wife also had a vision not to object to my plans. Hence, she agreed with my plans to travel to India!

So it happened that a group of nine couples, a man, and a woman, finally arrived in Whitefield, Bangalore, from the Netherlands to see Swami.

Two Interviews

During *darshan* that year, Swami came near me and asked, *"How many?"*

"20, Swami."

"*Which country?"*

"Netherlands, Swami."

Swami just walked on. But the moment He reached the door of His residence, He stopped, turned around, and came straight to me.

"Go!" He said. That was the first interview with Him. In that first interview, I saw Him materialize rings and chains for many.

The thought that came to my mind was, "Do I also want a ring?"

Spontaneously, the answer came from within, "No!"

"What do I ask for then?"

"I will ask to touch His feet."

That was my first *Padanamaskar*.

Let me fast-forward to 2003. I was again in the interview room. I didn't know then that it would be my last interview with Swami. My wife was also with me. Upon entering the interview room, Swami took my hand in His and held it like that throughout the interview. I melted and could not think anymore. During the interview session, Swami asked me thrice, *"Do you want a ring?"*

I did not answer because I wanted only what Swami had come to give: Self Realization. But when He asked me for the third time, I replied, "If you want to give me that too, I am happy to receive it."

Swami waved His palm and made a ring with a green stone. He put it on my finger but looked at it with disappointment.

"Wrong color," He said and asked me to take it off and hand it back to Him. Then He blew on it and changed it into a shiny,

transparent stone. He asked everybody, *"What stone is this?"*

"Diamond, Swami!" everyone answered.

"No," He said, ***"This is Die-Mind."***

As He put that ring on my finger, I felt delighted that He gave me what I really wanted.

After the interview, Swami asked the photographer to take a picture of Him with my wife and me. Swami asked me for our address so he could send the picture. But I was then on the proverbial "*cloud nine*" and could not recollect my address. It was only on a later trip that one of the devotees from that interview gave me the photograph.

Significance of the Diamond Ring

Back in the Netherlands, I constantly prayed to Swami to help me become a good person. That was when I got a vision of a Divine Hand pointing at someone, with three fingers pointing at me. When Swami gifts you an experience, He alone can grant you the ability to understand it. I understood that whenever I looked at other people, I had to find three good traits in them.

So, I did this exercise intensely. Nothing seemed to happen for one full year; then, it was sheer magic for two weeks! **For two weeks, I could not find a single mistake anywhere or in anyone–all was perfect and divine!** I woke up in a land that I never saw before. However, I did not arrive there by my effort alone. I took one step, and Swami took one hundred steps toward me to make this possible. After two weeks, this experience stopped as suddenly as it began. I knew I had to continue my exercises.

I began to pursue a second *sadhana* seriously: to find good in people when I meet them. But when I am alone, it is the *Die-Mind sadhana* where I just watch my thoughts. **I become a witness to my thoughts, and it is amazing to see how the thoughts drop off the moment you begin to witness them**. I only want to entertain good thoughts.

I cannot tell you how happy I am to know Swami. Swami says, *"You are already saved!"* That is how I always feel now.

Mr. Jan Floris
NETHERLANDS

Mr. Jan Floris *is an innovator, marketer, and entrepreneur from the Netherlands who has always practiced human values in his professional life. He joined the Sri Sathya Sai International Organization in 1989 after meeting Sri Sathya Sai Baba and served in various capacities, including as the National Council President of the Netherlands. He is presently a Central Coordinator for SSSIO, Zone 7 (North Europe). He is also the Chair of the SSSIO Christmas Program Committee.*

Divine Grace

Swami's Divine grace is indeed very precious because when we receive His grace, two very important things happen:

1. Our spiritual journey accelerates, and
2. Swami protects us from severe challenges in our lives.

Swami's Divine Protection: An Accident

In 2021, I was driving my car alone to the bank when the vehicle ahead slowed down to make a right turn. Naturally, I also slowed down. But the driver behind me did not, and I could feel the car colliding at the rear end of mine. I experienced a mild jerk and turned around to see that the driver of the colliding vehicle was visibly shaken. I got out of the car and told the driver who rear-ended me not to worry as I was perfectly fine. Fortunately, he too was not hurt. But I saw that the front of his car was smashed completely, and the airbags had been deployed. I felt for him because while my car was towed away for repairs, he was told that his car needed to be junked.

A woman from the body shop called the next day. She said that the damages to the car would cost $10,000 to repair. She also asked me if I had been hurt in the accident. I mentioned that I was not hurt at all. The following day another woman from the body shop called me asking if I was hurt in the accident. She mentioned that upon further inspection they noted a big hole at the bottom of the car. The new estimate to fix the damages was $20,000, which was more than the car's worth! Therefore, they decided to write off the vehicle and reimburse the total amount. The damage to the car was so extensive that nobody at the body shop was ready to believe that I was not hurt at all.

This is one way in which Swami lightens the load of our *karma*, as He Himself puts it:

> *"You might say that the karma of the previous birth has to be consumed in this birth and that no amount of grace can save man from that. Evidently, someone has taught you to believe so. But I assure you, you need not suffer from karma like that. When severe pain torments you, the doctor gives you a morphine injection and you do not feel the pain, though it is there in the body. Grace is like morphine; the pain is not felt, though you go through it! Grace takes away the malignity of the karma which you have to undergo."*
>
> **–Sri Sathya Sai Baba**
> November 23, 1964

Energizes Heart

In 2014, three years after Baba left His physical form, He came in my dream and with immense love and concern said, *"You have bubbles in your heart. May I energize your heart?"*

I was overwhelmed seeing the humility of the *Avatar* of the Age in seeking my permission to do good for me! With folded hands, I said, "Yes, Swami."

Swami then placed His hands on my chest and energized my heart in a circular motion. It was surprising that in all my previous annual medical examinations, there had been absolutely no problem with my heart. I am convinced Baba anticipated a future crisis and cured it before it even manifested!

This is **the second way** by which Swami eliminates our *karma* without us having to even experience it, as He says in His discourse.

> *"You know there are dated drugs, which are declared ineffective after a certain date; well, the effect of karma is rendered null, though the account is there and has to be rendered! Or the Lord can save man completely from the consequences, as was done by Me to the bhakta whose paralytic stroke and heart attacks I took over some months ago, in the Guru Poornima week!"*
>
> –Sri Sathya Sai Baba
> November 23, 1964

Wipes Out *Karmic* Burden

A student at Swami's University suffered severely from chronic asthma and always wheezed even while breathing. One day, Swami called him into the interview room and mentioned that this breathing difficulty resulted from a karmic burden.

"However," Baba said, *"if I take over the karma for only a few minutes, the karmic burden will be wiped out."*

The next minute, Swami started breathing just like the student; in fact, one could hear Him wheezing. This continued for several minutes, after which Swami began breathing normally. That very instant, the student was forever cured of his asthma! The *karma* had been rendered null despite the account being there! This is **the third way**.

As is clearly evidenced by these episodes, Swami's grace flows on us, and our *karma* gets cleared both in the physical presence and omnipresence of Bhagawan.

Law of Karma and Baba's Divine Grace

Here is an extract from the book *"Conversations with Sathya Sai Baba,"* authored by Dr. John Hislop, where Baba speaks about practicing His teachings, the law of *karma*, and His Divine grace.

Hislop: Swami can cure even terminal cases of cancer?

SAI: *Oh yes, a certain person whom you know is a good example of that. She was filled with cancer. The doctors gave up, removed tubes, sewed up incisions, and left her only a few days to live. Now she is strong and healthy and works all day.*

Hislop: Swami does that only when the *karma* is appropriate?

SAI: *If Swami is pleased with the person, He heals that person at once. Karma can have no effect on that.*

Hislop: This is extremely important information. Because when people fail to get cured by Swami, they put it down to the fact that their *karma* is not ready.

SAI: *If the person has a pure heart, and is living Swami's teachings, Swami's grace is automatic. No karma can prevent that.*

And Swami continues to protect His devotees even after *Mahasamadhi*.

Omnipresence of Swami

Our son was married in 2016 in the beautiful natural setting of an outdoor wedding in a very remote town in Northern California. That town only had a 'mom-and-pop' gas station with a tiny convenience store. The night before the wedding, I drove to the gas station to fill up the car. When I went inside the store to prepay $30 for the fuel, the store attendant was taking care of another customer. So, I stood there waiting for my turn and looked around at the usual items sold there–candies, chocolates, and cookies. When it was my turn, I approached the counter and paid the attendant $30. While he was ringing up the transaction, I noted that the counter had nothing out of the ordinary. I walked back to the car to fill

it with gasoline. Since the tank was filled with $27 worth of gasoline, I returned to the store to take the change.

That was when my jaw dropped to the ground!

On the counter, I saw a box of incense sticks with two pictures of Swami in the *abhayahasta* (blessing hand) pose! How did a box of incense sticks with Swami's pictures appear on the counter in a small store at such a remote location? Needless to say, I bought that box and used the incense sticks at the wedding the following day and was grateful for His grace and blessings.

How Do We Secure Swami's Divine Grace?

When we receive Swami's Divine grace, we will be guided and guarded no matter what challenges we face–a severe health problem, a financial crisis, or challenges in our daily lives. That is Swami's Divine assurance to all His devotees. But how do we secure that grace?

It is straightforward. **We can secure His grace by becoming full-time devotees**. Swami says that full-time devotees receive full-time grace and part-time devotees only receive part-time grace from Him. Swami gives the example of a part-time employee who receives part-time wages while full-time employees receive full-time wages. A part-time employee cannot receive full-time wages for part-time work.

How Do We Become Full-Time Devotees?

If we earnestly attempt to practice all of Baba's teachings, we can become full-time devotees of Baba. On the other hand, if we have a casual attitude toward practicing His teachings and adopt selected practices that are convenient for us and not for the higher good, then we are part-time devotees.

A yardstick to measure whether we are full-time devotees or not is our response to the ups and downs of life. Are we equanimous to the pleasures and pains that we face in life? Or do we positively or negatively get affected and go on an emotional roller-coaster? The more equanimous we are, the closer we are to being full-time devotees.

Our Good Fortune to Be Baba's Devotees

To recognize Baba as an *Avatar,* a person needs two things: (1) good *karmas* accumulated over many, many lives, and (2) His Divine grace. In that regard, we are very fortunate to be Sai devotees, and we should utilize this great good fortune to accelerate our spiritual journey.

Baba said not to let go of this chance to be close to Him as we do not know when we will have another opportunity to be contemporaries of a *Paripoorna Avatar*.

Let us become full-time devotees of Baba so that we receive His grace and attain liberation.

Mr. Vijay Desai
USA

Mr. Vijay Desai *has been a Sai devotee since 1980. He has served the SSSIO in many capacities and is the author of 15 books on Swami's Divine teachings. The latest 7 books are available on sathyasai.org, which can be located under "Divine Teachings of Sri Sathya Sai Baba."*

Faith and Trust in God

We experienced and saw that all stars and planets were part of Swami, the entire universe was Swami. It was overwhelming.

My path to Swami began when I was very young. I had the privilege of having a twin sister. For me, life was a gift, and my twin sister and I shared everything. At the age of 27, my sister died in a traffic accident, and that was the beginning of my search for a deeper meaning of life. Whenever I walked down the street people would stop and exclaim "Oh! we thought you had died!", unaware that I am the surviving twin.

In my first interview together with my husband Stig in 1983, I asked Swami "Why are we born as twins?" and Baba answered, *"That is not your business, it is something between the parents!"* This gave me comfort and an answer so that I could let go of further thoughts about "Why my sister?"

In 1983, my life as a primary school teacher started in earnest. I taught students from first to sixth grade for my whole life, and I started again a new first-grade class based on my new spiritual knowledge. My students were like my children, and their parents were like my family. As a devotee in the Sathya Sai Organization since 1983, I incorporated Swami's message and His teachings in my classes. In 1984, I became an SSE teacher and teacher-trainer in the SSSIO.

Besides classroom teaching, I had the privilege to be a leader of the Remedial Center – a self-governing team with 8 teachers and class teachers. I wanted to combine Swami's values and His profound message with my duties as a remedial teacher. During meetings with the children, parents, and teachers, I explained the fundamental truth that the source of wisdom already exists and the child has all the values and potentials latent within him/her. This close cooperation with different teachers, parents, and children gave me the opportunity to have a heart-to-heart connection with all. I had the opportunity to be heard and seen by many and demonstrated that Swami's values and message were part of my daily life. I served for 33 years as an elementary school teacher. During the last 20 years of service, I developed an awareness of Swami's presence, and **I hoped to follow Swami's words, "My life is My message" and further demonstrate that "my life is His message."**

It has been a gift to be His instrument throughout my life and teaching career. With Swami's inspiration and support, I have been able to transform the lives of many children who became young people, leading value-based lives. Many of them also came to believe in the Divine.

Experience of Divine Love

In 1984, Stig and I visited Baba again. This time, I got very ill, suffered much, and sought divine help. During *darshan*, I appealed to Swami mentally, asking Him if I could be relieved of my pains soon. In my mind, I heard Swami reply, 'Yes, in a couple of days.'

We were staying in the sheds at that time, Stig with the men and I with the women. The sheds assigned for families were unavailable, so we had to stay apart from each other. In the *ashram*, we were part of a group of ten from Denmark. Once, we needed to have our visas extended during our stay in India. One evening, along with another Dane, Stig went out to get the visas extended. He returned to the *ashram* from the town Dharmavaram after picking up the duly extended visas and passports of all the Danes. Meanwhile, left alone in the Ashram, I had the good fortune to be relocated to a family shed. I wondered how this move could have happened–perhaps because I was ill. But it was odd that only my husband and I got accommodation in an otherwise empty shed. They gave me the key to the shed and told me to lock the door from inside so that no one else could enter.

After Stig returned late in the day, I shared with him the wonderful news of getting accommodation in the family shed. But I felt very weak at night due to the sickness and laid down to rest. I called for help deep within my heart and meditated on Swami to help me bear the pain. Lying alone in the big dark shed by ourselves, both of us had the same amazing, awe-inspiring vision at the same time.

We experienced that the roof opened up, and a powerful white light was pouring in. The light took over, and we saw Swami´s face appear clearly in the expanse of the universe. Divine energy and pure love enveloped us. **We experienced and saw that all stars and planets were part of Swami, the entire universe was Swami. It was overwhelming.** No sound could be heard, everything was filled with the vibration of Divine Love; we were–in a state of being–with Swami in His majestic universal Divine form. The vision lasted for a long time.

Experiencing the love, vibration, and Divine Love so profoundly, it was permanently imprinted in our hearts. We knew that Swami is the entire universe–the omnipresent Divine consciousness! Then the vision disappeared, the bright light diminished, but **we were still vibrating with His Divine energy of pure Love.**

Outside, several volunteers, began knocking on the door shouting, 'What is happening?' They shone their flashlights through the windows and wanted to come inside to check. We kept completely silent. We were so moved by what we had just experienced and seen that we could not think of anything else.

The next morning, when we came out of the shed, the *Seva Dals* were looking at us as if we came from another planet. The day before, I was asked by the accommodation office to return the key, and in the afternoon, married couples and families with children were allowed to move into the shed.

Stig and I have talked about this overwhelming experience only once before. We have quietly saved the grace and gift of Swami in our hearts–as a token of His love, and an insight into His omnipresence, together with all other spiritual gifts that Swami has showered on us through the years.

Mrs. Birgitte Meincke

DENMARK

Mrs. Birgitte Meincke *has been a devotee of Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba since 1982. She worked as primary school teacher and remedial teacher for 33 years and implemented the human values taught by Swami in her classes for many years. She was also the leader of the Remedial Center for learning disabilities.*

Birgitte has been a member of the SSSIO Denmark since 1983 and has served as a Sathya Sai Education in Human Values teacher, both National and International Teacher Trainer, Center President, and National Coordinator for Devotional and Education Wings.

He Loved Me Just the Same

Swami entered my life long ago when I was a mere four-year-old child. My mother's eldest sister and her husband lived in Anantapur, a city less than two hours away from Puttaparthi, where my uncle served as the District Medical Officer. Even in those early days, Swami had built relationships with the medical community, and my aunt and uncle were one of the families that were close to Him. Once, Swami was going to visit them and stay at their home for a few nights, so my aunt and uncle invited our family to visit and meet Swami. I remember having a fever, so I was lying down on a cot at the end of the hallway that led directly to the front entrance. When Swami entered, He walked straight toward me, pinched my cheek affectionately, and then went on to meet the rest of my family in the living room next to the hallway. I learned later, on that night, my mother had been fretting about my fever, while my dad didn't seem worried. Instead, he said, "look, you're in the District Medical Officer's house; there's nothing to worry about." His remark led to a bit of an argument.

The following day, we all had an opportunity to take photos with Swami. When it was our turn, Swami turned to my parents and asked why they had been arguing all night. My dad was taken aback by this question; he had no idea how Swami could have known about their argument. This experience strengthened his connection with Swami and was the initial catalyst for his spiritual journey.

Growing Up in the Fold

My mother grew up knowing about Swami since her mother was a devotee, but my father had always been an agnostic, never believing in God. However, he was very kind in spirit and constantly sought to help and better the lives of people around him.

In the late 1970s, my father volunteered for the Tamil Nadu Sri Sathya Sai Seva Organization. He was part of the volunteer team helping transport materials for constructing the Poornachandra Auditorium in Prasanthi Nilayam. Swami was very involved in this project and often came to the site to watch the work and speak with the workers. While carrying a heavy load of bricks over his head, my father stepped on a thorn that pierced his foot. Right at that moment Swami was passing near my father. Realizing my dad's predicament, Swami bent down, removed the thorn from his foot, relieving his pain. That memorable moment of Swami's compassion and love moved my father and touched his heart so much that despite his lack of belief in religion at that time, **he found himself very much drawn to Swami–by the magnificence of His love**.

It was at this point that my parents began to devote themselves to Swami fully and became dedicated to doing His work. They visited Prasanthi Nilayam countless times every year, even when there were no comfortable accommodations or amenities, and they took my brother and me along with them. Eventually, my father took on leadership roles in the Sri Sathya Sai Seva Organization, and my mother began

coordinating the Sai Spiritual Education (SSE) program for children in Tamil Nadu. Under her stewardship, countless children learned about Swami and His teachings, and many of their children also participated in the Sai Organization. I had the immense privilege of getting a front-row seat to my parents' spiritual journey and many private conversations with Swami. **I witnessed the valuable personal guidance He gave and the overwhelming love Swami showered upon them. Ultimately His love was the sole reason my parents became His devotees and dedicated their lives to serve in His mission.** Watching this transformation was truly amazing, which is a source of inspiration for me even to this day.

Power of Love

I continue to benefit significantly from the wisdom I have drawn from Swami's teachings, the most essential of which is that Swami loves everyone just as they are. I once heard a story about His unconditional love, which has stuck with me ever since. A Russian group had come to see Swami, and one young child from the group was unruly, misbehaving, and not staying with the group. Everyone in the group was unhappy about the situation, and during an interview, one devotee asked Swami to send the child away from the Ashram. When Swami asked why, the devotee said, "Well, because he's crazy." Swami responded, "If I drive all the crazy people out, the Ashram will be empty." The point of the story is that Swami gives us opportunities not because of our good or bad qualities but because of His infinite love and compassion. **He loves us all unconditionally despite our faults.**

In my conversations with Swami, He never once has spoken to me about the challenges in my life. Though He knows more about my problems than I do, whenever He talked to me, it has always been about positive things–about love. I asked Him once, "Swami, how do I control my senses?" With the utmost kindness, Swami said, *"You know the answer to that."* He would tell me that I do not have to control my senses–I just had to use them the right way. He never judged me. He only showered love upon me, and it was only because of that that I was motivated to do the right things that pleased Him. It was only because of His love that I was inspired to understand the gap between my actions and Swami's expectations of me. I could then work to close that gap, not because He asked me to, not because He demanded it, but because of the love He showered on me.

It is not always easy for me to express love–I still struggle sometimes. I recall one instance when my wife and I were sitting in front of Swami. He looked straight at me and remarked that I get angry sometimes. I remember looking behind me to see if He was talking to someone else, but He said yes, He was talking to me. He then turned to my wife and asked her, "Am I not right?" She agreed. Finally, I told Him I get angry with my kids because they didn't, at times, listen to me. Swami said, *"Well, they're not going to listen to you just because you're angry. So, how is that going to improve the situation?"* Then **He told me that I had to speak with love, which would motivate them rather than speaking with anger.**

It is vital that we learn to understand love. **Swami's life is a beautiful example of practicing love for love's sake.**

Another lesson I have learned is that if you love everyone, it is easier not to judge them. I want to share an incident that occurred when my son was a three-year-old. I was sitting quietly reading a book when a hard object hit my head. I was upset for being disturbed and hurt. I looked around, and it turned out that my three-year-old son

had playfully thrown a small marble at me. With just one look at him, my anger disappeared, replaced by my intense love for him. When you love someone, it is easier to forgive that person–which is a valuable lesson learned from Swami.

Another important lesson I learned is that it is essential not to look at others' faults because nobody is perfect. What is the point in looking at someone else's faults when everybody has them? It only makes it harder to love them if we keep finding faults in others, whether a stranger or our brother. In Prema Vahini, Swami emphasized that we should practice this to nurture divine love. I remember how Swami exemplified this so beautifully–as He never looked at my flaws. He always loved me just the same.

Mr. Harish Naidu

USA

Mr. Harish Naidu *came into the fold of Swami in 1968 at the age of four. He was greatly influenced by his parents, who were transformed by Swami's love and dedicated their lives to serving Him. Harish moved to the USA in 1986 and obtained his master's degree in Electrical and Computer Engineering from the State University of New York, Buffalo. He has held senior executive positions in technology companies. Harish has served in the SSSIO USA in various roles including, Regional President, Deputy National Council President, and currently serves as the National Council President.*

Divine Mother and Father

"You must know how to use the opportunity you got in this life, having come in contact with the Lord. The lamp illuminates, but it can be used for various purposes, good or bad; the Ganges is sacred, but its waters are used for good or bad purposes. How you use this opportunity depends on your destiny, your luck, and how much grace you are able to earn. Develop faith; strengthen devotion, and the rest will come by itself."

–Sri Sathya Sai Baba
September 29, 1960

The above quotation made me think about the great responsibility and opportunity that Swami gave us by being able to see Him, touch Him and, above all, receive His teachings directly from Him. I want to share the lessons I learned as I recollect His advice during my interviews.

The Omnipresent Loving Lord

We visited the *ashram* for the first time in 1984, and every year thereafter. Five years passed before Baba called us for an interview for the first time in 1989. We were a small group of five Salvadorans, and to our joy, He gave us three interviews, one after another. Although the interviews were short, Swami revealed different facets of His divinity:

1. As a benevolent and loving mother
2. As a stern father giving instructions for a *dharmic* (righteous) life
3. As the omnipresent Lord who knows the most intimate details of our lives.

He showed His omnipotence by manifesting a beautiful ring that fits perfectly on the finger of the devotee who received it. But what filled us with the greatest joy was His blessings on us and our children for happy family life and His promise to see us in Puttaparthi the year after with our children. It suddenly flashed in my mind that it was expensive to travel to India, and reading my mind, He looked at me and said, *"Don't worry; I will provide the means."* It happened exactly as He said. To take care of my late father's belongings, I applied for leave without pay from the Social Security Institute the following year. But due to politics, I lost my position as head of the teaching department. Later, when I filed for retirement, I was awarded compensation, which was sufficient for our whole family to travel to India. It was His way of letting me know that He knew my thoughts, and He kept His word by granting me the resources to come to Prasanthi Nilayam with my family.

His teachings transformed our lives. We realized what actions were righteous and justified and how to act correctly. We also understood what we needed to do to overcome the *vasanas* (impulses and tendencies) we carried forth from previous lives. We grasped the need to control the senses, deny the temptations caused by the bombardment of stimuli from the outer world, concentrate on God and repeat His name, and be aware of the repercussions of our thoughts, words, and actions.

His Blessings

In April 1990, just after the guerrilla offensive in San Salvador had passed, our family had a memorable journey to Puttaparthi. On that trip, I had been granted the privilege of sitting in the *mandir's veranda;* when Swami passed by me, I mentioned to Him that our group was eager for an inter-

view. "I'll call you after *darshan"* was His response–so it happened.

You can imagine our overwhelming joy when we were called for the interview. Swami's words showed that He knew everything about the lives of every one of us. He materialized a *Shiva lingam* for a doctor in the group, forecasted a good husband devoted to Swami for our daughter (which came true later, beyond our expectations), and a university degree for our son (an excellent student who graduated with honors). He taught us the need for unity in the family, which is vital for individual and social happiness and emphasized the need for marital fidelity. He blessed me with a long and healthy life (I am now 82 and healthy). We will be grateful forever for the joy of being in His presence with our entire family.

The experiences we have had over the years with Sri Sathya Sai Baba have given us a deeper understanding of the law of *karma*. As a result, we have made an earnest attempt to make the right choices in our lives, and we pray that we may continue to do so in the future.

Selfless Service

At a very young age, I joined the Boy Scouts, which prepared me for working in the Sri Sathya Sai International Organization since selfless service is one of the pillars of Baba's teachings. For 13 years, we conducted a monthly medical camp in a rural area. We gave our time and energy to provide free healthcare for people in need, and dispense medicine saturated with His love. Swami's presence was very much felt since the very beginning of our service. **It is very apt to remember His assurance that if we take one step toward Him, He will take a hundred steps toward us.**

On one occasion, Swami told the students in the *mandir,* "To reach the ultimate goal, determination is very important in addition to discrimination." But what struck me the most was that we must be determined to leave behind our bad habits or persistent desires, to continue on the path of *dharma* and not relegate them to be done later because we don't know if we will ever find time later.

Do More *Sadhana*

During our last interview, I prayed to Baba, "Swami, help me have the determination to improve myself spiritually." He responded: "Do more *sadhana* to develop determination. You are doing good *sadhana* but do more."

Reflecting on my life, I am grateful that I have had a long and healthy life. However, I am committed not to rest on my laurels but instead spend the rest of my life engaged in spiritual practices that will take me toward Self-realization to merge with the Divine. **Let us live with the name of God on our lips and let our actions be saturated with the divine love of God.**

Jai Sai Ram.

Dr. Hector J. Castaneda
EL SALVADOR

Dr. Héctor José Castaneda *was a Professor of Internal Medicine and Neurology at the Faculty of Medicine of the National University of El Salvador for 25 years. Dr. Castaneda is the founder and past President of the El Salvador Neurological Sciences Society. He received a doctorate in medicine from El Salvador University in 1966 and completed postgraduate residency in neurology in 1973 at Georgetown University, Washington D.C., USA.*

Dr. Castaneda came to Swami in 1984 and has served in the SSSIO of El Salvador since 1985. He has held various positions, including National Council President of El Salvador, and Central Coordinator for Mexico and Central America. He is the Medical Director of Zone 2A for the countries of Central America and Mexico.

Unconditional Love Without Judging

It was a day like any other at Prasanthi Nilayam. Thousands had arrived from the northern states of Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh in India. It had, by now, become routine for devotees from different places to arrive in such a way that their pilgrimage dates did not overlap. Thus, all were assured of the precious proximity to Swami. Any group that was visiting Prasanthi Nilayam would come prepared with a program and seek Swami's approval to offer it. At times, it would be late in the afternoon when the group would know that they would have to present their program in the evening of the same day.

This fact put me on a high alert. Being a photographer, I would have to be ready for programs on any day, at any time. Once, I returned to the studio after a heavy lunch and was feeling very drowsy. I do not even remember when I dozed off. As I slept, I had a dream. I am sharing the diary entry for the dream that day.

> "When I slept at 2:50 PM, I had a dream. Swami was seated on a sofa and He seemed to be very pleased with two people who had performed well in a drama. He was calling them, speaking over my head, and I saw that He was about to materialize something. I had my camera with me but I decided that I would watch the creation of the gift and keenly observe the process. So I kept the camera aside. I felt that Swami was going to create two chains at the same time. I was watching when I was suddenly woken up. The time was 3:10 PM."

During the 20 minutes I had slept, I had Swami's dream, before being woken up by a phone call. It was my colleague who was on his way to the Radio Sai studio. He told me that he saw a backdrop being shifted into the Sai Kulwant hall and guessed that a program might be presented soon. I got up and got my camera and equipment ready for the evening's program.

My Dream Comes True

The drama was presented by devotees from Uttaranchal and Uttarakhand and was based on the secret behind the Sai Avatars.

As the drama was being staged, I felt that it was not a good presentation. I fell victim to the weakness of judging! Most of the audience seemed to be laughing quietly at what seemed like a below-average program. But Swami was engrossed in the presentation. That fact alone was enough to show that the presentation was very special. Who am I to judge? At that moment of repentance, something flashed in my mind - the dream that I had a few hours ago! I turned to my right and saw my physics teacher sitting there. I said, "Sir, though people are laughing at the drama, Swami seems very happy with it. In fact, after the program, He will manifest two gold chains for the participants!" My teacher looked at me with disbelief and I wondered what made me blurt out such a statement!

Soon, the drama concluded, and Swami asked sweetly, *"Drama over?"* He makes a perfect audience, as He always asks, *"Is it over already?"* because He is so engrossed in it.

His Divine Love

Swami is always engrossed in the presentation because He sees the sincerity and effort behind it–that is the vital difference between God and man. God sees only the effort and whether it is a fantastic performance or an average one, they are all the same for Him, as long as the effort has been made! **Love overcomes all**. It is like the parents admiring their children's performance despite their shortcomings, and He is the divine parent who has unconditional love.

And then, it Happened

Swami called over the dancers and began a circling motion with His right palm. In a flash, there were two gold chains! I exchanged glances with my teacher and began to get goosebumps! This was exactly as per my dream (which I was about to witness had the call not woken me up!) I remembered that in the dream I put down my camera to witness the creation. I was wondering whether that was what I was supposed to do. I had not even completed my thought when Swami called me. I went to Him and He said, *"Take pictures! I shall also come down with the children there and pose with them. Take pictures of that also."* I actually had a video camera in my hand. But I was totally lost in the magic of that moment. He not only showed me the whole sequence of events in my dream, but He was also confirming it by advising me not to stop taking pictures (as I had done in my dream).

Lessons Learned

It was a very poignant incident and an important day for me. I learned two important lessons.

1. Swami's dreams do not happen without His will. His dreams are as true as reality.
2. Never judge. It is very hard not to judge but abstaining from judging others helps us take baby steps towards realizing our divinity.

Mr. Aravind Balasubramanya
INDIA

Mr. Aravind Balasubramanya *comes from a family that has been devoted to Swami for nearly half a century. Aravind graduated from the Sri Sathya Sai Higher Secondary School and completed his Bachelor of Science from the Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning (SSSIHL), receiving a gold medal. He also holds an M.S. (Chemistry) and an MBA from the SSSIHL.*

He worked for Radio Sai from 2007 to 2021. Aravind has authored four books about his experiences with Swami. He was Swami's photographer for nearly five years. Aravind has dedicated his life to serving Swami and sharing His teachings with one and all through various media channels.

Baba, the Great Surgeon!

I am blessed to have been born into a spiritual family. My mother was an ardent devotee of Sri Shiridi Sai Baba and taught my elder brother and me to sing His glories as part of daily morning and evening prayers, laying the foundation for the devotional path *(Bhakti Marga)*. My father was a spiritual seeker who dwelt much on the *advaitic* aspects of spiritual practice, deriving his inspiration from the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa and Swami Vivekananda. Thus, my father laid the foundation for us to develop an understanding of the non-dual path of wisdom *(Jnana Marga)*. Having an elder brother who was my guide and support from my childhood and continues to be my hero and mentor for my spiritual development is yet another blessing.

Once again, the credit goes to my parents, who led us to the lotus feet of our Beloved Swami. **My parents firmly believed that God was walking on earth and decided to return to India to be near Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba** after a brief stay in the USA. They resided in Prasanthi Nilayam for over seventeen years, giving me, my wife, and two sons the opportunity to visit them–and **enjoy the blessing of having *darshan* of the Avatar, our Divine Mother and Father,** while sharing our love and respect for our earthly parents.

My first experience of Swami's miracle happened even before my first *darshan* or visit to Prasanthi Nilayam. It occurred in early 1983, just a year after my parents left to reside at the *ashram*. For nearly three years, I was experiencing a dullness and discomfort in my liver area, a kind of congested feeling, with mild shortness of breath, especially when I climbed a flight of stairs. It was a nagging feeling, but something for which I was not ready to see a doctor. During these three years, repeated **annual medical examinations at my workplace showed that my liver enzymes were abnormal**. I sought the advice of my elder brother, a practicing physician, and his recommendation was to have a liver biopsy done to diagnose the underlying cause. I did not want this procedure as I was scared to have a needle poked through my liver. Then came divine intervention.

Divine Healing

In the early morning hours of one day, I had a vivid dream, which I would characterize more as a vision since I could fully recollect the details when I woke up. In the dream, I saw myself with my hands raised, running on the verandah of the Mandir toward the first door where Swami was seen seated, and the bhajans were going on. I was loudly proclaiming, "Baba, the great surgeon!" Immediately, I felt an electric shock in my liver area, and I woke up sweating. I knew something profound had happened.

The following day I noticed that I did not have the congested feeling of the liver anymore and felt much better. I was then anxious to find out whether some miraculous healing took place. One quick way to get the answer was to verify if my liver function tests were normal. Although I could have them tested at a local diagnostic lab, I had a strong faith in Swami's healing. Since the annual medical screening at my work-

place was only two weeks away, I decided to wait. What a sweet surprise! **All my liver function tests were within normal limits and have been ever since.**

Blessings without Asking

The scriptures say, God is verily the doctor *(Vaidyo Narayano Harihi)*. Baba, the great Surgeon, indeed! Surgery performed without any instruments! Please note that I did not pray to Swami or any other God at any time to help me with my health setback. But the Supreme Lord knows how and when to protect and heal His children, even without asking.

The second miracle of the story is that I had never been to Prasanthi Nilayam when I had the dream. Only a year later, during my first visit to the *ashram*, I saw the verandah and the *mandir* of my dream. Nearly a year later, when we were blessed with an interview with Swami, I expressed my gratitude to Swami for curing my liver problem. Swami gave an approving compassionate glance and blessed me.

Dr. A. Krishnamohan Reddy
USA

Dr. A. Krishnamohan Reddy *holds a Ph.D. in Nutrition from the University of California, Davis, USA. He is board certified in Toxicology by the American Board of Toxicology and has worked in the field of human health and safety and held management positions in a multinational consumer product company. For over three decades he has been serving in the SSSIO and held many leadership positions including Regional President of Northern California, National Service Coordinator, and Vice-president of the SSSIO, USA. He and his family have received personal guidance and blessings from Swami.*

Guru Shows the Way to Truth and Divine Bliss

I first visited Prasanthi Nilayam in July 1987 on the occasion of Guru Poornima. For spiritual seekers of truth, this is the most auspicious day to pay homage to our divine master, who has come to lead us:

Asato mā Sat Gamaya	From the unreal to the Real
Tamaso mā Jyotir Gamaya	From darkness to Light
Mrityor mā Amritam Gamaya	From death to Immortality

However, I did not know the importance of this day at that time. Nevertheless, when I had the first darshan of Bhagawan Sri Sathya Baba, I knew that finally, after a long search, I had found my true master and guide. One glimpse told me He could lead me to what I was longing for in my soul–knowledge of the divine truth and the experience of universal love.

Since then, I have been a regular and active member of Sri Sathya Sai International Organization (SSSIO), which Swami established all over the world to help us reach the divine truth. All the tools we need can be found in His name ***S A I***:

S stands for Service, ***A*** stands for Adoration, ***I*** stands for Illumination

In everything He said and did, Swami turned the compass inward. To the modern world driven by technology, WWW means the World Wide Web. However, Swami would advise us to "Surf the Innernet, not the Internet!" To spiritual aspirants driven by divine knowledge, the three W's, in His words mean Work, Worship, and Wisdom. These three words define the three pillars of the Sathya Sai Organization: *Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga,* and *Jñāna Yoga*.

Service, *Karma Yoga*

At the entrance of the Sri Sathya Sai Super Specialty Hospital in Puttaparthi there is a saying in Sanskrit:

"Paropakarārtham idam śarīram"

(The purpose of this body is to serve others)

At Swami's *Mahasamadhi*, out of volumes of His teachings, just four words have been chosen to be engraved, to remind us that, above all, His organization stands for the spirit of loving service.

LOVE ALL - SERVE ALL

The global magnitude to which His work has quietly grown is astounding and unparalleled in the history of mankind. Inspired by Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba, the SSSIO continues to spread His universal message of pure love and selfless service in 111 countries outside India.

Adoration, *Bhakti Yoga*

One of Swami's favorite bhajans explains the power of devotion:

Hari bhajana bina sukha shanti nahi

Hari nama bina ananda nahi
Prema bhakti bina uddhara nahi
Guru seva bina nirvana nahi

Without singing to the Lord, there's no peace or happiness

Without praising His Name, there's no feeling of bliss
Without love and devotion, we will never be free
Without service to Him, no salvation can there be.

Sri Sathya Sai Centers all over the world conduct weekly group devotional singing to foster adoration for God. He taught us to use our hands to serve all and our lips to praise God in all forms.

Illumination, *Jñāna Yoga*

The third pillar of the organization is focused on illuminating the mind. To help us do that, Swami created a more transformative kind of education.

EDUCARE

Sathya Sai Educare has been aptly described as the Veda of the 21st century revealed to the modern world by Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba. *Educare* is the Latin root of the English word Education, coupled with *Educere* which means "to bring forth, manifest, educe." The purpose of Educare is to bring out from within the hidden treasure of human values: Truth, Right Conduct, Peace, Love, and Nonviolence – *Sathya, Dharma, Shanti, Prema, and Ahimsa*.

Human values are the divine ideals, that serve as beacons to guide our lives. The word *ideal* comes from the Greek word *idea*, introduced to philosophical thought by the great Greek philosopher Plato. The word *'idea'* literally means, "that which is seen." This implies that human ideals are not just moral principles but divine truths that can be seen through the inner eye of the soul. Swami gave us the ideal version of education and made it our reality with Educare.

While I immersed myself in all the pillars of His organization, I traveled from Greece as often as I could for divine interactions with Him. Bhagawan Baba recognized the importance of ancient Greek philosophy, which is the foundation of western philosophical thought. In interviews, He often asked Greek devotees, and me personally, about the father of Greek Philosophy. *"Who was the Guruji of Alexander the Great?"* We answered "Aristotle, Swami." He then continued: *"Who was the Guruji of Aristotle?"* "Plato, Swami." *"And who was the Guruji of Plato?"* "Socrates, Swami!" When He heard Socrates, Swami was blissfully content. He loved and held Socrates in high esteem.

Know Thyself

One day He told us: *"Socrates is not the right pronunciation. The right pronunciation is So-crat-is."* We were all taken by surprise because this is indeed the right pronunciation in Greek: So-crat-is. And then Swami continued, *"His name reveals His identity: 'So' means He, 'Crat' means Creator. He is the Creator, He is Divine!"* And He continued:

> *"Socrates was the same as Me but in a different time. He was teaching young students the same fundamental inquiry as I do: "Know Thyself. Ninnu neevu telusuko." Always inquire: "Who am I? Who am I?" Then you will know the answer: "I am not the body, I am not the senses, I am not the mind. I am the Master of the body, I am the Master of the senses, I am the immortal Atma!"*

Socrates was totally detached from the senses. He did not have body consciousness. He was fully aware of his divine nature.

So, Socrates died with his mind totally focused on God and he achieved complete union with Him. That is why Swami loved him so much.

Truth, Goodness, and Beauty

Swami asked us in many interviews: "What was the essence of Plato's teachings?" Despite our Greek heritage, we were unable to respond, when he first asked this question. Then Swami Himself gave the answer: **"The essence of Plato's teachings was Truth, Goodness, and Beauty: *Satyam, Sivam, Sundaram*."** Swami's biography is titled *'Sathyam, Sivam , Sundaram.'* Just like that, with three simple words, He showed the unity between Greek philosophy and Sai's teachings.

In November 1996, during Bhagawan's 71st Birthday celebrations, the Greek devotees performed a drama in Poornachandra Auditorium. The drama was entitled *"The Tales of Janaka."* King Janaka was a *karma yogi*, dedicated to serving his people. Though he was burdened with the responsibilities and duties of a King, he remained detached from the world and firmly focused on the spiritual path and the final goal, Self-realization. The drama consisted of three stories selected from Bhagawan's divine discourses. These stories described the yearning of King Janaka for truth and his meetings with three great sages of ancient times: *Vasishtha, Śuka,* and *Ashtāvakra*.

Swami used to call our group 'drama boys', and showered us with special blessings during the rehearsals. He would visit us daily at Poornachandra Auditorium to supervise the rehearsals, give advice and guide us on every detail. In the drama there were two female roles, one was the Queen, the wife of King Janaka, and the other was Mother Sita, the wife of Sri Rama. However, Swami had given us strict instructions that only boys should perform all the roles in the play. So, the two female roles were assigned to two boys in the group, by Swami Himself. One of the two was me, who received the role of Sita! At first I could not appreciate what later turned out to be a unique blessing for me.

As Swami used to come daily to Poornachandra, we had the chance to ask for every little detail to get clarity in our minds. We reviewed all the discourses of Swami relating to the play, as well as other books, but we could not find the name of King Janaka's wife anywhere. So, one day we decided to ask Swami about this, "Swami, please tell us the name of King Janaka's wife." Then, Swami became very serious. He closed His eyes as if He was connecting with the Tretha Yuga thousands of years in the past. We eagerly awaited His answer. Then Swami opened His eyes, looked at us mischievously, and with a big smile said: *"The name of King Janaka's wife was... Mrs. Janaka!!!"*

The next day, He came to my friend who was playing the role of the Queen and asked him: *"How are you, Mrs. Janaka?"* As I jealously longed for His attention, Swami responded immediately. With the same playful smile, He asked me: *"How are you, Mrs. Rama?"* This was the divine humor of Sai!

In the first story of the drama, King Janaka returns to his palace very tired. He is seated on his throne and in front of him is a table full of delicacies. The Queen, seated by his side, tenderly massages his feet. King Janaka falls asleep and has a strange dream. In the dream, he has lost his kingdom and he is wandering exhausted and hungry in a forest. There he comes across three robbers who take pity on him and invite him to share some food with them. Before he has a chance to take one bite, a tiger appears. Scared, they scream, "Tiger! Tiger! Run for your lives!"

Is This Real or Is That Real?

At that moment, Janaka wakes up, full of fear. He looks around and finds himself seated in a comfortable sofa; with a table full of delicious food and the Queen is tenderly massaging his feet. He falls into a trance, and wonders aloud, "Is this real, or is that real? Is this the truth or is that the truth?" Perplexed, the Queen asks: "What are you talking about, my King? What do you want to know Maharaja?" But King Janaka does not respond; he keeps asking, *"Idi nijama? Adi nijama?* Is this real or is that real?"

The worried Queen calls the ministers, but no one comprehends the dilemma of the King, who continues to question "Is this true or is that true?" They try to bring him back to his normal state, with no success. Finally, they decide to call the great Sage Vasishta, the family preceptor. When Vasishta arrives, he sees the King in this trance, and with his yogic vision, he understands the depth of his dilemma. Then he says to him: "King Janaka! Life during daytime is a daydream; during nighttime is a night-dream. They are both illusions. Idi nijamu kadu, adi nijamu kadu. This is not true, that is not true. You alone are true! The Self that is present as Pure Consciousness in both dream and waking states is the only true reality. The world is constantly changing; the Self alone is real and changeless. Only the Self exists, and He is Brahma, the One without a second." Every interaction, every moment with Swami reminds us to question the illusion we live in and pursue the divine reality, which is One without a second *("Ekameva Adviteeyam Brahma")*.

Gift of Guru–*Brahmānandam*

My search for the gift of divine knowledge led me to my guru Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba, on that auspicious Guru Poornima day. Over 35 years in His presence and His organization has granted me the most valuable gift of all: oneness with my Guru to experience divine bliss, *Brahmānandam*.

Jai Sai Ram!

Mr. George Bebedelis
GREECE

Mr. George Bebedelis *serves as the Director of the Institute of Sathya Sai Education of South Europe (ISSE-SE) and Co-Chair of the SSSIO Education Committee. He served as National Council President of SSSIO, Greece, and has an extensive background in Sathya Sai Education, having received guidance from Swami over many decades.*

Mr. Bebedelis was born and lives in Athens, Greece. He has a Diploma in Mechanical Engineering from the National Technical University of Athens, a Diploma in Pedagogy, and a master's degree in History and Philosophy of Science from the National University of Athens. He teaches Mechanical Engineering in secondary vocational education in Athens.

Play the Game– Be Happy!

Many people ask me how I feel about Sai Baba, now that He is no longer around in His physical form. My response always is that it actually makes no difference since I have always felt so connected to Him, especially when I am at home in London. But I am not being completely truthful– there is a small white lie in this answer! Because when I recollect how it felt when He would suddenly appear for *darshan*, and the music would start, I do miss Him. Even though everyone gathered would sometimes be sitting for ages, with legs and back paining, the moment He would walk toward us, everyone's heart would be thumping with anticipation, spirits uplifted, pains recede, and our hearts would overflow with joy. It is impossible to fully express this feeling in words unless one has experienced it personally.

When I first visited Prasanthi Nilayam about 40 years ago, the yearning for personal attention and to have an audience with Swami was very strong. But having been ignored for over 12 years, I came to accept it and was totally content, as I felt that I was at the right place to learn the things that I needed.

All of that changed once I was approached to sing during Swami's 70th Birthday celebrations at the Hillview Stadium. I had assumed I would be expected to sing *bhajans* but I was informed that instead, Swami wanted me to sing Western songs; so, of course I was elated to obey His instructions. I knew that blues music hadn't really been heard in Prasanthi Nilayam and I have since met some of the audience who were horrified by this music. Up until then, only Indian music was played during celebrations at the ashram, but I surmised that Swami was preparing to open up the world of music to His devotees around the world. It was a wonderful opportunity to share His love and message as a song writer, and I hoped that this could be conveyed to one and all.

I had assumed that I would get the interview I was longing for, on the day after the big concert, since everyone told me that typically Swami would call the artistes for an interview. But to my disappointment, I got ignored once again. While all other performers were called for interview, I was not included. I sat alone outside feeling ignored and unloved. However, a few months later, as providence would have it, Swami graciously called me in. What a joy, to be accepted at last! In retrospect, I realize that I needed this lesson of being ignored for I learnt that "delay is not denial" and that He had planned to teach me this lesson, for everything happens in His timing.

Swami always said that it is better not to share personal matters about what happens in the interview room. But there is one thing that I would like to share, because it has a message that everyone can benefit from. Our Beloved Swami asked me once if I had any questions for Him, as I had always noticed how people

came to Him with questions that needed answers. But I felt so totally blissed out and happy that I had no questions at all. However, since He asked me I wanted to ask Him a question, and so I asked, "Swami, what is the meaning of it all?" meaning life and all its ups and downs. Swami just looked at me and said five very important words, ***"Play the Game, Be Happy!"***

How simple and wonderful are these five words, and how important it is to live by this simple instruction – and it is one of the main mottos of my life now.

Thank you Swami, for this and everything else in my life, especially my singing voice!!!

Ms. Dana Gillespie
UK

Ms. Dana Gillespie *came to Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba four decades ago. She is a musician of international repute, who shares Swami's message of love through music, around the world. This British singer, actress, song writer and blues singer has been performing in the Divine Presence of Bhagawan Baba since her first performance during Baba's 70th Birthday.*

She has 56 years of music background with over 61 albums. In the 1970s, she became well known for her appearances in London's West End theatres. Dana played the original Mary Magdalene in the first London production of Jesus Christ Superstar.

Faith and Surrender

My transformation from 'Ego and Control' to 'Faith and Surrender' started in 1995 from my first interview with Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba. Little did I know that this would be the start of a long journey that will continue through the rest of my life. I asked permission from Swami to volunteer at the Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Medical Sciences (SSSIHMS) in Puttaparthi. Swami held my hand, looked lovingly into my eyes, and said *"You don't need to ask for permission. This is your home. You can operate here anytime."* The SSSIHMS is a true miracle. Not only was it built within one year to the highest world standards with the best equipment, but it is also verily a Temple of Compassion and Caring. Patients get completely free medical care and in a setting of peace and tranquility. I might have volunteered my time and services, but in the final analysis I was the person who got the most benefit from working there. Take one step towards Swami and He will take a hundred steps towards you. That could not be truer for me, from my experience there. It was at SSSIHMS that Swami started to slowly peel away the layers of my Ego. Let me narrate an incident that started the process.

Lesson of Giving Priority to God

During the early days at SSSIHMS, the infrastructure and surgical expertise was still being developed so that we would come together as a team and perform surgeries. Currently, the team in SSSIHMS is so well trained that the senior surgeons act more in an educational and advisory role. I had come with my team and the first question people asked is how many surgeries will be done by me during the visit and compare it to the number performed by the surgeon who preceded me. I was very competitive and was fixated on treating as many patients as possible.

One day, the nurse informed me that all cases were to be stopped at 2 PM so that the staff could attend Swami's discourse and possibly also get interviews with Swami. Instead of embracing this great opportunity, I was upset that I might not reach my set quota and fail to do more procedures than the previous surgeon. Despite pleas from the staff, I told them to let my assistant and I show them how to do a procedure so fast that we could maintain our quota, and yet go to see Swami. But that day, there was every possible delay during the surgery, although the patient did come out fine. It took so long to complete the procedure, that unfortunately the team was deprived of the opportunity to listen to the discourse and have *darshan* of Swami. As was customary in those days, we attended the morning darshan. Swami blessed us with His presence and engaged in a brief conversations and enquired about the patients. What precious moments and what a blessing! But the sad thing is that I never appreciated the honor and rarity of being able to communicate with the Living God. When Swami came near me, He asked me about the patient. I told Him that we finished the procedure, the surgery went well, and the patient is doing fine. He looked at me mischievously and probed "What happened?" and contin-

ued "Not the expected half the time but the procedure took twice as long." Swami thus revealed His omnipresence–He knows everything. Swami's words struck me like lighting. My Ego had gotten in the way of common sense and patient safety, and I had denied the team the opportunity to meet with Swami. That lesson has stuck with me to this day. Whenever I pride myself that I am better than someone else and let my ego raise its ugly head, I can hear Swami's voice as if I were still in the veranda for His Darshan.

Lesson in Patience– Thy Will be Done

Our pathway to Faith and Surrender can take many twists and turns. I am a slow learner, so Swami had to work hard to show me the right path–not only through my own experiences but by living through the experiences of others. Mohan was an IT professional who relocated to Puttaparthi to take care of his mother. She had been diagnosed with a leak in her mitral valve which caused increased amount of fluid in the lungs and shortness of breath. She was advised to have the valve fixed. Due to her advanced age and infirmity, the surgeons at SSSIHMS suggested that she have her surgery at a private hospital in Bangalore. Mohan asked Swami about this during multiple interviews and the reply was always the same–*"wait."* But his mother was getting sicker, and the doctors were telling him to get her operated on elsewhere, because she did not meet criteria for surgery at SSSIHMS, and Swami kept telling him to wait. This continued for several months.

On the Thursday evening *darshan* during my visit (I was going to leave on Friday evening), Swami came to Mohan and asked him why he was not taking care of his mother and getting her operated on. Swami told him that I was there for one more day and to get me to do the surgery. Mohan was elated. He could finally get treatment for his sick mother. But this is where Swami allows us to be part of His *maya*. Mohan ran back to the hospital and told the staff to prepare his mother for surgery. But since she had been denied care there, the staff would not proceed without permission from the Director or from Swami Himself. Unfortunately, *darshan* was over and Swami had retired to his residence. Mohan was frantic. The Director or senior members of the hospital could not contact Swami. Mohan had to get Swami to directly give permission. Mohan wrote a letter to Swami and rushed to get it to Him before He went up to His bedroom. He wanted to give a picture of his mother to Swami so He could identify his mother but there was no time. Mohan rushed to Swami's residence and was met by one of the students. To his utter dismay, Swami had just gone up to His bedroom and there was no way to get Him the letter. The student reiterated that Swami never came down after retiring to the bedroom. Mohan was devastated. He gave the student the letter hoping for a miracle–namely, Swami coming down. Lo and behold, to everyone's amazement, Swami did come down and asked for the letter. He opened the letter and materialized the photo of Mohan's mother that Mohan did not have time to include with the letter. Then Swami showed the picture to the student attendant and gave permission to proceed with the surgery.

Mohan rushed back to the hospital so the staff could prepare for surgery the next day. They called me and asked if I would operate – without seeing the patient or the imaging studies and records, I accepted. Who are we to question or doubt the Divine Command? The next day during morning Darshan, I asked Swami about the case. He blessed me and told me to do whatever I thought was correct professionally. He

then held my hand, blessed me and told me to proceed.

The staff at the hospital were concerned especially since the patient was elderly, malnourished, and weak. They had never operated on or handled such an elderly patient. They were afraid that she would never make it out of the hospital even with successful surgery because of poor chances for recovery. With Swami's grace we proceeded. Mitral valve disorders can be either repaired or replaced. It is preferable to repair them which allows for the patient's native valve to remain in place and not have the complications of a replacement. But repair is much more complicated and sometimes may not be durable. The staff was concerned that repair would take longer time and if the leakage recurred, a second operation could not be done. I was in a quandary–do I replace or repair the valve? Then I could hear Swami's voice–*"Do what is correct?"* I proceeded to repair the valve, all the time surrendering to Swami, and making it operation by Him. The repair procedure was successful (should I have ever doubted that it would?) and the patient was stable.

During *darshan*, I asked Swami if I had done the correct procedure. With a blissful smile, Swami said that He was with me in the operating room, that I was His instrument, and that He would take care of her. And He did exactly that–the patient made a quick recovery and enjoyed many years of health and joy, blessed by Swami. Mohan and his mother had a lot of faith in Swami and surrendered to His will–and He rewarded their faith in the best way and in His own timeframe. My takeaway message is that one should work tirelessly and earnestly–but the ultimate outcome is determined by God. For me, that is the true meaning of faith and surrender.

Implicit Obedience to Divine Command

Swami often communicates with suggestions, symbolisms and indirect advice. There was only one time in my life that Swami was very direct–and He had to be, so that I could follow it implicitly and surrender to His Will.

I was the Director of the Heart Transplant Program at Temple University, Pennsylvania, USA. Swami would affectionately call me His 'coconut tree surgeon' because of my tall stature. At Temple, we had the largest heart transplant program in the USA. We had a talented team and received several prestigious research awards for our innovative work. At least in my mind, we set the standard for a good heart transplant program. In February of 1998 I was to travel to SSSIHMS for doing cardiac surgery. I got a call from the Chairman at the University of Chicago (UC) to come and look at a job opportunity to be the Chief of not only heart transplantation but of Cardiac and Thoracic Surgery. He called me on a Monday and as I was to travel to India on Friday, I told him that a trip to Chicago was out of the question. It just so happened that my cases for Tuesday were cancelled and at the last minute I went to UC for a one-day visit. UC is one of the most prestigious academic centers in the world. But at that time their cardiac surgery program was in disarray. The transplant program barely existed. I had absolutely no desire to move from the largest renowned program at Temple and start from scratch at Chicago.

I flew to India and got fully engaged in working at the SSSIHMS. The big difference was that my trip was a little later in the year, and Swami had already left for Brindavan, and so I missed my precious daily *darshan* of Swami. I was wondering if I would ever be able to see Swami during the trip. Swami knows your innermost thoughts. He sent

word for me to come to Brindavan and that He would see me on Saturday morning. With much excitement and anxiety, I went to Brindavan and entered the interview room. Swami was holding a group interview with several families and motioned for us to have a private family interview. On the way to the adjoining room, He held my hand and said *"You are going to Chicago. I set up a job for you there."* I was stunned since I had no desire to pursue that position. My mother and father who were with me asked Swami many questions. I must have asked Swami multiple times about the Chicago job and no matter how hard I tried to change His mind, His answer was the same: Go to Chicago. I pleaded with Swami, explaining that the program in Temple was the best. He gently corrected me–quantity does not mean quality.

They offered me more money and a promotion to stay at Temple. But, in the end, putting faith in Swami's words, I went to Chicago despite getting less salary and joining a far underdeveloped program. My stay at UC posed many challenges. The program was good but not spectacular. Every time I would get job opportunities elsewhere, I would ask Swami and His answer was always the same–*"who told you to go to Chicago?"* I often felt however, that the move to Chicago was better for my family although it certainly did not appear to be better professionally, for me. I accepted the situation as Swami's Will.

The situation at UC stated to change only after fourteen long years. The Cardiology Head of Transplant left the position to join our main competitor. Then the program was placed on probation since our volume and results deteriorated. We had always accepted very high risk cases and also accepted a certain number of poor outcomes to help a larger population of patients who did not have any alternatives. I began to change my philosophy on how to lead the program. We had been very focused on surgery and did not interact as much with other disciplines of medicine. The hospital invested in medical components to augment surgery and also invested in Advanced Practice Nurses and coordinators, and an entirely new infrastructure. We wrote and developed protocols, so that patient care was better standardized. We had to accept less complicated cases until the foundation was solidified. Then slowly we were able once again to do surgery on high-risk patients considered inoperable by other major medical centers. We became the leaders in helping Jehovah's Witnesses who due to their religious beliefs do not accept any blood transfusions. We became the leaders in the incredibly complex triple organ transplant procedures (heart-liver-kidney) done in a single operation from the same donor. Our volumes increased. Much of this happened because I set aside my ego and allowed a magnificent team of professionals to blossom. In September of 2021, I finally handed the Surgical Directorship of the program to a very senior highly talented Surgeon.

The Best Heart Transplant Program

I compared our program to others in the country, at the end of my leadership. Data from all transplants is reported by the SRTR (Scientific Registry of Transplant Recipients) which is a database of all organs transplanted in the USA and supported by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. When we looked at the July 2021 report, to our amazement, the UC Heart Transplant program had the best survival rate of any program in the country. In a historic first, we also had the shortest wait times and the highest percentage of underserved minority community patients in the country–truly a miracle! Never could anyone conceive of that combination being achieved. We were the best program

in the country–de facto, the world, since such comprehensive databases only exists in the USA. Swami had sent me to Chicago for a reason–*"Quality over Quantity."* It was achieved over 23 years; and as Swami would have desired, it happened just in time for the final report with me as the Surgical Director. My faith in Swami had kept me in Chicago. With hard work and more importantly, change in personal behavior and respect towards others, Swami had performed a miracle. Historically, it was the best transplant program in the world. It is really Swami's program, where He challenged me to face obstacles – and showed me the way to overcome challenges and conquer them.

Swami is Eternal and Omnipresent

The experiences I have narrated happened during the blessed physical presence of Swami. Without that close and personal guidance, I might have never found the strength to surrender and place my life in His hands. My faith in His words never wavered in the ensuing years after He left the physical form. We can all communicate with Swami–during prayers, through dreams, through signs or incidences that we must pay attention to. Swami might not be physically present, but He is omnipresent and as pervasive as ever. Let us be patient with Swami, for patience with the Divine is Faith. Let us listen to Him and follow His teachings and guidance with conviction. When we surrender to Him, we will realize that nothing will happen without His Divine Will. Our journey may not be as planned–but He will give us what we need to progress towards the goal of Self-realization.

Jai Sai Ram.

Dr. Valluvan Jeevanandam
USA

Dr. Valluvan Jeevanandam *is a Professor of Surgery and Chief, Cardiac Surgery, and Director, Heart and Vascular Center at the University of Chicago Medicine. Dr. Jeevanandam has performed over 1,500 heart transplants.*

Dr. Jeevanandam was one of the physician leaders of the transplant team that made history in December 2018 after performing two triple-organ (heart-liver-kidney) transplants. There have only been 25 such procedures done in the world, and he has performed the heart transplantation operation for all 13 done at the University of Chicago. His personal and professional life has been transformed by our beloved Lord, Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba who affectionately called him His 'coconut tree' heart transplant surgeon. He is an exemplary devotee with great faith in Swami.

What's in a Name?

In the Spring of 1971, we were a bunch of 6 or 7 young Western men devotees who lived in a rural house near the Whitefield area, Bengaluru. Though it was close to Swami's Brindavan *ashram,* it was still far enough that we rode bikes to *darshan* twice daily. Swami had permitted 5 or 6 western ladies to live behind the classrooms closest to His residence. Every morning, I would enjoy riding the bicycle through the green countryside to pick up milk for the ladies at a nearby dairy. With big milk cans hanging off on either side of the bicycle, I was literally like the milkman of Brindavan!

One morning, I arrived on the driveway near Swami's house. I was about to park the bike and deliver the milk when I saw Swami leaving His house to give *darshan*. No one expected Him to come that early, and very few people were around. It looked like I would have my near-private *darshan* because I was in His direct path! I had no clue what the protocol for this situation might be. So, I just froze in place, holding my bike with the milk cans hanging on my bicycle, probably looking ridiculously out of place.

"What is Your Name?"

Swami looked at me from a distance as He walked slowly toward me. This gave me plenty of time to have a gamut of rambling thoughts, like, "This must be my big, blessed moment. Will He say or do something deeply profound? I should ask him for what I want most!"

My over-excited mind then got tangled up with, "Well, what SHOULD I ask for? What is right to ask for?" I still hadn't sorted this out and was awestruck and dumbfounded when He so gracefully and yet inexorably came up to me.

Looking at me, He surprised me by asking simply, *"What is your name?"* Letting go of everything I had thought so far, I just said, "Philip Gosselin."

Swami looked at me as if thinking, *"What a most bizarre and foolish thing to say."* I couldn't get out any words or even organize any thoughts to respond as my mind stopped functioning completely, and He glided on. I was enthralled at being so close in such a casual and intimate exchange with the Lord. At the same time, I was mystified as the Master, by the most prosaic of all questions, had thrown a Koan (a story, dialogue, question, or statement that is used in Zen practice to provoke the "great doubt" to test and aid a student's progress) on the nature of desire, reality, and Self!

Understanding The Koan

Swami always emphasizes the importance of the divine name, but for most people, our names are more important as they are part of the identity we create for ourselves. That is probably what Swami refers to as 'Being is lost in Becoming.' **Our original Godly nature is obscured by the identity we create over time.**

Swami also says, *"You are not one but three– the one you think you are (body), the one that others think you are (mind), and the one that you really are (Atma)."*

Evidently, one of Sai's tasks is to undercut false identities of who we think we are and allow our reality to shine forth! That process was once jokingly described as going from seeing ourselves as VIPs (Very Important

Persons) to becoming VVOPs (Very Very Ordinary Persons)!

Names He Gave to Hasten Our Growth

Swami didn't usually refer to devotees in our groups by their given names. Just as Swami used to refer to His father as "Home-boy *(griham abbayi)*," or "father of this body," and His mother as "Home-girl *(griham ammayi)*," or the "mother of this body", He would often use casual or even deflating names for many of us. He did it perhaps to ensure that we would avoid our usual, overly elevated and self-concerned view of ourselves. For example, if someone was chubby and short, He might refer to them as *"Pakoda"* (Indian equivalent of dumpling). If they were tall and slender, He would refer to them as "Coconut Tree" (my wife and I fittingly once received this appellation). Others we know were termed "Dirty Beard" (for those with long beards) or "Lion" or "Big Head," for example. Sometimes Sai would occasionally express His love and care by renaming devotees. For example, Robbie became Ravi, Shri Ravan became Shri Raman ("I don't want to call anyone Ravana (a demonic king)," He said), and Wendell became Sai Wendell.

For the most part, though, Swami didn't refer to us by name. This sometimes evoked reactions. I was once in an interview with a distinguished educator from California who wanted to start a Sathya Sai University in California. Swami gave him a lot of attention then, but when he returned a year later, Swami seemed very distant. He thought, "He doesn't even know my name!" A few days later, Swami leaned toward him during *darshan* and said, *"I know your name."*

Whether He gives names or doesn't call by our names, it is always to ensure that we are distancing ourselves from our bodies and minds toward the Atma!

From 'Not Important' to an Integral Part of My Life

Let me conclude this article on a humorous note. In the Spring of 1974, during my second trip to Swami, I brought four others looking forward to meeting Him. There were more Westerners in Whitefield now, and some were taking on new Hindu names or of other traditions to signal their new spiritual life. One member of our group, Peggy Atkin, was enchanted with this idea, and she seemed to have Swami's ear as He spoke to her in the *darshan* line and seemed to enjoy mimicking her high-pitched voice. One day, she presented a big card to Him asking for a new name, to which He graciously and touchingly replied, *"Name, not important. Heart and love important."*

This was a profound message that bound her even more closely to Sai.

I couldn't resist teasing her that Swami had given her a new name–"Not Important!" However, she felt that she got the last word as Swami performed our marriage several years later, and she gleefully pointed out, "See, He did change my name to Mrs. Gosselin!"

Dr. Phil Gosselin
USA

Dr. Phil Gosselin *is the Chairperson for Zone 1 of the Sri Sathya Sai International Organization comprising of the English and Dutch speaking countries of the Western Hemisphere. He is also co-Chair of the SSSIO Archive Committee. He is one of the original Central Council members for USA announced at the 1975 World Conference in Swami's Presence. Dr. Gosselin was also a Founding Member of several Sai Centers in the Northeast USA including the Manhattan Sai Center. He had the great fortune to live in Prashanthi Nilayam for 2 years in 1971-72 and 1974-75.*

Professionally, Dr. Gosselin is a clinical psychologist and has been a Professor of Psychology at Union Institute and Director of the Behavioral Medicine Department at Franklin Medical Center in Greenfield, MA. He also previously worked on Wall Street for twelve years in the 70's and 80's. An account of his professional life on Wall Street is described in the book The Dharmic Challenge.

Sai, the Sole Purpose of My Life

I am a native of Kerala, India, and grew up in Hyderabad. Even though my father was a staunch follower of Lord Ayyappa (a Hindu deity), I was fascinated and attracted to Lord Venkateshwara (a form of Vishnu) in the renowned pilgrimage place of Tirupati, India. That is why upon relocating to Sydney in 2004, I searched and found a Venkateshwara temple at Helensburgh which became my Tirupati in Australia. Though I had lived much of my life in Hyderabad, I never knew much about Swami.

Phase of Ignorance

I married into a family of Sai devotees. I got a little exposure to Swami but never really understood what He meant. For instance, soon after we got engaged, my fiancé (who was in India then) called me excitedly. She told me how delighted she was that Swami had 'accepted' our wedding card from her brother, who was in Puttaparthi for a medical camp. Apparently, Swami had stopped the car during darshan and had sent a *seva-dal* (volunteer) to collect the wedding card from my brother-in-law. Swami had also opened and read it before the car moved on. I didn't understand her excitement. My mind was asking, "so what?"

My wife's family offered *arati* to Swami's photo during our wedding. We all sat clueless about what was happening. Then, when my wife came to Sydney, she brought a picture of Swami and put it on the altar. I was shocked because I had a magnificent picture of Lord Venkateshwara, and now she put a picture of a man beside it! But then, I thought it was her faith, and I must respect it.

In 2011, we received news of Swami leaving His body. My wife and her family were devastated by the news. I continued to be puzzled by their extreme devotion and attachment to Swami.

Phase of Seeking

My relationship with God–Lord Venkateshwara–was mainly about praying and asking for things, which He granted me most of the time. But each time, I was left feeling unfulfilled and empty, and I would go again seeking something else. Despite all my wishes being granted, I did not feel content. I felt nothing gave me lasting happiness, and I would return to square one again. This went on and on in my life. Then, there was a phase of contemplation in my life, when I started asking deep questions. What is it that really makes me happy? What will stop me from going into this state of feeling unfulfilled and empty and again seeking something else?

Then I prayed, and again I asked for something from God. But, this time, it was different: "Lord, give me something beyond which there is nothing more left to seek." I believe that was the turning point in my life, and my Lord gave me that beyond which there was

no more seeking–Swami! Looking back at this today, I feel this perfectly aligns with two quotes from Swami.

"I give you what you want so that one day you may want what I have come to give you."

"Seek that, seeking which you will never have to seek again. So, seek Me and Me alone. True happiness lies in Union with God alone and in nothing else."

Power of Reading Swami's Stories

Let me share how I met Swami. In 2012, my in-laws came to Sydney for a vacation and brought some books. One day when I was leaving for work, my father-in-law asked me if I wanted to read any of his books. To please him, I said, "Okay, give me. I will read on the train."

He gave me a special edition of the India Today magazine titled, *'Divine Grace,'* fully dedicated to Swami. After reading it for some time, I felt something special. Later I borrowed another book from my father-in-law– *A Catholic Priest Meets Sai Baba*. Again, it was an enlightening and inspiring book to read.

While taking my in-laws to the nearby temples, I found a Sai Center just 500 meters from my home! I took them there once, and soon it became a weekly affair! I became fascinated by the beautiful bhajans. I also felt that the people at the Center were genuine and unique–very different from others.

After some time, my in-laws returned to India, but we continued to go to the Center. Some days, when my wife was sick, I even went alone to the Sai Center!

Tryst with Divinity

Early in the morning, on the 13th of June 2012, Swami appeared in my dream for the first time. It was such a clear and vivid dream, the likes of which I had never experienced before. The dream had four parts.

Part 1: I was in Puttaparthi with a backpack. I saw Swami there with an old lady. She asked me why I was there, and I said that I was there to work for someone. Swami nodded as if He knew. His look was stern, but my heart said He cared for me.

Part 2: I went into a vast hall, where Swami approached me and asked, "Did I say I will give you something?" I said, "No, Swami." He said, "Okay, I will give you," and He walked away.

Part 3: There was a big basket or a bin. I saw Swami and others standing around it and watching me. I put my hand in my backpack and found rotten fruits! Swami looked at me as if asking me what I wanted to do with them. I put the rotten fruits in the basket. Swami and others nodded in agreement with what I was doing. (My experiences later indicated that the rotten fruits represented vasanas, or tendencies, I had experienced from my past life.)

Part 4: Swami sat on a wall where I conversed with Him. In the end, I took padanamaskar (prostrating at His feet). While taking padanamaskar, I could hear people say that, although I was there for the first time, I knew what to do!

Then I woke up, and it was 4 am. I could not believe what had just happened. In a half-sleepy state, I told Swami, "People say that when You appear in a dream, it is only by Your will. Now I need some proof that you really came into my dream. Maybe a fragrance would be a good indicator." As soon as I said that, I went back to sleep, only to wake up again with the fragrance of thousands of flowers around me! Then I said, "Oh, Swami, You actually came to me!"

Miracle of Sai

Swami says, *"Come just one step forward; I shall take a hundred towards you. Shed one tear; I shall wipe a hundred from your eyes."* My willingness to read and know about Him

was my one step toward Him. Since then, each day has been a miracle. He has taken not just a hundred steps but thousands of steps toward me.

If you ask me what the biggest Sai miracle in my life is, I will say it is the inner transformation He has brought. Swami says, "*When you said 'Yes' to Me, you gave up the right to be like everyone else. Then you will have experiences that help to purify you.*"

That is how He works, and that is how He transforms. I don't know what good deeds I have done in past lives that brought me to Him. I experience His love all the time; I am never alone. I always talk to Him, and He responds in His inimitable ways. He has become my true friend, guide, guru, God, and everything. In fact, He has become the sole aim and the soul-purpose of my life!

Mr. Srinath Nair
AUSTRALIA

Mr. Srinath Nair *is a finance professional working in Sydney, Australia. Currently, he serves as the SSSIO Regional President for New South Wales in Australia. He has held roles as an Education Coordinator and SSE teacher. He came to Swami's fold in the year 2012. Though he has never seen Swami physically, he feels a strong inner connection with Him.*

My Eternal Companion

From a very early age, I was attracted to seeking God's company, although I did not know it then. I often found refuge in holy places, and I would sneak out of my house to go to churches to listen to Evangelists or Christians praying or singing. Sometimes, I opened the doors of my home to Jehovah's Witnesses, who narrated amazing entertaining stories from the Bible. I was fascinated by the different paths to get in touch with heaven.

At school, when I was about 5 or 6 years old, during recess, I would run to a little chapel and sit in the front row, with my legs dangling because they couldn't touch the ground, while I ate my snack. The place gave me much peace and happiness, sitting alone quietly in silence. Time passed quickly there, and it seemed that the bell signaling the end of recess rang too soon. **I realize today that I felt good because I was with Him, totally with Him, residing fully in His presence, in Him.**

When I Call on God, He Always Answers

I instinctively and spontaneously asked God for help when I needed it. On one occasion, my little dog got sick and started to convulse. My mother had left the house, and my siblings and I were alone with the animal. The only thing I could think of was to bring down a picture of the Child Jesus and ask for help because I didn't know what else to do. He responded, and the little animal stopped convulsing and relaxed completely. Soon after, my mother returned, and everything was back to normal. **This was perhaps the first time I experienced the immediate response of God to my prayer.** However, there was no mystery in this, as I did not doubt that God would respond the instant I called Him.

There is No Request He Cannot Fulfil

I faced a challenging time when I was about 30 years old. One day I prayed intensely and asked God for something I had never thought of before. I asked God that I wanted Him close, so close that I could see and hear Him, that I needed Him to appear in physical form because He has the power to do anything.

A few days later, one of my assistants at work left a flyer with a talk by Swami on my desk. The brochure was among a mountain of documents for me to sign. When I found it, my heart began to beat fast. I read it avidly, sensing something important and sacred was hidden in those pages. When I finished, I asked her, **"Is Sathya Sai Jesus?" She replied, "That is for you to find out; I can't tell you anything else."**

My curiosity grew and seeing my interest and enthusiasm, my assistant brought me a book which she also left among my papers the next day. It was *Bhagavata Vahini*, written by Swami. I was truly delighted to read it, but I could not understand much of it, to my regret. After rereading the first six pages several times, I gave up and gave it back to her saying, "I tried to read it, but I could not get past the first few pages, as I could not understand anything!" My ego was crushed because until then,

I had consistently scored high marks at school and university, and my professional career was flourishing. So, what was it that I still could not understand? However, I felt **God had answered me, and 'that Person in India' was the answer to my prayers. I could now see and hear God as I had prayed and longed for**.

Slowly but surely, my life began to change. Over the years, I witnessed countless "miracles," and I share a few.

The Miracles of Vibhuti

One day one of my employees was using a pressure cooker in the kitchen when it exploded. The pressure cooker's lid broke the kitchen ceiling, and my employee's neck was burned. When I arrived, I saw that she had huge blisters and was in intense pain. I just said, "Swami!" Without a second thought, I put *vibhuti* on her neck. When I took away my hand, there was not a single lesion noticed on her skin.

On another occasion, at a friend's farm, one of her dogs ran amok and broke through a window, shattering the glass. The dog started bleeding from a deep gash over his nose. Again, without thinking, I said, "Swami!" I ran to my room, brought *Vibhuti,* and gently placed it on the wound. Immediately, the bleeding stopped, and the little dog recovered.

Recently, one of my grandchildren, a little boy under two, received multiple mosquito bites, which led to inflammation of his whole face. Since he is allergic, he was restless and upset with itchy skin. I applied *vibhuti,* and gradually the redness faded away. The next day there were only slight traces, and soon he recovered completely.

On countless occasions, Swami had responded immediately when I applied *vibhuti,* so I always carry it with me as my first aid. **Not once has He failed to answer my call to help people or animals in distress. He dwells in my heart, and there is no distance between us**, no delay in His response, as confirmed by the divine episode below.

Divine Vision

Several years ago, I had a little dog who became ill, and the veterinarian said she had to undergo surgery to remove a tumor. One day, I dropped her off for surgery, and while waiting at a traffic light, I prayed, "Swami, please don't let Jackie suffer. She is an extraordinary little animal; please help her." At that instant, I mentally saw an image of Swami entering the surgery room and taking Jackie away. As the traffic light changed and I started my car, my mobile phone rang. The vet called to inform me that the moment he put the dog on the surgery table, she passed away before putting her under anesthesia. I was overwhelmed with mixed feelings of sadness at her departure while deep gratitude for Swami flooded my heart with reverence. Once again, my prayers had been answered.

His Visiting Card

Swami told us that His miracles are *visiting cards* that inspire us to ask Him for what He has truly come to give. From the depths of my heart, I have asked Him with sincerity to be my companion on my path of awakening until I attained liberation. I know He heard this prayer, and His answer was prompt. Each of our spiritual journey is unique, so I can only speak of how He has lovingly guided me. Every experience I have had has been meaningful. **Swami is undoubtedly by my side in every step I take.** So, I have studied His teachings and practiced them as best I can, learning Vedic *mantras*, meditating, sharing my learnings, and understanding with others.

Study Circles

Study Circles have had the most influence on me. For almost three decades, I have coordinated Study Circles on Swami's teachings and scriptures from various

faiths. I have learned the importance of listening respectfully to the questions and comments of others. I have developed humility and patience. Above all, I am grateful for the precious inner peace that manifests as my consciousness, with a sense of expansion that often accompanies me throughout the day.

Sathya Sai–My Eternal Companion

Many texts have inspired me and even provoked tears of gratitude as I gradually discovered and understood what seemed unattainable to me. Among these texts, I pay special reverence to *Yoga Vasishta*, which I started reading many years ago, as it is one of the works Swami recommends to help us achieve liberation. **It has become my guidebook par excellence.** Each story, each explanation, has an indelible effect on my heart.

We live our daily lives more "consciously aware of Consciousness" with fewer distractions. When *Maya* gets stronger, we begin to "slip into the silence of Consciousness" (for us, it is like surrendering without forcing anything), which inspires us to continue our practice with determination.

Swami's quote *"Source not Force"* always accompanies me, and when my *Vasanas* get in the way, I remember that they are also part of Consciousness, for nothing exists without His will. Then I relax, quiet my mind, and think of this teaching *of Vasishta*: "Infinite Consciousness is immediate, the closest thing to myself, my own Self."

My understanding has been expanding. I am integrating the teachings to the extent that in everyday life, instead of judging or being uncomfortable, I often observe and understand that nothing in the manifest world is devoid of Consciousness. If everything is Pure Consciousness, why would anything bother me? It is only my ego that gets uncomfortable, so I smile and observe until I can let it go. **The challenges and obstacles I encounter are also a tremendous gift because I discover the attachments or aversions that distract me. Again, I smile, calm down and keep letting go.**

Only a *Sadguru* can guide us from unreal to real, darkness to Light, and death to Immortality. All along the way, I have prayed, sung, meditated, and enjoyed many miracles, but most importantly, I have been awakened little by little through His teachings and guidance! I know that one day, by His grace, I will achieve the final goal. **Thus, I am led on my path by the hand of my beloved Sathya Sai,** filled with gratitude and love toward Him. He is my Eternal Companion.

If your path is different, follow it with all sincerity since all spiritual paths lead to the same ultimate goal. **Trust Him, knowing that everything is as it should be by His grace.**

Ms. Esther Cristina Puentes
COLOMBIA

Ms. Esther Cristina Puentes *hails from Colombia, South America. She graduated as a psychologist from the Catholic University of Colombia and later obtained her diploma in Management from the University of the Andes. She also graduated as a Vedic Master from the Chopra Centre University in San Diego, California. She is an Executive Mentor and Certified Coach of the International Coach Federation in the USA. Esthercris has over 30 years of experience as an executive trainer for multinational companies.*

She met Sri Sathya Sai Baba in 1993 and was immediately inspired by His profound teachings, which she practices in her personal and professional life. She has held various positions in the Sri Sathya Sai International Organization of Colombia, including the Central Coordinator of Region 22, Zone 2B. Esthercris is a founding member of the Institute of Sathya Sai Education in Human Values of Colombia, established in 1989.

Journey to Sai Through SAI

In 2007, Sai devotees of the SSSIO, USA, Region 3 had the great fortune to embark on a pilgrimage to Prasanthi Nilayam to present a musical program to Swami, *"From Sai to SAI."* We hoped to offer this program to Swami whenever He permitted us during our scheduled visit from June 22 to July 5.

The *'Journey to Sai through SAI'* program activities commenced around June 2006 in the southeast USA (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and St. Thomas/Virgin Islands). A few dedicated devotees took the lead and planned the first-ever pilgrimage to Prasanthi Nilayam to unite the entire region as one big family. During the early stages of preparing for this journey, the devotees discussed the reasons for undertaking the pilgrimage and concluded that the real pilgrimage was toward Sai consciousness at an individual and group level. **Though a significant milestone, the outward journey to Prasanthi Nilayam was only complementary to the journey toward Sai consciousness which could be achieved only through the triple path of Service, Adoration, and Illumination.** Thus, inspired by Bhagawan, the pilgrims adopted an apt theme for the pilgrimage, *"Journey to Sai through SAI– Service, Adoration and Illumination."*

Preparatory *Sadhana* for the Pilgrimage

Subsequently, several activities involving Service, Adoration, and Illumination, were designed. We increased our commitment to existing service projects and took up new initiatives and medical camps locally. **We intensified our devotional activities by group chanting and special bhajan sessions to encourage increased participation at Sai centers.** We also organized special *satsangs* and increased involvement in regular study circles. Thus, after kindling the fire of *sadhana* for over a year, we finally arrived at the sacred abode of Lord Sai on June 24, 2007.

An Unforgettable Day

On July 2, 2007, the program began with great devotion and zeal. A few of us presented a large invitation card to Swami signed by all the devotees who came on the pilgrimage. Swami looked at the invitation and enquired about someone who did not come but signed the card anyway, **thus showing His omniscience.** I was blessed with the unique opportunity to record and edit the pilgrimage video and felt very fortunate for this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

With much gusto, we sang in unison, and the audience joined in by clapping in rhythm. The songs comprised an eclectic selection of English, Spanish, Hindi, and Native American songs, with medleys

and blended western music and *bhajans*. **Swami's countenance was radiant, and countless smiles lighted up His face making us happy.** The program lasted approximately 40 minutes.

He allowed the group to sing additional *bhajans* after the regular program ended. Flooding the hall with infinite love, He blessed the program participants by distributing saris for the ladies and cloth for white suit for men. Swami even talked with some of the people while distributing the gifts. Some people commented afterward that they were surprised that He allowed the program to be extended beyond the scheduled time limit since He was not giving long *Darshans* those days.

An Unexpected Group Interview

Swami called our group for an interview in the bhajan hall on July 5. Several people were absent from the interview because some had made travel arrangements to return early to the USA, while others went shopping or were busy with other activities. So, out of 300-plus participants, only 64 devotees were blessed to be present for the interview. I learned a lesson that during a pilgrimage, our focus must be **ONLY** on Swami because **He can 'call' us at any time, and we must always be prepared.**

Swami told us the exact number of devotees present in the interview. He said several people would be disappointed to have missed the opportunity for an interview, but **He told us to let them know, *"My love is with them."***

Then Swami started talking to the entire group, asking some of the ladies, *"Where is your husband?"* He asked one of the ladies first, and she replied, "You know, you know." Swami then asked another lady, *"Where is your husband?"* She replied, "You know, Swami, I'm single."

At this point, my wife Gabriela started lifting her hand, saying to Swami, "I am married, Swami," while someone behind her was trying to pull her back, telling Gabriela not to interrupt Swami unless He asked her.

Swami then looked to Gabriela and asked, "*What is your name?*"

She told Him, "My name is Gabriela." Very slowly, He repeated the word '*Gabriela*,' mimicking a similar word in Telugu *(Gabara)*, which means 'you worry too much.'

Meanwhile, a few Telugu-speaking people in the audience were laughing. We did not know about this until several years later.

Swami then asked my wife, *"Where is your husband?"*

I was sitting across her on the men's side, and she pointed at me. Swami asked her my name. She mentioned my name, and He asked us both to sit in the front beside Him. Then He asked Gabriela, *"Do you have any children?"*

Gabriela replied, "No. But I am very happy, Swami."

He asked me, *"What do you do?"*

I told Him that I worked for a cable television company, and He replied, *"You do other things."*

He had asked me the same question before in an interview in 1997, and at that time, He told me, *"Sometimes up; sometimes down, but stay there."* **I know Swami does not waste words; His words have a deeper meaning**. I am still trying to figure this out and need to go deeper to understand its meaning.

He asked Gabriela, "*What do you want?*"

She told Him, "All I want is your love." Swami made a gesture and told her, "*You already have my love*.

He asked her again, "*What do you want?*" At this point, she did not have an answer, so Swami asked, "*How is your husband?*"

She said, "He is good." Swami said, "*Very good husband*."

Culmination of Prayers of Lifetimes

Swami looked at me and asked, "*How is your wife?*" I was hesitant, and Swami looked at her sternly and said, "*You fight with him too much*." Gabriela promised Him that she would not fight with me anymore. At this point, everybody was laughing. As He was speaking to us, He materialized a medallion. While holding the medallion in His hands, He was pronouncing some mantras which I did not understand or recognize.

My wife looked at the materialization intensely and thought, "If this is for me, I want the chain to be a little longer." She then saw Swami extending the length of the chain. She saw this and had another thought to keep the thickness of the chain the same. Swami finished materializing the chain with a medallion and showed it to everyone in the Mandir, who clapped with joy.

Then Swami showed us the medallion and asked us who was the figure in the center. It was the figure of Mother Lakshmi (Goddess of Wealth). Then He pointed to the side of Mother Lakshmi and asked, "*Who is this?*" It was an elephant. But we were both hesitant to answer as we did not know the elephant's name. Swami said, *"This is Sai Geeta,"* and pointed to the opposite side of Mother Lakshmi and asked us the same question, which we could not answer. Then He said, *"Another Sai Geeta."*

Swami then told Gabriela, *"I am giving you everything here."* Swami gave the medallion to me so I could put it on her. After this, He signaled both of us to touch His feet, which I was not allowed to do in our first interview, although it was my sincere wish. I was overjoyed to be allowed to touch and kiss His feet. I got His left foot and Gabriela His right foot. I felt His foot was a little hard, contrary to the description by others who told me they were soft like petals. I remember this sensation even today as I write about this experience that I hold dear.

After we both lifted our heads, Swami put His hands on our heads and blessed us. He signaled one of the students to bring a container with *vibhuti* packets. He gave each of us several packages and told me especially to keep them with me at all times.

Next, Swami motioned for families to come and take *padanamaskar* (saluting the feet). When they approached Swami, He would lovingly ask them personal questions and enquire about their professional life. He waited patiently for each person to offer *pranam* (salutation at His feet). Swami would sometimes smile at the young boys and say, *"Come on, boy!"* He would also ask them their names, how old they were, and what standard they were in. After the men were done, Swami called the women to come up one at a time, sometimes talking to them about personal matters and giving them *vibhuti* packets. Afterward, Swami blessed a couple of large bowls full of *prasadam* of strawberry-flavored wafers, which the volunteers distributed to the devotees.

Swami then turned to the group and said, *"Are you happy?"*, "Yes, Swami, Yes!", "We love You," "Thank You, Swami," we responded in unison! Swami held up His hands, smiled, and said, *"Very happy."* **After blessing everyone, Swami advised everyone always to repeat, *"I am God, I am God. I am God."***

Everyone went out of the Mandir Hall. While we were outside, somebody asked me, "Do you know what Swami did inside?" I was a little surprised by the question. He then added, "Swami performed your marriage ceremony!" I had prayed to God to find the right person to marry. This was a long time ago, before I even knew of Swami.

I felt Swami rewarded us with the opportunity to perform our program in His divine presence since the group was united in doing service activities, *bhajan* practices, and *sadhana*. For the pilgrims from the southeast region of the USA, **it was perhaps the culmination of prayers of lifetimes. The Lord blessed us with grace beyond our imagination and filled us with boundless bliss.**

Mr. David Yoder
USA

Mr. David Yoder *was born and raised in Venezuela. He has worked in the Television & Cable industry for over 30 years. A Catholic school student who keenly studied different religions and philosophies since age 12, he saw Sri Sathya Sai Baba for the first time in 1994. He has been blessed with several interviews with Swami and has served in various capacities in the SSSIO, and presently serves as the President of Region 3, SSSIO USA.*

Christmas With Sai

I was barely 15 years old in 1979 when I first traveled to India with my parents to see Sai Baba. The notion of a Guru or 'God in human form' was alien to me as all my early life was spent in a conservative Catholic school. **My parents explained that Sathya Sai Baba was an Avatar, the Divine descended in human form, like Christ, walking on earth again**. They also told me that this isn't surprising because God incarnates from age to age when goodness declines in the world. Therefore, accepting Swami came easily and spontaneously to me.

True Spirit of Christmas in Sai's Presence

From 1980 onwards, many of my Christmases were celebrated in the divine presence of Swami at Prasanthi Nilayam. That was when I learned how Christmas should be celebrated away from the commercial buzz, feasts, and parties that are the standard in America. Instead, in Prasanthi Nilayam, especially in those early years, Christmas was a simple celebration that was deeply spiritual with the least pomp and show.

All the foreigners would get together for *satsang* and practice singing carols which would be sung in Swami's presence on the 24th of December, Christmas Eve. On Christmas Day, we would have the morning *Nagar Sankirtan*, marching around the Mandir singing Christmas Carols with lighted candles, ending in front of Swami's residence. He would come to the balcony in His white robe with a bright glow all around Him. Tears of devotion and gratitude would well up in our eyes as our hearts and tongues sang *"Silent Night," "O Come All Ye Faithful," "O Holy Night,"* and other popular and immortal carols. **It felt like spending Christmas in the presence of the Heavenly Father!**

Reviewing His discourses during that time, the insights Swami gave on Jesus Christ's life, proving His Omnipresence, always amazed me. After listening to His discourse, we would enjoy a drama related to the life of Christ presented by His students. Then, late in the evening, Swami Himself would give each of the 1,500 or more devotees a plate of food, bringing to life the lines from the Lord's prayer–'Give us this day our daily bread!'

Christmas Celebrations: Behind the Scenes

From 2005 onwards, Swami blessed my father, Mr. John Behner, with the honor of being the Chairman of the Christmas Committee to coordinate the Christmas celebrations by the overseas devotees, which had become a 3-4 day event. My father shared many stories about these events, which are recounted below. Based on his experience in running a large food company, my father organized teams of devotees to take charge of different aspects of the Christmas celebrations–decorations, adults' choir, children's choir, *sevadal* (volunteers), Christmas feast, transportation, rentals, audio-visual systems, photography, video coverage, reporting, and the *prasadam* to be distributed to the devo-

tees. Everyone put in their best efforts, but **it was, and always is, Swami who silently orchestrates everything, like puzzle pieces coming together**.

Here are some incidents that illustrate His Omniscience, Omnipresence, and Omnipotence!

What Does Swami See in Our Offerings?

Volunteers with artistic talents would lovingly make many greeting cards and offer them to Swami during Christmas. One year, one of the cards shaped like a Christmas tree looked quite ordinary, and my father felt it should be put aside and not offered. But at the last minute, he discovered that there was no card for the children's drama group to present their program to Swami. Thus, the 'rejected' card was finally selected! When Swami received the card together with the drama outline, He held it in His hand for the whole length of the drama! **It became clear to us that Swami was seeing the devotion and dedication of the artist and not her artistic abilities**. After the evening's program, the lady who made the card was waiting outside the men's exit, and she asked my father if Swami had seen her card. He replied, "Seen it! He held it in His hand during the entire program, which rarely happens."

Lord Sai Blesses the Children

Though my father was the primary coordinator, he delighted in engaging with the kids, telling them a story every day about Swami's childhood along with tips on how to behave during *darshan*. He told them, "If you ever see Swami point His finger in your direction, He is calling you, not someone else. You should get up immediately and go to Him." During one Christmas, the children were all seated in Sai Kulwant Hall, waiting to present their drama. Unexpectedly, due to a medical emergency of a devotee, Swami had to leave for the hospital. When the car came for Him to get in, Swami motioned to one of the children. The next instant, His car was surrounded by all the children. With great delight, Swami blessed each of the children with a packet of *vibhuti* from His divine hand. When He returned from the hospital, the children happily presented their drama.

Devotion Also Needs Discipline

Another Christmas, all of us were in for a real surprise. As the children waited expectantly to present the drama, Swami sat on the stage reading letters. Suddenly, He got up and left the hall in His car. He did not return, leaving us all wondering what went wrong.

When my father returned to his room, my mother told him that Swami had been signaling by rotating his fingers when He passed her in *darshan*. My mother surmised that it meant disharmony or some dispute was going on in the group. When my father investigated, he found out that the mothers of the children were all too eager to see their children perform. So they broke in through the entrance ignoring all instructions given by the volunteers about their assigned seating. My father called these mothers and asked them if they wanted to see their children perform. Of course, their answer was a resounding 'yes.' He explained to them how important discipline was to Swami and that they would have to follow protocol and directions from the volunteers. In the morning *darshan* the next day, he asked Swami if the children could perform that afternoon. Swami readily agreed, and the mothers behaved like angels that afternoon!

The Constant Evolution

The experiences during Christmas are gifts from Sai with the sole objective of our spiritual transformation and growth. He has also beautifully explained this process of evolution from the life of Jesus

himself. During the discourse delivered on December 25, 1982, Swami explained the journey Jesus undertook into Oneness with the Divine Essence or Christhood.

First, Jesus announced Himself as being a 'Messenger of God', where He identified the body as being given to him as an instrument for serving humanity, or as Swami mentioned, *"He denied the demand of the flesh and devoted His skills and strength to relieve agony and pain."* Then Jesus' consciousness rose to the level of the mind when he declared, 'I am the Son of God.'"

Swami continues explaining that on the last part of Jesus' journey, *"He strove hard to discover the distinction between Appearance and Reality, between Truth and Mental Image, and He became aware of the higher level of consciousness which transcends the vagaries of the mind. From that peak of intelligence, He became aware that 'I and My Father are one'."*

In this same discourse, Swami said: ***"Jesus was a messenger of God; but note this also, all of you are messengers of God. Jesus was not the only Son of God; you are all His children. Jesus and His Father are one. You and God are also one, and you should be aware of it."***

This is a powerful message that Swami gives. That is the evolutionary path that we need to follow. Today, walking that path for me is Christmas with Sai in Prasanthi Nilayam.

Mr. Eric Behner
EL SALVADOR

***Mr. Eric Behner** hails from a family of staunch devotees of Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba. He was involved in the formation of the Sathya Sai Center of El Salvador. He is the President of the Central Committee of the SSSIO of El Salvador and a member of the Sri Sathya Sai Foundation of El Salvador. Eric holds an MBA with more than 20 years of experience in Telecommunication. He is the Director for Business Solutions of Telefonica Movistar, El Salvador.*

Guru of Gurus

In 1975, my wife and I attended a public meeting about Sri Sathya Sai Baba in our hometown in the USA. We were awestruck hearing about His mind-boggling miracles, profound universal teachings, and the healing powers of His *vibhuti* (holy ash).

Divine Physician

At that time, our son was two weeks old, born with health issues, but too young to receive the needed surgery. We began giving him *vibhuti* regularly. When he was nine months old we took him to the hospital for preparatory screening for the surgery. **The doctors came out to the waiting room and told us to our elation that there is nothing wrong with our son, and there is no need for surgery!** We were greatly relieved and thankful. We knew it was a miracle and wondered about the power of *vibhuti*. Within another year, we were delighted that our daughter was born. We soon attended the local Sathya Sai Baba center for the first time. Though we love them now, the bhajans sounded too foreign to us then. We could not connect, and so we discontinued attending the center.

Even though we knew of Swami, He had not yet revealed Himself to our hearts. It was a sort of lukewarm relationship. But, when He established His connection in our hearts, it was in a very endearing manner.

He Touches our Hearts with His *Bhajans*

During those years it was not unusual to see a box of community give-away or recycle items at the entrance of a grocery store. As I passed by one day I glanced at the box, and on top was an audio cassette tape, *"Sathya Sai Baba Sings the Bhajans at the Fiftieth Birthday Golden Jubilee."* We brought it home and played the tape; It was as if the skies opened, and rainbows came out as we thrilled to the sound of His voice singing the bhajans. We played the tape non-stop for several days. We immediately began singing *bhajans* at our Center meetings; it no longer sounded foreign, because of the heart-to-heart connection. I played the guitar. We began reading anything we could find on Sai Baba. What I read I knew undoubtedly was true: that He is an incarnation of the Universal Absolute, an Avatar (God in human form). We realized that striving from lifetime to lifetime for Self-realization is for mortals like us, and **an Avatar is there to help us and guide us to realize our true goal and identity**. We began having dreams of Swami and experiences in meditation as our love toward Him grew. I knew He was God. We met devotees who had been to Prasanthi Nilayam, some for long periods. It wasn't long before we wanted to visit India to see Him.

In July 1981, we found ourselves sitting on the sands of the holy grounds of Prasanthi Nilayam with our eyes seeing the Lord *(darshan)* each day. Our longing to see Swami was so intense that no hurdle seemed too high. To come to Prasanthi Nilayam, we had to sell our newly built home, I had to quit my special education

teaching position, and we came to India with our children ages 3 and 5, intending to stay a long time at the feet of Swami. We attended *darshan* eagerly, hoping for good chances. We rejoiced every minute in His presence and joined all devotees in observing His every move. We attended talks for westerners given by Professor N. Kasturi and his son Mr. Murthy. We strictly followed the ashram guidelines by staying inside the ashram and eating food at the South Indian canteen, even though it was too spicy for our western taste.

"I Have More Work to Do with You"

At first, Swami paid a lot of attention to our children. We have many sweet memories of those precious days. For my son's birthday, Swami wrote the Sanskrit letter *'OM'* on the slate he held out. On another day, He blessed him with a plum. He tossed candy to our daughter. Gradually, Swami taught and guided us ever so gently and subtly. Swami's first look directly in my eyes came after some days in *darshan*. At the instant of His gaze, I knew I should resume my career in special education.

We were slowly being transformed by Swami, despite the physical challenges of losing weight from the lack of food we were accustomed to. We reluctantly came to the realization that we had to return home sooner than expected, but we also had the conviction that we were forever devoted to Swami whatever life may bring. The night before we left Prasanthi Nilayam, Swami came to me in a dream, and said, "You may be going, but I have more work to do with you."

With Swami's grace, we returned home, I re-entered the special education field, my wife began teaching, and we soon were able to build another house. We attended Sathya Sai Center meetings. Over the years, I had the wonderful opportunity and privilege to serve in various leadership positions in the SSSIO. By the late 1990s, we started annual visits to Prasanthi Nilayam for Swami's *darshan*, then twice a year during the 2000s.

"Follow the Conscience"

In late September 2000, the ten-day festivities of Dasara (Navarathri) were in full swing at Prasanthi Nilayam. The Human Values conference organized for educators around the world had just concluded. The organizers of the conference were given privileged seating in front of the interview room door. Being my first time sitting on the veranda, I felt an indescribable peace and deep spiritual bliss.

On October 1, 2000, Swami called me and a doctor sitting on the *veranda* for an interview We sat on the floor by His chair. He spoke to us lovingly, revealing His omniscience. **Every word and casual talk that we were privileged to hear were so precious that they were etched permanently in my memory**.

Swami enquired, *"How is your work?"*
I answered, "You mean, special education?"
Swami said, *"What is special education?"*
I said, "Education for the disabled."
Swami said, *"It is just bookish knowledge."*
I replied, "Should I stop?"

Swami advised, *"Two years."*

I felt that the 'bookish knowledge' applies to my work. I continued to work for another seven years. At the end of each year, I followed my conscience in deciding whether to work another year. When a retirement package of "two years" additional credit was offered, I retired. Swami's statement came true.

Swami said to the doctor, *"I came to you in dreams."*
The doctor replied, "Yes."
Swami then said to me, *"Dreams."*

I responded, "Many times, Swami." Swami motions to His chest, *"Not imagination."*

I had numerous dreams with Swami, but occasionally my mind would doubt whether it was real. He cleared that doubt.

Later Swami said, *"Body is a water bubble, don't follow the body. Mind is a mad monkey, don't follow the mind.* ***Follow the conscience***," pointing to my chest. Toward the end of the interview, He told me, *"You are divine."* In my heart, I heard, "ask for *padanamaskar*." I said, "Swami, may I take *padanamaskar*?" Swami, *"Yes, take."* As I was touching His feet, He blessed me.

Time has passed. In 2022, I continue to keep my connection with Swami, as they say, "keeping the coal in contact with the live ember." **I am filled with gratitude to Swami for revealing His Divinity and enabling me to recognize my own**, for bringing us into His orbit, for His teachings, and for the chance to help spread His message to the world through the SSSIO.

Dr. Tom Scovill

USA

Dr. Tom Scovill *first visited Swami in 1981. He holds an Education Doctorate and lives in California, USA. Tom is a retired educator who worked for 32 years in teaching children with disabilities and administration. Dr. Scovill is a member of the SSSIO Education Committee and also develops content for the sathyasai.org website. He served earlier as the President of Region 7 (Northern California and Nevada) of SSSIO, USA. Dr. Scovill has trained many teachers in Sai Spiritual Education in Northern California.*

Eclipse of the Ego

In 1979, I was 26 years old and immersed in a lifestyle of comfort and worldly pursuits in Salt Lake City, Utah, USA. I had dropped out of college and become a fashion model. My spirituality at this time consisted of praying to God and merely hoping to get "enlightened" while high on drugs. My life goal was to be rich and famous. Besides my shady, get-rich-quick schemes in commodities, securities, mortgages, and real estate, I was successfully modeling in fashion shows two or three times a week. I felt that I was so special that I would inevitably be "rich and famous." I would daily get high on drugs and thought that I was being cool when, in reality, I was headed inevitably toward self-destruction.

A Humble Prayer for Humility

That was when I witnessed something strange when attending the "Awareness Centre" in Salt Lake City. I saw a woman hugging, with great reverence, a framed photo of a man with an African hairdo in an orange robe. I had never witnessed such odd behavior before and asked my counselor about the person in the photo.

"That is Sai Baba, but I know you wouldn't be interested in Him. He's not your kind of guy." But I was extremely curious and interested! So, he gave me a book to read, *"Sadhana–The Inward Path."*

This book is not a typical book about Sathya Sai Baba filled with personal stories and miracles. There were no miracles or experiences described in it. It is a book of Sai Baba's core teachings on spirituality and the ideal way of life. I was incredulous that ANYONE would lead a life like this and assumed that it was written only for people in India. But there was something in it that I knew was true and enticing–living on a path where every thought, word, and deed was saturated with God's love. Somehow, I was blessed to recognize the divine source and authenticity in the writing, solely by His grace, of course. **I also received one major lesson from the reading. I was very arrogant at that time, and I felt that I needed to develop humility.**

> *"Do not hesitate to practice humility and obedience, discipline and compassion; give up pride in your status, wealth, scholarship or official position."*
>
> **–Sri Sathya Sai Baba**
> Sanathana Sarathi 1995

I prayed to Sai Baba: "Dear Lord, you have given me everything. Now I just need humility". Incredibly, I prayed for humility while high on drugs and camping alone in the mountains!

Coming Down To Earth

Sai Baba works fast! Within a week, I got a phone call from an ambitious man who was looking for investors for his new company, having to do with investing in gold and silver 'pyramids.' I had cultivated business relationships with many investors over the years in my commodities, securities, and real estate endeavors. I was excited by the idea that we would be getting investment money to buy gold and get the gold molded into pyramids, displayed in a beautiful plexiglass case on velvet. How spiritual is that, I thought! Everybody "knows" that pyramids are

"spiritual" … Not only would I become rich, but I would be "holy" no less! My ego was out of bounds.

At the end of November, my 'partner' vanished with all the money and the gold–including my own, my father's, and his friends! He was a classic con artist, and even though I sought help from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI, law enforcement authority in the USA), there was no way to get back the money. I came crashing down to earth from the imaginary clouds of hubris that I was floating in.

After all, the root word for humility is *'humus,'* which means the mud, the earth. I was humbled in a way that I had never experienced before. I was now scared that people would come after me for cheating them out of their hard-earned money!

Hope Beckons

In the depths of this crisis, I desperately wrote Sai Baba a letter explaining my predicament and asked Him what I should do. I mailed it to Him without expecting anything much to happen.

A few days later, my mother tracked me down in Los Angeles and called me. (This was in an era before mobile phones, and I wondered how she managed to do that.) She told me that she had received a brochure from the American Astronomical Society (AAS) to travel to India and see the solar eclipse. The tour would take us to Hyderabad in India to see the total eclipse and then visit the city of Bangalore. I had never known my mother to travel without my dad. Added to this, Sai Baba's *ashram* was in Bangalore! That is why I felt that this was a response from Sai Baba. I gratefully said yes to my mother, feeling very much in my heart that I was saying "Yes" to Baba.

So, in February 1980, we went to India. I packed an assortment of my favorite "recreational substances," and we joined the AAS at JFK Airport in New York City. The AAS had commissioned a photographer to go along the tour for professional eclipse photos and photos of the group of about 80 people. When I informed him that I was a model, he asked me to model a sari for him when we got to the renowned Taj Mahal on the tour. I looked forward with great anticipation to having pictures of myself at that iconic site in my portfolio.

We flew to Hyderabad, where the eclipse was in totality. It was the new moon in February, which, of course, is the night of Mahashivaratri. I was just starting to learn the meaning of it at Baba's *ashram*, where it was a time of all-night prayers, singing, and meditation. I went out into some fields in the countryside near Hyderabad to get a perfect view of the eclipse. I had taken some psychedelic drugs to enhance my experience, as was my habit. As the total darkness ensued, we were astounded to see a huge golden eagle fly right over our heads. I took it as a sign of Sai Baba's Grace. The eclipse was a mystical experience.

Back at the hotel that evening, as people were partying and drinking, I soon realized that the meaning of Shivaratri was being perverted. My lifetime's misdeeds and egotistical actions weighed on me like an anvil of shame. I was completely mortified and cried for hours. **Teachings that I had so blithely written off when reading the book *"Sadhana–The Inward Path"* became not only desirable but a necessary way to reconcile the mess I had made out of my life.**

A Very Special Journey

The AAS group flew to Bangalore the next morning. I asked at the hotel desk in Bangalore and learned that Sai Baba was nearby at his Whitefield *ashram*, called Brindavan.

At 6 am the next morning, I took about 100 Rupees, my camera, drugs, and a bedsheet

in my travel bag, and said goodbye to my mom. I got a cab to take me to Whitefield, Sai Baba's *ashram*. As we pulled up to the gates, which were closed, a man standing there told the driver that Sai Baba had just left to go to Puttaparthi! I was devastated and wailed in anguish, "Take me to the bus station." They said that the bus had left hours earlier and it was too late, but they took me there anyway. When we got to the bus station, the Puttaparthi bus was still waiting there and had one seat left for only 5 Rupees.

I gave the taxi drivers a note for my mom back at the hotel, saying that I was going out to the wilds of India to Sai Baba's *ashram,* not believing that they would deliver it to her because I did not pay them to drive back to the hotel.

Lessons on The Bus

A photo of Sai Baba was hanging in the front of the bus with a fresh garland on it, which gave me a sense of relief. There were no other Westerners or English-speaking passengers on the bus, just country folks, children, and chickens. At each village over the 7-hour trip, the riders who were crouched in the aisle would get off, replaced temporarily by a stream of beggars. I tried to give money to one of the beggar children, and the young mother on my left slapped my hand to put the money away. It brought to mind the injunction in *"Sadhana"* about not giving money to beggars. She later took my money to buy milk for a sick woman, demonstrating that giving food or sustenance was appropriate.

After a few more hours, my head was drooping forward with sleep and hunger when an orange dropped into my lap. I jerked my head up, looking around in surprise. Some girls with colorful saris and flowers in their hair near the front of the bus had conspired to pass the orange, seat to seat, to the strange American girl who was sitting alone on the bus! To me, it was a gift from Sai Baba. If He could inspire such kindness, perhaps there was some hope that He is really who He says He is–God incarnate. I ate the orange slowly, relishing it.

It was about 3 pm when I reached the *ashram* in Puttaparthi. I was dressed inappropriately for the ashram, so the *Seva Dal* (volunteers) wrapped me in my sheet and took me to the Accommodations Office. I was assigned a room with a mother and a daughter from New York, which made me think of my own mother, who I thought was unaware of where I was and what I was doing. The ladies lent me a sari, choli, and skirt, wrapping it for me and dressing me up just like an Indian woman.

The Sight of God–True *Darshan*

I excitedly went for *darshan*, with my camera swinging from my wrist, still wearing my sandals. There were no lines and few people there–perhaps four or five hundred in total.

Sai Baba came out onto the sandy area in front of the *Mandir*. He slowly came straight toward me, staring like a fierce Shiva all the while. I put my camera up and began to snap photos as he walked closer, oblivious that this was completely forbidden. Entranced by His intense stare, I never put the camera down but received the full force of His eyes through the lens. Time stood still.

I immediately experienced in my heart that He was a divine being, full of light and love. Although His look was intensely fierce, it conveyed a force of loving energy that I had never before experienced, filling me with unearthly bliss. It also conveyed the full aspect of all that I had become. It was as if I was a brilliant ball of light, covered with a thick layer of black sludge, like coal tar, which was my egotistical desire. I knew instantly that He was

God, and yet I was also God underneath the black layer of ego. I felt love beyond anything I could ever imagine. It dwarfed any idea I had about love, bliss, or happiness. It was the highest "high" that I had ever experienced. There was a profound sense of peace, and my desperate quest to get the usual "high" was instantly and completely gone!

After Sai Baba slowly shifted His gaze and walked on, I realized that the whole time, I had held the camera up to my face, and my entire *darshan* had occurred through the lens of the camera. After the initial embarrassment, I immediately thought that had the camera not been there, I might have been "fried" by His intense and stern look. A simplistic thought, but that is how it felt. I discovered later that out of all the pictures I took, only one photo had come out when He was closest to me and giving me the profound *darshan*!

As I sat, stunned, through the rest of the *darshan*, my mind kicked in, and I realized that my questions and doubts had been laid to rest, and the world was now a different place with deep meaning. "Now, what do I do?" was my prevalent thought. I could give up the world that I came from, renounce my life, my mother and dad, and stay at the *ashram*. Or should I go back to the world and try to lead a different lifestyle with my transformed self?

I dazedly wandered out of the *ashram* grounds and found myself on the hill of the wish-fulfilling 'Kalpavriksha' tree–a hefty climb up to a vantage point overlooking the *ashram* as the sun was setting. My initial concern was to figure out what Sai Baba expected of me now. Then, the old ego took over, and I thought about the trip I was a part of and my mom, and mostly about the opportunity to model at the Taj Mahal. I decided that I just could not give up the modeling opportunity! That being decided, I went down the hill to find a way back to Bangalore.

Checking at the bus station and finding that no buses were going back to Bangalore that night, I started to get a little worried and frightened. I had about 70 Rupees left, not enough for a cab ride. I knew that the AAS group was to leave Bangalore the very next morning for New Delhi and move on with the rest of the tour. Praying to Sai Baba desperately, I walked back into the *ashram* grounds. Almost immediately, a young man came up to me and said, "Are you ready to go back to Bangalore now? I have an empty cab and am heading back."

We arrived back at the Hotel at about 11 pm. My mom's face was contorted from crying, and she hugged me quickly and said, "I was afraid to tell your father that I had lost you in the wilderness of India!" **She was praying to Jesus to send me back to her and has always looked at my return as a miracle from Jesus.** She had not received my letter from the cab driver. Digging out my stash of drugs, I flushed them down the toilet.

Lessons on How to Live as a 'Sai Devotee'

We got on the flight to New Delhi the next morning. There, our group boarded two big tour buses for the 4-day "Golden Triangle" experience, Delhi to Jaipur, then to Agra, and back to Delhi. As the first day of travel progressed, I was impressed by a young man who was our "helper" accompanying the driver. At each rest stop, he would graciously help us down the steps and carry bags as needed while constantly wreathed in the biggest smile imaginable. He treated us like royalty. On the second day, I asked him, on a hunch, "Have you ever heard about Sai Baba?" **He went ballistic with joy, chattering about how his cousin had been cured of a club foot, and his uncle had been cured of cancer,**

and on and on about how wonderful Sai Baba was. He then said, "But YOU'RE no devotee of Sai Baba! Just LOOK at how inappropriately you are dressed." I did not quite understand what he meant, but he asked me if I wanted to seriously learn about Sai Baba and how to be a good devotee!

The young man, Pawan, took his job to heart. Each morning, when I came to the bus, he would send me back to the hotel to change my clothes into something more modest. He made me sit near him in the front section of the bus with the driver while he regaled me with passionate stories about Sai Baba's divine nature, His teachings, and His miracles.

Curing Ego with Ego-Prick

Days later, after checking into a posh hotel in Agra, I took out the fancy new green and gold sari, and I preened and prepared for my big day at the Taj. When we arrived at the beautiful Taj Mahal, we learned from our guide that it was 'Free Day,' which was every Friday at that time in 1980. On 'Free Day,' the locals can come into the beautiful grounds with no entrance fee and picnic or stroll about. The AAS tour photographer and I stayed behind the group and set up our photo session at one of the beautiful reflecting pools. People started to gather to watch, as it must have been an unusual sight. More and more of the dark-eyed men, women, and children watched as I posed and preened, and the photographer snapped pictures. The crowd started chanting "Lakshmi," the goddess of wealth. More and more people gathered until there was a sea of chanting faces surrounding us!

Looking out at the sea of eyes that seemed to be adoring and worshipping me, I was mortified with shame for defiling the symbol of feminine purity that goddess Lakshmi represented. I had just seen what true purity and divinity were in Sai Baba, and here I was, masquerading as a pseudo-celebrity. All I could think of were the layers of 'ego-tar' that Sai Baba had shown me and how unworthy I was of adulation. After getting into the cool, safe, and exquisite Taj Mahal interior, I started to laugh! Through the miracle of the crowd's adulation, Sai Baba had just cured me of ANY desire I had to ever be a model again! As a perfect closing zinger, designed to target my ego at its heart, the lesson was unmistakable, as not even a single photo of the Taj Mahal photo shoot came out! It made me laugh in delight over the blessed convolutions of the divine will and humor. It reminded me of the quote of how one can remove a thorn only with another thorn. **God had used my attachment to the ego trip of modeling to remove it from my life for good.**

> *"Treading the spiritual path is very essential because the effects of karma have to be removed by karma alone, as a thorn can be removed only by another thorn. You cannot remove a thorn by a knife, or a hammer, or even a sword."*
>
> **–Sathya Sai Baba**
> Sadhana–The Inward Path

We boarded the airplane bound for home, where I tried to figure out how to best serve the Lord, who had given me so much. I could not associate with any friends because they were all involved in drugs and alcohol. The vermillion mark on my forehead from India kept them away with one look!

I moved back to my hometown in New Mexico, and embarked on a new life, making amends with my parents for my earlier bad behavior, and joining the Sathya Sai Baba Organization to serve Him in any way possible. I visited Sai Baba's *ashram* six more times through the ensuing years, never receiving another intense

look, word, or interview. I guess that one was enough!

I try to follow Sai Baba's teachings and live according to the five human values. The ego requires constant vigilance to control. I pray, "Help me see myself and others the way you see, Lord, with the eyes of love." God has blessed me with a wonderful husband and two amazing children, and through His *leelas,* He has continued to bless all of us throughout our lives. I bow in gratitude at the feet of the Father, Mother, Lord God of the universe, who guides us all if we just turn to Him.

I serve in the SSSIO in any way I can, asking each day, "How may I be of service to you?" When feeling lost, alone, or sad, I meditate on the divine love He gave me in that wonderful moment of *darshan*. **I believe the amount of God's love we feel inside is directly proportional to the love we feel for God, in whichever name or form He is most treasured in our hearts.**

Mrs. Elaine Hausman
USA

Mrs. Elaine Hausman *lives near Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA, with her husband of over 40 years, treasuring their shared love for Christ and supporting each other's spiritual paths. They have lovingly raised two adult children. In 1980, Baba inspired her to dedicate her life to serving Him. She has served in the SSSIO since 1981 and currently is the President of Region 9 of the SSSIO, USA.*

By profession, Elaine is a bookkeeper and volunteers as an arts education administrator and treasurer of Moving Arts Espanola, which serves children with arts education in many genres and provides free healthy vegetarian meals daily to the needy. Elaine served on the founding board of the Santa Fe Youth Symphony in 1994–2002. She is also the treasurer of the Board of the Bodhi Manda Zen Center, where SSSIO retreats have been held annually since 1983.

The Many Miracles of Sathya Sai

The first time I heard of Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba was in the late 1970s while in college. Unfortunately, I did not take Him seriously and even made fun of Him, influenced by what I read in the newspapers about fake Babas who had cheated their followers. I thought Sathya Sai, too, was one of them. Additionally, His claim of being God in the Kali Yuga was impossible for me to comprehend.

Why Fear When I Am Here

In the 1950s and 1960s, I grew up in Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Brunei as my father was a soldier in the 6th QEO Gurkha Rifles of the British Army. My mother was a schoolteacher in the same battalion. Sometimes, when I played with my friends, there would be situations where we would need help solving problems or issues. I would remark, "Why fear when I am here?" to make the mood lighter. I felt proud for coming up with a catchy phrase without realizing that I was actually using Swami's assurance to His devotees!

From childhood, I have been keen on serving the community and wanted to become a doctor. But, considering the age limit, other technical challenges, and course prerequisites, I could not get into a medical college. My mother advised me to take up teaching as a profession and apply for British Army schools as she had. Though that was the last thing I wanted to do, I eventually took up teaching as a career and developed a passion for the profession. In 1987, I was selected for a teaching post in a British Army school in Hong Kong.

My experience with accepting Swami was similar to my choosing a career in teaching, although much later in life. Considering Him God was the last thing I wanted to do, though my parents had accepted Him as such.

Swami's Master Plan Unfolds

In December 1989, I got married to Sarita. She had faith in Swami as she witnessed Swami's miracles first-hand at her own home in India as a child. So, before she flew to Hong Kong to start our life together, my father gifted her a large picture of Swami. But I did not allow my wife to place that picture in our shrine!

In 1992, after a brief stint at the British Army School in Brunei, I was promoted and posted in Hong Kong, where my college friend, Urmila, became my colleague. She was a follower of Baba and encouraged me to read books on Swami. She even lent me some books from her collection. As I read these books, my antipathy toward Him turned to curiosity, and I gradually gained faith. We also started experiencing His miracles at home. Over time, with a small group of friends, we started holding Sai *bhajans* weekly. Urmila was instrumental in not only

introducing us to Swami but also teaching us *bhajans* and sacred chants.

Swami Grants *Darshan* in Hong Kong

One of the many miracles we experienced was in 1995 when our eldest son, Amodh, suffered from a very high fever of 103-104°F for several days. He was just over three years old, and the medicines were not working at all. One night, my wife woke me up at 2 AM, very worried about Amodh's condition. I promised to take him to the doctor the next morning, but she continued her prayers, holding on to Swami.

The next morning, we were in for a pleasant surprise. Amodh had no fever; he had fully recovered and was playing by himself. **Pointing to Swami's photo, the three-year-old child told us that Sathya Sai Baba had come out from there at night and gave him a spoonful of water to drink.** "Sai Baba went to each and every room in the house. Then, He returned to the bedroom and went back into the same photo on the wall..."

How could a child make up such a story and narrate what happened in such detail? **We realized that it was our compassionate Bhagawan who came, gave *darshan*, and cured our son of a high fever.**

Swami's Blessings can do Wonders

I always wanted a daughter, but when my wife gave birth to two sons in 1991 and 1992, I lost all hope. Then, in 1994, when we were living in Hong Kong, my wife became pregnant for the third time. One day, Urmila, my college friend and colleague, visited us at home with a handkerchief, which Swami had blessed. She knew we wanted a daughter. So, she asked my wife to rub the handkerchief on her belly and told her that Swami's blessings could do wonders. But we had our doubts and were not confident it would help.

Dispelling all doubts, lo and behold, our daughter, Surina, was born in September of that year to our greatest joy but much to the surprise of the doctor and the medical staff. The nurses then shared the reason for their surprise with my wife, that the doctor had told them in confidence much earlier in her pregnancy that it was going to be a boy this time, too. **We not only thanked Swami but also realized that Swami knows our innermost thoughts and desires and that His blessings can do wonders.**

When Swami calls us, He makes the Impossible Possible

In 2002, my mother was ill with heart problems, and my wife, Sarita, traveled with my youngest son, Ajitesh, from Brunei to Nepal to take my mother to the Super Specialty Hospital in Puttaparthi. Sarita and Ajitesh traveled with my parents to Puttaparthi for the first time. The doctors in Super Specialty did all the necessary tests the same day and were surprised to see that my mother was able to endure such a long journey with only 15% of her heart working. My family was blessed to have Swami's *darshan* before returning to Nepal. **We realized when Swami calls you, the impossible becomes possible.**

The same year, I had a strong desire to visit Puttaparthi, but a few days before I went to Nepal, I discovered that direct flights to Bangalore by the then Royal Nepal Airlines were discontinued. Although disappointed, I was determined to reach Puttaparthi via any flight. But to my great and pleasant surprise, on reaching Kathmandu, I found that Royal Nepal Airlines had just resumed direct flights to Bangalore. This was convenient for me because I was traveling alone and for the first time to Puttaparthi. I spent a few days in Puttaparthi and had Swami's *darshan* before flying back to Kathmandu. After reaching Kathmandu, I was further

surprised to find out that Royal Nepal Airlines had decided to stop direct flights to Bangalore once again. **This was when I realized when Swami calls you, He makes all the arrangements.**

Swami Feeds Birds in Brunei

We were in Brunei in 2009. My 17-year-old second son, Ishan, was visiting us from his boarding school for the weekend. As he was getting ready for breakfast, from the corner of his eyes, he saw someone standing on the porch outside our living room. As he turned around to see who it was, he saw Swami in His orange robe, standing and feeding the birds with rice grains, which we did every morning at the same spot. Just as Ishan called out Swami's name, He disappeared. When we all came running into the living room, Ishan described in detail what he saw.

Who says that one has to travel to some place to 'see' Swami? **Swami can give *darshan* to His devotees in any country, even far away, at any time.**

Swami's Protection is Forever

In 2017, I retired from the British Army school in Brunei and, by Swami's grace, opened a restaurant in Kuala Belait, Brunei. On December 1, 2020, we drove from Kuala Belait to the capital city of Bandar Seri Begawan, about 110 kilometers away. I always play Sai *bhajans* in the car and usually drive very fast because, otherwise, I would feel sleepy. So, I was driving around 160-170 km per hour on the highway. Halfway along the journey, I heard a slight popping sound behind me on the right-hand side of the car, but I continued driving. Suddenly, it struck me that, perhaps, one of the tires had punctured. So, I stopped my car on the side of the highway to check the tires, and to my horror, I saw that the rear tire was not only punctured but completely shredded. I wondered how my car did not go out of control, overturn, or even wobble at such high speed! It was the Sai *bhajans* that had miraculously drawn Sai's grace!

My next problem was getting the spare tire out because it was kept under the floor in the rear of the Toyota Innova I was driving. My poor eyesight made it difficult to insert the retrieving rod into a groove in a small hole. As I was struggling, suddenly, a van stopped behind us. The Indonesian driver and his friend got out and offered to help, saying that he saw us stranded and took a U-turn to come and help us! **As he changed the tire, my wife noticed his van's number plate (KH 7830), which surprisingly had the same digits as our vehicle (KJ 3087) but in a different sequence!** After he had changed the tire, we offered them some money, which they refused. My wife then offered some grapes, which they happily accepted. They told us they visit Kuala Belait twice weekly to deliver orders. We invited them to have free lunch at our restaurant during their next visit and noted their phone number. Though we sent them several messages via WhatsApp, inviting them to lunch at our restaurant, they never responded. And, to this day, Sarita and I wonder if it was Shirdi Sai Baba and Swami who came to our rescue that day in the form of the two Indonesian gentlemen.

Gold Chain Lost in Brunei Found in Nepal

In August 2019, Sarita had to travel from Brunei to Dharamshala, India, via New Delhi because her mother was seriously ill. On the day of her flight, Sarita decided to remove her gold necklace which was presented to her by my mother after our wedding. She kept it in a container on the dresser. After several weeks, she returned to Brunei and wanted to wear the necklace, but it was nowhere to be found! She and my daughter, Surina, both searched for it everywhere but in vain. Sarita finally decided to seek Swami's help through prayer and picking a 'Yes-No'

chits, as many Sai devotees do when in a difficult or unfortunate situation. Swami's answer to her was that the necklace would be found which set her mind to rest.

Two years later, in December 2021, Sarita went to Kathmandu to get some important documents we needed in Brunei. One day, she decided to sort out some of our suitcases and found a box in one of the suitcases. When she opened the box, she discovered a small yellow jewelry purse. In Brunei, all jewelry shops pack the jewelry when we purchase it in small purses with the shop's name clearly printed on it. But this purse had no typical branding with the shop's name. **She curiously opened it to see what was inside. To her utter amazement, it was the gold necklace that was missing in Brunei!**

How could a gold necklace lost in Brunei be found in Kathmandu? I believe it was exactly like how my faith, which was lost in my head, was found in my heart, through Swami's unconditional love and grace.

Mr. Rajesh Thapa
SPAIN

Mr. Rajesh Thapa *completed his Bachelor of Science at St Joseph's College in Darjeeling, India, in 1979. Then he returned to Kathmandu, Nepal, where he worked in various jobs. He completed a Bachelor of Education in 1984 and joined a British Army school in Hong Kong in 1987. In 1995 he moved to another British Army school in Brunei as Deputy Headteacher. In 2017, he retired and opened a Nepali restaurant in Kuala Belait, Brunei, with his wife, Sarita. In March 2023, they closed the restaurant and moved to Spain, where they are members of Sri Sathya Sai Centre in Madrid.*

The Evolving Faith

I was fortunate to have been born into a spiritual family that has faith in Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba as Guru and God. I grew up attending the *Bal Vikas* (Sai Spiritual Education) Program from the early age of five. Growing up, most of my weekends were spent engaged in bhajans, service, satsang, and other spiritual activities. We would also host devotees and spiritual teachers from India at our home in Los Angeles when they came to visit the USA. **I can thus say that I had faith in Swami being God even before I saw Him in physical form**. In fact, I was about 12 years old when I saw Swami for the first time.

The First Experience

My brother had the opportunity to speak to Swami during one of his visits to Puttaparthi, and he asked Swami to perform his thread ceremony *(Upanayanam)*. Swami graciously agreed. So, our entire family, along with a few relatives from India, gathered in Puttaparthi for the ceremony! Swami kept His word (as always) and called us in for an interview. In the interview room, He performed my brother's thread ceremony. Apart from the actual ceremony, I have fond memories of Swami's lighthearted jokes and Swami laughing so hard that tears rolled down His face!

During that interview, Swami waved His hand and materialized a beautiful silver pendant for my younger sister. She reacted in a totally unexpected manner, innocently asking Swami, "Where is the chain?" Swami immediately took it back and held it in His clenched fist. Then, He blew on it, and when He opened His fist, there was a linkless chain into which the pendant had been threaded! He blessed my delighted sister by putting it around her neck.

It was an amazing experience to watch this up close. Now, I got all ready for my turn to receive something from Him as I thought, naturally, I would be next. I sat up straight and alert in eager anticipation. Swami continued to speak, and I hoped that He would not forget that He had to give me something, too. That's when He looked at me and said, *"I sent you a necklace through your friend. You just put it on a shelf and left it there!"*

My mind flashed back instantly to a few months prior when one of my friends had visited Puttaparthi. I had asked her to get me a chain with a pendant of Swami on one side and Shirdi Baba on the other. She did get it for me, and I wore it for a few days before removing it and leaving it on a shelf–just as Swami had said! I was shocked! **This was my first trip to see Him, and I wondered how He could know something that nobody else knew**.

Witnessing His omniscience and omnipresence was reinforcing. I used to think of God as a power located somewhere far away in the universe. I now knew Him to be a person who lived on the same planet, in India, just a flight away.

Think of God, and He Responds

Years later, when I completed my medical college and residency training, I wanted to go to Puttaparthi and seek Swami's blessings before I started my career. I got the opportunity to work at His General Hospital for two weeks. It was an amazing experience, and **I learned the 'Sai way' of lovingly interacting and providing care for patients**. I heard many wonderful stories about Swami's visits to the hospital, too. A desire arose spontaneously in my heart, and I said, "Swami, I see You daily

in different ways in the hospital. Before I leave, I want You to come and see me! After this, I am returning to the USA to start my career, and I want this as a sign from You to bless me as I begin my medical career."

What began as a desire for me to have His darshan had turned into my desire for Him to have my *'darshan!'* But the heart wants what it wants. The next day, I was walking to the hospital for my afternoon shift wearing my doctor's white coat with the stethoscope around my neck. Suddenly, there was a commotion, and I learned that Swami's car was coming. I quickly moved to one side and, luckily, by Swami's grace, it was the side on which He was seated in His red car.

As the car passed by me, Swami looked straight at me. He saw me in my doctor's attire, smiled, and raised His hand in *Abhayahasta* (blessing hand gesture). The speed of His response thrilled me and reinforced my faith and awareness of His omniscience. **I realized that God was not just a *flight away* but just a thought away from me always!**

His Presence is Eternal

The year 2011 was an unforgettable (or shall I say forgettable) experience for all of us Sai devotees. Swami chose to leave His physical frame on 24th April, and it struck me hard. First of all, I feel immense gratitude that He allowed me to see Him, touch Him, and speak to Him–*darshan, sparshan*, and *sambhashan*. As a child, I always thought that the third and the last word was 'combustion' and not *'sambhashan'* as I could not remember the word. I realized later that when we internalize and see Him, touch His feet in our hearts, and have that constant dialogue with Him, He combusts or burns mountains of our sins, ego, and karma.

Years later, when my son was born, I thought that he would never get to experience those blessings–seeing Him, touching Him, and speaking with Him. Then, a prayer emanated from my heart for my son. In 2023, my son had a school assignment to make a presentation on any holiday that he celebrated in his country of ancestry. He chose Ugadi, which is the new year for the Telugu and Kannada-speaking people of South India.

After that day's school, I asked my son, "So, how was it? How did you do?" His reply baffled me, "Oh! It went very well. And Baba came to my class today." It turned out that for every festival that was presented, the teacher also played a relevant video with more information about the festival. After my son had spoken, the video the teacher chose just happened to be on Ugadi celebrations from Puttaparthi, with Baba blessing the devotees. All those present in the classroom had His darshan, heard His words, and experienced Him!

I realize now that He is everywhere and verily within each and every one of us.

It has been a memorable journey in my faith so far, from God being in this enormous universe somewhere to Him being closer, in India, to Him being the closest one, right in my heart!

Dr. Sridevi V. Upadhyayula
USA

***Dr. Sridevi V. Upadhyayula**, a pediatrician by profession, lives in California, USA. She feels privileged to have been born into a spiritual family and came to Swami's fold at the age of 5. Her first trip to Puttaparthi was at the age of 12 when Swami called the entire family for an interview, and she was able to have Swami's darshan (sight), sparshan (touch), and sambhashan (speech). She has had the good fortune of serving in Swami's hospital in India as well. Dr. Upadhayalu has served as the Education Coordinator and Vice President of the Sri Sathya Sai Center of Arcadia, California, and is currently the President of the Center.*

My Journey to God

Divine Memories with Sri Sathya Sai Baba

It was 1989–my first visit to Prasanthi Nilayam. I was sitting in the *large* interview room with Swami in the mandir. I am with my best friend Michael, and we have already received our first lesson from Swami that we must be very clear in our prayers about what we want from God. However, as I learned later, Swami had also planned a personalized experience for me. Back then, I had a passion for mechanical wristwatches and was fascinated by them. They were expressions of craftsmanship, and I admired these miniature works of art.

As I sat in the interview room, the only window facing the mandir's forecourt casually caught my eye. There was a clock on that windowsill. And it was not just any clock; it was a mechanical model that could be often found in almost every lower-middle-class household in Germany at that time, including in my parent's living room.

The clock was enclosed in a glass cover through which the movement mechanism was visible. There was a balance wheel made of a cross with four balls that swung back and forth when the clock was running. This clock, however, was motionless and appeared to have stopped working for some time. I was surprised. How could it be that there was a defunct clock in the sacred mandir of Prasanthi Nilayam, in the same room where the divine incarnation Himself receives His guests? I thought it must have been a gift from a German pilgrim, and Swami evidently didn't know what to do with it. So, it must have been left on the room's windowsill and forgotten!

It took me quite a while to forget my negative emotions and focus on Swami again. But after ten minutes, my eyes fell on the clock again. I was amazed that it showed precisely the right time, which I confirmed by checking my wristwatch. So, I thought that the clock must have stopped at that exact moment in the past. What a coincidence - I thought.

Another few minutes passed as Swami conversed with all His sweetness with another family that had also been called for an interview. And then the impossible happened. I looked at the clock on the window sill again and couldn't believe my eyes. Again, the clock showed the current time, which I confirmed by checking my wristwatch a second time. It showed the right time despite the mechanism being at a standstill! How on earth was that possible? I was going out of my mind and ready to scream to draw everyone's attention to the miracle! I could barely control myself and had a hard time waiting for the interview to end.

But after what seemed like an eternity, Swami ended the session after distributing a handful of *vibhuti* packets to each one of us. He patted my shoulder lovingly as if to say goodbye. As soon as we were outside, I rushed to the other group members from the interview and enthusiastically told them about my experience. To my great surprise, however, I only got confused looks because

I seemed to be the only one who noticed a clock on the window sill. Instead, each interviewee reported a different experience that I didn't recognize!

Today, I know that Swami arranged this little drama, especially for the doubter in me. After all, it was only my third day in His presence, and as I had to admit to myself, I was far from being convinced that God had entered my life. Still, by then, He had me hooked, and my wife and I experienced another magical Christmas and a very special New Year in His divine presence. **It was to be the beginning of a lifelong spiritual journey with our Lord Sai.**

Mr. Manfred Müller-Gransee
GERMANY

Mr. Manfred Müeller-Gransee *came to Swami in 1989. Since then, he has been a member of the SSSIO and has served in different positions. Since 2018, he has been the Chair of Zone 7, Northern Europe. In addition, he is the Chairman of the SaiCare Foundation in Germany.*

Manfred graduated from the University of Brunswick in 1981. He worked in education before starting an institution for management training and consulting in 1988. Since 2005, he has run a recycling company for electronic waste.

Miracle of Transformation and Gift of the Organization

It all began as a misunderstanding on December 8, 1989! I left home to go shopping in Milan with a lady friend of mine. Instead, she took me to the Sai Baba Center of Milan at Via San Gottardo! Disinterested yet curious, I entered the place and was struck by the prominent image of Swami on the wall above the door leading to the worship *(puja) area*. He appeared stern, which impressed me. Then we saw a short film on Swami walking among the crowd of devotees, and I remember thinking how strange it was that you could not see His feet. After the video, the *bhajans* (devotional singing) followed. It was my first experience listening to *bhajans,* and even though I could not understand their meaning as they were primarily sung in Indian languages, I appreciated the rhythm. At the end of the *bhajan* session, fragrant white ash, *vibhuti,* was shared. My friend told me that it had therapeutic and miraculous properties and, if I wished, I could put it on aching parts of my body, or taste it, as many devotees did.

The Miracles of Sri Sathya Sai Baba

Five days after this tryst with Sai Baba, my friend called me to share the miraculous experience of her classmate who had also attended the *bhajan* session. Her bone had grown over the instep, and she was scheduled for foot surgery to remove it. On her friend's advice, she applied *vibhuti* to the affected part, and now, she was all fine and did not need surgery! I also learned that my friend went to the Sai Baba Center to hand over her passport to the travel team coordinator, which was required for my friend to travel to Puttaparthi with a group on December 31. Before she left, she gave me two books: *Sai Baba, Man of Miracles* by Howard Murphet, and *Christ is Back* by Giancarlo Rosati. I read them both more out of an obligation to my friend since I did not particularly care much for manifestations and miracles.

But I was impressed with my friend when she returned from India after three months. She came to my house, and I was surprised to see her transformation. **Happiness seemed to ooze out from every pore of her skin**. She told me things I could not relate to then, but her happiness gave me tremendous joy, and I continued listening to her. She also invited me to her birthday party on May 22, 1990. She told me she had also invited some people she had met in India.

A Very Special Birthday Party

I went to her party, curious to see whom I would meet. The room was in a large attic with a very high roof and a large photograph of Baba. I ended up sitting cross-legged on the ground with about thirty people, which was unusual for me. My friend, standing before us, started reading a discourse by Sai Baba. Just then, five swallows entered from the window on my left and started flying over my head. I have a phobia of anything flying close to me, including birds, bees, butterflies, flies, etc. So, I crouched down to dodge the birds, but they kept flying silently in circles above me. I thought, "How strange, they are not making any noise!"

Then something inside me moved, and I felt '*He is here.*' This sensation, just like a veil, began to descend from my head to toe. **All my fears disappeared, and I felt a great calm envelop my whole being, at which point I began to cry and could not stop**. At the end of the *bhajans*, after the meal, I was eating a piece of cake when my friend approached me and asked me how I was feeling. I answered that I was okay but had gotten anxious when I saw the swallows enter through the window. She looked at me incredulously and replied that no swallow had ever entered that area!

It was Baba's "*Leela* (divine play)." I was stunned, like St. Paul on the road to Damascus. From that very moment, I became a devotee of Swami.

Joining the SSSIO on Divine Command

I exuded such joy in the days following the miracle that the words '*just witnessed a miracle*' seemed to have been etched on my forehead! I felt blessed like those who saw the apparition of Our Lady. A month later, I also had my first dream of Swami when I was on holiday in a beautiful hotel on a cliff on Italy's Amalfi coast. At dusk, thousands of swallows would rise from the sea, chirping happily, reminding me of my memorable experience. I dreamt of being in Baba's Ashram, although I had not been there yet. While He was getting into His car, I went up to Him and said, "Look, Swami, I brought my mother." He replied, "But I want you." I was amazed at His answer but did not understand its importance for many years. But even then, my life completely changed. New inner happiness helped me face every difficulty with fortitude. I was also inspired by a quote by Swami, which I kept framed at the entrance of my house–***"Be ready to face any obstacle gladly; only in this way can you achieve the goal."*** Many years have passed since that first dream, and my understanding of His teaching has improved.

Despite being one of the founders of the Sai Baba Center in Bergamo, I did not want to be registered as a founding member. Two years passed, and on November 22, 1995, I was in Prasanthi Nilayam for His seventieth Birthday. I wrote a letter to Swami asking Him to let me know whether I should join His Organization. During the discourse He gave that day, Swami said, *"The Organization needs people."* Those few words were enough to dispel all my doubts, so I became an SSSIO member on my return to Italy. I am extremely grateful to Swami for giving me the opportunity to serve Him. I am now fully committed to the Organization, which has given me the opportunity to grow.

Swami taught me the true purpose of life, which is to help others. **As years have passed, meditation practices, participation in SSSIO events, and the various opportunities I have received have made me love and respect nature and all creation**. And it has been a great joy!

What a challenging experience to put into practice Swami's advice to practice Ceiling on Desires! It was hard at first, but slowly, it became natural, and I was happy even with little. I was delighted not to have worldly desires because His Love is what I wanted most of all. I have had many beautiful experiences which have helped me grow within and allowed me to feel His presence constantly.

In retrospect, I understood the meaning of the *leela* with the swallows. Swallows are associated with spring–the rebirth after winter, and the number 5 is linked to the five human values. My work in the educational field is associated with the five human values, the SSE program with children, and the ISSE. I am infinitely grateful to Swami and feel honored because He took me by the hand and allowed me to have these experiences within His Organization. I am blessed to have the opportunity to meet Him and to be with Him in the interview room to listen to His sweet words. What a gift! I have been asked several times what the meeting with Sai Baba meant to me, and **my answer is always the same–a beautiful adventure, the most beautiful in my life**.

Ms. Cinzia Patrizia Lutti
ITALY

Ms. Cinzia Patrizia Lutti *is a human values educator. She is a graduate of the Institute of Sathya Sai Education of Southern Europe (ISSE-SE) and an integral part of the trainers of the Italian and European teams. She is also the Referent of the Sai Vivere Committee (www.saivivere.it) and the National Secretary of SSSIO Italy.*

There is Only One God–He is Omnipresent

Meeting Sathya Sai Baba has been the best thing that has happened to me in my life. After years of spiritual quest, I discovered in 2001 that a group from my country, Colombia, would travel to India to visit a spiritual master. Ever since I was a teenager, I had felt a strong desire to travel to India, which was finally coming to fruition in my 40s! Such was the intensity of my desire that I did not even find out in advance who was the Guru that the group would meet.

As I watched my first sunrise in India, in my heart, I knew that I belonged to this place. The place seemed familiar as I entered the ashram in Puttaparthi. It was as if I had always lived in Prasanthi Nilayam, even though I resided in Colombia! And when I saw Baba for the first time, my eyes filled with tears, and I could not stop crying. Although my mind resisted and questioned why I shed tears daily during my stay in the ashram, my soul recognized Him! **I could feel His love and compassion sprout in my heart–thus, I began a life of unending adventure.**

Doubt and Deliverance

Doubt is a major obstacle to overcome in our spiritual journey. Despite my experience during the first visit, I doubted whether I was doing the right thing. I was greatly concerned about disloyalty to my beloved Jesus and Mother Mary, to whom I was devoted from childhood. As I walked towards the *Mandir* in Prasanthi Nilayam, these thoughts scorched me more than the hot Puttaparthi sun. And then, it happened! In the sweltering heat, I heard a loud, clear voice as I stood at the crossroads leading to the *Mandir* and the Western canteen. **Standing at the crossroads of my spiritual journey, I heard the voice say, "THE MOTHER AND SON BROUGHT YOU TO THE FATHER; MY NAME IS BABA."** I stopped and looked around, but the streets were empty. My heart felt indescribable joy and peace, and I understood that Baba had clarified my deep concern. Right away, my path became easier and clearer. Since then, my life has been a constant miracle, as I feel His presence every day, with increasing frequency and intensity.

A Roller Coaster Journey

He is my Father, my Friend, my Comfort, and my hope. He is my everything. He has allowed me to understand more and more that everything is His will. I understand that the dedication and gratitude that I feel for everything that happens in my existence, for knowing Him, for His Love, sustains me and allows me to improve a little more every day as a human being. Among the hundreds of His *leelas* (divine plays) that I have experienced, the most amazing event that still makes me cry with joy and gratitude is the miracle leading to the birth of my third grand-

child. It happened in 2009, and the divine drama began two days before I traveled to Puttaparthi.

My eldest daughter, who was in the sixth month of her second pregnancy, called me. She said she had been diagnosed with Placenta Accreta, a severe condition that occurs when the placenta grows deeply into the uterine wall. I asked her to see other doctors at the Columbia University Hospital, who are experts in treating such conditions. But the next appointment was not available until two months later!

Praying to Swami was my only resort, and He answered by ensuring she got an appointment the next day! But then, the doctors advised the condition was actually Placenta Percreta, the most severe (third-degree) complication during pregnancy. It occurs when the placenta penetrates the uterine wall completely and attaches to an adjacent organ, in this case, the bladder! This was extremely dangerous which could lead to unstoppable bleeding.

The Omnipresence

My daughter was advised to stay at the hospital. I canceled my trip to India and decided to serve Swami by looking after my daughter, and I surrendered the whole situation to Baba. As His benediction, Swami sent David, a beautiful young adult of the SSSIO, to me. He was blessed to receive Baba's robe and lent it to me as I left for New York to be with my daughter. **Upon arrival at the hospital, I placed the robe on her belly, and after a few moments, the cramps and pains ceased! We both expressed our infinite gratitude to Baba.**

Is it any surprise that two weeks later, the doctors who had recommended that she stay in the hospital for the remainder of her pregnancy advised that she could go home and return to the hospital only in case of emergency? They were pleased with the improvement in her pregnancy but also astonished at the miraculous turn of events.

After a month in New York, I returned to Bogotá to attend to my work. I called the same taxi that had taken us earlier from the hospital to the apartment, driven by a man from the Dominican Republic named Cecilio (my name is Cecilia). He loved Jesus, and we talked about God during both journeys. When the doctors advised that my daughter be admitted to the hospital for surgery and delivery, I returned to New York.

Delivery and Deliverance

The name of the obstetrician in charge of my daughter was Dr. Divine, while the operating surgeon was an oncologist named Dr. Right! This was a highly complex surgery; 22 people were in the operating theater, including surgeons, nurses, specialists, and medical students. My daughter had headphones placed over her ears through which the sacred Gayatri Mantra was played throughout the surgery. It was estimated to be a 6-hour surgery.

Barely two hours later, the surgeon came to the waiting room and told us that the newborn baby and the mother were doing fine! The baby had been taken to the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) and placed in an incubator, and my daughter was in Intensive Care Unit (ICU). Though thrilled and joyous on hearing this good news, my happiness evaporated when I saw my daughter was in great pain and distress. I felt sick, and however much I prayed, it did not help. **I kept on repeating His Holy name and the Gayatri mantra. I surrendered to His will and placed the situation in His Hands.** I could not take it anymore and walked out of the hospital toward the subway to pick up my daughter's elder child from the nursery.

That was when I heard a voice calling "Cecilia." I thought it could not be for me

because I did not know anyone in New York. The voice called again, and I felt a hand on my shoulder. When I turned around, I recognized Cecilio, the taxi driver from the Dominican Republic! He asked me about my daughter and told me he would take me back home. I expressed my gratitude but told him I was taking the subway. He led me by the arm to his taxi, opened the door, seated me inside, and said, "This is my gift to you."

As soon as I sat down, I saw the fish symbol at the back of the seat, a reference to a great miracle of Christ. **I felt my Swami guiding me along the stream of life, sitting in the driver's seat. I was bathed in infinite peace, unimaginable contentment, and equanimity.** Cecilio drove me to the nursery to pick up the child and then dropped us off at the apartment.

The next time I saw my daughter, she was smiling–no pain, no distress! Needless to say, the mother and baby recovered well and are doing fine by His grace.

With Swami, Life is a Continuous Miracle

Life's experiences taught me patience, forbearance, and surrender, but most of all, they strengthened my faith in my inner Self, my inner Swami. He is part of my daily life and always ready to respond, guide and protect me. I remember an occasion when I was thinking about Swami's visit to Africa and dozed off in a waiting hall in Frankfurt. When I woke up, imagine my surprise at meeting the person who had driven Swami around during His stay in Uganda! I can go on and on but will never be able to fully share all the stories of His love and grace. **May we experience His presence in our lives at every moment, everywhere.** May we realize that life itself is one continuous miracle with Swami!

Mrs. Maria Cecilia Villamizar
COLOMBIA

Mrs. María Cecilia Villamizar *studied psychology at the Pontificia University Javeriana in Bogotá, Colombia. She has worked in clinical and educational fields in several universities and other entities for 18 years. Mrs. Villamizar also served for 18 years in regional commercial management and currently coordinates the Quality Management of a company.*

She came to know Swami in 2001 and has served in several positions in the SSSIO, including National Service Coordinator, National Council President of SSSIO, Colombia, and the Central Coordinator of Region 22, Zone 2B, for the past ten years. Maria is part of the team of facilitators of the Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Human Values in Colombia.

Mother Sai My Eternal Companion

My family's multi-generational journey with Swami began in 1964. At the end of a typical workday in Chennai, my mother's colleague mentioned that she was going to see Sai Baba and invited my mother to join her. Being raised in a conservative family, it was atypical for my mother to agree to go anywhere without her father's permission, let alone see a spiritual teacher. But on that particular occasion, she felt a strong urge to accompany her friend.

Face to Face with God

The moment she saw Swami, she felt an instant connection and knew she was face to face with God. Filled with newfound faith, she returned home to share her experience with the family. When she entered her home, she was greeted by anxious parents and reprimanded for returning late. My mother began to cry, explaining that she did not go to a movie or a club but to see Sai Baba. Seeing his beloved daughter in tears, my grandfather comforted her and promised the whole family would visit Sai Baba the next day. **Thus began the eternal companionship with the Lord and integration of divinity into our family**.

My mother, her parents, and her three sisters went to see Swami the following day. During *darshan*, as Swami passed by, my eldest aunt attempted to get His attention and began to say, "Swami." Swami interjected and said in Telugu, "*Telusu-ley! Nee shoes akkada petti, ikkada vocchi koorchunnaavu. Swami neetone eppudu untaadu.*" (I know! You have left your shoes there (pointing to a tree), and you've come and sat here. Swami is always with you.) He then blessed her by touching her head and granting *padanamaskar* (blessing to touch His holy feet). Even before she could tell Swami about her disability caused by polio, Swami, in His infinite compassion and omniscience, indicated He knew about her condition. To the family's utter amazement, my aunt was offered a position as a schoolteacher the following Thursday, giving her financial independence. She had suffered numerous rejections for employment. As a disabled daughter destined to be dependent, by His Divine will, she was able to support her aging parents.

Over time, each family member developed a personal connection with Swami. Free time was spent focusing on Swami, and vacations were spent in Puttaparthi. They joined the Sai Organization in different capacities. Eventually, the family became fully dedicated to Swami.

Thummi Flower Garlands

Back then, Swami would often accept and wear garlands that devotees offered to Him. During their visits to Puttaparthi, my mother and her sisters learned how to make Thummi *(Leucas Aspera)* flower garlands for Swami. **These tiny delicate white flowers are a favorite of Lord Siva**. The flowers had to be carefully plucked, preserved, and strung into a life-sized garland for Swami. The sisters were blessed with several opportunities to make these garlands for Swami during His visits to Chennai. Swami affectionately referred

to them as the "*Thumba Poo Sisters*" (Thummi flower sisters). Every Sunday, during bhajans at the Sai Center *(Samithi)*, which was in their home, they would make a life-size garland for the altar. To them, the act of making garlands was service *(seva)*, expressing their devotion (*bhakti*), and spiritual practice *(sadhana)*. During bhajans, they not only felt His presence but also witnessed several miracles and materializations.

While my mother and her sisters devoted their lives to Swami, my grandmother did everything to support them so that they could focus on their devotion. She ensured that every family member was fed and taken care of. After her household duties were completed, she too participated in the garland making. Once during Swami's visit to Chennai, He sent for my mother to come to the prayer room of the residence where He was staying. As she watched Swami being garlanded with the Thummi flower garland she and her sisters made, she heard Swami tell the other devotees, *"Idi yemo telusaa? Thummi poolu. Shivudiki preeti."* (Do you know what this is? Thummi flowers. Lord Shiva is very fond of them.) Swami then materialized *vibhuti* for her and blessed her with *padanamaskar*. Such is the joy of living in the light and love of Mother Sai.

My Connection with Swami

Growing up with stories of my family's dedication and devotion inspired and accelerated my spiritual journey. My first recollection of Swami is seeing Him at *darshan* in Chennai as a child in the early 1980s. As Swami was gently gliding across a sea of devotees, it felt like He, who is beyond time, moved in slow motion. **I witnessed His playfulness, love, humanness, and divinity embodied into one beautiful form**. Even at that age, I knew He was God and that I could have a personal relationship with Him.

Some of my fondest childhood memories are going to my grandparents' home for bhajans with my parents every weekend. That sparked my love of bhajans. My mother had enrolled me in *Balvikas* (Sai Spiritual Education or SSE) classes held in the house where Swami stayed while visiting Chennai in the 60s.

Joining Swami's College

Every year in May, devotees from Chennai were given the opportunity to volunteer for various services in Prasanthi Nilayam. One year, I accompanied my mother as a young adult and met some students of the Anantapur campus (Swami's college for women). I was amazed and inspired by the prospect of close *darshan* and guidance from Swami while getting an education. My strong desire to become a Sai student prompted me to write a letter to Swami. As He stood before me, I could hand Him my letter and bow at His feet. Shortly after, I applied and was accepted to Junior College (11th grade). However, I was so homesick that I returned home after just two weeks. Determined to join Swami's educational institution, I reapplied for the undergraduate program.

Swami's Love and Omniscience

By His grace, I was accepted on my second attempt but was, once again, homesick. This time, my mother convinced me to hold on to my dreams and surrender to Swami. She explained that she could only be there for me when she was nearby, but Swami was ever-present and always ready to come to my aid. It took the unconditional love of my mortal mother to lead me to the unconditional love of our eternal Mother. That same afternoon Swami showed His divinity to me in a mysterious way during the Summer Course in Brindavan.

Before the evening *darshan*, Swami sent for the women students and staff so He could bless us with sarees. Usually, Swami

also allows for *padanamaskar,* but on this occasion, we were asked not to take *padanamaskar*. We were all very disappointed, but I devised a plan to get my *padanamaskar*. The plan was while Swami would hand me the saree, I would "accidentally" drop it. Then, while picking up the saree, I would sneakily take *padanamaskar*. I was all set with my scheme, and my turn came soon. But our dear Lord had His own plans. As Swami handed me the saree, He just wouldn't let go! As we had our mini tug-of-war, it was not until our eyes met that I noticed He was teasing me! How foolish of me to try to outmaneuver the Lord, only to be outsmarted! Although I felt I did not receive what I wanted, **I was rewarded with an even more profound lesson and a blessing: He knows everything, and I am never alone**.

Two months later, during Guru Poornima celebrations in Prasanthi Nilayam, I was seated in the front row with a tray of toffees and sanctified rice *(akshatas)* for my birthday blessings. Swami came out from the mandir and walked over to us. He allowed me to take *padanamaskar* and blessed me with sanctified rice. He stated matter-of-factly, in our family's Tamil dialect, *"Appa, Amma vandirukkaalaa? Good Morning sollu!"* (Mother and father have come? Say Good Morning to them.) I was puzzled and had no idea what Swami was talking about. After *darshan*, as I was leaving the mandir, to my utter disbelief, I saw my parents standing near the coconut trees with their luggage! They had decided to come and surprise me for my birthday, not knowing that Swami had let the cat out of the bag!

Over the next three years of my stay at the Anantapur Campus, I was fortunate to witness glimpses of His omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence.

The First Ladies' Day

The first Ladies' Day celebration in Prasanthi Nilayam in 1995 was momentous. It was held during my graduation, and it especially opened my eyes to the capability and leadership of women in the Sai Organization. **As Swami emphasized the importance of women in spirituality and society, I realized the importance of living a life that embodies Sai values**. Swami also gave me an opportunity to impart what I learned at His lotus feet to my children. My daughter, the fourth generation of Sai devotees in our family, has found her connection to Swami through teaching SSE, service projects, and working in healthcare

As I narrate and relive these experiences, my companionship with our dear Lord strengthens and deepens, as it is eternal.

Ms. Anu Venkateswaran
USA

Ms. Anu Venkateswara*n hails from a family that has been in Swami's fold since the 1960s. She attended and graduated from Balvikas (SSE) in Chennai, India. She graduated from the Anantapur campus of Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning. Currently, she is the SSSIO USA Region 3 Devotional Coordinator and serves as the President of the Northeast Atlanta Sai Center in the USA, where she also teaches Group 4 SSE.*

Buddha on Buddhi

in an interview in the late 1990s, Swami said to me, *"In Thailand, the Buddhists think I am just a monk."* Of course, we devotees know that Swami is not a monk. He is much more than a monk. He is the primeval Buddha. In this article, I would like to share with you the universal message of Gautama Buddha in light of Swami's teachings.

At one time, Swami asked me, *"What is the highest knowledge?"* I replied, "Practical knowledge." He then probed deeper, *"How do you get to practical knowledge?"* And He offered the answer as well, "By discrimination." *Buddhi* is discrimination. Buddha only imparts *buddhi* in order to remove ignorance. I heard that Swami had said to a Buddhist devotee, "Buddha is my gift to the world." So, I repeated this quote in His Divine presence in my talk during *Buddha Poornima* celebration, and Swami graciously acknowledged it.

Whenever an *Avatar* (Divine Incarnation) comes, He gives new insights to ancient teachings and scriptures, making them simple and easy to understand.

If you look deeper into the teachings of the Buddha, as expounded by Swami, another consistent theme emerges. Here is a Buddhist prayer which Swami explained beautifully. *"Buddham Sharanam Gacchami"* and continued with *"Dharmam Sharanam Gacchami,"* and *"Sangham Sharanam Gacchami."* But Swami had the order differently. He said that Buddha declared first, *"Buddham Sharanam Gacchami"*; meaning, I take refuge in *buddhi*, intellect, or discrimination. Then He said later, in the second stage, if discrimination is at an individual level, it often tends to be selfish. Swami said, the Buddha later declared the second stage, *"Sangham Sharanam Gacchami"*; meaning let me take refuge in society, in the *sangham*, in the community.

On another occasion, I asked, "Swami, how can we change or transform the mind?" Being a psychiatrist, I was eager to hear His answer, because nobody has given me a satisfactory answer to the question. Swami looked at me quietly, kind of innocently, and said, *"It is very simple. It is very simple–by discrimination."* And then He added, *"But it has to be fundamental discrimination, not individual discrimination."* Individual discrimination is whether something is good for me or not. Whereas fundamental discrimination according to Swami, is whether it is for the good of all, good for society. Only when you have fundamental discrimination will you be able to transform the mind. That's how He explained this point.

Once He told me to practice detachment. I still remember that I thought at the time that He meant, by giving up attachment to the world. I thought that I am not ready to do that yet. As if reading my thoughts, He said *"No, no, no! Detachment is 'deep attachment to God;' 'De–tachment' means deep attachment to God."* And then He said, *"What is attachment? Attachment is detachment from God."* It's very simple, but at the same time, very profound.

Swami loved to tell the stories of Buddha, especially about how Buddha was abused and the lessons He taught by His responses to the abuses.

Number one, when Buddha was abused, He did not react or accept it. Swami narrated the story about Buddha going to a village, where He was abused by the villagers since they disliked Him. Buddha in turn would only smile at hearing the

abuses and asked them, "If a beggar comes seeking alms from you, and you offer food, but the beggar refuses to accept the food, to whom does the food belong? The villagers acknowledged that it would remain with the giver. Then Buddha said, "The same thing happens to all the abuses hurled toward Me. I do not accept them. So where do they go? They will remain with you. They return to the abuser."

This is the first response of Buddha, and this is so prevalent in today's world of social media. Having been a Minister for five years, I have experienced this so many times in social media. So, my first response is that I do not read the chatter in social media, and that I stopped seeing them to keep my sanity. When people say bad things, one should not accept it. Then it goes back to the people who say them. This is the first response.

The second response is what Swami often illustrated with another story of Buddha. He said that at one time Buddha was sitting under the Bodhi tree and His disciples were seated around and praising Him. But other people were also gathered, who were abusive toward Him saying bad things about Him. Again, Buddha's response was a gentle smile. The disciples on the other hand were irate and wanted to beat up the abusers. But Buddha forbade them and said not to resort to violence and told them, "Just as you get joy by praising Me they too get joy and satisfaction by abusing Me. Thus, both sides are getting joy. I have been given the opportunity to serve by giving joy to all of you."

As Swami says, whenever somebody says bad things about you–number one, do not accept it, and number two, you should rejoice knowing that you are actually making them happy and giving them satisfaction. This means that you have the opportunity to do *seva* (service). The third response is very deep, and at the spiritual level. If you analyze this situation, the first response arises from the physical (worldly) level, and the second response is coming from the mental level.

When you change your perspective, you will recognize that the third response comes from the understanding and ultimate realization that we are all one. The Buddha says the abuser and the abused persons are one and the same. They all have the same essence of Divinity. They are all God, and therefore nobody can abuse another person, because all are one. There is no other. This is Swami's favorite teaching on the Buddha.

Swami said in a way that encapsulates the essence of the Buddha's teaching and His teaching for us in two simple terms, "We should have peace within and love without." The essence of *Buddham Sharanam Gacchami, Sangham Sharanam Gacchami,* and *Dharmam Sharanam Gacchami* can be summarized as peace within and love without, just as He summarized all the *Vedas* (scriptures) in a few profound words–***"Help ever, hurt never."***

When we sing *Buddham Sharanam Gacchami*, we always end with *Sayeesha Sharanam Gacchami*, we take refuge in Sai!

Sai Ram.

Dr. Teerakiat Jareonsattasin
THAILAND

Dr. Teerakiat Jareonsattasin is a long-time devotee of Sri Sathya Sai Baba. He was a Central Coordinator of the SSSIO in the late 1990s. He is presently the President of the Sathya Sai Foundation, Thailand.

A medical doctor by training, Dr. Teerakiat Jareonsattasin worked as a Child Psychiatrist in the UK. In 2016 he was appointed as the Minister of Education, Thailand. He received the Royal Decoration: 'Knight Grand Cordon of the Most Noble Order of the Crown of Thailand' in 2021. He was the 'Gusi Peace Prize Laureate' in 2019, which is a prestigious award for distinguished contributions to public service. He also holds an Honorary Doctorate in computer engineering.

Welcoming Sai into Greek Hearts and Homes

It was in July 1981 that several of us gathered at the home of Mary Tambourlou in Athens and felt that we should create an association named after Sathya Sai Baba. Since Swami had often granted interviews to Mary, she was requested to convey our proposal to Him. Mary agreed and left for India.

On July 25 or 26, 1981, Swami granted her an interview. Just as Mary started conveying the devotees' wish to establish a Sai Center in Athens, Swami interrupted and told her, *"Yes, yes, you will be doing My work!* ***Don't be afraid. I will always be by your side to support your every effort. I will send you worthy devotees to help you****."*

Swami then assured her that He would send people who would help meet all financial needs to start a center. He instructed the devotees to gather for bhajans every Thursday at her home. And then came a wonderful promise, *"After bhajans, I will come in your dream at night to bless and guide."*

Mary sat at His feet, overwhelmed, with her palms joined in prayerful reverence. Unexpectedly, Swami grasped her folded palms with His divine hands and, looking lovingly at her, said, *"These two hands, I trust!"*

For two years after that, we followed Swami's instructions in Greece, and He kept His word of regularly guiding us through Mary's dreams.

Swami Dances in My Heart

When Swami granted her the second interview in July 1981, I, too, was called in along with my sister, Christina. He asked Mary to meet Sri Indulal Shah, the President of the Sathya Sai Organization at that time, to discuss the establishment of the organization in Greece. He also told me to help and support Mary.

Mary asked Him how she should select and accept people who wished to join the group. **He assured her He would instruct her in His own way and guide her from within**. Then, He asked us to write down our questions and that He would answer them when He saw us again.

After this private interview, we went back to the main room. Mary and Christina sat at Swami's feet while I sat behind. Swami said, *"Come, sit closer to your sister."* I went forward and sat near Him.

He asked me, *"How are you?"*

"Very well, Swami," I answered.

"What do you want?"

Though I had often wondered what I should ask from Swami, my mind went blank! I just looked at Him with love and did not answer.

"Do you want Swami?" He asked.

"Yes, of course!" I answered.

As He spoke to an Indian lady, He suddenly moved His hand in a circular motion. *"Here*

it is! Yes, it's all gold, together with the chain," He said.

He showed it to everyone in the room. It was a rectangular gold pendant with Swami's face in enamel. He showed it to Mary and asked, *"Are you jealous?"*

"I am never jealous," she replied.

"Jealousy is a very bad quality," **Swami observed.**

"Come here," He beckoned to me. I was stunned. Thoughts sped in my mind. "Is it possible? Is this for me? My God, thank You!"

I went closer to Him, and He passed it around my neck. *"Swami is dancing in her heart,"* He said to Mary.

Then, He gave packets of *vibhuti* (sacred ash) to all of us as we left the room, enchanted by the divine Presence. Swami also lovingly permitted us to attend *bhajans* in the *bhajan* hall, seated behind His 'sister,' Venkamma.

Experiencing Sai Krishna at Brindavan

On August 7, 1981, the entire Greek group enjoyed morning *darshan* from the front row, and I got a chance to bow at His lotus feet. Even as we rejoiced, we got the news that Swami was suddenly leaving for His *ashram* in Whitefield. We panicked, quickly locked all our belongings in Verena's kitchen, and started off in the car of an Indian friend hosting us in Bangalore.

The next morning, we went to the *ashram* for *darshan* and sat under the big tree in the pristine open grounds. Mary was seated in a chair. We saw Swami approach her and talk to her. Later, she told us that Swami enquired about us, and she told Him that Christina had pain in her legs. Swami advised, *"Bring your friend with the girl and stay in My hostel."*

What joyous news! The next day, we moved to the hostel next to Baba's College. That afternoon, Swami told Mary, *"After darshan, the three of you come to My house for evening satsang and bhajans."*

And that was how we entered our God's house! We were happy beyond our imagination, though I felt the other Greek devotees should also be granted that blessing.

On August 12, Swami called the three of us for another interview. He started speaking about Christina, *"In Puttaparthi, she walked a lot to go to the conference, and her legs hurt. Now she is walking all the way from the hostel! The three of you come and stay at Swami's house. You will always be close to Swami and will see Him ceaselessly!"*

We lost our minds, overwhelmed by His love, compassion, and attention! Mary asked if we could be at His house for bhajans again in the afternoon, and He answered, *"Why not? Come to My house every afternoon. You are My guests."*

He also promised to speak to us again!

The Perfect Host

We entered the small apartment right beside Swami's home. It was spartan and empty. Just then, six students suddenly appeared and asked us what we needed. Before we could ask for anything, they brought us beds, mattresses, pillows, sheets, blankets, a small table, and three chairs! As soon as we had arranged our things, they brought us food! I cried in gratitude, overcome by their love and caring. We were overwhelmed by Swami's love and generosity.

Swami hosted us for 24 whole days! Each day, early in the morning, a student would bring us a large bucket of hot water to shower. Then they would bring us 3-4 varieties of food in metal utensils for breakfast, hot tea, coffee, milk, and laundered white towels in a lovely basket! Similarly, they also brought us lunch and dinner. **Swami was the most perfect host in the world!**

Swami's cottage is a circular two-storied building surrounded by a beautiful garden of trees and well-groomed shrubs. Scattered in the garden were about a dozen small cottages He had given to devotees. We were in the three-storied building at the back of the garden, with many apartments. Swami's residence had a separate entrance from the main road and within the compound. But we had to go out onto the street to re-enter through the main gate of the *ashram* for *darshan* and *bhajans*.

Swami would stop by every day and ask about Christina's health and whether we were happy. What could we say? One day, He told us, *"Don't go out on the street. Christina will get tired. Use My gate in the compound to go for darshan or bhajans."*

A few days later, He asked Mary at the *darshan* line, "*Why do you come here?*"

Mary got confused, and she thought we might have made some mistake. I dared to ask, "Where should we have gone Swami?"

"*To My house,"* He replied.

We remained speechless, astounded. This was a great blessing Swami bestowed on us. Every day, from 8:30 to 11:00 AM in the morning and from 4:30 to 6:30 PM in the evening, we would go to His house when *bhajans* were over. A long and wide corridor on the ground floor was divided into two parts lengthwise. On one side, Swami would sit during *bhajans* with students, teachers, doctors, foreign visitors, and men of His entourage in general, and on His left side sat the women in a semi-circular hall separated by a wall. A curtain on the open side of the room was drawn during the day, as Swami and other men would be present in the hall.

Swami would come and open the curtain many times a day and joke with the devotees. He asked us if we liked the food He sent to the room. Since Christina and I liked spicy Indian food, we said, "Very nice, very nice."

Turning to Mary, Swami would say, *"Very nice, very nice,"* while fanning His mouth with His hand, in a gesture that Mary used to make when the food was spicy!

Greece Gets His Love

On August 16, Swami called Mary for an interview and guided her on how to conduct the Sai Center. Then, on August 19, He called the whole Greek group of 16 people for an interview. Christina and I were sitting at the back of the interview room. Our beloved boundless sun entered the room, and the whole place lit up. Like the Emperor of the Universe, He sat on His chair, glanced at us lovingly, and spoke to me, saying, *"Come with Christina and sit in the front."*

Swami began by asking Michael in the group, *"I will give you a good girl to marry. What do you want?"*

"I want to be with Swami all my life."

Mary said, "He is a very good lad. He comes to my house and prepares everything for the prayers. He sings lovely bhajans."

"I know," said Swami.

Then He told us, *"Come to my house to join the bhajans in the afternoon!"* Our joy was so great that we didn't know how to contain it.

"Thank you, Swami, for honoring our homeland Greece so much."

Suddenly, Swami made a circular motion with His palm and said, ***"Diamond, die mind, pure mind..."*** Then He called me and put the diamond ring He had just created on my finger!

Soon, the doors opened, and the students came in for *bhajans*. Swami came and asked Michael, *"Will you sing?"* He nodded. Swami tapped him on the forehead and asked again, *"Do you play the harmonium?"*

"No, Swami."

The session began, and after four *bhajans*, Swami stopped the students and asked Michael to sit at His Feet. He exclaimed, "*Greece*." Full of tension, Michael started singing *"Gajavadana Gananatha."* After the second line, he gained speed, and we all sang together, with the students playing the instruments. Swami was happily playing the cymbals, moving His head to the beat.

After the *bhajan*, Swami spoke for a while with the students and then asked Michael if he knew any other *bhajan*. So he sang, *"Par Karo, Udhar Karo."* Swami asked him to continue, and he sang *"Rama Rama,"* and "*Manasa Bhajare Guru Charanam*." At the end of each *bhajan*, Swami would say, *"Very good,"* and speak to His students. We found out later that He praised Michael, saying to the Indian audience, *"You Indians have teachers and the scriptures, but you don't care. You croak like frogs in the well, while foreigners come here, learn them, and use them. Look at this boy. He doesn't know the language but see how well he sings!"*

All of us were thrilled and felt a bit proud, too.

Guidelines for His Organization

On September 2, 1981, Swami again blessed the three of us with an interview. He guided and advised us on issues regarding the organization of the Center. He had already spoken to us about His intention of coming to Greece. He told Mary that her husband should come to Swami first, and then He would visit their house. Mary was committed to bringing her husband for Swami's Birthday.

On September 3, there was another interview, and **He discussed His work again: *"Those who come should have faith in Swami and must show discipline abiding by the rules of the organization."*** **He characteristically said to Mary: *"Those who do not want to follow discipline, let them go– even if it is just you and Me that stay!"***

Returning to Athens in the autumn of 1981, Mary immersed herself in establishing the Sathya Sai Association, following Swami's words. Thus, in November 1981, the first Sathya Sai Baba Association was founded in Greece with legal status, and it continues to grow with His love.

Mrs. Gina Kokkali
GREECE

Mrs. Gina Kokkali *was born in Greece and is a founding member of the SSSIO of Greece. She first heard about Swami from her Yoga teacher and visited Him in the early 1980s with her daughter. Mrs. Kokkali started the first Sathya Sai Center in Greece under the direct instructions of Bhagawan.*

The Interview and Inner View

It was sometime in the 1970s that I had my Introduction to Baba through a book I found in the library of a Yoga Center. My heart instantly recognized Him as God in human form. Though I wanted to travel to India immediately and see Him, my circumstances did not permit this extravagance. I was divorced then and was raising my two children, aged 2 and 5. In the 1980s, I somehow got the address of Baba and sent Him a letter praying for an opportunity to meet Him at least once in my life. Nearly two decades later, I learned more about Him and traveled to India as part of a spiritual group from Belgium in 1994.

Love At First Sight

The group spent a week at Swami Premananda's *ashram* in Trichy, after which I decided to travel to see Baba. I learned He was in Bangalore and, along with another elderly lady of the group, took the train there. The 'Masterplan' ensured that the train halted precisely at the Whitefield railway station, a stone's throw from the Brindavan *ashram*.

It was 7:45 AM. Depositing our luggage in the cloakroom, we sat in the darshan hall, awaiting Swami. My very first *darshan* was unforgettable. It was love at first sight, probably because that love had already been kindled and incubated for years. Swami looked at me directly in the eye, and though He didn't say anything, I felt He was telling me,

"Finally, you are here!"

I stayed for many days after that. Though the accommodation and facilities were really basic, I enjoyed every moment, sustaining myself on the daily darshan and bhajans. There was no looking back after that. From then on, I made at least annual pilgrimages to see Swami.

Heart to Heart Communication

My visits to India usually coincided with Baba's Birthday and Christmas celebrations every year. I also participated in the Christmas choir. One year, Swami graciously gifted us with white sarees to wear for the program. I was thrilled to be a recipient of His love and grace. As Swami came walking toward me, I thought of handing over the bunch of letters that I had in my hand. But when He came close, I noticed He was saying something to me in Telugu. I forgot all about the letters and tried to make out what He was saying. He repeated it, but I still could not decipher what He said. But my heart understood that He wanted me to be present for Mahashivaratri. I received the white saree which I wore during Christmas celebrations. I also returned to India to celebrate Mahashivaratri with Swami. That year, Swami did the much-coveted *Lingodbhava*, the Hiranyagarbha Lingam, and an ellipsoid golden *lingam* emerged from His mouth. Swami said that those who had witnessed are assured of liberation in this lifetime. Was I thrilled that I listened to Him with my heart? I was ecstatic!

The date, January 15, 2003, remains forever etched in my heart, as Swami called a group of Belgian ladies for an interview. One of them beckoned me to join in as well. I walked over and sat near the interview room but was very nervous. What if Swami sent me back? That thought by itself made me cry, and I had profuse tears streaming down my cheeks when Swami arrived. He gave me a broad smile assuring me immediately that He approved.

The minutes in the interview room flew by like seconds as Swami was jovial with us, answered our questions, and blessed us with the *vibhuti* that He materialized. After speaking with all of us, He went to the inner room and began calling us in pairs.

Hold My Hand and Never Let Go of It

The two of us stood in front of Him. He took my hands into His and said His grace and blessings were always with me, just as I had prayed for. He promised me He would bless me with opportunities to serve. When He spoke to the other lady, He asked me to translate into Belgian for her. I let go of His hand in my enthusiasm to explain and be a good translator. Swami immediately held my hands again, tightly this time. I had goosebumps as I realized that He had fulfilled everything that I asked Him in my daily prayer:

> *"Oh, Baba! Grant me your grace and blessings. Hold my hand tight and lead me to God in my thoughts, words, and deeds. Give me the strength to love You and serve You more and more in everyone."*

Even today, I repeat the same prayer–more as a reminder to myself rather than asking Swami. I know that He is omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient. And I know that getting the opportunity to know, recognize, and serve Him is a true privilege and Blessing.

The interviews that day ended. The inner view continues to this day.

Ms. Regina Van den Broecke
BELGIUM

Ms. Regina Van den Broecke *was born in Belgium. She studied languages and bookkeeping in Ghent and worked for 38 years in a steel factory. She was the coordinator of the Sai Center in Antwerp and the National Coordinator for SSSIO of Belgium. Regina is trained in human values education in both Dutch and English. She has visited Swami 20 times and traveled throughout Europe as the National Coordinator.*

Power of Prayer

During one of Swami's Kodaikanal visits in the 1990s, a student asked Him, "How does one get close to God?" Swami replied that it all begins with longing for God, further strengthened by daily prayers to God. Looking back at my life, I must say this has been my experience, and I am eternally grateful to Swami for this lesson. Prayer is a beautiful way to get close to God. In fact, **prayer is our only strength and God's only weakness!**

Coming Near to God

We were staying in Calcutta (Kolkata today) in the Indian state of West Bengal when my father had to relocate to Bangalore (Bengaluru today) for work in 1968. I was happy because my paternal aunt and uncle were in Bangalore, and so were my cousins. It would be good to be able to play with them daily!

My aunt and uncle were devotees of Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba. My aunt's family from Rajahmundry were initially devotees of Shirdi Sai Baba. When Swami visited the town in the early 1960s, seeing Him, they were convinced that Sathya Sai and Shirdi Sai were one and the same. Though it took some time, my uncle soon became devoted to Swami. Thus, when we came to live in Bangalore, we heard some amazing and interesting devotional stories about Swami from my aunt.

This piqued our interest leading us to visit the Brindavan Ashram to have Swami's *darshan* in July 1969. While my father and younger brother sat on the men's side of the *darshan* hall, my mother and I sat on the ladies' side. Swami walked up to us and lovingly welcomed us. He also welcomed my father and brother when He went on the men's side. That was it! Swami, very soon, became the center of all our daily activities and routines.

Becoming Dear to God

My mother was a strict disciplinarian and ensured that we followed the discipline Swami had laid down for devotees. She enrolled us in *Bal Vikas* (SSE) classes where we learned daily prayers for everything–waking up in the morning, having a bath, beginning studies, taking food, turning on the lights in the evening, and before going to bed, thus filling our day with prayers. **This habit of praying multiple times a day made me more attached to Swami**, and He became the center of my heart as well, just as He had become the center deity in our home altar.

Every Thursday, we would attend *bhajans* in the Malleshwaram *Samithi* (center) and every Saturday at the Vyalikaval Samithi. We also engaged in service activities–locally distributing food, fruits, and crackers to the needy.

Initiation into Gayatri

The *Upanayanam* is a rite of passage ceremony that signifies a boy's entry into the world of spiritual learning. It is also known as the sacred thread ceremony, traditionally performed for boys when they reach the age of 8-12. During the ceremony, the boy is initiated into the study of the sacred Vedas, especially the powerful Gayatri *mantra*. Marking the initiation, he is vested with a sacred thread worn over the left shoulder and under the right arm. The sacred thread symbolizes the boy's commitment to learning and his status as a *Dwija* ("twice-born"–one being the birth and the second being the initiation into

the Gayatri *mantra*). **The Gayatri *Mantra* is one of the most important *mantras* and has the power to bestow spiritual enlightenment and transformation.**

Swami conducted mass *Upanayanam* ceremonies where He would initiate and bless the boys into true learning–*Adhyathma Vidya* (Spiritual Education). In the mid-1970s, Swami announced that He would be conducting one such Mass *Upanayanam* and my parents felt that this would be a good chance for my brother to get initiated by Swami Himself. So, during *darshan*, my parents prayed to Swami for the blessing to be conferred on my brother, and Swami approved it! Needless to say, we were exuberant.

Once my brother was selected, we were called by the organizers for an orientation program. We were given a list of items needed and the exact location where we would be seated as a family. In particular, we were told that Swami would provide the *Yagnapaveetam* (sacred thread) and treat us to a feast after the ceremony! Since Swami would be blessing my brother, my parents thought that I should also have some role in the ceremony, as this would give me a chance to interact with Swami. Thus, it was decided that I would place a garland around Swami when He came to bless my brother.

The Garland of Grace

I was keen to place a sandalwood garland around Swami. The state of Karnataka is famous for sandalwood, and it was a traditional practice to make a garland from sandalwood tree shavings. The garland thus produced would be not only durable but also very fragrant. However, even though we tried hard, we could not obtain a sandalwood garland. On 'D-Day,' we purchased a flower garland from the flower lady sitting outside the Brindavan *ashram* and went in to take our seats.

Swami arrived, splendorous as the sun, and the ceremony began. Sri Kamavadhani, a renowned Vedic scholar, was the officiating chief priest, and he conducted the rites and rituals in a systematic and inspiring manner. Everything went well, and Swami delivered a discourse at the end of the ceremony. After the discourse, He began to walk around the assembled *Vatus* (initiates) and their families. As He came near us, I rose and garlanded him. Previously, some other family had placed a sandalwood garland around Him. When I garlanded Him, Swami took out the sandalwood garland and gave it to me, blessing me with His *Padanamaskar*! He said, "*Take this garland. Go home and place it on my picture.*" Was I thrilled! It is one of the best lifelong memories I have of Swami!

Triple Blessings Through the Garland

When we reached home, my mother placed the garland around Swami's picture near my bed. I would thus see it first thing every morning and the last thing every night when I went to bed. For a while, my room became a destination for *Bal Vikas* children, who came to see the sandalwood garland that Swami blessed me with.

Even now, every time I look at the garland, I am transported back to that blessed day when Swami made me feel that He has come only for me! It has helped me develop a strong and unbreakable bond with Swami forever. Three messages from the garland episode have stayed with me to this day:

1. I had given him a garland of flowers, and He gifted me a sandalwood garland. I learned that even when I offer something small to God, He will give something much more valuable than we can imagine.
2. I always liked a sandalwood garland and thus wanted to offer it to Swami. But

Swami gifted it to me! I learned that whatever we consider offering to God comes back to us.

3. **Swami always listens to our prayers. He answers them at the right time and under the right circumstances. We must have faith and patience.**

I believe that the process of praying is an evolutionary one. As we pray, we realize that Swami is aware of the past, present, and future. He has the power to change the course of our life with His will, and He will be there for us even when we are not thinking of Him. So, when He 'grants' our prayer, it is for our good; even when He 'denies' our prayer, it is for our good. Even when we think prayers are not working the way we want, we still grow spiritually. **We learn to surrender and accept everything as His *prasad* (gift) and that everything He gives is for our ultimate good**. The whole process assuredly guides us to that state as I learned through my recent experience.

A Complete Circle

I had worked as a general-education post-graduate teacher in India from 1985 to 2001. Prior to relocation to the USA in August 2001, I was working as headmistress in Delhi Public School (DPS) at Faridabad (near New Delhi). After moving to the US, I completed the Master's Program in Early Intervention, obtained teaching credentials to run special day classes and worked as an assistant and teacher in special education since 2002.

When I went to visit my parents in New Delhi in October 2022, I also reached out to a former colleague and friend at DPS Faridabad and we agreed to meet up and spend time together at Puttaparthi when I would be visiting there! During the course of our conversation, I updated her on what I was doing and she told me that DPS Faridabad had just started to take in children with special needs. She told me about the difficulties that the general education teachers were facing in integrating them into the class and requested me to make a presentation on 'inclusion' and integrating children with special needs in general education and the benefits. I agreed to make the presentation, taking it as Swami's blessing that the whole discussion was happening in Puttaparthi despite both of us staying in Delhi!

By Swami's grace, my presentation went off very well. The DPS Principal was extremely happy and he offered to create an employment opportunity for me at the school. I was both shocked and thrilled as I began to understand the Divine Plan. Apart from me working at DPS till July 2001, both my children were educated there and I always have a deep seated gratitude towards the school. The omniscient loving lord created this unexpected and beautiful opportunity for me to serve the school that contributed heavily to the growth and development of my children.

I have been working as a consultant at DPS Faridabad for the past few months. **I am also convinced that Swami continues to shower me with what is best for me, without me even praying for it!**

Mrs. Lakshmi Vyakaran
USA

Mrs. Lakshmi Vyakaran *is an educator and was the headmistress at Delhi Public school, Faridabad, India, before moving to the USA in 2001. She received gold medals in her bachelor's and master's degrees. After coming to the USA, she completed a second master's degree in Special Education with a focus on Autism Spectrum Disorder and has served as a Special Education specialist since 2002. Mrs. Vyakaran also teaches an online SSE course for children with autism. She was drawn to Bhagawan Baba at the age of 9 and was a Bal Vikas student. She served in the Sri Sathya Sai International Organization (SSSIO) in various capacities, including as the president of Region 7, USA. She is currently serving as the National Coordinator for the Women's Wing, SSSIO, USA.*

The Journey to God Comes Full Circle

"The journey to God is merely the reawakening of the knowledge of where you are always, and what you are forever. It is a journey without distance to a goal that has never changed. Truth can only be experienced. It cannot be described, and it cannot be explained."

–ACIM (A Course in Miracles)

I was born in Baku, Azerbaijan, a republic of the former Soviet Union, to a Jewish Father and Christian Mother. My parents, however, did not practice their religions. My father never went to the Temple, and my mother went to the Church occasionally. However, I was aware that I am Jewish because we observed the holiday of Passover. But then, I didn't even know its significance, and no one explained it to me. All I knew was that we were not allowed to eat regular bread for a week and instead had unleavened flatbread, Matzah. Much later, when I was about 13, I learned about the history of Judaism, along with my sister, in Jewish Sunday School.

Whenever my mother went to Church, she would take me with her. However, she never spoke much about Jesus. She observed the festival of Easter by cooking a special meal but never mentioned Christmas or its significance. The Christmas tree that we joyously decorated every year was not done as part of religion but as our New Year's celebration!

A Path to God through Israel

I knew there was a God for as long as I could remember. My earliest awareness of God was around the age of five. I had a connection that I simply couldn't explain. **It was just a sense of knowing that there is God and that God is my Father who loves me and everyone else**. Sometimes, I would hear remarks about a judgmental and punishing God, but I just 'knew' that was far from the truth because it was not my experience of who **God was–Love and Gentleness!**

One Sunday at the Jewish School, I heard about an organization that supported and assisted youth immigrating to Israel. I welcomed the opportunity to travel to Israel as my 15th birthday gift, and with 40 other kids, I boarded the airplane to Tel Aviv. Upon arrival, we were assigned to different schools, and I traveled to the north of Israel, which was surrounded by mountains and forests. It was a serene and peaceful place, and the people were friendly and welcoming.

In school, we studied the Torah daily, in addition to academics. We prayed and sang for God, and I developed an intense yearning for God. One day, when everybody was at lunch, I sneaked into the Temple and stood before the Torah scrolls. I could feel God's spirit upon me. I knew God was real, but somehow I also knew that this was not my path to Him!

I completed school, lived my life, and lived my dreams. But life was wonderful only because I wasn't aware of how miserable I was! When I was 24, one of my best friends invited me to attend a guided meditation for world peace. During that session, in my inner vision, I saw the lights and divine figures. **Something clicked, and I immediately realized that this was my path to God!**

Introduction to Sathya Sai Baba

The teacher who guided the session was named 'Tikva.' The name meant 'hope', and that is what she offered me. Whatever she taught, she did it based on the principle that God is love and is present in all our hearts. I was inspired and signed up for the courses on meditation and alternative healing that she taught. It was at her school that, for the first time, I saw a picture of Sri Sathya Sai Baba! I asked her, "Who is that scary-looking man with big hair?" **"He is my Guru," she replied, "He lives in India and is an *Avatar*, God descended to earth."** I just heard her out and did not feel the slightest inclination or desire to meet this *'Avatar'* or even to know more about Him.

It was around this time that my acting career started to pick up. I got cast in a feature film alongside a few famous actors in Israel. However, since I didn't have proper training in acting, my director suggested that I go to Los Angeles to study under Lee Strasberg and upgrade my skills in acting. Without thinking twice, I took this advice, left everything–my career, my friends, and my family behind–and moved to the USA.

I was staying at my cousin's place in Los Angeles. One morning there was a heavy package for me from the United States Postal Service. It was a Russian edition of *'A Course in Miracles'* (ACIM), a psychological mind-training book based on universal spiritual themes. The goal of this course is the attainment of inner peace through forgiveness. I started to take the course sincerely, attending workshops and study groups. I learned how to relinquish thoughts based on fear and adopt new thoughts based on love. Going beyond the senses, I was guided to perceive the truth through forgiveness and surrender. **I learned that God is my life, my source. God is everything to me–my mother, my father, and my friend**.

One day, after attending the ACIM study group in Anaheim, I found that my car had broken down. One of the attendees kindly offered to let me stay overnight. When I entered his house, I couldn't believe my eyes! It was filled with pictures of Sathya Sai Baba! My friend explained that he had regular devotional meetings at his place.

I felt the energy in his house, and I knew it was an invitation. There was no room or corner in the house without a picture of this man's Swami! That night, I slept in a guest room surrounded by Swami's portraits, and I knew He was calling me.

Travel to Puttaparthi

A month later, a friend who lived in Australia suggested that we could go to India and perhaps meet in Puttaparthi. This felt like the continuation of the invitation for me. I was very curious about Baba, though I didn't think of Him as anything more than a saint.

So, in March 2011, I was on my way to India along with my mother. Three days before our departure, we learned that Bhagawan Baba had been hospitalized! When we arrived at Puttaparthi a few days after Shivaratri, Swami continued to be in the hospital! We went to the *Mandir* and sat through the prayer and bhajan sessions. It felt beautiful, and the unity of the voices opened up my heart. Tears would flow copiously during many such sessions. After 21 days, it was time for our departure, and we still hadn't seen Swami! Three days later, we heard that Bhagawan had attained Mahasamadhi!

The 'Dream' Darshan and Sai's Center

I returned to Los Angeles and continued with my ACIM study. In November 2011, I had my first dream of Bhagawan! He was sitting, surrounded by devotees in a circle. Though He didn't speak to me, He gazed at me penetratingly. I simply knew He was calling on me to travel back to India.

Once again, in 2013, my mother and I decided to go to Puttaparthi. This time, we arrived a few days before Maha Shivaratri and had a blissful time. My mother was very happy, and I was glad to see her surrounded by like-minded, spiritual people. Again, after spending 21 days, we returned home.

This time, after my return, I decided to attend a Sai Center and participate in Center activities. On the same day, I went to the Whole Foods Market on Sunset Boulevard and Fairfax Avenue, where I saw a man with *vibhuti* on his forehead! I walked up to him joyously and asked, "Are you by any chance a Sai Devotee?" He happily affirmed it and gave me directions to a Sai Center nearby! The next week, I attended a devotional meeting at the Hollywood Sathya Sai Center. Everything looked familiar, and the people were nice and friendly. I felt at home and started attending the Center meetings regularly and participating in a variety of service projects.

Sathya Sai is My Jesus and His Organization My Church

I used to have many dreams about Lord Jesus. In one of my visions, Jesus led me by hand to a flight of stairs. At the top of the staircase was a throne of God, and Baba was sitting on the throne! I looked at Him, and I realized that He was God. I was thrilled at this discovery because it had taken me so long to come to this realization.

According to ACIM, prayer is a medium of miracles. I had been praying to God to come into my life, and He had answered my prayer. Though He did not come to me in a form I was expecting, it was a form that was right for me!

From 2014 onward, I started dreaming about Baba regularly. In one of the dreams, He came to the Hollywood Center, sat on His chair, and granted *darshan*. He pointed to me to sit in the front. I knew right away that He wanted me to serve as an officer in the organization. A few months later, I was offered the position of Devotional Coordinator and I simply couldn't refuse. I accepted it as an honor and a blessing to serve God. After all, hadn't He already shown His plan for me?

My Initiation and Divine Experience of Oneness

In 2016 I had another dream in which, one by one, devotees came to Baba and received His blessings. When my turn came, I just took *padnamaskar*. Swami then put His hands on my head and said, *"Om Sri Sathya Sai Baba Namaha."* It was the first time He talked to me, even though it was a dream. I began crying and woke up with tears of joy! **I knew this was**

my initiation and that I had received a *mantra*.

On the same day, as I sat meditating on His form, I heard an inner voice say, "Say My Name." So, I chanted, *"Om Sri Sathya Sai Baba Namaha."* Again, the voice told me, "Say My Name." Again I chanted. This was repeated again and again, *"Om Sri Sathya Sai Baba Namaha."* And suddenly, I felt Bhagawan's presence and His voice saying, "Say My Name!" Now I felt His presence within and all around me. The voice kept repeating persistently, and I kept chanting. I was in total bliss. There was only God, and I was Him, Sri Sathya Sai Baba!

Then I asked myself, "If I am Sai Baba, where is Daniella?" I realized that she did not exist, and I laughed. I stayed in that bliss for a few days before I slowly got back to my small self-identity. However, this experience stays with me forever.

My search for God was over. I found what I was looking for. My God, My Baba, and my true Self.

Ms. Daniella Danilov
USA

Ms. Daniella Danilov *was born in Baku, Azerbaijan, and lives in Hollywood, California, USA. She works at Lee Strasberg Institute as a teacher and Method Acting Instructor. Daniella became first acquainted with Sri Sathya Sai Baba in her early twenties while completing her master's degree in Reiki. After her first trip to Puttaparthi in 2011, she started to attend a Sai Center regularly and served in many positions. She is the President of the Hollywood Sai Center.*

How Swami Found Me Even Before I Visited Him

We often think that we are searching for the Guru (teacher) and God, but actually, **it is God, the supreme Guru, who is constantly searching for a true devotee and a genuine disciple.** The events in our lives are all connected with our search for the divine, the life journey from bondage and death to ultimate liberation.

When I was about 27 years old, my sister-in-law showed me two old books that she had saved from a fire that destroyed her apartment. The books were from the library of Mr. Caesar Kaljo, my paternal grandfather. One of them, *'Kriya Yoga,'* had a thick black cover and was written in German, which I could not read. The second book in blue buckram binding, *'Agni Yoga,'* was written in Russian, and I was well-versed in it! I spent many happy hours with the book. It opened new vistas and dimensions of the spiritual world. The book was so complex and rich that it often left me in deep thought, not allowing me to complete it in one sitting.

One day, **I read a passage that said the Golden Age of humanity–Sathya Yuga or the Age of Truth–would come again.** I was elated without realizing that all this would happen so quickly! The same book also mentions that the 'teacher' is never dormant; He comes when the student is ready. My preparation to meet my Master was undoubtedly starting.

In 1989, during summer, I was with my fiancée on the second largest island of Estonia, Muhu, working on the renovation of wooden artifacts. Being an artist and a painter, such travel was part of my profession. There, I came across a magazine called 'AUM' in Russian, which contained an extract from the book *Sai Baba Man of Miracles* by Howard Murphet. When I read it, lightning seemed to strike the very core of my being! "This is it!" I told myself, **"Sathya Sai is the one to usher in the Sathya Yuga!"**

Miraculous Travel to Thailand and the First Sathya Sai Group in Estonia

The same summer, a couple who were our friends introduced me to a man from the University town of Tartu. He was my age and was the first person from Estonia to visit Sathya Sai Baba's *ashram* in Prasanthi Nilayam. He gave me a booklet about a human values conference that was scheduled in November 1991 in Thailand. Later, he also sent us a film on a VHS cassette, *Aura of Divinity,* by Richard Bock, which was the first video I saw on Sathya Sai Baba.

After seeing the film multiple times, I filled out the registration form and wrote a letter seeking financial assistance to travel to Thailand. After a few weeks, we received a letter from Dr. Art-Ong Jumsai from Thailand. He replied that they could not help us financially, but they prayed that we could find sponsors in our own country.

Within a week, in the capital city of Tallinn, a young man wanted to purchase a painting from me. He asked me to name any price I wanted! Feeling that this was divine grace, I named a price that was exactly the cost of

the plane tickets to Thailand. The sale was quickly completed, and I bought the tickets to Thailand!

In the interim, we found out that my wife was expecting to deliver a baby soon! The delivery was due at the exact time we would be attending the EHV conference in Thailand! So, we could not travel, but what about the tickets we bought already? Swami's master plan then unfolded when we received a phone call from a friend, a Buddhist lady, who wanted two tickets to travel to Thailand. We gladly sold our tickets to her and suggested that she and her friend also participate in the Sathya Sai Education in Human Values (SSEHV) Conference in Thailand, and she agreed!

Thus, two Estonian Buddhist ladies had a chance to participate in the First SSEHV Conference in Thailand. When they returned, they brought back many books, *bhajan* tapes, and conference materials. How happy we were to welcome all these materials with love along with our newly born son!

We also started learning *bhajans* and singing at home. Soon, more young people joined our group, and thus began the **first Sathya Sai Group in Estonia, which was officially affiliated with the Sri Sathya Sai International Organization (SSSIO) in April 1992.**

SSSIO Enters My Life As I Enter SSSIO

Before the official affiliation of the first Sai Group, I regularly traveled to St. Petersburg in Russia. There, I would visit the Vedic Cultural Society in search of spiritual books. I was excited when I found books on Sathya Sai Baba. I began to purchase those books for distributing them to many bookstores in the country. On one occasion, I happened to go to the first floor of the Vedic Cultural Society publishing house. There He was! I saw a beautiful altar for Sathya Sai Baba flanked by photos of Buddha and Jesus. Candles and flowers adorned the altar, and I felt Swami had truly arrived in Russia.

I soon found out that regular *bhajans* were conducted at the homes of devotees in Russia. Once a week, there was a big gathering at the Sai Centre hall. **By the beginning of winter in 1991, the first Sathya Sai Center in Russia was inaugurated in St Petersburg.** Mr. Bernhard Gruber from Germany, the Regional Coordinator of the SSSIO, delivered the inaugural address, followed by talks by others, including the first Center leader, Mr. Sergey Neapolitansky.

It was at this meeting that Mr. Bernhard Gruber asked me if I would like to be a contact person for devotees in Estonia. I gladly accepted the offer. **That is how I came into Swami's fold and became an integral part of the SSSIO, even before I saw Swami physically!**

Lord! Make Me Thy Instrument

One day, I was blessed with a dream about Swami. I entered a dimly lit hall, and Swami invited me to the other side of the big room. He showed me some discarded clothes in a container and said, "You certainly did not come after this paltry thing!" I agreed mentally. I wanted Him and Him alone. Inviting me to the other side of the hall, where there were some wooden seats, He sat on one of them and invited me to sit by His side. Looking sternly into my eyes, He said, "I want a painting!" I wondered what painting He wanted. When I started to talk about one of my sea paintings, He said, "I know, it is quite a wet picture!" The dream ended there.

Soon, Swami began to show His presence at our home. We had a visitor at home, a lady seeking books on Swami. We gave her Samuel Sandweiss' book, *Sai Baba: The Holy Man and The Psychiatrist*. The visitor's husband, Mr. Roland Viru, met with me to discuss an idea he had been inspired by. He owned an old community center on the island of Abruka, built in the Soviet era to accommodate 150-200 people. He was

renovating it, and he wanted a giant mural on the wall. Would I be willing to paint it? I excitedly narrated my dream to him, and we both were convinced that we were the instruments in Swami's master plan.

I put all my mind, heart, and soul into creating the painting. **The ideas flowed by His grace, and I felt like a mere brush doing the work of my Master.** I started with a small-sized drawing on paper and then transferred that inspiration to the wall. That was my *sadhana* for weeks. My whole being was immersed in it. Barely 30 people lived on the island, but still, many times, devotees would come to see the painting coming to life. We also had a summer camp with Sai Spiritual Education (SSE) children and conducted *bhajans* in the hall.

The hall was formally inaugurated on October 10, 1995, with devotional singing, chanting of auspicious *mantras*, and ceremonial cake cutting. I felt fulfilled and blissful.

The First Darshan and...

By 1995, Swami's mission in Estonia started blossoming. We already had four Sathya Sai Centers in Estonia–in my hometown, Kuressaare; in Tartu; in the capital city, Tallinn; and there was a Sai Group in the town of Paide. Many devotees visited Prasanthi Nilayam often, and Swami blessed some of them with interviews. These were events of enormous magnitude for the devotees of Estonia to receive Swami's love and blessings. Everyone began dreaming about an interview with Sathya Sai Baba.

A major international conference of the SSSIO had been planned, coinciding with Swami's 70th Birthday celebrations. That was my first trip to see Swami in India with the Estonian group, although I often felt His presence in Estonia even before this pilgrimage. It was a miracle that we found accommodation and had a comfortable stay in Puttaparthi despite the surging crowds. **But the most significant experience for me, needless to say, was my first darshan of my beloved Lord!**

We were seated in the Sai Kulwant Hall when the *darshan* music started. It was not the Indian classical music that I had expected, but it was music composed by a modern Japanese composer, Kitaro! It was from the album *Kojiki*, a tape I had back home and which I would listen to for long hours. The familiar tunes pressed deep emotional buttons within me, and my eyes welled up with tears. I could not control them. At this time, Swami came near me. I looked at Him with gratitude as my heart wanted to jump out and embrace Him. Right then and there, it was as if I was reborn by the grace of His *darshan*.

Even now, as I close my eyes, I can see Him in that beautiful form wherever I am. That one *darshan* is miracle enough. Life has never been the same ever since.

Mr. Enn Kaljo
ESTONIA

Mr. Enn Kaljo *was born and grew up on Estonia's largest island, Saaremaa. He started drawing pictures in early childhood. He has worked as a freelance painter, artist, nature conservation planning expert, and translator of spiritual books. He owns a small business dealing with organic food products and cosmetics.*

After coming to Swami, Mr. Enn Kaljo has served for over thirty years in the SSSIO and held various positions in the past, including center president, educational coordinator, National Council president, and Public Outreach Coordinator for SSSIO, Zone 7 (Northern Europe).

Once in Sai Organization, Always in Sai Organization

For over 22 years, till 2013, there was a Sri Sathya Sai Center in Fort Walton Beach, Florida, and it was in my home for the last 15 years of that period. Over those years, I received valuable guidance from 3Bs of the Sai Organization–Ms. Bettina Biggart, Ms. Bea Flaig, and Ms. Berniece Mead, who trained me in Sathya Sai Education in Human Values (SSEHV) and the Center officers' roles, including how best to serve as a Sai Spiritual Education (SSE) teacher. The Center verily became my heart *chakra*–it was the vibrant hub from which I derived energy, spiritual growth, and love. **I felt Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba with us always, giving us tangible, miraculous, loving reminders of His presence.**

Over time, the children attending SSE grew up and left the Center. Our service program, 'Love for Lunch,' which delivered food to the elderly, ended when its last recipients either passed away or were cared for by other shelters. So, the Sai Center at our home could no longer continue there. To meet with other devotees and stay involved with joint service projects, I migrated to the Pensacola Sai Center in Florida. Even as things seemed to stabilize there, COVID-19 pandemic broke out, and we stopped meeting at the Pensacola Sai Center. After that came the challenge of a newly created organization, the 'Global Council,' which distracted and divided the group. The new group leader left, our service projects ended, and the last of our members left. Sadly, our Sai Center was no more!

Sai's Center Has Sai's Love as its Center

Then Baba revealed what He had already willed–**once a Sai Center, it is always Sai's Center.** When I thought that my home had ceased to be a Sai Center, it actually transformed into an 'assisted living facility' for my mother-in-law. We discovered her lifelong dependency on prescription painkillers and nursed her through detoxification for as long as possible. Finally, after a year and a half of loving care, we came to accept that she required care at a professional nursing home.

After fulfilling that responsibility, our home now became a refuge and safe house for our daughter and two grandsons. Our daughter had been traumatized through her divorce from an abusive, cocaine-addicted husband. Her recovery took four years. Then, just as our home grew very quiet, our financial difficulties began. We struggled for a couple of years, and finally, we lost the house to the bank, just like four of our neighbors. So, we finally moved on.

Yet, Baba was with us. Through all the beginnings and endings, through the transitions and transformations, He has been there all along. But still, once you had a

Center in your home, how do you fill the void when it's gone? And how do you continue to serve your community without a Center, without a connection, when you seem to be isolated?

Faith is the key. We must remember we are not alone. **Baba is all that matters.** We start with small service projects, like helping a neighbor, donating blood, or making arts and crafts to drop off at a nursing home. We serve individually or work with other service providers. Sri Sathya Sai Baba will bring the opportunities to us, responding to our genuine efforts and faith in Him.

Continued Opportunities, Continued Blessings

One day, my husband (who had been a Recreation Manager, teacher, and avid golfer) came home and joyfully announced that he was being considered for a new golf program called 'First Tee,' which incorporated core values and character training in children's golf lessons.

"Guess what? This is the closest I can get to teaching Baba's universal human values in a mainstream curriculum! Plus, I get to teach kids golf!" he exclaimed. He would be teaching nine core values - honesty, integrity, sportsmanship, respect, confidence, responsibility, perseverance, courtesy, and judgment – each one incorporated into a weekly lesson.

In the First Tee program, elitism was eliminated from playing golf. It would not be for rich kids alone anymore but open to all children, no matter if they could afford the lessons or not. The cost would be on a sliding scale. If the kids came from low-income households and qualified for a reduced rate or free lunches at school, then the lessons were offered at a reduced rate or for free! If the parents had more than one child in the class, the price was reduced. None of the parents would have to buy golf equipment because the kids would be playing with clubs, bags, and balls from the golf club. That way, if the kids didn't like the sport, they just returned the equipment to be used by the next kid who needed it.

This is how Swami brought a tailor-made job directly to my husband. It was an answer to his prayers. Little did I know it would turn out to be a perfect fit for me as well, like an SSE class that had gone mainstream.

From 2013-2021, my husband served as the First Tee head-coach in our county in Florida, USA, recruiting three other coaches as the program expanded to seven golf courses. I worked by his side as a volunteer, helping teach kids between 5 and 16 years old. Over the last 10 years, 3,500 to 4,000 kids have completed the program in our county.

My husband always told the children, "In every other sport, you have a judge, a referee, an umpire, or an official to police your behavior. But in golf, you are your own judge. So it's imperative that you have good character and honesty. It is how you behave when you think no one else is watching that counts. You must count your strokes and tell the truth if you make an error."

"Your life skills are even more important than your golf skills because, face it, only a few talented kids will make it onto the pro tour (professional golf tournament). But the majority of you will go on to be successful citizens who enjoy playing golf. It enables you to play the game with your grandparents, your parents, or your bosses. What really matters is that you have fun."

Each One of Us is His Sai Center and We Should Grow

My husband suffered a stroke, developed Parkinson's disease, and dementia. Hence, he is unable to play or teach golf, and I have been promoted to be an Assistant Coach one day a week in order to help the program continue.

Remembering how Swami instructed Berniece Mead that all SSE children were her children, we believe this is Swami's program.

We have treated the First Tee kids as our very own grandchildren. We've taught some children from when they were six years old until they graduated high school.

The most satisfying moments have been when parents have shared that playing golf brought their children focus, calmness, and good behavior at home, unlike some other sports, which seem to foster aggression or cause injury. We've had some special kids with Down Syndrome or Autism who came to us to learn how to behave so they could transition into the mainstream environment.

One boy, who initially could not bear to be touched, gradually allowed my husband to put his arm around his shoulder while shaking his hand for the group photo, and he received my hug with a smile. Once, a child who had lost an arm came to us. We played Zoo golf (imitating different animals). We acted like elephants, putting (golf stroke) with one hand, using it to imitate a trunk, like bats walking blindfolded, and like flamingoes limping on one leg. We all forgot the boy had only one arm. With a few coaching tips on balance and swing, he actually won a putting competition!

We've also had a few kids who became great golfers, going on to play at renowned Pebble Beach and John Deere tournaments, while some have received scholarships. Many joined their high school or college golf teams. The fulfillment is indescribable.

Last but not least, the entire process has made me let go of my personal and political prejudices. I realized that it was all Swami's work. Just like the Beatles' song, *'Hey, Jude'* says, "Take a sad song and make it better," can our involvement make the activity we are involved in better? That's what Swami did. He made golf better by removing its impurities: elitism, racism, expense, and waste. He made us better people, having coached the children in core values, just as He had taught me strictly as an SSE teacher.

So, if you find yourself without a nearby 'Sai Center,' don't worry, be happy. You can bloom where you are planted and grow into a Sai Center yourself. Life is full of beginnings, endings, transitions, and transformations, and you don't know sometimes how things will turn out. **Just have faith. Swami will show you the need, bring you the opportunity, and fulfill the desires of your heart, making it your true Sai's Center!**

Ms. Jorja Kelley
USA

Ms. Jorja Kelley *worked at the Kansas State University, Physics Department and also as a defense contractor at Eglin Air Force Base, Florida. She was on the Joint Electromagnetic Interference (JEMI) Joint Test Force, building classified databases. She is certified as an Industrial Defense Facility Security Officer. She met Ms. Somalatha Calnaido in 1987, who led her to Swami, by sharing with her the darshan video, "The Message of Love," by Cosby Powell. When she heard Cosby read Swami's quote, "There is only one religion, the religion of love, there is only one language, the language of the heart, there is only one caste, the caste of humanity, and there is only one God, and He is omnipresent," she realized that Sri Sathya Sai Baba was her God, her Father, and her Godfather. Swami changed her career to that of a professional writer and also led her to write SSSIO service articles since 1992.*

When Sathya Sai Calls...

I was barely eight when my mother took me to a Sai Center in Barquisimeto, Venezuela, for the first time at the invitation of a lady from the center. It was a Thursday, and we entered the hall to attend the *bhajans* (devotional singing).

The people welcomed us warmly with the greeting *"Sai Ram,"* which was very foreign to me at that time. But even as an eight-year-old, I was very impressed with how pristine the place was and the variety of beautiful idols on the altar. Everyone sat on floor cushions, and chairs were provided for the elders and those who couldn't sit on the floor. We sat beside the lady who had invited us, the founder of that Center.

The session began with sonorous chants of *'Om,'* followed by 108 names of Sathya Sai Baba in adoration and worship. *Gayatri mantra* chanting was next, followed by *bhajans*. I was fascinated hearing the enchanting songs in a new language and wondered how it seemed to have some magic. I wanted to participate in the *bhajans* but could only clap in rhythm, unable to decipher and pronounce the words. Later, the lights were put out. I thought this indicated it was all done, and we could go home. But as I stood up, the lights came back, and they sang another song *(arati)* while waving a flame to the photo of Sai Baba. We were given a pinch of sacred ash *(vibhuti)*, after which we dispersed. I told my mom that I did not enjoy that session much. She left it at that.

A Childhood and Youth Well-Spent

Months later, my mother enrolled me and my siblings in *Bal Vikas* (Sai Spiritual Education) classes. These were really fun because while we were taught about God, human values, and the way to lead a good life, we also had lots of play, games, and tasty snacks to enjoy. **I am grateful to my SSE teachers who introduced me to Swami and His wonderful teachings.**

Years later, it was a natural transition for me to grow into a Sai Young Adult. Though I had never seen Swami, I was keen to follow His teachings, which were very appealing to me. In 2005, at the national level of the SSSIO, we all started learning the Rudram–*Namakam* and *Chamakam* (Vedic chants adoring Lord Shiva) . We also enthusiastically participated in service activities organized by the Youth Wing. We would prepare and distribute food to needy people on the streets and to hospital patients. We would visit old-age homes and spend time with the elderly, uplifting their spirits. Often, we also organized tree-planting drives in the city.

In 2006, we received an email inviting all Sai Young Adults to Prasanthi Nilayam to participate in an International Youth Conference in July 2007. I was in high school, dreaming of securing a seat in the prestigious Public University in southern Venezuela. I wanted to prepare for the entrance exam, and the dates clashed with the Youth Conference! So, although I was

part of all activities organized by the Sai Youth in preparation for the conference and was providing full-time support doing translations for the Sathya Sai Institute of Education in Human Values of Venezuela, I decided not to travel to India in July 2007. In addition, I did not have a passport or a visa!

When He Calls, Everything Falls in Place

But in the same year, we received another email. This time, it was an invitation to all educators and members of all Sai Institutes across the world to participate in the Sathya Sai Education in Human Values Conference (SSEHV) to be held in Prasanthi Nilayam in 2008. By this time, my exam results came out, and, to my disappointment, I was not accepted by the University. But the blessing is, I was free to go to India. My mother and I were assigned the task of preparing the list of Venezuelans traveling to India. By the beginning of 2008, we had a list of 100 participants. But by June 2008, we had dropouts, and the list became half as long.

My mother had managed to secure discounted flight tickets with an agency as long as there were 60 travelers. To reach that number, my mother also added my name to the list. But I had no passport or visa! My mother reached India successfully with a group of 30 Venezuelans, and I applied for a passport, intending to lead the second contingent of 30 Venezuelans.

I traveled with my father to the capital, Caracas, to expedite my passport issuance at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The plan was to get the passport and then rush to the Indian embassy to make an appointment for my visa. It was an unnerving sight to see so many armed soldiers patrolling the Ministry. It was almost 10 AM, and I had no update on my passport. Half an hour later, I heard my name being called and rushed into a small room. I was given a yellow envelope bearing my name and told to verify that the details were correct. I was told, "If you have no issues or questions, you may exit the room."

Tears of joy streamed down my face incessantly as my passport came out of that yellow envelope! That was it? I ran out of the room, my face red and eyes brimming with tears. My father wondered what had happened. When I informed him, he, too, shed tears of joy, and we rushed to the Indian Embassy. It was then 1 PM.

As instructed, we left the application form and documents and waited. Around 4:30 PM, the consul himself came to hand over my passport. He said, "Today is Friday, and you came a bit late. There was no time to print the visa, so I gave you a handwritten one. Enjoy your trip to India."

Swami's Gifts to Me

That was how my first trip to Swami materialized. It was the most memorable trip of my life, and I attended the SSEHV conference in July 2008. Swami showered so much love and blessings on all of us. Most importantly, **He assured us that He is always with us everywhere and at all times.**

I was so touched by the experience that I prayed to Baba, "Swami, please give me the opportunity to study in the college of my dreams or allow me to stay here and study at Your University." The very next morning, my father called the University in Venezuela for a final confirmation. The voice on the other end said an email had been sent to the candidate.

"Haven't you seen it yet? Your daughter needs to come here and sign the papers

accepting her admission. She will start this September."

I firmly believe that **Swami gives us what we want so that our hearts can begin to yearn for what He came to give us**. Patience and perseverance are essential, along with complete faith. He is always with us. He is always looking after us... listening to us. Believe it!

These days, I live in India, in the city of Pune. I am married to an Indian, and we have a baby girl. I am still an active member of the Sri Sathya Sai International Organization and the local *Samithi* (Center). I lead my life inspired by what Swami said in His discourse on July 16, 1997, "*It is the privilege and duty of the young men and women to promote the welfare, progress, and peace of the world. Transform all your actions into sacred duties. Experience the love of the Divine. That is the meaning of Swami's declaration: 'My life is My message.' Adhere to the ideals set before you by Swami.*"

Ms. Linda Fonseca
VENEZUELA

Ms. Linda Fonseca *was a Sai Spiritual Education (Balvikas) student in her native city of Barquisimeto, Venezuela. She also completed the Sathya Sai Education in Human Values (SSEHV) diploma course from the Instituto Sathya Sai de Educación en Valores Humanos de Venezuela (ISSEVHVEN). She was associated with ISSEVHVEN for more than ten years as a teacher trainer, translator of materials, and interpreter. Linda graduated from the Sri Sathya Sai International Leadership Programme (SSSILP) in 2016. She is an SSE teacher for Group 1 students in Pune, India. Linda has a degree in Modern Languages with a major in International Organizations.*

When Sai Gives You a Task...

In May of 2009, a series of incidents showed me how the unseen hand of our beloved Swami orchestrates every little aspect of our lives. It all started with the National Retreat of the SSSIO planned to be held in Poland along with the Regional Retreat (for Region 73 of SSSIO Zone 7). The double blessing of gathering in Swami's name at the national and regional levels became even more special as we invited ardent devotees of Swami, Dr. Thorbjorn Meyer and Ms. Marianne Meyer; our zone coordinators; and the teachers from the ESSE (European Sathya Sai Education) Institute, for the special occasion. Having served as the National Council President (NCP) for Poland for five years, I was happy at the prospect of retiring on a high note, passing on the baton to another able member while continuing to work as an active member of the SSSIO.

A Re'tire'ment Proposal

A few weeks before the planned retreats, I received a call from Dr. Thorbjorn Meyer in which he proposed that I take over his position as the Central Coordinator (CC) of Region 73. I had never wanted to hold any position in the Organization and just wanted to serve as a regular member. But I had been led by divine providence from one position to another despite my reluctance. In fact, it took a lot of time and effort for Dr. Thorbjorn Meyer to convince me to take up the role of National President of the Sai Organization in Poland. So, I was very surprised by his magnanimous offer, yet I respectfully declined. I was looking forward to relaxing and taking care of my family. But then, he gently prodded me to meditate and talk with Swami, seeking His guidance, before meeting him the following week.

I meditated for a whole week after that and sincerely prayed to Swami for a solution. Part of me was confused about the right thing to do, while another part of me was frightened about taking up the daunting responsibility. That was when He came to my rescue!

Life Is a Dream–Realize It

One night, Swami appeared in my dream. **Looking deep into my eyes, He spoke only one sentence, *"Some time ago, you said 'Yes' to me...."*** I woke up with a heart that was beating fast. I immediately sat down to write to Dr. Thorbjorn. I wrote to him about the dream and explained that I didn't feel I was up to the task of being the Central Coordinator (CC), but I would gladly accept the role of a deputy. I never received a reply from him to my email. Thinking that he had gotten busy, I let it pass.

During our Regional Retreat, we learned the sad news from Dr. Thorbjorn's wife, Marianne, that he had passed away on

June 11, 2009! Everyone was shocked at his unexpected demise, and indeed it was no occasion for anyone to bring up the matter of a new CC for the Region. I pondered on my last conversation with him. It was as if he knew what was coming and hence his urgency!

One week later, I got a letter from the then-president of the Sri Sathya Sai International Organization (SSSIO), Dr. Michael Goldstein, congratulating me on my appointment as the CC of Region 73. He also invited me to the Prasanthi Council Meeting during Guru Purnima 2009, where I would be officially welcomed to the fraternity of senior SSSIO officers.

I became numb witnessing the speed at which things were happening. I realized that when we say 'Yes' to Swami, we lose the right to be like anyone else. As His instruments, our thoughts, words, and deeds become His, and our will becomes a manifestation of His Will alone! I slowly started to accept the idea and prepared myself for the new, major responsibility being placed on my shoulders. The meeting in Prasanthi Nilayam and my nomination was memorable, joyful, cordial, and warm.

When Swami Gives a Task...

Soon after I assumed charge as the CC, Dr. Goldstein and Ms. Marianne Meyer enquired about my plans to visit all the countries in my Region (Region 73 included Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland). It was important for the CC to get an intimate understanding of the people and activities of the Region. It was also a mandate for me to put in my best efforts to inspire and uplift them with spiritual activities. I promised to do my best, but deep within, I wondered how it would be possible. Region 73 consists of four other countries apart from Poland, where I lived. I had never visited any of the other countries before, and although I was acquainted with the National Council Presidents (NCPs), I had no idea about the leaders in the various Sai Centers there. I had to travel, but how would I find the time and funds for it? Apart from my travels to Puttaparthi to see Swami, I could not manage to travel anywhere else.

He Provides Everything to Accomplish the Task

I prayed and poured out my heart complaining to Swami, "How am I supposed to do all this? How do You want me to travel to all these countries? After all, You know my situation well. What do You want me to do? Only You can manage, not me." I prayed to Swami to show me the way, and again, the speed of His response left me speechless. In the evening, I went to the post office to call my friend in Poland, with whom I confided about the situation. After discussing the upcoming trip to Puttaparthi, he asked me if I would be interested in a trip offered to us by one of the business partners on my return to Poland.

"What kind of trip?"

"A trip that the businesses typically arrange for the stakeholders to entertain open discussions in a less formal and less stressful environment. You will be visiting four countries...."

"What countries?"

"See, the idea is to travel from Poland to Finland, sailing through the Baltic Sea. After a two-day stay in Finland, you will travel to Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania for two days each on your return journey to Poland."

His answer left me stunned and speechless. These were precisely the same coun-

tries in my Region! Not getting a reply, he continued,

"You will not have to pay for anything, of course. We hope you accept this complimentary travel...."

And that was how, three weeks after my appointment as the CC for Region 73, I travelled for the first time to meet all the NCPs and leaders of the countries from Region 73–spending one day on the excursion and the second with Sai devotees in all four countries! Swami's arrangements were perfect as ever!

After the visit, I told the organizing business partner about Swami's miracle. He, too, was devoted to Swami and was amazed! He said, "And I naively thought that it was me who organized this trip!" Whenever we meet, we fondly recall this story.

When Swami gives us a task, He also provides everything to accomplish the task. Swami is verily Omnipotent!

Ms. Maria Quoos
POLAND

***Ms. Maria Quoos**, having completed her MA from the Academy of Art, Maria Quoos also graduated in journalism from the Pontifical Academy of Theology. She has been part of the SSSIO since 1995. She serves as the Central Coordinator for Region 73 and has been the conductor of the Sarva Dharma Choir since 2009. Since 2016, she also has served as the editor of the quarterly magazine, 'Sai Ram.'*

My Spiritual Transformation

I took a deep breath and walked up to the teacher's table. I placed all the tangerines I brought on the table and called the children, one by one, handing over one fruit to each. The rector had come to observe and evaluate how well I could teach mathematics. She seemed surprised at my actions and watched us with a strange expression.

I asked the children to peel the tangerines and eat as many slices as they wished. Once the children had relished the sweet, juicy pieces, I asked them whether they remembered how many segments were in the fruit at the beginning. Then, I began to teach about fractions with graphic representations based on each child's experience. By the end of my class, every child had grasped the concept of fractions well.

The rector said, "At first, I thought you were out of control–how could you invite the children to eat in class?" She was frank with her feedback, saying, "But then I understood your approach, and I really liked your way of breaking barriers. When can you start teaching?" I was filled with happiness upon hearing this.

I learned to teach human values through Sathya Sai Education classes. It was 2006, and at the early age of 21, I had been accepted as a teacher in a primary school in Bahía de Caráquez, Manabí, Ecuador. I was soaring high with delight, a sense of belonging, and fulfillment. **I did not realize then that this was the start of a beautiful journey in spreading Sathya Sai Education In Human Values through the community.**

Miracle of Sathya Sai's Love

I was then 21 years old and tried to solve adverse situations by shouting. I had learned to be strong and not let anyone put me down because of a difficult childhood. My father left us when I was a seven-year-old. It was a big blow for my mother. She had six children, no home, and no income as a housewife.

By the time I was hired as a Mathematics teacher, I was already responsible for caring for others, and my heart had expanded with love. Filled with joy, I began to imagine what I could do for the children's benefit. However, after the first week of classes, I saw my previous boss entering the institution one day. He had fired me earlier because I became pregnant. I learned his action was not legal, and I filed a complaint with the labor department. Although it was never resolved, my former boss would seek revenge from that day on. Whenever he found out I was working somewhere, he would visit my new bosses and ask them to fire me.

On that fateful day, my ex-boss talked with the rector. Then the rector called me to her office. As I looked at the children, my eyes filled with tears, and my heart sank as I thought this would be my last day at school. But I was about to witness the mira-

cle of Sathya Sai's love. The rector notified me of the visit by my previous boss but told me not to worry! She said everything would be fine and asked me to continue doing my best. I could not believe she had broken the circle of hate by Swami's grace!

I met many people throughout my life who spoke about love. **But that day, the rector showed me love in action, following the teachings of Sri Sathya Sai Baba. I was never the same again, and thus began my transformation in thought and feeling.** My heart softened with love, and I decided to do my best to love more and more.

Be the Change That You Want to See in Others

Everything around me began to change when I understood that change starts with me. I became transformed by practicing the teachings of Sathya Sai Education in Human Values. Since I learned through actions and experiences, I appreciated the role of harmony of thought, word, and deed. This has taught me to know my true self. As part of the Sai family, I never feel that I am being judged. I have discovered my strengths and learned to work together, supported by a great team of coworkers.

Today my life is different since I have overcome my fears. I have come to appreciate the soft caress of the wind, the song of the birds, the smiles of the children, and the support of the parents of families. Additionally, I have the affection of the teachers, harmony with nature, and an earthly father who supports me. He listens to my tantrums and helps me develop self-confidence. I confess that it is often difficult to face 'storms,' listen to foolish words and learn harsh realities. However, at the end of the day, there is always the smile of a teacher, the hug of a child, and a thank you from someone to help me overcome the negativity. **Many times, I had to unlearn to learn again**.

Today, our educational institute has grown. We have become beacons of light and hope where teachers, children, and parents practice love. In addition, we have **six maxims** for our students as institutional objectives:

1. Be good
2. Be happy
3. Serve society
4. Be responsible for nature
5. Be leaders
6. Know thyself

We believe that it is fundamental to humanize education. On the other hand, I can affirm with complete certainty practicing human values as taught by Sathya Sai has saved my life. **Now, I understand the importance of transforming myself to bring about the change I want in others.**

SSSEHV Equips Us to Face Life's Challenges Better

In addition, I think it is not by chance that the Lord brought me to this beautiful place to experience personal transformation. It also enabled me to bring out the best in others. I am now the mother of two beautiful children, although one of them has Noonan syndrome with a partial intellectual disability. **The education program in human values has made me a better mother, partner, teacher, daughter, sister, friend, and human being. This is reflected in everything that surrounds me.** This does not mean that I do not have problems, but I can see these challenges as learning opportunities to assess and improve myself. It helps me to get rid of my negative emotions.

I believe that self-confidence is essential to achieve control of our lives. I grew up listening to words like "she can't do it," "she

has no chance," and "she will never make it." But positive words spoken by my elder brother and others have always energized me never to give up, which shows the power of the word. Today, I may not have material or academic achievements, but I enjoy much affection, kindness, love, and respect from people close to me as well as strangers.

It is time to understand that the light of others does not limit our brilliance. **Each person shines with their own light, and it would be spectacular if all of us could shine and vibrate with love in harmony.**

Ms. Rosa Zambrano Rivero
ECUADOR

Ms. Rosa Zambrano Rivero *holds a degree in Education Sciences from the Technical University of Manabí (Ecuador). She has more than 18 years of experience teaching at almost all educational levels, in both formal and informal contexts. Currently, she is the Rector (Academic Head & In-Charge) of the Sathya Sai School of Bahía de Caráquez (Ecuador).*

The Shiva-Shakti Swaroopa

Dr. Narottam Maharaj Alreja had the greatest good fortune of being the 'personal physician' of the Avatar of the Age–Sri Sathya Sai Baba. Before joining the Sri Sathya Sai General Hospital, Prasanthi Nilayam, as its Superintendent in 1975, he had worked as the Superintendent in the well-known J.J. Hospital in Mumbai.

One afternoon, at about 1:30 pm, he was suddenly summoned to Swami's residence. Wondering what the issue might be, he gathered his medical bag and rushed to His presence. Swami welcomed him with a smile and said that He felt a bit uneasy. The one who is always divinely and supremely easy sports uneasiness only to convey a message and grant an experience. That would be the doctor's discovery that day.

"Check my blood pressure," Swami told Dr. Alreja, who immediately readied his sphygmomanometer (blood pressure machine) to take the readings, placing the cuff on Swami's right arm. The blood pressure was 80/56, and the pulse rate was 48 per minute. The measurements were too low, and the doctor was at a loss about what to say, but he also knew that he was face to face with God.

"Is there anything serious, Alreja?" Swami enquired.

"Swami! What can ever be serious with Swami?" He replied.

"But the expression on your face changed when you took the readings..."

"May I take the blood pressure readings from the other arm?" requested the doctor.

"Do whatever you need to make your diagnosis."

The Differential Diagnosis

Dr. Alreja removed the cuff from Swami's right arm and slid it over His left arm. The blood pressure readings were 120/80, with a pulse rate of 72 per minute, which was perfectly normal, and the doctor was visibly happy.

"Now, what is your diagnosis?" Swami asked.

Alreja was a devotee first and a doctor next. He prostrated at Swami's feet and gave his diagnosis. "Swami, You had a heart attack from a blocked artery. You proclaim that You are Shiva-Shakti Swaroopa. Shiva on the right side had taken over a heart attack of a Shiva Bhakta (devotee of Lord Shiva). In contrast, Shakti on the left side was unaffected. **I am grateful you gave me direct medical proof that you are Shiva-Shakti**."

At that moment, Swami partially parted the robe on His chest.

"*See, on the right chest and arm, there is hair. On the left side of My chest and arm, there is no hair*." The doctor was thus blessed with another beautiful revelation and experience.

The Differing Feet

Swami granted a similar experience to Prof. Anil Kumar Kamaraju. He entered the interview room and found Swami seated

on His chair in the north-western corner of the room. The professor rushed and seated himself at His feet. Even as Swami began to converse, the professor placed his hands on His feet and started enjoying the bliss of *Padasevanam* (massaging the feet of one's Guru). A few minutes later, he realized that there were some heavy anklet pressure markings on the left ankle. Surprisingly, these pressure impressions were absent on the right ankle. Unable to contain his curiosity, he interrupted the conversation and asked,

"Swami, what are these marks on your left ankle?"

He immediately realized that the curtains had been partially parted for him to witness the manifestation of Shiva-Shakti. Even as that realization dawned, **Swami confirmed it, saying, *"This is the Shiva-Shakti Swaroopa."***

Indications From His Childhood

The earliest recorded instance of Swami revealing His Shiva-Shakti aspect was when, as a child, He would apply both *vibhuti* and *kumkum* (vermilion) on His forehead. Unable to grasp the import of this, His 'parents' and 'friends' watched in wonder, unaware that they were witnessing a divine revelation. Nobody probably comprehended this aspect of the *Avatar* until the magnificent miracle and declaration during the Guru Poornima of 1963. Swami cured a paralytic stroke to the left half of His body just by sprinkling a few drops of water. Then, to the astonishment of everyone, He stood up to deliver a divine discourse, revealing that He was indeed Shiva-Shakti *Swaroopa*. (The historical discourse is found in this earlier issue of Sathya Sai–The Eternal Companion)

The name 'Sai' itself means Shiva-Shakthi. Etymologically, the first syllable *Sa(h)*, signifies the supreme divinity *(Ishwara)* or Shiva. The second syllable, *Ayee,* signifies *Shakti, Amba,* or the universal divine mother. Putting the two together, the euphonic combination becomes *Saayee*. The great Vedic scholar and seer of the holy mantra Sri Sathya Sai Gayatri, the late Ghandikota Subramanya Shastri, expressed it beautifully:

Shivah Sah Ithi Anena Ukthah
Ayee Ithi Ambaa Prakeerthithaa
Thath Samyogah Shivas-Saambah
Saayee Ithi Prathipaadhyathe
(Sanskrit Verse)

Many say 'Sa' means Shiva.
'Aai' is the Divine Mother.
The holy union of Shiva and the Divine Mother is Sai.

There is also a beautiful instance where Swami reminded the great Sanskrit scholar of this Truth.

True Form of Sathya Sai

On Shankara Jayanthi day (the birth anniversary of the Indian Guru, philosopher, and *Adwaitin*, Sri Adi Shankaracharya), Swami asked Sri Ghandikota Subramanya Shastri to address a large gathering of devotees in the magnificent Poornachandra Auditorium. Being a Pandit of Vedic learning and practice, he passionately spoke at length on Swami's divine qualities and powers, comparing Him with several deities–Gayatri, Dattatreya, Vishnu, etc. Inadvertently he forgot to mention the Shiva aspect of Baba, although Shiva happened to be his *Ishta Devata* or chosen form of divinity. Later, through the rest of the day, he regretted this inadvertent omission.

The next morning, after the regular bhajan was over, Swami blessed the scholar and his son with a memorable interview. The discussion centered around the triple paths of *Karma, Bhakti,* and *Jnana* (Work, Worship, and Wisdom) and the trinity: *Brahma, Vishnu,* and *Shiva*. In the end, Swami led them into the Bhajan Hall and

showed them around the new decorations in the Bhajan Mandir. Stopping in front of the Shirdi Baba painting, He waved His right palm and lovingly materialized an unusual color picture proclaiming, *"Idi naa nija svaroopam"* (This is My True Form)–showing that Shirdi Sai, Sathya Sai, and Shiva are one. The Vedic scholar was ecstatic at this revelation.

If the Sanskrit word *Esa* (short for Easwara or Shiva) is pronounced in reverse, it becomes *Sayee* or Sai. Thus, Swami's name and its inner meaning reveal His true nature as Shiva-Shakti.

Mr. Aravind Balasubramanya
INDIA

Mr. Aravind Balasubramanya *comes from a family that has been devoted to Swami for nearly half a century. Aravind graduated from the Sri Sathya Sai Higher Secondary School and completed his Bachelor of Science from the Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning (SSSIHL), receiving a gold medal. He also holds an M.S. (Chemistry) and an MBA from the SSSIHL.*

He worked for Radio Sai from 2007 to 2021. Aravind has authored four books about his experiences with Swami. He was Swami's photographer for nearly five years. Aravind has dedicated his life to serving Swami and sharing His teachings with one and all through various media channels.

Divine Mother Sai and Motherhood

"Past, present, or future, for all time, women are the backbone of progress, the heart of the nation, the very breath. They play the chief role in the dharma of life here below, a key role that is charged with holiness. The woman's mission is to lay down the canons of righteousness and morality. She must provide children with moral and spiritual training. When the mother is imbued with dharma, the children get the benefit and get similarly saturated. When she is skilled in morals, the children learn to be moral. Therefore, the level of education among women decides whether a country is to prosper or decline. Her acts and conduct are crucial factors."

–Sri Sathya Sai Baba
Dharma Vahini

"Ana María," Swami called out to my mother as we sat in the interview room. She was shocked and delighted at the same time to find that Sathya Sai Baba knew her name! As she expressed her wonder and joy through the eloquence of silence, Swami continued, *"You are very worried about your daughter; she comes and goes from here to there."* As a 9-year-old child in 1986, I was a handful and kept moving about here and there in the Prasanthi Nilayam *ashram*. I kept making friends with other children and played all day until I collapsed in bed at night. To make matters worse, I did not understand English and could not make out anything the volunteers told me in the *ashram*. My mother replied, "Yes, Swami, I am worried..." That was when Sai, with the love of a thousand mothers, tenderly reassured her in a whisper, *"Do not worry about anything; your daughter is a good girl...good girl."* **Those words were enough for my mother to calm down and trust that Swami is watching over us constantly!**

Love at First Sight

I was blessed with the grace of "knowing" Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba through my mother when I was just six. I was immediately convinced that Sai was much more than just a "*Guru*" (a spiritual master)–He was omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient. I felt close to Him, as a mother, as a father, as a friend, and as a confidante, despite not having seen Him physically.

We lived in Argentina, far away from India. However, we had the chance to travel to Puttaparthi and be in His Divine Presence for the first time in 1986. I was only nine years old, but by then, I had attended the Sai Centre in my city, Buenos Aires, for three years. I learned His teachings through books, speeches, workshops, and talks on human values. I also heard about devotees' experiences with Him that transformed their lives permanently.

During that visit, Sai Baba welcomed us, along with several other devotees, in His interview room. He ensured that all of us felt comfortable and, as the Divine Mother, showered His love on us, attending to every detail. He turned the fans on when it was hot, distributed presents and sweets, and lovingly spoke with each of us. At that time, He reassured my mother about me, as I mentioned earlier. There was no turning back for me ever since. **He was installed in my heart, and will always be there**.

Mother of Mothers

I had the blessed opportunity to travel to India with the rest of my family on many other occasions. I even lived there for three years. I divided my time between Prasanthi Nilayam and the Institute of Sathya Sai Education in Human Values in the city of Mumbai, first as a student and later as a faculty member. During those three years in India, Swami guided me as a Divine Mother, and I took every step, trusting Him. I can share thousands of anecdotes and miracles about His omnipresence, omniscience, and love, but I would like to focus on one in particular.

One day, my mother phoned me and said that after much hard work, she had saved enough money to visit me. In those days, traveling to India was expensive, and I was overjoyed at the prospect of seeing my mother again after a long time. She arrived in Prasanthi Nilayam in December 2007 to spend the holidays with me. Due to our Christian upbringing, celebrating Jesus' birthday was always very important for our family, as it was a deeply emotional connection. On the night of December 24, I was thrilled to learn that I would give a speech the next day along with another young man. We were told to share our experiences with Sathya Sai and how He transformed our lives and guided us. Furthermore, we were going to speak in Swami's presence and before a packed Christmas audience of more than 15,000 people! Thus, on the afternoon of December 25, 2007, the birthday of our beloved Jesus Christ, I spoke in the presence of Divine Mother Sai. My earthly mother, Ana María, was also seated in the front row, crying with joy.

At the end of my speech, Swami beckoned me to come toward Him. As I knelt before Him, He waved His hand, materialized a gold chain with a locket, and lovingly placed it around my neck. I thanked Him for everything. Although I was in utter disbelief and joy, I somehow managed to say, "Swami, thank you for bringing my mother here." Swami laughed and asked, *"Where is she?"* Puzzled, I replied, "Over there, in the front, Swami, wearing a red sari." He smiled even more at me. I learned a lesson from that confident and loving glance. **I understood that "Sai" is my "mother," the "Divine Mother," the "Mother of my mother Ana María," the "Divine Mother of all Creation." He is always willing to give us love, protection, and guidance and is always ready to meet our needs!**

Walking the Path of Motherhood

I had entertained thoughts of living in India because I felt it was my *dharma* to stay at the Institute in Mumbai. One day, the Director of the Institute, who was fully devoted to serving Sai, told me, "It is time for you to go back to your country to share the knowledge and experience you have acquired here and, most importantly, to start a family."

Having faith that Sai would always guide me like a mother, I obediently returned to Argentina. I got married and started a family as I understood that **my primary *sadhana* (spiritual practice) was to be a wife and, most importantly, a mother! My role as a mother was more important than any other role**.

Today, 35 years after my first journey to India, I live happily with my beloved husband, Carlos. We are both immensely grateful for being the parents of 7-year-old Santino and 3-year-old Jazmín. Is it easy to be a mother? I would be lying if I said yes. It is a challenging, 24-hour job but very enriching, noble, and fulfilling. As our children grow up, we as mothers grow in our sacred role under the guidance of our Divine Master. God is present in our children's hugs, their glances, their imitation of us, and their actions. They inspire us to use our judgment and love and to correct them if necessary. I believe the 5 D's, "Discipline, Discrimination, Dedication, Determination, and Devotion," taught by Sathya Sai, are essential for children's upbringing. As Sai has said, we must give our children *"moral and spiritual training."* They receive and follow the message when we think, talk, and act virtuously. Family is a gift of God, where we remind each other about the way back to the source, the essence, which is our innate divinity.

Being a mother is a divine gift. For the women who do not have children, if you are willing to become a mother, God provides you with millions of opportunities to perform the role of a mother through nephews, godchildren, etc., or "students." Swami told a teacher who did not have children that He would give her thousands of students to guide them as a mother would.

Sai, our Divine Mother, unconditionally devotes Herself, day and night, to loving, protecting, caring for, educating, nourishing, and guiding Her children. Sai's earthly mother, "Easwaramma," did this also and was an exemplary mother. As a mother, I need to follow their example. Thank you, thank you, thank you! In a personal interview, **Sai told me and my father, Horacio, *"Be happy! Be happy! Be happy!"* and I need to practice His Divine command**.

With infinite love and gratitude,

Ms. Inés Redini Latrónico
ARGENTINA

Ms. Inés Redini Latrónico *lives in Argentina, holds a graduate degree in Ontological Coaching, and is licentiate in Commercialisation and Television Production. She has an Advanced Diploma in Education in Human Values from the ISSE in India, where she is also a faculty member. As a team member of the Sathya Sai Mahatma Gandhi School in Argentina, she loves to work especially with the student's families.*

Motherly God and Godly Mother

"Aye, who is she?" Swami asked my brother pointing toward our mother in a family interview. Puzzled, my brother slowly responded, "Mother, Swami." Then, pointing to our father, Swami asked, *"Who is she to him?"* He replied, "Wife, Swami." The questions continued to the extended family, *"Who is she to your grandfather, to your uncle?"* And the answers trickled in, "Daughter-in-law," "sister-in-law," etc. The penultimate question by Swami was, *"Who is she to your wife?"* Being in high school, my brother knew that any answer would land him in hot waters, so he put his head down and kept quiet. Then came a sweet and profound revelation. *"Mother-in-law, right! See, she is a mother to you, wife to your father, daughter-in-law to your grandfather, sister-in-law to your uncle, and mother-in-law to your wife. Look at me! I'm a mother to you. A mother to your mother, father, grandfather, uncle, and even to your wife. I'm always a mother-in-love for all. Law may change but my Love will never change.* ***My Love is like that of a thousand mothers.***"

Life is defined by incessant changes – day and night, pain and pleasure, heat and cold, birth and death, etc., but God and God's love are the only true constants. Is it not interesting how Swami used the example of a mother to illustrate this profound truth and to highlight that a mother's love represents God's supreme love in a small measure?

Mother Easwaramma Inspires Me

As a *Balvikas* (Sai Spiritual Education) student, I have many fond memories of Easwaramma day. Hundreds of children from Sai Centers would gather in Sundaram, Swami's *ashram* in Chennai, along with their *gurus* for a day filled with fun activities and competition. At the end of the day, there would be *bhajans*, prize distribution, and speeches by senior devotees. As a nine-year-old child, it was clear to me that the day was celebrated because Swami loved His mother and she loved children. So, He was honoring her life by celebrating it as a special day for the children. As an adult, I have now come to understand and appreciate how Swami inspired me to love and respect my mother and all mothers through His example. When we study the lives of incarnations like Rama, Krishna, Buddha, Prophet Mohammed, and Shirdi Baba, little is known about their mothers and their role in the divine mission.

On the other hand, Easwaramma, the chosen Mother, had a pivotal role in the divine mission. For someone who did not attend school at all, who gave birth to all her children at home, and who did not have access to clean drinking water, her three wishes inspired the launch of three of Swami's landmark humanitarian projects. These projects (education, healthcare, and water supply) continue to benefit millions today. In wishing for others to have what she herself lacked, **Mother Easwaramma**

epitomized generosity, compassion, sacrifice, and selflessness – qualities that Swami often highlighted as examples of inherent virtues in women.

My Mother Brings Me Closer to Swami

While I revered Swami and was deeply inspired by Him, I was also terrified by His Omniscience. As a child, any little transgression would become like a stern reminder that Swami is watching! So, Swami was like a policeman for me waiting to punish me. During one of His annual visits to Sundaram, Swami called my parents to discuss family matters and I remember hiding behind my mother. When it was time for Swami to leave, my mother grabbed me by the arm and moved me closer to Swami for His blessings. The memory of Swami placing His hand on my head and my mother holding me close to Him is still vivid and precious. **My mother demonstrated the value and benefit of leading a God-centered life** by always relying on God for good health, good behavior, and success, surrendering to His will, and accepting the outcome.

Swami Answers Prayer

After a long gap, Swami visited Chennai again in January 2007 for the *Ati Rudra Maha Yajna*. The Citizens Conclave organized a special event to express gratitude to Swami for the Sathya Sai Ganga Canal Project which provides free drinking water for millions of thirsty people in the city and surrounding areas. It was a blissful two weeks and the *Yajna* was an incredibly unique experience. After returning to Los Angeles, I called home and noticed that my mother sounded a bit sad and was missing Swami. That night, I prayed to Swami to take care of my mother and to fill her heart with His loving presence. In the morning, when I called home again, I was pleasantly surprised to find my mother in her usual cheerful spirits. Even before I could ask, she said that Swami had sent her a sweet surprise. Dr. Rama Devi who was often her '*darshan* buddy' (they would sit next to each other), visited her around noon to deliver a special gift. When she opened the gift wrap there was a beautiful, framed picture from the last *darshan* in Chennai. In the picture, Swami is in the foreground, lovingly looking at my mother with Dr. Rama Devi by her left.

My heart was filled with overwhelming gratitude. There are so many ways to rationalize why Dr. Rama Devi brought the framed picture to my mother on that particular day or time or if it was a lucky coincidence. But for me, these simple and mundane experiences, however small, are building blocks of faith and devotion. **Swami has affirmed the power of sincere prayer and dependence on God**– both qualities practiced and taught by my mother.

Ladies Day

In His discourse on November 19, 2001, Swami declared, *"There is nothing in this world that women cannot achieve. Recognizing the nature of such women, we must encourage them and give them equal opportunities in society."* When you read about Swami's life and His works, women were given a prominent role in the divine mission – Easwaramma, Subbamma, Rajmata of Jamnagar, Indra Devi, Elsie Cowan, and Phyllis Krystal to mention a few. As the Sai movement grew, more opportunities were created through the Sai Organizations–such as the women's wing *(Mahila Vibhag)*, *Balvikas* (SSE), and college for women in Anantapur. Declaring November 19th as Ladies' Day and making it an integral part of Swami's Birthday celebrations is an enduring testimony to His commitment to women's upliftment and empowerment. Much of who I am today I

owe to following Swami's personal example, His teachings, my mother, and all the extraordinary women who have nurtured me on this journey to God. With faith in His words that we can achieve anything in this world, I offer our collective prayer to Swami that we do our part in creating opportunities for all, especially those who need it most.

Jai Sai Ram!

Ms. Aparna Murali

USA

Ms. Aparna Murali *was blessed to be born in a family devoted to Swami since the early 1960s. She attended the Balvikas (Sai Spiritual Education) program and also the Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning (SSSIHL), Anantapur. She is an active member of SSSIO and currently serves as the National Education Coordinator, USA. Professionally, she is a Board-certified Genetics Counselor in the Department of OB-GYN at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).*

Swami is My Guru, Guide, and God

Professor Kasturi, the biographer of Swami, once said that every devotee's experience is an unwritten book. I will share a few pages from the book of my life's journey and tell you how Swami has shaped my life.

I will now turn to a page in my life in 1999 when I attended the 2nd World Youth conference in Prasanthi Nilayam. Of the many spiritual pearls Swami gave us in His discourses during the conference, **a key recurring point Swami made that struck a chord within me and transformed my life was His emphasis on selfless service *(Seva)* and sacrifice**. Swami highlighted service as an essential means for one's transformation. I was inspired and determined to move forward and follow Swami's advice.

Miraculous Experiences in Medical Camps

Swami already had a master plan for my life. When I returned to the United Kingdom, I was given the opportunity by the Sri Sathya Sai Organization of the UK to help coordinate international medical camps in different corners of the world, including Kenya, Malawi, Sri Lanka, Russia, and India, among others.

During the planning phase and while conducting medical camps, Swami showed His omnipresence in different ways, which helped me internalize some of His precious teachings.

During a trip to Russia, the UK medical team had significant excess luggage containing medical items for the camp, and this was a cause for concern. We were unsure if this luggage would be allowed into the country without difficulty. Therefore, we silently chanted the Gayatri Mantra as we approached the airport check-in counter. When it was our turn to weigh the luggage, something unbelievable happened– suddenly, the weighing scales at all the counters of that airline went out of order, and all our baggage was accepted without any questions. **This was proof of Swami's words: *"Why Fear When I Am Here?"* and *"You do My work, and I will take care of yours."***

During one medical camp in Kenya, I saw a patient at a distance and had this sudden urge to give him a packet of holy ash *(vibhuti)*. I asked the patient to place the vibhuti under his pillow and sleep. The following day he came rushing over to me with an excited tone and said, "Madam, Madam, for the past 14 years, I have suffered from nightmares and disturbed sleep. But last night was different! I slept well and had no nightmares. It is God's miracle. I request you to give me one more packet of this holy ash for my daughter, who also suffers from the same problem!" I realized that when we immerse ourselves in Seva and become instruments in His Hands, He will work through us. I don't know what made me give the *vibhuti* packet to this man. I believe Swami reached out to him to relieve his suffering. This incident made me realize that Swami will never let His devotees down wherever they may be. Also, when we unconditionally accept any opportunity for *serving others*, **Swami will**

work through us and reinforce the faith in Him for both the person serving and the person receiving the *seva*. Swami has laid out a simple guideline for this: "Love all, Serve all."

Such events deepened my understanding of Swami's teachings and increased my faith in Him. Participating in seva activities not only increased my faith in Swami and my love for others but also had an added benefit. I noticed that I had developed essential management and leadership skills, which were crucial for my professional life as an investment banker. Let me now turn the page to "Swami in my professional life."

Swami Guides My Professional Life

Swami has always shown His presence and guided me in my professional life in addition to my service activities. The corporate and banking world is a challenging work environment, and our moral/ethical principles are at risk of being compromised. However, Swami took care of things for me– He gave me the right work ethic, taught me human values, and gave me the ability to work sincerely with a spirit of sacrifice. Therefore, despite all the challenges of the corporate world, Swami guided me to stay on the *dharmic* path, and He took care of the results.

At this point, I recollect a beautiful incident. During one of the interviews Swami gave in Prasanthi Nilayam to the UK youth and medical group, I sat by Swami's Lotus Feet in the bhajan mandir, looking into His beautiful eyes. A young person asked Swami how to deal with stress in the workplace. **Swami promptly responded that the solution is to consider work as worship**. This declaration made a profound impact on me. I now consider any work or task given to me as a directive from Swami. In my profession, I try to understand the client's needs and make my best effort based on the client's needs and not my convenience. However, I always try to ask if this was the right thing to do or not, as I consider myself answerable to Swami.

Swami Gives Promotion

Swami has helped me tremendously in the workplace. Through His Grace alone, I successfully survived three corporate mergers in my work tenure when hundreds of people lost their jobs. Swami can make the impossible possible. When pay cuts were the norm in an environment of downsizing, I received a promotion. Again, these events reinforced my faith that **Swami protects and takes care of our personal needs when we are immersed in His work and consider work as worship**.

I have experienced Swami's guidance while working on important projects as well. When the 9/11 terrorist strike happened, I was working in New York. My seniors asked me to prepare a paper for the aerospace and defense sector with a same-day deadline. I found the task quite difficult, given the airline industry just faced a significant risk incident. I didn't know where to start. I then closed my eyes and prayed to Swami to guide me and show me how this should be handled. Lo and behold, within a few minutes, I received a phone call from someone I did not expect, and that person wanted to discuss the very same topic with me! This discussion helped me start drafting my paper and better understand the content. Hence, I could complete the task as scheduled due to Swami's Grace.

Similarly, there have been other times when I faced challenging situations, and Swami has helped me make the correct decision.

Swami is Always with Me

Whenever I am traveling on business trips, Swami reminds me that He is with me. He manifests in one way or the other.

During one of my work travels to Vietnam, after a site visit to a power plant that my bank had financed, my client and I were returning to Ho Chi Minh City. As we approached the city, I asked my client if there were any temples nearby, and he said there was one next to his office, where he dropped me off. As I entered the temple, I saw a huge picture of our beloved Swami in His blessing *(Abhayahasta)* pose, to my astonishment! With tears of joy, **I thanked Swami for being my 'Eternal Companion' in all my travels**.

There was another time when I had to travel to Pakistan for work. My flight was delayed, and I eventually got to the hotel late at night. Usually, when I reach any hotel, I set up a small altar in my room with Swami's picture. I then realized something was not working in the room, so I called the hotel maintenance for assistance. A middle-aged Muslim man came to help out, and his eyes fell on the altar, and he asked, "You know Sathya Sai Baba?" I said, "Yes, how do you know Him?" The Muslim man said that he was originally from Anantapur, Andhra Pradesh! **Although we know Swami is Omnipresent, such incidences reinforced my faith and conviction that Swami is always with me**.

Swami has guarded and guided my growth both in my spiritual and professional life. He is my Divine Mother, and He continues to write the book of my life. I offer my gratitude to Mother Sai for everything that I am today. Swami has showered me with the love of countless mothers, the protection of a father, the support of a friend, and the guidance of a guru. Dearest Mother Sai, I pray to You to make me an instrument to work in Your Divine mission.

Mrs. Urvi Widhani
ABU DHABI, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Mrs. Urvi Widhani *hails from Kenya and came to Swami at the age of 16. She pursued higher education in the U.K. and subsequently moved to the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Urvi has arranged and participated in many SSSIO service projects and medical camps during the past 21 years in remote areas in India, Russia, Zone 8 countries, Africa, Sri Lanka, Guyana, the Philippines, etc. She is currently the Secretary of the International Medical Committee of the SSSIO. In her professional field, Urvi is an Investment Banker, currently serving as Managing Director and Head of Loan Agency, Global Corporate Finance, at the largest bank in the UAE.*

Women as Instruments of Divine Love

"Among human beings, it is a privilege to be born as a woman"

–Sri Sathya Sai Baba
NOVEMBER 19, 1995

From my childhood I was questioning how is it a privilege to be born as a woman? In modern society, a woman has responsibilities both at home and at work. She has to be a good daughter, a wife, a mother, an employee, and a friend. How could all this work together and her responsibilities be a privilege? Over many years of reflection, I concluded: "When Sai speaks about woman's role, He speaks primarily about Indian women and Indian society, which has no relevance to western women and my way of life!"

Every time I arrive at wrong conclusions, Sai makes sure I revisit these in-correct conclusions. In reality, this is a great blessing. During the past several years, Sai has put me in a position to be equal with men at work and spend much of my time working with them. As many women do in a man's world, I made the same mistake and brought out my masculine side. I tried to behave like a man in order to be equal with men and started feeling ashamed of my gentle feminine side.

As I was becoming more and more of a man in a woman's body, Sai's words were reverberating louder and louder in my mind. These words of Sai be-came so loud that it made me very uncomfortable, and I realized that I have come to the precipice of a cliff. I decided finally that I have to carefully study Swami's teachings on woman's role in society.

During my university studies, I did a lot of research and this time I decided to take the same investigative and analytical approach to this problem of mine, as a scientist. Over the years I have learned that the meaning and understanding of Sai's words depends on our readiness to hear and under-stand them. So, I started to carefully read Sai's discourses about woman's role, once again. For this research and inquiry, I used Sai's discourses and my experience as the basis. Then, I realized that by trying to be equal to men, a woman is not recognizing her innate powers, and that a woman is not only equal to a man, but also inherently divine. When a woman tries to be strong like a man, she actually comes across as weaker, like a goddess without her powers.

During this internal-external journey, I realized that we are all superheroes in a divine comic book. All of us have powers, God gifted powers, and by pretending to live lives that are not ours, we make ourselves weaker.

Doing this reflection and analysis, I realized my own limitations, and I saw these misgiv-

ings present in many women around me. Women are struggling to be equal with men, to work hard in business, to earn the same amount of money, to show that they can do everything as good as men, and to have the same rights as men.

During this struggle for equality with men, women forget that they are the pillars of the family; they are able to bring peace in their families; they have the power to raise happy, capable and confident children who are leaders of the future; they are able to change men by love, gentleness, patience and persistence; and by their loving example they can move mountains and build a happy society for the future. They are verily the foundation for a better society of tomorrow. Only by women's love and gentleness can the world be transformed. When I woke up to my true powers as a woman, I realized that the true ruler in the world is not the King, but the Queen!

Taking the example of a car, man is like the engine and woman is like the key. The engine would not start without the key; but ultimately God is the driver and without a driver (God), the car cannot move. Each one of us is God and Goddess, each with its own powers, and only by unifying our inherent divinity, we can realize heaven on earth.

As Sai says: *"If women change, men will definitely change. Women should take to the right path. Then men will also take to the right path."* (November 19, 1995).

Led by Sai's hand, step by step, I finally came to the conclusion that Sai's words were meant for all women around the world, to remind them of their inherent potential and thus inspire them.

In honor of Women, Swami declared November 19th of each Year as "Ladies Day" emphasizing their important role in the family and society.

Lord Sai, I thank You for this privilege of a lifetime!

With Love,

Ms. Milica Djuric
SERBIA

Ms. Milica Djuric *lives in Belgrade, Serbia. In 1991, at the age of seven, she came to Sri Sathya Sai Baba. She is the Deputy Zone Young Adult Coordinator of Zone 6 and National Council President of Serbia. She has been an active member of the SSSIO in Serbia for a long time and has served as Center president and National Young Adult Coordinator. Professionally, she is a sales agent and the owner of a company.*

The Magical Place

When I was asked to write about Sri Sathya Sai Baba, I wondered what I could say about His love and glory that had not been said or written before. Considering it a loving command from my beloved Master, I am happy to share my experiences as an offering at His lotus feet. I would like to briefly introduce myself so that you can understand the circumstances when Swami came into my life. At the age of seven, I lost my mother to a brain tumor that had made her completely blind. Two years later, while we were still mourning her death, my only brother sadly died of leukemia after going through terrible pain, hospitalization, transfusions, and suffering. Needless to say, experiencing these two deaths at a young age had a devastating effect on my life. My young mind was led to believe that God loves everyone but me, that God is not my friend, that He gives happiness to others but not me, and that happy family life is for everyone else but me. I was always intellectually curious and in 1982, while browsing in a bookstore, I came across the book *"Sai Baba–Man of Miracles."* **Thus began my adventure with the *Avatar* of this age, Sri Sathya Sai Baba**. I had challenging times adjusting to Indian culture and traditions and somehow, they have not always been pleasant. Added to that was the burden of struggles within myself, owing to childhood pains, loneliness, and unfulfilled desires. But finally, I slowly began to let go of unpleasant events and relationships of the past. I slowly realized that Swami was fully in charge, and being the perfect therapist that He is, on each trip **He would let me experience His unconditional love and tenderness**. Although He seemed not to listen to my pleas to deal with my pain, in the depths of my being, I knew that it was all for the ultimate good of my spiritual journey.

Since I knew what awaited me, we embarked on a trip to Prasanthi Nilayam with a mindset to enjoy the bliss of His *darshan*. But it was not all that easy. A few days after arriving in the *ashram*, I was afflicted by the familiar "interview syndrome", as I jokingly called the desire for an interview that permeates every devotee who sets foot in the *ashram*.

One afternoon after *darshan,* I came to my room frustrated, sad, and hopeless, and I appealed to Swami: "Swami I give up, I don't want to wish or ask You for anything anymore. Just let me experience that You have accepted me. I want to rest my head on your lap like a daughter with her mother."

At that time, a medical conference was being held in Prasanthi Nilayam, and fortunately, the group of doctors had special seating during *darshan*. Being part of the group, I had the "front-row *darshan*" of Swami from close proximity. This physical closeness filled me with immense happiness. Exchanging glances with Swami assured me that there was a true heart-to-heart connection with Him without the need for words.

In one of these *darshans,* Swami materialized a necklace for a doctor and placed it around his neck. On the way out I told Héctor, my husband, how happy that person must have felt, and what I wanted most was to put my head on His lap as the

doctor did when Swami put the necklace on him. It was a wishful desire, without urgency, simply the desire to surrender and reaffirm my feelings for my Master. Days passed, the conference ended, and we returned to the daily routines of the *ashram*. I am not one of those who talk a lot in *darshan* lines and who can make friends quickly. However, from time to time, I came across certain people with whom I bonded more closely. We did not even waste time exchanging our names, as it was not necessary. We simply shared the joy of the moment and the most intimate experiences of our spiritual life.

It was on one of those Prasanthi Nilayam mornings when the sun rises with the chirping of birds, and the air is filled with sacred chants praising God and with the smell of jasmine. I received a beautiful message from a friend whose words have been etched in my memory forever. The friend said, **"Search well, search well, this place has magic, don't get lost in the hustle and bustle of people or your mind, focus on Swami and look for the *inner-view*."** The time to enter the *darshan* hall came soon and our conversation ended.

Inside the *darshan* hall, moments before I began meditating, I asked from within my heart for the '***inner view***', which gave me a lot of peace. The *darshan* was as usual, but at the end, I saw that my husband, Hector got up and called me, which meant that Swami had called us for an interview! With my heart racing, I walked toward the interview room for what seemed like an eternity. As I walked, I thought that everybody could even hear my heartbeat!

While waiting for the interview, before Swami entered the room, I had a profound mystical experience, which I knew that other devotees had experienced. My heart was overflowing with love and gratitude, and I was so moved that a stream of tears flowed, and I was unable to keep my composure. I was unable to do anything to stop what was happening to me.

When Swami arrived, He looked at me and started the conversation. I regained my composure a little. It is very difficult to describe in words the deep feeling of love and joy that saturated each cell of my body and permeated my being, the depth of His gaze, and the sweetness of His voice. Perhaps I tasted a drop of His Divinity and that is what I believe He gifted me. **I will keep this spiritual experience as the most precious treasure of my life**.

With Swami's promise of blessing us with another interview soon, I left, brimming with joy and peace as if the 14 years that had passed since our last interview was a distant memory. This was the same Swami who knew us, who knew our innermost thoughts. This was the same Swami of my spiritual longing and my dreams, who loved me with the love of a thousand mothers. He was the same Swami who moved my heart to tears with a single look, even as my tears start flowing, just thinking of Him, as I write these lines. **It was my Swami.**

Life in the *ashram* continued as before, but I had found the way to the "**Magical Place**" within me. The inner experiences multiplied, and I was able to look truly into my heart. I was able to recognize the girl of my childhood; I was able to observe and care for her; I was able to experience her innocence, goodness, and simplicity. I was able to feel her pain and loneliness, her search for herself, and finally, I was able to integrate her into my adult life with amazing depth and determination.

Just as He had promised, four days later Swami called us for a second interview. With His infinite love and knowing my most intimate thoughts, He materialized a gold

chain for me along with a pendant with His image on it and He placed it around my neck. He allowed me to kneel, place my head on His lap, and He whispered, "**Your heart is My seat, your heart is My throne.**" That was an affirmation that He accepted my surrender to Him and blessed me with His infinite Love.

Swami continued to flood me with His motherly tenderness and allowed me to capture that moment with a photograph so that I could always cherish the memory of that magical moment when my prayer of resting my head on my Divine Mother's lap was fulfilled.

JAI SAI RAM

Dr. Milagro Langlois de Castaneda
EL SALVADOR

Dr. Milagro Langlois de Castaneda *is a medical graduate from the National University of El Salvador and received a postgraduate degree in Psychiatry from Georgetown University in Washington D.C. She served as a professor at the Faculty of Medicine of the National University of El Salvador and as the chair of Psychiatry. She was a teacher in the Faculty of Psychology at the Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas and continues her private practice as a physician. She and her husband Hector are long-time devotees of Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba with many precious personal experiences.*

His Constant, Compassionate Presence

The year 2019 was an important milestone in my life. An incident that vividly demonstrated Swami's omnipresence occurred during SSSIO Malaysia's '*Yuvathi Yathra*' (pilgrimage of young women) to Puttaparthi in 2019. It might be a little incident as far as the world is concerned, but for 'little' me, it made a world of difference!

Sai is the Destination and the Journey

We prepared for the trip by participating in service activities, spiritual practices *(sadhana)*, and study circles for several months. The visit to Puttaparthi itself was filled with many activities, which would sometimes cause us to miss the regular programs in the *mandir*. The day before the trip ended, we traveled in a van in the evening for a scheduled activity. We got delayed, and it became evident that we would miss *darshan* and *bhajan* (devotional songs) sessions in the *mandir*. This hit me hard, and I was disappointed, but I was not alone! The others, too, were all feeling the same sentiment.

To uplift our spirits, our facilitators suggested that we sing *bhajans*. However, in our van, only a few of us were familiar with *bhajans*, and fortunately, I was one of them. We began singing *bhajans* wholeheartedly as we continued our journey toward the *ashram*. The melodies flowed through us, filling the van with devotion and an uplifting energy. Since it was a long journey, many fellow travelers fell asleep exhausted. I was also tired but continued singing with an unwavering focus on Swami's beautiful form in my mind. It was the maximum number of *bhajans* I had ever sung in one sitting, and the experience was exhilarating.

Then, a profound moment unfolded! Precisely when we entered the *ashram* gates, I concluded my last bhajan! And to my utter astonishment, at that very moment, the *arati* (concluding prayer after a *bhajan* session) was being sung in the *mandir*! Tears welled up in my eyes as a profound realization swept over me. I could feel Swami whispering to my soul, *"You thought you were missing Me because you were not at the mandir in time. But I orchestrated this moment to show you* ***I am present wherever my devotee sings for Me****. I made you sing so many songs for Me, timing the Arathi perfectly for your arrival, My beloved child!"*

In that instant, I understood that **Swami's presence transcends His physical presence**. He orchestrates moments of profound connection and divine grace in the most unexpected ways, reassuring us of His ever-watchful care and love. This learning became critical the very next year because COVID-19 made travel impossible, and the only pilgrimage I could undertake was to the Sai within!

My Swami Comes to Me

As the pandemic struck the world, I was afflicted by severe head pain that radiated

to my neck and shoulders. The pain was unrelenting and excruciating, and none of us knew the cause. After months, I was diagnosed with Chronic Pain Syndrome, a neurological disorder for which there is no known cure. This was the last thing one would want during a lockdown when no help was available, and all hospitals were overwhelmed with COVID patients. My family was thrust into a state of immense stress, grappling with the overwhelming burden of caring for me. Physically and emotionally, we were all teetering on the brink of despair.

That was when I got introduced to the beautiful poem, *'Footprints in the Sand,'* a metaphor for having faith in God even when times are tough:

One night I dreamed I was walking along the beach with my Lord.
Across the dark sky flashed many scenes from my life.
For each scene, I noticed two sets of footprints in the sand,
One belonging to me and one to my Lord.

After the last scene of my life flashed before me,
I looked back at the footprints in the sand.
I noticed that at many times along the path of my life,
especially at the very lowest and saddest times,
there was only one set of footprints.

This really troubled me, so I asked the Lord about it.
"Lord, you said once I decided to follow you,
You'd walk with me all the way.
But I noticed that during the saddest and most troublesome times of my life, there was only one set of footprints.
I don't understand why, when I needed You the most,
You would leave me."

He whispered, "My precious child, I love you and will never leave you. Never, ever, during your trials and tests.
When you saw only one set of footprints, It was then that I carried you."

That was my experience during this harrowing journey. I felt a remarkable sense of Swami's presence. Even as I was wondering how I could go on with my daily routine with such pain, my mother decided to employ a helper, Sumarni. She was Swami's gift to us when it was difficult to get any new person to help with household chores. I believe Swami Himself came to my rescue and helped me in her form! She took such excellent care of me, along with the responsibilities of cleaning and maintaining the home. This also gave my family the time to care for and support me. Swami was my painkiller to endure my pain and go through the process of *karma*.

Like a loving and watchful guardian, Swami is always there to uplift us, protect us, and carry us through life's trials and tribulations. It serves as an important reminder that even when we cannot see His physical presence, His divine grace is ever-present, cradling us in times of need and guiding us along the path of spiritual growth and self-discovery.

Today, I am doing much better with my spirits uplifted, grateful for His grace, and all thanks to my compassionate Swami!

Ms. Bhavadharni Ealingoo
MALAYSIA

Ms. Bhavadharni Ealingoo *has been with the Sri Sathya Sai International Organization since age 7. She is an active Young Adult from Malaysia and produces the popular podcast 'Chai with Sai' for her Sai Center. She is studying to become a neuropsychologist.*

The Hourly Alarm

I attended an SSSIO conference in Indonesia while serving as the Zonal Young Adult Coordinator for Zone 4 of the Sri Sathya Sai International Organization (SSSIO). We, international delegates, were traveling to the venue in the car of a Sai brother who had kindly picked us up. The car was packed with delegates, and I ended up sitting beside him in the front seat. With a smiling face, this brother seemed to have a divine aura.

As we were driving uphill, I heard the sound of a gong coming from his phone. None of the others seemed to hear it, as there was much talking in the back seats. At this point, the brother pulled the car to the side of the road and closed his eyes as if in deep meditation for a few moments. Then, he resumed driving normally as if nothing had happened. What was that about, I wondered?

We reached the conference venue and were getting out of the car when another gong emanated from his phone. Just as we were alighting, I asked him, "Are you coming?"

"You carry on," he said, "I'll come in a minute."

Curious, I walked on but turned to see that he was doing the same thing again–closing his eyes as serenity spread across his face!

I was intrigued and decided to find out what he was up to! Later in the day, I located him and asked, "Brother, I noticed that you stopped to meditate every time a gong sounded on your phone. I'm sorry to pry, but do you mind sharing what you are doing?"

He smiled and replied, "The Lord is so gracious, and He looks after everything for everyone at every moment. Isn't that amazing? I feel I should be grateful for that always. So, I developed this habit of saying 'thank you' to Swami every hour, for myself, and on behalf of everyone in the world. That gong you heard is my hourly reminder."

I was blown away and deeply touched by his response. I understood why he carried that amazing aura! It was a divine gift from his attitude of gratitude.

Start the Day With God

Since that day, I, too, made it a point to express my gratitude to Swami as much as possible in a day, if not hourly, inspired by that brother. It makes me feel magically connected to Swami and reminds me that He's always with me, in me! By remembering Him throughout the day, I feel I am living with my Swami in my Prasanthi Nilayam!

In my current phase in life, I am primarily a mother of two, a teacher, and a baker. Hari and I spend the morning looking after my 6-year-old son and preparing him for school. On the way, we made it a practice to pray together in the car. We focus on Swami mindfully, with intent, till we feel He is with us.

After dropping him off and on the way back home, I sometimes listen to spiritual audiobooks or talks as I go for a short walk. Sometimes, I practice watching my thoughts and letting them go without

holding on to them during the walk. By doing this, I have enjoyed some profound moments when there are no thoughts at all! **There is a beautiful silence that is so blissful. It is such silence in which we hear the voice of Swami within. At such times, if you look for Swami, you'll see him everywhere**–in the buildings, in the trees, and in animate and inanimate beings. Somehow, reaching this point of silence slows down time, and I feel I can achieve more and focus better, thanks to the deep stillness within.

Fill the Day With God

Once I'm back home, it's time to bake. I run my small business (MrsSheelsJr) from home, and there are orders almost every day. I'm very happy to say that Swami is the love ingredient in my cakes! As I bake, I have a habit of saying 'Sai Ram' with each ingredient I add to my batter, as my grandmothers did before me. This is because energy is also a critical ingredient we add to food. **Saying 'Sai Ram' nullifies all unwanted vibes and fills the food with goodness and love.** Some days, I have my customers telling me,

"Saiusha, **we could taste the love in the cake.**" That's what "Sai Ram" seems to do–so regularly, too!

After that, it is back to precious 'mother-daughter' time, as I spend time with my two-and-a-half-year-old daughter. We play, read, and paint for a while, and then we go to pick up my son from school. On the way back, we spend some time in the park. Returning home, we have lunch together and play some more, and then I begin my other profession as a teacher!

Spend the Day With God

I tutor at home from 3 PM to 8 PM most days. Here, too, just like in my baking, I ensure that Swami's name and Swami's love are the key ingredients, and it shows. I have gained a reputation as a "special needs" tutor when, in fact, I have no training in special needs education. Over the years, I have had counselors and therapists reach out to me, seeking help for students with difficulties in learning at school! With humility and gratitude to Swami, I can say that in 14 years, 99% of my students who have appeared for competitive exams like the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) and A-level exams have received top scores, either A or A+! IGCSE is considered the most popular international certification at the end of secondary school, equivalent to the British O-Level, UK GCSE, fifth form, or year 11. The A-level exam is taken two years later–it is (subject-specific) pre-university education certification.

Swami says Educare is not about filling children's heads with what is outside but eliciting from them what is already present within! That is pretty much all I do! **There is no special technique or skill other than loving and listening, inspired by Swami. One needs to be patient, deal with every student individually based on their needs, and get them to think of what they need to learn.** To do that, I start the lesson by seeing Swami in the children's seats before the lesson starts. That somehow helps the lesson flow smoothly. With Swami's grace, the kids don't seem to get bored, and time just flies.

End the Day With God

I have a lovely *au pair* who helps us with the kids, so by 8 PM, my kids return from their classes, bathe, and have dinner. Then Hari and I sit with them to tell them stories, sing them a bhajan, and lovingly tuck them into bed. At 9 PM, I get a little time to respond to messages, be with my husband after he's back from work, read, and unwind. I also make it a point to sit silently and send Sai love to the world and talk to Swami.

Before calling it a night, when I sit by myself, I run through the day in my head

and do a self-audit. Some of the things I reflect on are:

1. In what way was I of service today?
2. What was my attitude during the service?
3. Did my moods affect the way I spoke or behaved?
4. Did I connect and help the kids connect with Swami and His Love during the day?
5. Was there anything I could have done better?

This is an ongoing effort, so I can always be a better version of myself the next day as my offering to Swami.

The more I practice these, the more I feel Swami's love and presence. I also notice that, in the process, I become more adept at whatever I am doing.

Parting Thoughts

As I've gone through life, I've had experiences where I've held interesting roles and titles. I have traveled extensively, thanks to SSSIO activities as a coordinator. At this stage, I may not communicate with as many people as I did before, but molding young minds is a big task and one I have the honor of doing, thanks to these beautiful children. **It's not just about what we do, but how we do it, that makes all the difference. And more than that, why we do it is the most important reason!**

This current phase has also taught me to appreciate the importance of paying attention to detail–small changes and actions make a huge difference to how the kids behave and respond–and it always begins with me. I occasionally find time to run an SSE (Sai Spiritual Education) Group 4 class, a YA session here and there, pick up courses online, and become a better version of myself. All of this makes me appreciate Swami that much more. We look after just a few kids, and our day is spent–but how magnanimously and intricately He looks after each one of us, to the extent that we feel He's just mine, my personal Swami, and no one else's! **To this Swami who runs all the Universes and looks after me... Eternal gratitude to my Eternal Companion!**

Mrs. Saiusha Haridas
MALAYSIA

Mrs. Saiusha Haridas *is a fourth-generation Sai devotee, originally from Hong Kong. She settled in Malaysia after marriage with Hari in 2008. She has taught English, Language, and Literature, and has run Group 4 SSE Classes for over two decades. She served Zone 4 as the SSSIO Young Adults Coordinator for four years, overseeing young adult projects and activities in 15 countries in Asia, serving about 15,000 youth. Saiusha is also a passionate vegetarian and vegan baker who runs a home-based baking business inspired by her mother!*

A Blessed and Memorable Day

On a beautiful November morning in Prasanthi Nilayam, a few days before Baba's Birthday, we were all sitting in the *darshan* area. The crystalline air smelling of jasmine, the chirping of birds, and the slight buzz of the many devotees gathered there set the background for our longing to see Swami walk towards us with His elegant and graceful floating gait. Suddenly, in unison, we perceived that He was coming, and here He was walking towards us, smiling. He embraced us with His eyes. After a while, the volunteers *(sevadal)* guided our group of Italian women to the area adjacent to the veranda, arranging us in parallel rows so that Baba could easily walk among us. I thought that Swami was giving us a '*pada-namaskar,*' (blessing to touch His holy feet) and I was so happy with this special opportunity. Time was crystallized in a paradisiacal dimension where every expectation, every thought, and every emotion dissolved in a sparkle of love and peace.

> *"Woman has been, is, and will be the backbone of progress, the heart of the nation, indeed its very breath of life. In the spectacle of life, she has been assigned the most sacred and important role, namely the mission of establishing the criteria of righteousness and ethics, as well as the moral and spiritual preparation of the children. If the mother is virtuous and respectful of morals, the children too will be moral and will automatically and advantageously follow her example. This is why the education of the woman, reflecting itself in her way of acting, determines the rise or decline of society."*
>
> **Sri Sathya Sai Baba**
> Dharma Vahini

Sacred Gift

Baba came out, followed by the volunteers *(sevadal)*. They carried in their arms some packages that He, displaying a broad and sweet smile, personally began to distribute to each one of us. What an unexpected gift! In the package, there was a magnificent sari, and as soon as the distribution was finished, Swami asked us to wear it for darshan on the morning of November 19th, two days later. Once the darshan was over, we went outside to have the blouses made, the fabric of which was attached to the sari. We were all gripped by irrepressible anxiety, knowing well the delays of the village tailors. How could they satisfy so many requests in one day? With great confidence, we entrusted our saris to those good tailors with the promise to collect them the following evening.

On the morning of November 19th, carefully dressed in the sari given by Baba, we went to the Mandir for darshan. The volun-

teers (sevadal) seated us in a row inside the temple waiting for Baba who came shortly after. He started heading towards the Poornachandra auditorium, followed by His students who recited the Vedas, followed by the volunteers (sevadal) with an entourage dressed in saris like ours, and then all our group following in a sacrosanct procession.

Baba Declares Ladies' Day

Baba consecrated that day, November 19, 1995, as **"Ladies' Day,"** with a Vedic ceremony in which only women participated. I had the feeling that something very important was happening. The solemnity of the initiation ceremony, the chanting of the Vedas, the magnificence of the place, and the words of Baba with their Divine power, ushered in a new era for women. The women present would become aware of being part of a Divine Plan to help themselves and humanity to land on the gilded shores of the Golden Age, where human values are the pillars of a noble and prosperous lifestyle, in harmony with creation.

The divine teachings of Sai continue to shape my character, my mind, my attitudes, and my habits making me different every day and immensely grateful for all the gifts received. In rare circumstances, my impulsiveness prompts me to react to an emotion or a particular circumstance. Then, His words resonate within me, reminding me that God is present in every situation and every person, and just like a ray of sunshine pierces the darkness, the tension, disappointment, or expectation vanishes.

Noble Qualities of Women

What fascinating alchemy! On the chessboard of life, there are many opportunities for a woman to show that values are the lifeblood that sustains and protects her. Qualities, such as compassion, patience, sensitivity, humility, modesty, tolerance, altruism, tenderness, gentleness, and understanding, are inherent in women. The woman has been entrusted with the most important task: that of an educator. It is the mother who teaches the children, and they emulate her, learning respect for parents, elders, and teachers, along with discipline, basic behaviors for good living, self-care, good manners, and much more. The mother will always be there to help, encourage, discipline, comfort, and correct.

The following aphorism, which comes from a very distant time, underlines what is the true value of the woman, which has persevered over centuries and must always be recognized, especially in this very particular historical moment.

"Not the beauty, but the good reputation of the woman must be known to many."

Gorgias–Fragments
(5th Century BC)

Ms. Bettina Di Carlo
ITALY

Ms. Bettina Di Carlo *came to Swami in 1991 and has served in the SSSIO of Italy since 2000. She is the National Educational Coordinator of SSSIO, Italy. In 2007, she produced a handbook for women called "The Path of Excellence" and has written articles about women on the Sai Vivere website. She also wrote a Compendium for the women's section. Bettina is a retired elementary school teacher who taught human values in public schools in Italy.*

The Journey

Pleasure Is An Interval Between Two Pains

We have come to realize that life is indeed a journey. Life is a journey towards Self-realization that is not easy to understand and sometimes difficult to endure. It is a journey that could be as bumpy or deceptively as smooth as it can be. Sometimes, there is not enough time to recover from one bump before a second bump hits you. The intervals between joy and sorrow are so short that there is no time to feel the pain or the pleasure. But in all that, **Swami is with us, constantly guiding us like a steadfast friend.** Such was our experience during our visit to India in 2010.

An Omen

Our daughter was about to get married, and so we embarked on a journey to India with the sole purpose of receiving blessings from her 91-year-old paternal grandmother. I arrived a little early to do some shopping and personally invited all the family members to the wedding. My husband and daughter were to join me a week after I arrived in India. A few days after my arrival, I was hit with the sad news of the sudden death of my sister-in-law's husband. It was an unexpected but peaceful death for a 75-year-old healthy man who had just finished a game of tennis and returned home to rest. However, little did he or anyone else at that time realize that he was heading to his true home for eternal rest! I watched my sister-in-law brave the shock of the sudden loss of her life partner of 50 years. It amazed me that she was so composed and poised, and she handled herself with great dignity. She obviously had a better understanding of the true meaning of life, that we are made of the five elements that ultimately return to their native state.

Blessings And Departures

My husband and daughter joined me a week later, and we visited my mother-in-law in Hyderabad to seek her blessings for the bride. She was amazingly healthy for a 91-year-old, with all mental faculties intact, with the only signs of age being her impaired vision and hearing. After receiving her blessings, the next morning, we flew from Hyderabad to Bangalore to head out to Puttaparthi and receive Swami's blessings. Unfortunately, within minutes of our landing, we received the sad news that my mother-in-law had moved on to her final resting place. The news of her death was hard to absorb. We hadn't the slightest clue that she would leave us so suddenly and without warning!

We wondered whether to return to Hyderabad or proceed as planned to seek Swami's blessings for our daughter. She had a flight back to the United States from Bangalore, and my husband had a speaking engagement at the Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Medical Sciences that afternoon. With heavy hearts, we continued on our journey to see Swami. The mixed emotions were unbearable.

In His infinite grace and love, Swami accepted the *Save-The-Date* Card from my husband for the wedding. He started opening the card as His vehicle passed by in front of our daughter, who was seated wearing her bridal sari and anointed with *haldi* (turmeric) and *kumkum* (vermillion), ready for His blessings. She saw Him glance at her as **He opened the card and blessed her with '*Abhaya Hasta*,' the compassionate hand**

gesture of blessing and protection. Our daughter's joy knew no bounds. Later that night, she left to go back to the USA, very happy and content. However, deep down, she was saddened by the loss of her beloved grandmother.

Intervals Between Pains

We flew back to Hyderabad and faced the challenge of breaking the news of the death of my mother-in-law to her 71-year-old son, who was on oxygen support at the hospital for a while. He had lived his entire life with his mother. It was Swami's grace that the attending doctor did a marvelous job of informing him. He also permitted him to leave the hospital briefly in an ambulance to view his mother for one last time! But he could not perform the last rites, and that duty fell upon my husband, who performed them with a heavy heart.

Within a few days after returning to the USA, we received more sad news that my brother-in-law, too, had passed away! This was right in the middle of our preparations for the wedding. We rushed back to India to be with my brother-in-law's family since he was very near and dear to my husband.

Having comforted the family, we returned to the USA to resume preparations for the marriage. That was when we met with a severe car accident. The accident was so bad that our car got *totaled* (rendering the car unusable). But Swami's grace was such that we emerged unscathed. It was a true miracle. We had Swami's pictures, CDs, tapes, and even *vibhuti* in the glove compartment. That is when we truly realized the meaning of Swami's statement that pleasure is merely an interval between two pains.

The marriage of our daughter took place as planned. In His infinite grace, Swami surrounded us with loving friends who provided much help, family support, and teamwork. The divine hand played throughout the wedding, with all the intricate details of a traditional Telugu wedding carried out to the smallest detail. The stellar execution of the ceremony elicited compliments, such as "*magical*", "*superb*", and "*dream wedding*." To our great joy, Swami sent His ambassadors, Prof. and & Mrs. Anil Kumar, to grace the wedding. Their presence was the icing on the cake for us. They lovingly played the role of the bride's party and treated all our guests as gracious hosts. **Swami's blessings and guidance and His unseen hand in the events were self-evident!**

The Journey continues...

Only with Swami's grace can we remain balanced in all the joys and sorrows of our lives and be a *Sthithaprajna* (person with equanimity). We feel that He has been with us throughout. He has surrounded us with loving friends and family to help us remain calm and discharge our duties to the best of our abilities, and He will take care of the rest. We thank Swami for being with us through our bumpy ride and beyond. **We realized that HE has been with us throughout our lives, in good times, hard times, sad times, and other times.** We march forward with confidence for the rest of our lives, knowing well that He is always with us.

Mrs. C. Ashalata Ram
USA & INDIA

Mrs. C. Ashalata Ram *was a registered pharmacist by profession. She was an SSE teacher at the Sri Sathya Sai Center of Dallas during its formative years. She was actively involved in the Center's various activities to sustain and promote Swami's mission for the betterment of humanity. She has a passion for community service and has served in several organizations as a volunteer to strengthen our culture and tradition.*

Darshan of Shiva on Maha Shivaratri

Sri Sathya Sai Baba assures us that the influence of the mind is diminished by focusing on God during the holy night of *Maha Shivaratri*, and we will be in tune with the omnipresent God who is always with us. The following experience beautifully shows us **the omnipresence of God no matter where we are physically, if only we have the urge to "see" Him**.

Many years ago, I was invited to work for an American company as a translator for a marine project. All marine operations were carried out from a diving vessel named after the academician Tofik Ismailov, and I was fortunate enough to work as the interpreter on the ship. However, my shift at sea coincided with the celebration of the holy day of *Maha Shivaratri*. I was distraught that I would have to be at sea on this very auspicious day. The ship was located about 300 km from the coast, and I was thinking about how I could celebrate this holy night of Lord Shiva. From Swami's discourses, we know this is a special night when the moon, symbolic of the human mind, wanes and almost disappears. **During this blissful night, one can find inner peace and harmony if one contemplates sincerely on God since the illusory effect of the mind is greatly diminished**.

Often it can be difficult for us to accept the circumstances of our life, especially when something goes against our wishes and expectations. **Swami says, *"Love My uncertainty."*** His mysteries are beyond understanding. I was upset because I could not think of how to focus on God while I was on this ship. Amazingly, to my pleasant surprise, I discovered that a whole team of Hindus was working on the ship as service personnel. One of them was a devotee of Lord Shiva as well! In a conversation with him, I mentioned my devotion and dedication to Sri Sathya Sai Baba. As a devotee of Shiva, he readily understood that this night was the holy night of Shiva and offered to do *puja* in my cabin. By the way, my cabin number was SS9, an auspicious number, and a blessing!

My new friend came to my cabin at the appointed hour, set up a small altar for Lord Shiva, and we recited the *mantra* for Lord Shiva together for some time. After he left, even though it was already late, I decided to watch TV and started watching a Russian channel. Unexpectedly, I saw a program called "It's hard to be God." The transmission began with a video clip about Sri Sathya Sai Baba in the *ashram* at Prasanthi Nilayam. At the end of this program, there

was a video clip of Swami materializing the Shiva *Lingam* during *Maha Shivaratri*.

I fondly remember the spiritually uplifting feelings I experienced during the mysterious sequence of events. I was overjoyed. **My loving Baba heard my prayers and gave me His *darshan*** (vision of the divine), and He also showed me the emergence of *Hiranyagarbha* (golden lingam). Mysterious are the ways of God. Such is the greatness of our Almighty Lord Sai. He made it possible to fulfill my innermost wish to be with Him on this holy night, despite being in the middle of the sea. I thank our dearest Swami for His Omnipresence, Omnipotence, and Omniscience.

Dr. Riza Khalilov
AZERBAIJAN

Dr. Riza Khalilov *teaches at the Baku Branch of Moscow State University in Azerbaijan, He holds a PhD degree in Philology from the Azerbaijan University of Languages. His doctorate thesis was dedicated to the Creative Activity of American writer Thomas Wolfe.*

He currently serves as the Zonal Coordinator for Communication in Zone 8 of the SSSIO having previously served as the National Council President of Azerbaijan.

The highest sadhana is to transform love into service.
Service will lead into devotion!
Manav seva is Madhav seva!

- Sri Sathya Sai Baba

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