

Preface

The last hundred years or so have seen an unprecedented and unparalleled rise in the popularity of Sri Sai Baba. While many would initially be drawn to *Baba* due to the miracles He was known for, in time, through His unique methods, He would direct them onto the path of *bhakti* (devotion). This phenomenon of gradual conversion to the sublime prevailed even before 1918 (when Baba took *Mahasamadhi*) and, by His benevolent grace, continues to date. He would say ‘I give people what they want so that they may want what I want to give them,’ meaning spiritual upliftment and *Self-realization*.

Sri Sai Baba taught through His *leelas* and seldom gave direct instructions. If one was spiritually ripe and earnest, one would be worthy of these subtle teachings. Although they might appear easy to comprehend, they were not, let alone embodying them.

In chapter three of the *Sai Satcharita*, *Ovi* 18–19, Sri Sai Baba says ‘Listen to the stories with reverence; reflect upon them deeply. After reflection, contemplate them. This will bring great satisfaction. The mind will transcend the consciousness of the self, and the differentiated consciousness will dissolve. And by single-minded, absolute faith, the *chitta* (Heart) will become a mass of divine energy.’

This book aims to humbly offer guidance to devotees in the hope that they will be reminded of Baba’s assurances and teachings. The talks within, encourage them to contemplate deeply on the life and teachings of this revered master, thereby enabling them to own the precious jewel of spiritual upliftment, which Baba has bequeathed them.

Gautam and I, far from calling ourselves devotees, are not even qualified to comment on Sri Sai Baba’s teachings. Over the years,

both of us would sometimes telephonically joke with each other that, perhaps, one or both of us were a dog or some creature that lived in Shirdi during Baba's time and were graced by the dust of His lotus feet.

We are very blessed and fortunate that, by Sri Sai Baba's grace, these series of talks took shape and significantly deepened the devotees' understanding of the teachings. Truly and humbly, we are not even His instruments, for it is He Himself who inspired it and got it done.

I was fortunate to have a close friendship with Gautam over the years and found that he was greatly blessed with the gift of explaining things very simply, his focus being the application of the teachings for attaining peace of mind in daily living. I am deeply grateful to him for having given us so much time over the years to help devotees delve deeper into the significance of the teachings.

I would also like to acknowledge Sunita Kripalani for her work in carefully captioning the talks before they were published. This was in the years long before technology evolved, and her work also often helped fact-check and scrutinize the content. This priceless work on the captions and transcripts later became the foundation for the book.

It is recommended that you read these chapters and watch the corresponding talks from the series *Living the Teachings of Sai Baba* if possible. [QR codes for the videos are provided as some of the titles as well as the sequence are different from that used in this book.] You will find that it will help you seriously reflect on the pointers shared in the talks. In turn, it will permeate your reading, contemplation and practice of Baba's teachings in everyday life.

We sincerely hope that you find this book helpful in deepening your faith, love and complete unconditional surrender to Lord Sri Sai Baba, making you truly eligible and worthy of attaining what He wishes to give you.

Om Shri Sainathaya Namaha.

—Nikhil Kripalani

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To Nikhil Kripalani for making our series on the YouTube channel Sai Baba's Devotee Speaks a joyful affair. I have learnt much from our exchanges across the interviews.

And finally, to all the viewers of the channel for writing to us and encouraging us to keep sharing our insights into Baba's teachings. It is their dedication to living the teachings of Sai Baba that has motivated us to do so.

Introduction

This book comprises a series of recorded conversations between Gautam Sachdeva and Nikhil Kripalani on the popular YouTube channel Sai Baba’s Devotee Speaks. Nikhil interviews Gautam on various aspects of Sai Baba’s teachings and the subtle spiritual import of His leelas. As Gautam’s focus is on living the teachings of *Advaita*, all the talks are based on the impact of Sai Baba’s teachings—from the *Advaitic* perspective—in our day-to-day life.

The fifty-six talks contained herein are carried out in simple language and have a conversational flow, covering topics such as *shraddha* and *saburi* (the hallmark of Baba’s teachings), surrendering to Baba, spiritual progress, Self-knowledge, free will, serving Baba and *rnanubandhan*—something Baba often spoke about to stress its importance in our life. Some talks span the period of the Covid pandemic and subsequent lockdown, and delve into all the challenges faced by people in its wake as well as ways of overcoming them by living the teachings.

When the conversation veers towards Baba’s *param bhaktas*, the reader can sense their devotional *bhava* for their *guru* whom they revere and consider above everything else. Something worth cultivating for those who are well and truly on the spiritual path.

The text contains a substantial number of non-English words and spiritual terminology in particular. Hence the reader (especially those who are unfamiliar with this terrain) will find it helpful to refer to the glossary at the end. All the first instances of the words therein appear in italics in the text (and vice versa in passages where the rest of the text is italicized).

The quotations in this book have come up spontaneously during the talks; they are not necessarily verbatim and cannot be definitively traced back to specific sources in some cases. Hence, citations have not been provided.

This compilation of talks is probably one of a kind in that Sai Baba's leelas and the teachings they illustrate have been approached in a way that's considerably distinct from the literature available on them.

Most present-day literature on Baba, particularly in Hindi, which has come to my notice, is based on facts narrated in the Sai Satcharita and other available books. To date, I have not come across any literature that reveals the philosophy behind Baba's actions and words, His way of life and living, and their analysis. Certainly, there is a need for writers, philosophers and researchers to delve deep into the life and leelas of Baba, the experiencing of Baba's Grace by unknown persons all over the world and the like. A mere narration of the miracles of Baba and the experiences of devotees will not suffice.

I am certain, in time to come, devotees will undertake a serious and deeper study of Baba and His leelas, and produce literature giving deeper significance to His actions and words.

—*Scribblings of a Shirdi Sai Devotee*,
Suresh Chandra Gupta

Living the Teachings of Shirdi Sai Baba



Nikhil: Today, we are interviewing Gautam Sachdeva, who has been a spiritual guide to me for more than eight years and comes from the Advaitic tradition and lineage of Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj. His teacher was Ramesh Balsekarji, and Gautam's essential teaching is about peace of mind in daily living, with the focus being on how to live the teaching. I have benefited immensely from my association with Gautam, and I am very grateful for that.

I have requested Gautam to speak about Sai Baba's teachings to help devotees understand them deeply and imbibe them to attain peace of mind and equanimity in day-to-day living.

Gautam, the journey for most devotees on this path with Sai Baba typically begins with them being drawn to Baba by a miracle, a dream or a vision when He pulls them towards Him. That's essentially the common thread. Then it is followed by a further series of miracles that draw them to Shirdi, His life and His teachings. But somewhere down the line, I've noticed that many people write that their faith and their surrender are very dependent on favourable circumstances—that Baba does things in accordance with their will. In one of your talks, you mentioned true faith. Could we begin with you shedding some light on that?

Gautam: Sure. Nikhil, first of all, thank you for giving me this opportunity to talk about Shirdi Sai Baba's teachings. As you rightly said, there is so much material out there simply because of the miracles

Baba performed in His lifetime. As a ray of the Absolute, anything was possible in His domain. However, when I read the Sai Satcharita, I found that on one level there was the actual event of the miracle taking place, and on the other, there was a teaching being conveyed by each story, which seemed to directly impact daily living. So, because I was with a spiritual teacher [Ramesh Balsekar] for almost ten years, I started viewing the Sai Satcharita through the prism of Advaita, or non-duality, as it is called in the Western world. What I found was so pragmatic, but it had been hidden by the overwhelming evidence of miracles. I started underlining the expressions of Advaita uttered by Baba that really appealed to me and which I felt were within everybody's life experience. Through these non-dualistic gems, Baba delivers the greatest miracle of all—peace of mind.

People ask me about masters performing *siddhis*, yet there's this whole other layer of thought that says, 'Don't get stuck at the level of siddhis because they are mere experiences.' Even Nisargadatta Maharaj, in his younger days, used to perform certain siddhis for his devotees, but his guru, Siddharameshwar Maharaj, said, 'Look, don't get stuck at that level. You have to give them the message of Advaita.' And truly, peace of mind is the biggest miracle that Sai Baba gives through His teachings because that becomes a way of living, a way of being and a way of looking at yourself and the world around you.

So, through the stories, we can understand the core Advaitic message of such a Divine Being, whose very presence was venerated by Hindus as well as Muslims. That fact itself shows that He was non-denominational and that He was a guru to everyone unconditionally. Thus Baba's teachings had their origin in His own secular and selfless life, from which people can learn by example.

N: Yes. There are people who've had a vision: some sort of an experience. How do they understand what Baba is trying to convey? This is a common concern for many people. *How do I interpret this? How do I relate to it? What is Baba trying to tell me?* What would you say to devotees who have experienced this?

G: The very fact that they've had a dream or a vision means that it is not their doing but Baba's. That is how He has pulled them to Him.

Now they have to trust that force, which has pulled them without their free will, to do its job. We tend to analyse and seek the meaning of what we have seen or what we have experienced, but that force is so powerful that, if it could come to us without our knowledge and pull us in, we must trust it to take us all the way.

When you have such a vision or a dream, or whatever it may be, you get the answers once the mind becomes less caught up with the elation experienced by thinking, *I had this vision; I had the experience*. Since the ‘me’ feels great that God has chosen it to have a vision rather than someone else, it can strengthen the ego.

N: Exactly.

G: Yes. But to have the humility to understand that this vision happened without me doing anything is to trust that Source, which will show you the way. As my teacher would say, ‘Never consider your glass half empty but half full. If God has brought you this far in your spiritual journey, why do you feel He will drop you here? He will hold your hand and take you home.’ So, these are signs, not for the ‘me’ to take pride in but to see that life is taking a certain course through Baba’s form, and you have to trust Baba to lead you along the way.

N: I have a question about this. There are certain practices Baba would advocate to devotees who followed the path of trust and surrender, such as *japa*, *dhyana* or even *Self-enquiry* at times. For those devotees who are sincerely committed to Baba and wish to go down the path of Self-realization, could you talk a little bit about practices that can help still the mind? Could you make some suggestions here?

G: Generally, masters like Baba saw the spiritual ripeness or inclination of the devotee and then prescribed what they felt was the right method for that specific person. Some were more inclined to bhakti, some to japa and some to Self-enquiry, while others, to a total understanding of what Baba was saying. For example, a *mantra japa*—the word ‘*mantra*’, when broken up, means ‘*man*’, or ‘mind’, and ‘*tra*’, or ‘freeing’—could help shift the energy of an overactive mind, involved only in mundane issues, to the mantra. This helps you move out of the regular pattern of thinking that you are embroiled in.

Someone may not have the inclination to practise Self-enquiry or understand Baba's other teachings but may find that they are very comfortable doing japa. So, different practices that best resonated with the individual devotee were prescribed, and they would all lead to the Source.

For instance, Baba would tell someone, and it is in the Satcharita, 'See Me in all beings.' Now one person may find that too abstract, but another might think, *Yes, what Baba is pointing to is that the same Consciousness, the same sense of the presence of being, functions through everyone.* That may be easy for that particular individual to understand. That person need not do japa because his life becomes the Living Teaching. He sees God in everyone. So that is what is meant by different practices for different temperaments or tendencies. It is not that we have to sequentially progress from one to the other.

Even Nisargadatta Maharaj would see the ripeness of the person who had come to him and then decide whether his *Jnana Yoga* talks were suitable for them or whether they should just do mantra japa. So that is what the master does.

N: A question arises in this regard. Now Sai Baba is not in physical form, yet many people regard Him as their main guru. How do they get guidance that is specific to them, so that they know they are on the right track?

G: The guidance will come. The point is that we have to be open to receiving it. There are some instances that everyone is familiar with, where Baba appears to certain people, after which they begin spreading Baba's message. The other instances are about those who don't have that connection. But Baba, being present in their life, brings about circumstances that would benefit them. The question is, Are we aware of the fact that these situations have been created for us? Or is our vision only on one track, waiting for some miracle to happen? It is only when we drop this narrow, conditioned vision, and are open and aware, that the Source, as represented by Baba, will step in to show us the way.

But we get so stuck on the thought *Baba will show me the way, Baba will show me the way*, that although Baba is showing you the way

through something that happens in your life and which is coming your way as a gift, you remain blind to it. We remain unaware of this blessing because we have this fixed concept in our mind that it should come to us in a certain way; hence, we miss the opportunity.

N: Many devotees have experiences they believe Baba gave them. But how do you distinguish between a real experience and an imaginary one?

G: A real experience is an experience that comes to you. An imaginary one, in the sense you might be referring to, is that which I make myself believe is an experience. So, there's a very thin line here, and that is why this whole business of experiences is very tricky because 'All experiences come and go,' as masters like Ramana Maharshi or even Shirdi Sai Baba Himself said. 'You are the witness of whatever transpires,' is what Baba has said in the Satcharita. And 'whatever transpires' means all the pleasures and pains which come and go in life—all experiences. Because, for an experience to be registered, an experiencer has to be there. All experiences come and go because the state of the experiencer is temporal.

The mind is such that it tends to hook on to an experience, feels special about that experience and then wants to repeat that experience. Now that experience may or may not come again, and then you can get frustrated by that, making you think, *Oh, Baba came to me once in a dream; now I'm going to wait for Him to come another time!* But the bedrock of your life should be Baba's teachings. It should not be dependent on an experience you had of Baba. Otherwise, what is the point of a teaching if it doesn't impact your daily living? What is the point if it is stuck at the level of one experience you had? The value of the experience is tremendous because it's like a catalyst, but many of us tend to get stuck on the level of that experience.

N: This takes me to the next question. Sai Baba would often advocate the practice of Self-enquiry, saying, 'Ask yourself at all times, Who am I?' Could you talk a little bit about it in general and give us some guidance?

G: Sure. Self-enquiry is also mentioned in our scriptures, and after Baba, it has been taught by sages like Ramana Maharshi, who was known for his teaching of asking yourself, Who am I? Now this will appeal to those with a certain spiritual ripeness. It's not everyone's cup of tea. But what Baba is pointing to, or this enquiry of 'Who am I?' is pointing to, is to help us understand 'Who is this "me" that is living this life? Who is this person thinking this thought?' And when this enquiry of 'Who am I?' is undertaken, the understanding 'I am not this, I am not that,' starts sinking in. Why? Because I am the one aware of this. Who is the 'I' who is aware of this? There is no answer to this question as 'I' is not a thing—an object to be experienced. 'I' is the subject. The enquiry 'Who am I?' is meant to dissolve the constructs that we have created, which separate us from what *is* and from the world: this 'me' with its baggage of likes, dislikes, conditionings, feelings and emotions. It is designed to deconstruct this shell that we have created around us since childhood and take us back to that pure Being, that pure Source—that child consciousness which existed before the ego came in saying, *You and I are separate*.

So, this is what the enquiry 'Who am I?' does. And someone who can go deep into this enquiry will realize the absence of separation because the riddle of 'Who am I?' has been solved. So again, it is a practice, just like japa is a practice.

N: Sai Baba would say that one of the ten prerequisites for Self-realization is choosing what's right over what's pleasant. It seems that it's important for a devotee to be able to discern this in their day-to-day life. Even Ramakrishna Dev [Ramakrishna Paramahansa] made a clear distinction between worldliness and the path of God. It seems that discernment could be that fork or the starting point, where the devotee begins to be a witness and be aware. Could you speak a little bit about discernment as a practice and how devotees could implement it in their day-to-day lives?

G: See, there are many aspects of discernment, but we shall just touch upon one. Many of us, in fact, most of us, are so hardwired by conditioning that, based on our past experience, we react to different people the same way. We are in reaction mode rather than response

mode. Now, in this case, what is discernment? Discernment is to understand that we are a result of our conditioning, and so is the other. That in itself is a level of discernment because you are no longer functioning on autopilot. With the understanding that the same Consciousness functions through each of us, as Baba has said, you accept others for who they are because God has made them, and likewise, you accept yourself too.

Earlier, you were going around pointing fingers, accusing, blaming and condemning people, but now you understand that such behaviour was improper. This understanding is discernment. So, you see that when you follow the teachings, discernment is initiated, and every aspect of life and of all kinds of relationships is seen in the light of discernment.

N: What you shared was discernment in relation to other people and events that are associated with them. Could we talk about discernment which need not have much to do with other people but more with everyday circumstances and the choices you make? Essentially, how can the devotee who is putting God first in his life, who is a serious aspirant, make choices which are favourable to the path rather than those which are not? For example, if you have to choose between peace of mind and lust or something that could lead you astray, as opposed to staying on the path, how do you discern when making these everyday decisions? Could you talk a little bit about *that* discernment?

G: Let's take desire, for example. Desire can arise, but suppressing desire is not the way. And indulging in it is not the way either. This is what the sages have advised. If we are discerning, when desire arises, the understanding arises at the same time that desire has arisen and whether it gets fulfilled or not is God's will. So, any involvement in the desire drops. That is how a desire arising is witnessed.

It could be something as simple as a desire for a cup of coffee. That's also a desire, right? But if for some reason, the coffee powder is over, you tend to vent your frustration by blaming a family member: 'Why isn't it stocked? I wanted to have a coffee, but now I can't have it.' And then the blame game begins. But if you have the understanding that

the desire to have a coffee arose, which is fine, but it didn't get fulfilled because it was not meant to, then the hold that the desire has on you loses its grip. I have used a very soft desire, like a cup of coffee, but it would apply to any desire, like lust, as you said.

Allow the desire to come up because suppressing it is not going to work. But also let go of the attachment to the outcome because it is the 'I' wanting things to be a certain way and getting frustrated if they are not that way. The discernment in this case is allowing what has to come up to do so but with the understanding that it will get fulfilled only if it is meant to. So there is no frustration.

The other aspect of discernment is right thinking: 'Does my desire harm anyone?' If the answer is no and the understanding is there that it is a desire arising in the moment, there is nothing wrong with that. But sometimes you are so consumed by your desires that you don't even realize it could be harmful to someone else or yourself.

I keep pointing to this fact that Baba spoke about: 'Be a witness; let the world go topsy-turvy around you, but be a witness,' because there is a very deep teaching in that one line. And let the world go topsy-turvy does not refer to external events, because the world is inside you. He would even say that the *Bhagavad Gita* and *Kurukshetra* are inside you.

See, it's very simple. Right now, you are appearing outside me, but the fact is that you are in my field of consciousness. I am conscious that everything is appearing within that consciousness, including you and myself. It appears that I am speaking to you, but this voice which you are hearing now is being heard in your own consciousness. That is *maya*.

But we have lost touch with all of this because the sense of separation, which we have grown up with, is so strong. What was a simple structure in a life of duality—which is what life is: black and white, big and small, up and down, rich and poor, front and back—has become dualism. The 'me' and the 'other', the polar opposites of duality, have become 'me' versus the 'other'.

To understand what Baba's words mean, one has to live by them.

N: Absolutely. In this regard, I've received emails with a common theme, where people say they are living according to Baba's principles,

such as ‘Do your worldly duties, and keep your mind on Me.’ Nevertheless, they find themselves leading a life which is pretty much immoral and not in alignment with Baba’s teachings.

Could you shed some light on the deeper meaning of what Baba said [the statement mentioned above] to help devotees relate to it, with the emphasis being on whether they are living in harmony with Baba’s teachings?

G: Sometimes it’s not the time for the teachings to sink in. It is not that they have a choice as such, because the level of understanding or awareness is at a certain level. One can’t say that they are voluntarily not following the teachings, but the teachings have not sunk in yet, if, for example, you harbour a desire that harms another. If you truly are living Baba’s teachings, it would just not be possible.

So this is where being earnest and sincere in your practice, which all masters point to, gains relevance. What happens is that we segment our life, we segment our day. For instance, we may have a *puja* ritual with Baba in the temple, where we are full of bhakti, but the rest of the day, we are having fights with everyone. We don’t get along with people.

Now if Baba has said, ‘See Me in all beings,’ what is true bhakti? It is to see God in everyone. What can be a higher bhakti than this? So then, bhakti is not just worshipping the *murti* at home or in the temple but actually living with bhakti by seeing God in all beings.

But when does this understanding arise? It arises when one is immersed in a master’s teachings. It is a level of awareness that can speed up the process. But if it is not meant to happen, it won’t.

A true *bhakta* of Shirdi Sai Baba, or any master, is one who follows the master’s teachings and whose every breath, whose life force, is dedicated to the master and the teachings. Because they are not two. The form is of the formless. We tend to venerate only the form of the master. The guru is a projection of our Higher Self onto a form, so that also is not separate from us. But we are so conditioned by this world of forms and objects that everything is viewed as such.

It’s as simple as saying the Sun is not apart from you. While it appears that the Sun rises and sets in the sky, it is all appearing in Consciousness, which is essentially what you are. That is how vast you

are; that is how vast Consciousness is. You will find Baba pointing to this in the Satcharita.

N: Could you give some general guidelines and pointers for people who spend more and more time with Baba, or whichever path they are on, to know if they are on the right track and making progress? Some signposts as indicators?

G: Ramana Maharshi was asked by someone how a person could know whether one acclaimed as a guru is a true guru. The master gave a very simple answer: the sense of peace you feel in the guru's presence and the degree of respect you feel for him is an indicator.

This word 'peace' is very important because that sense of peace which you feel is within you, and if you are a true devotee or a true disciple, that would be imbibed by you.

The point I'm trying to make is that your own life, and your attitude towards what happens in your life, will be an indication to you as to how close you are to the master's teachings: the degree of peace you feel in your life, your accepting people for who they are and the sense of respect you feel towards others. Someone was criticizing another guru to Nisargadatta Maharaj, and he replied, 'To criticize anything or anyone is to criticize the affairs of *Brahman*.'

To know the impact of the teachings is to see how they have influenced your daily living and, in turn, your acceptance, tolerance and compassion for people. Because we are not living in caves; we are living in a society, we are dealing with people. As Baba kept pointing out, all relationships are *rnanubandhan*, a cosmic debt of a former relationship. That is why He would keep emphasizing that even if you don't want to give money to a beggar who comes up to you, it's okay, but don't shout at the beggar as if he were a dog.

After living Baba's teachings, when you find that you experience a general sense of harmony with people, it does not mean you have to love everyone. There may be people you don't like, but you have the understanding that they are who they are, the way they have been made. And you naturally prefer the company of others to them, but you accept them for who they are.

You will see that your life has transformed as a result of the

message of the master, and then you know that, yes, you are living the teachings. And your whole life, from the time you get up to the time you go to sleep, becomes a meditation on the teachings.

We think of meditation as a practice. We have to sit for half an hour, close our eyes and concentrate. My guru said, 'True meditation is witnessing whatever arises in life as movements in Consciousness.' For example, pleasure and pain come and go. It is witnessed, as Baba says.

The ground for meditation is life, and it becomes a way of being. Peace, equanimity and compassion are its characteristics. No blame, condemnation, hatred, malice, jealousy and envy.

Baba says, 'I am the Sole Doer. Nobody is the doer. The Lord is the Doer.'

Whereas pride and arrogance may have arisen earlier, prior to living the teachings, now, if I do something because of which society praises me, the humility and understanding is fully there that God gifted me a set of attributes as a result of which something useful got done, and so it was appreciated by society. What arises may be pleasure, because it feels good, but there is no pride and arrogance as it is clear to me that it is not my doing. These tendencies, as well as hatred and malice, start dropping away.

N: Sometimes if you experience this, maybe to a lesser degree, and you are pulled astray temporarily, you tend to be very hard on yourself: *I've been doing meditation, and I've been with Baba for so long, yet I had an episode of anger or outburst.* Could you shed some light on how to be in those moments?

G: We are not sages; it is human nature. You may follow a practice for years and, suddenly, an incident happens that disturbs your peace of mind. It's a happening. We take ownership of that and say, *I was not disturbed for all these years. But now I am disturbed by this happening. Why did I do it?* The fact is, you didn't. It happened in the moment.

So then, with this understanding, you don't set up these expectations that you have to be the perfect figure who will not make a wrong move and who will not say anything wrong. That puts a lot of pressure on you.

When we stop putting this demand on others as well as ourselves, life becomes free and joyful. Things may happen sometimes because we are human, but we are not claiming ownership of them. Because to claim ownership is then to get stuck again.

God has made us with all our imperfections. So, in a sense, we *are* perfect, because our imperfections are also made by God. Yet, we do what we think we should, to improve ourselves.

N: I remember you had mentioned once that when you were a child, you were taken to Baba, in Shirdi.

G: Yes.

N: So could you share a few personal experiences of your relationship with Baba?

G: See, I have not had many experiences, although He did come to me in a dream recently. When I was born, my father, especially, considered me a gift from Shirdi Sai Baba. I think I must have been really small, maybe two or three years old, when I was taken to Shirdi. The temple priest, who was on the podium, was taking babies from their parents, putting them at Baba's feet and then giving them back to the parents. This has been vividly etched in my memory. In that moment, I was aware of nothing else but being laid at Baba's feet and being handed back to my father.

But apart from that, I just feel that a lot of people in India, and Maharashtra especially, have grown up seeing Sai Baba's images in taxis and in temples dedicated to Him, built at street corners. He has truly become a part of us.

Plus, in my journey with spiritual masters, I was very drawn to the *Nath Yogis*, and they revere Lord Dattatreya. And there is a connection between Sai Baba and Dattatreya. The Nath Yogis consider Him a manifestation of Dattatreya; that is why He is called Sai Nath.

So I picked up these kinds of cues along the way, and with Sai Baba, because He is so all-pervasive, you keep finding these connections and stories and understanding aspects of Him as a truly Divine Being.

Just the other day, I was telling my mother that we were planning to have this interview, and she asked me, 'Did I tell you about my episode at the Shirdi Sai Baba temple?'

‘Which one?’ I asked.

‘About Baba’s trunk.’

‘No,’ I replied.

Then my mother recounted that many years ago when she had gone with a friend of hers to the temple at *aarti* time, she was looking at the statue. She thought she saw a trunk on the murti, but she dismissed it because she felt that with the incense sticks, the *dhuni* and the lights of the *diyas*, sometimes the mind is tricked into creating patterns where none actually exist. She waited for the smoke to disperse; however, the vision persisted even after it had cleared. It was very perplexing for her.

After they stepped out, her friend wanted to buy some murtis from the shops in the vicinity. In one of the shops, my mother saw one small murti in a corner, almost leaping out, saying, ‘Pick me up, pick me up.’

She wondered what it was and asked the shopkeeper about it. He replied, ‘Ji, *yeh toh Sai Ganesh hai* [Ma’am, this is Sai Ganesh].’ It was a statue of Sai Baba’s with an elephant’s trunk, like that of Ganapati.

She hadn’t bought that statue, so I Googled images of ‘Sai Ganesh.’ Sure enough, I found Baba’s images with a trunk.

So you see, all this is very symbolic. You could very well dismiss it by saying that someone had put Ganesh’s face on a statue of Sai Baba’s, just out of their creative imagination, but how do you explain the fact that my mother had a vision of the same image? That was *her* experience. I think it was very beautiful because a form called Sai Ganesh actually exists.

N: That’s amazing. I think Baba is very . . . I would use the word ‘cryptic’. A lot of His messages, His ways, His leelas were not very direct. He would use symbolism, which appeared in people’s dreams and visions. Any reason?

G: Because He wants us to discern. He doesn’t want to give us ‘A for Apple’.

N: That’s true.

One other question. Sai Baba is probably the most popular deity in India and pretty much in many parts of the world, especially where

Indians reside. Any reason why the teachings haven't spread in the West as much as they have spread through the path of Bhakti in India?

G: As you rightly said, Indians are Bhakti-oriented; the tradition is to visit temples and revere the deity's murti or one's guru. But the Western mind is more into enquiry, knowledge and thinking.

Now there's very little literature on what Baba has said about Jnana Yoga. But His leelas all point to that. Even the story of the two lizards, where He's sitting and someone sees a lizard on the wall and asks Him, 'This lizard is getting very excited. Why?'

And Baba replies, 'Its sister is coming.'

The next instant, a man comes along in his cart and puts a sack down, from which another lizard runs out and goes and meets the first one.

At one level, we can say, 'Look at Baba's leela. He knew that another lizard was going to come from some other town.'

However, the process of Jnana Yoga would be, What is behind this? What is the meaning of this? It is very clear. Baba is saying that anyone you meet in your life is because of rnanubandhan. The Universe conspires to bring about circumstances to make you meet them. In this case, it was two lizards. That was his vision, his enormity.

So now, what happens is that because the literature is mainly driven by these stories and incidents which evoke so much bhava and bhakti, because truly only God or the Absolute could do all this, the Westerners don't have much to look at unless they delve deeper.

I was with a master [Rameshji] who belonged to a lineage of Jnana Yoga masters, because of which my background is Jnana Yoga. When I read the Satcharita, I saw it through the prism of Jnana Yoga. And that is why I underlined all the things that appealed to me. I truly felt that living this is the highest form of bhakti because both paths are ultimately the same.

I do feel that, in time to come, the Western world is going to get more familiar with this master. I'll give you one example. It's only recently that a shrine has come up dedicated to Shirdi Sai Baba around Arunachala Hill in Tiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu, which was

not there earlier. And this is a place that Westerners frequent because of Ramana Maharshi's *ashram* located there.

And I feel that Sai Baba's message is going to spread far more than ever before in the years to come. That is why He said, 'My bones will speak from My tomb.' And He will come in any form: whether it is a vision, whether it is dreams or whether it is through Jnana Yoga. We don't know.

Ramana Maharshi and even Nisargadatta Maharaj had said very clearly that Baba was the Absolute.

So I do feel that it would be really wonderful if Sai Baba's devotees, like us, live His teachings in such a way that they have a direct impact on their daily living. I think that is a service we could render to Baba.

N: So that being said, we pray for His grace, that His will be done.

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