

DANAM CONFERENCE 2007

SESSION DKM4

Theme: The Dharma of Moksha-Seekers: Asceticism and Social Engagement

Ramdas Lamb, University of Hawaii at Manoa, *Convener*

Swami Tyagananda, Vedanta Society, *Presiding*

ABSTRACTS

Tulasi Srinivas, Wheaton College

The Truant Ascetic: Transcendence and Escape in the Transnational Sathya Sai Movement

Against the context of cultural globalization, and an urban, syncretic religion emergent from South Asia-the Sathya Sai Movement, this paper examines the somatic disciplinary tactics and ascetic proscriptions that the transnational Sai Movement engages; their epistemological meaning; and the Sai devotees' differential ontological understandings of them, as a reflection on the politics of knowledge that shapes conceptions of devotion and desire, and the varying emotional and moral values inherent in, and assigned to, these conceptions. Focusing upon the fashioning of a Sai self through cognitive, corporeal, and emotional building blocks forged by popular borrowing of classical Hindu philosophy regarding ascetic experiences, the Sai Movement seeks to "translate" and transcend the body. The ethnographic problem of embodied truancy frames the problematic paradoxes embedded in the transnationalization of culturally specific, embodied, meanings and values-the "gaps" between cultures, to enable the dissection and exploration of the processes that inform mobility of religious movements across cultural difference.

Antoinette E. Denapoli, Emory University

God Depends on His Devotees: Social Engagement and Reciprocity between Ascetics and Householders in Rajasthan .

In Udaipur, women sadhus use narrative performance to teach householders popular Hindu virtues of sacrifice, courage, and faith in the expression of steadfast devotion to bhagvan. Performing these narratives, women sadhus evoke their understanding of sadhu-dharma and promote a socially engaged way of life that is modeled on paradigmatic images of reciprocal devotion between deity and devotee. Women sadhus' perception of duty as devotion not only encourages mutual dependence between householders and ascetics, but also neutralizes the dichotomy between devotion and asceticism in India.

Pravrajika Vrajaprana, Vedanta Society

Bridging the Gap between the Sacred and the Secular: Seva as Ascetic Practice

Ascetic practices in Hinduism primarily involved either the acquiring of supernatural powers or spiritual emancipation, both of which were individualistic practices meant to benefit the ascetic personally. Swami Vivekananda enlarged the scope of asceticism by lifting service (seva) from a mere philanthropic activity to a form of spiritual practice. Serving others by seeing them as embodiments of the Divine not only leads to spiritual

freedom (moksha) but also to collective well-being, bridging the gap between the sacred and the secular. Such an ascetic, as envisioned by Vivekananda, teaches more through one's actions than through words and embodies more fully the essence of the Hindu view of life.

Graham M. Schweig, Christopher Newport University
Moving Between Two Worlds: Chaitanya as Teacher and Ascetic

Sri Krishna Chaitanya was a Bengali ecstatic and bhakti reformer in 16th century India who took up the renounced order of sannyas at the age of twenty-four. It was during this second twenty-four year period that he established his form of Vaishnava bhakti in the eastern provinces of Bengal and Orissa, and in the north, specifically in the Vrindaban area. In his famous biography by Krishnadas Kaviraja Gosvamin, Chaitanya at times, during his exuberant establishing of the ecstatic chanting of the holy names of God, exhibits very strict adherence to his ashram of sannyasa and at other times utter disregard. This paper will carefully review the various instances of his powerful roles as a teacher and his various forms of ascetical practices. It will be shown that his dual role becomes a type of structure-antistructure model within renunciation that powerfully promotes his mission both as a teacher and reformer in this world and simultaneously as an ascetical mystic of divine love wholly absorbed in another inner world.

Ramdas Lamb, University of Hawaii
Ramanandi Sadhus and the Proliferation of Ram Bhakti in North India

The Ramananda Sampraday is the largest and most diverse order of renunciants in India today. Integral to their sadhana is the tradition of wandering throughout the villages of North India. This is not only a part of their practice of renunciation of a permanent abode, but it also brings them into contact and interaction with countless villagers as they spread their message of Ram bhakti and promote the practice of various forms of sadhana.