

Brother Vijayananda  
Belief, Faith, and Wisdom  
Lake Shrine Temple  
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Brother wished everyone a very Happy New Year and hoped that everybody had a blessed holiday season. Also, that the first week of the New Year was starting off well. In the beginning of a new year it is traditional to pause or reflect and if we haven't already done so, to look back at the past twelve months; to look at the trend, the direction, our lives are taking and then look forward trying to set some goals and resolutions for the New Year. It may sound trite or commonplace or a cliché but setting goals is important because as human beings we're dynamic, we're fluid, we can't stay still. If we're not moving forward chances are we're moving backwards. We're allowing life to live us instead of living our lives to the fullest. We all have within us this urge to be the best that we can be; to strive to express and to live up to our highest potential. Even if it's difficult, it is worthwhile to take a few minutes to see what we want to accomplish and see what direction we'd like to take because really the person we see ourselves becoming is ultimately the person we will become.

There's a little story about the great sculptor, Michelangelo who found a piece of marble that had been discarded by the other sculptors because it was irregular in shape. It was kind of long and narrow and no one could find any use for it but Michelangelo took it. They said: "What are you going to do with that odd shaped piece of marble?" He answered: "I see David in this piece." He went to work chiseling away, hammering, chipping, etc. and when he was done the beautiful, world famous, renowned statue of David emerged that now hangs in a museum in Florence. What had he accomplished!

Brother explained that in a way that's what we are: both the marble and the sculptor. The new year is filled with possibilities and we can visualize, direct and see what we want to be. What do we want to accomplish? Then we go about chipping away trying to bring into expression what we see ourselves becoming. It is not always easy. We may start out full of enthusiasm and then little by little we lose interest or we find it's difficult to change, don't we? But perseverance, taking it seriously, is the way to go. Paramahansa Yogananda said: "There is no law of God preventing us from being what we want to be and accomplishing what we want to accomplish." It is really our own will and determination that will determine what we want to be and what we will become. As we begin the New Year take a few moments, even if it's something very small, what do we want to accomplish, what do we want to become. No matter what our goals, no matter what resolutions we have, no matter what we want to accomplish, it always behooves us to connect our aspirations to God, the Divine Presence within each one of us. We can all be more effective, make ourselves stronger, in the New Year.

Our accomplishing power can be increased by connecting our goals to God through meditation, contemplation, going within...taking some time each day to connect with our higher power, our higher essence, the Soul. This is what we do when we meditate. We take a few moments to calm the body and restless thoughts in the mind and we feel, we go within, and realize that under all the restlessness, all the constant thoughts and feelings is the soul, the underlying peace and calmness that gives us the

strength to accomplish our worthy goals.

This morning's talk is about faith and belief, the difference between them and how they interact or go together in our lives. Brother said that as he was preparing the service he noticed that we use the word faith in our language today in slightly different contexts depending on the situations. An example is to have faith in another person meaning that we trust them, that we can count on them, that we can depend on their loyalty and their ability to come through for us in some way.

Also, we hear the expression "keep the faith" meaning: don't give up hope, stay positive and don't give in to discouragement, etc.. Then there's the concept of taking a "leap of faith" meaning that when we have to face some situation or make an important decision without having all the information or enough information to make an informed decision or taking on an activity. When it comes to religion we may ask someone what is your faith, what is your outer mode of worship, what are your beliefs about the nature of God, life, death and the hereafter? We, also, talk about faith healing and other uses of the term.

This morning Brother focused on the essence of faith...the meaning of faith in the spiritual sense. Paramahansa Yogananda defined faith: "as the intuitive conviction of truth that could not be shaken even by seemingly contradictory evidence." We've all experienced a time or situation where we absolutely, positively, one hundred percent knew for certain that something was going to happen and later on it did. We didn't really have any reason for believing that or thinking it would happen but it did. Those so-called hunches are examples of this intuitive faculty that exists within each one of us that allows us to know for certain the truth of something with any logic or outer sensory evidence for it.

As human beings we have three elements, three aspects to our nature – the physical, the mental and the spiritual. We have a physical form, a physical body, a mind with intellect, feelings and emotions. We also have the spiritual side, the soul, which is our consciousness, our awareness that has the ability to perceive truth directly. That's why in the Bible it says: "Faith is the substance of things hoped for; the evidence of things not seen," because certitude does not come from outside; it comes from inside...it is unseen. The soul realizes truth directly and expresses itself through the faculty of intuition and the resulting knowing in our consciousness is called faith. When we have real faith, a real conviction, it cannot be dissuaded. It cannot be led to doubt by anything contrary that seems to happen outwardly. There are varying degrees of faith and its highest expression, when cultivated to the greatest extent opens a channel in our being, in our consciousness that allows that Divine Power to express itself in our lives, through our being. That Divine Power can seemingly accomplish miraculous things. Jesus said: "If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, remove hence to yonder place and it shall remove, and nothing shall be impossible." This is the power of faith.

When our late president, Sri Daya Mata, met Paramahansa Yogananda for the first time, she was seventeen years old living in Salt Lake City. He was there giving a series of public lectures. At the time she was suffering from an illness that the doctors of the day were at a loss as to how to treat, how to cure, so she had bandages covering the sores on her face. After that first lecture, Sri Daya Mata and her

mother went up to meet Paramahansa Yogananda and as they were talking he asked what her problem was. Because she was so shy her mother explained what the problem was. The Master said: "Please come back to the lecture tomorrow night." They were planning to attend anyway and she eagerly anticipated returning the next evening to hear him speak. He spoke about the power of faith and will power. As she listened she said that she was so inspired that she felt that it was definitely possible to move mountains with faith in God. After the lecture, they again waited to talk to Paramahansa Yogananda. As they were conversing, just chatting, out of the blue the Master said to her: "Do you believe that God can heal you?" Because she was in this enthusiastic frame of consciousness she said: "I know He can" with great power! He then touched her at the spiritual eye, the point between the eyebrows, and told her: "Then from this point forward you are healed. Inside of one week the bandages will no longer be necessary and your scars will be gone." And that is exactly what happened and throughout the remaining eighty or so years of her life the illness never returned. The Master had aroused that deep intuitive conviction, that faith, that made her receptive to the healing vibrations that emanated through him from God.

In the Bible we read many instances where Christ was able to heal people of various maladies and sicknesses. One of Brother's personal favorites is when Jesus was on his way to visit someone's home and a crowd of people thronged around him. They were jostling him. Everyone was trying to touch him and suddenly Jesus cried out: "Who touched me?" Peter next to him hearing Jesus said: "Lord, everyone is touching you. What do you mean, who touched you?" And Jesus said: "No, someone touched me for I perceive that virtue has gone out of me"...meaning healing power. Hearing what he had said the woman who was there to the side who had touched the hem of his garment, came up before him, knelt and said: "I touched you and I was healed just now when I touched you." Jesus blessed her and said unto her: "Peace be with you. Go on your way, thy faith has made thee whole." Again, it's a great illustration of the power of faith and what it can accomplish in all of our lives if we cultivate it to this high degree.

Paramahansa Yogananda once said: "Illness is a gauntlet tossed at the feet of faith. An ill person should try earnestly to rid himself of his malady and even if doctors proclaim there is no hope, he should remain tranquil for fear shuts the eyes of faith to the Omnipotent Compassionate Divine Presence." It is interesting that in most cultures, if not all, there are shrines and holy places where people can go for healing. Places like Lourdes and Fatima are probably the most famous but many countries, many areas, have them. It seems that instinctively we turn to divine help when we've exhausted all the measures of our own ability. Those whose faith is strong enough find they come away healed. When you go to these places, you see many medical devices, crutches, wheelchairs and stuff that have been left there by people who have been healed through faith. The question really before us is how do we, as individuals, acquire that deep degree of faith. That kind that can move mountains, literally, or perhaps even greater, the hidden awareness of God's presence, God's divine presence in our lives...the love that will strengthen and support us through all the challenges, through all adversities that can weaken us.

We have to start with where we are. We have to start with our beliefs. Beliefs and faith are different. Belief is when you accept the reality or the truth of something but you don't have that 100% certainty, that intuitive conviction, that we talked about. Yet you may have the expectation that you might know.

For example you might say, "I believe in God" but without that realization your belief could be shaken and be led to doubt. Genuine faith, real faith, is always something warm. It may start with a belief but it is always deep, something more tangible, something more real to us.

Faith is a belief that has been tested and converted on some level into experience and this is the great secret of life and about creating things. We have to convert our beliefs into faith by putting them to the test of everyday life. We have to act and live by them in order to demonstrate the validity of them in our lives, especially when we're talking about spiritual truths and spiritual values. This what the Bible actually advises us to do. "Prove me now sayeth the Lord of Hosts. If I will not open you the windows of heaven and pour you out a blessing that there shall not be room enough to receive it"...prove them, demonstrate them, live by them, convert them into faith.

Brother Vijayananda grew up in Niagara Falls in New York State. It is a big tourist town. People come from all over the world each year to view the beauty and spectacular scenery of the Falls. As a teenage and in his early twenties, Brother, to earn extra money in the summers would get a job as a tour guide. To prepare for the job he had to learn all of the history of the Falls and some of it was very colorful. There were all the personalities, who were called dare-devils, who would do things like go over the Falls in a barrel and do these death defying things. Brother was most fascinated by the tightrope walkers. They would tightrope from one side of the Falls to the other. It was quite a distance but sometimes tightroping wasn't even enough. They would do stunts, like somersaults or blindfolded, on the wire. One person carried someone on his back [Brother commented that he thought his manager made him do it]. But another fellow whose stage name was The Great Zumbrati picked a day to tightrope across the Falls that was very rainy and windy. Several times he almost fell but finally he successfully made it across. On the other side there were many people to greet and congratulate him. There was one fellow who was very profusive in his praise of Zumbrati. He kept saying how wonderful and magnificent he was and also that he believed he could do it pushing a wheelbarrow along the wire. This was a stunt that others had already done. Zumbrati was very grateful that he'd made it the one time and said that he didn't think he wanted to do it again, let alone pushing a wheelbarrow. But this man wouldn't give up and again said that he really thought he could and should do it. Finally Zumbrati got tired of it all and said: "You really believe I can do it, don't you?" "Yes, I do, one hundred percent", was the man's response. "You really think I can make it pushing a wheelbarrow across?" "Absolutely, I do! No doubt about it!" "All right," Zumbrati said, "get in the wheelbarrow."

Faith! This is what we have to do to strengthen our faith, to convert our beliefs into faith. We have to put them into the wheelbarrow of life. Brother reiterated that we need to test them out, live by them, demonstrate them. If we don't then we run the risk of falling into just blind belief or blind faith, which doesn't help us when we go through some adversities or trying circumstances. We have nothing to fall back on because we haven't proved the validity of our beliefs. Things like serious illnesses, loss of a loved one, financial problems, relationship issues, all the things that we all encounter to a certain degree in life. These are big tests of our faith at those times. How will we react? How will we respond? Will we emotionally go to pieces and just fall apart or will we have the inner strength, the inner fortitude, to meet those challenges and trials head on with faith knowing that God is strengthening us in our lives.

We all have that steadiness and strength that will see us through the hard times.

There was a man who was shipped wrecked on a desert island and he prayed and prayed to be rescued but none was forthcoming. He finally managed to build a little hut out of leaves and straw. One day upon his return to the hut after he'd been foraging the whole day, he saw that the hut had burnt to the ground. He went to pieces in anger and in anguish cried. "Why God? Why have you done this to me? Why did you allow this to happen?" Then he fell asleep in that state of consciousness. The next morning he saw a ship coming right to the island to rescue him and after getting on board he asked the rescuers how they knew he was there. They said that they saw the smoke signal.

The point is that it is easy to become discouraged and lose heart when trials and misfortunes befall us. But we shouldn't because if we have faith that God is at work in our lives -- His presence is in the background. Sometimes we may feel like the little straw hut of our lives is burning down but remember it just may be a smoke signal bringing God's presence to it. All these trials cause us to go towards God. When it comes to spirituality, our religious beliefs, if we don't test them out or validate them, we have a false sense of security that God will come to us, that we can know Him, without having to make any effort. But it doesn't work that way. Just saying you believe in God will not save you. Listening to sermons, reading scriptures are good because they give you the desire to realize what you are believing -- to motivate you to what you want to accomplish -- but it is not enough. If you shut yourself up in a room and affirm that God will make you rich, you will find that He will not do it. You will have to work in order to obtain wealth or anything else.

The universe operates by certain laws. Law governs everything. Most people have never tried to apply the scientific law of experimentation and research to test their religious conviction, religious beliefs. They simply believe thinking that it is impossible to investigate and prove scriptural truth, scriptural text. Paramahansa Yogananda said: "No, this is outmoded thinking. This blind belief is from the past. Unequivocally God exists. He created this universe and He is known." This is what we have to do to prove, in our own consciousness, the truths of the scriptures. Yoga meditation is the science of uniting the soul with Spirit. Meditation is, perhaps, the greatest way of awakening and strengthening faith because it is the greatest way of awakening and strengthening our intuition. In fact, one of the Sanskrit words for faith is *biswas*. It is practically a literal reference to meditation. It means to breathe easy, to trust and to be free of fear. What do we do when we meditate? We slow down the breath. We sit calmly and breathe easier. We turn our attention within. We still the restless flow of thoughts and let go of negative emotions and feelings, such as fear. In that interiorized consciousness, we trust that God will respond to us and to open the channel that allows that Divine Presence to manifest in our conscious awareness. The Bible, too, references meditation and faith. It says: "Faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the word of God." Paramahansa Yogananda explains that the word is the Aum vibration, the cosmic vibration that sustains all creations and it's a manifestation of God that can be heard in meditation. "By merging with the Aum or Amen, the true and faithful witness, we can unite our consciousness with God."

We all, in a way, have to become spiritual scientists. We can demonstrate, if we want to, the truth of the

scriptures. We don't have to accept them blindly. We can actually experience them in our own lives and isn't that what we all want? Can we really be content with just reading about Truth or about God without having the experience? We have to run a good experiment, a true test. We have to be regular and apply ourselves, just like in anything else, in order to be successful. We have to give it a good try -- be faithful and regular.

Three seers were on a quest to discover the cave of wisdom and truth. They made a long and arduous journey and finally they found the legendary cave. As they approached they saw there was a sentry standing guard at the opening. They had to speak with him before they could enter. The sentry said: "I only have one question. How far into the cave of wisdom do you wish to go?" So the seers talked it over, went back and said: "Look, we don't want to go very far. All we want to do is go in far enough to say we've been there." So it was with great disappointment the sentry summoned a guide who took the three seers in a short way, then brought them back out and they returned to their homes. The point of the story for us is that if we just hurry through our meditation, through our spiritual practices, in effect we're saying we don't want to go very far into the cave of wisdom today. We're too rushed, we're too busy... "I love you Lord but now I've got to go." It's not the kind of reliable experiment that we want to conduct. We have to be sincere. We have to give it our best effort in order to reap the results that scientifically will come back to us if we put in the effort. We have to cultivate devotion and love for God. In Sanskrit the word is shradda. Unconditional love is also a word for faith. So with these things together, we have to open our hearts and not pour out anything tangible that can return to us from God but out of love, out of devotion, that unconditional love given returns to us.

The New Year is here and filled with new opportunities. It's filled with new possibilities but also, new challenges and problems that each one of us will have to face in our lives. Somethings you may know and already see that will have to be dealt with but other things may come unforeseen or unbidden. Cultivating this greater faith will enable us, no matter what they are, to meet these adversities, meet these trials in a better, greater and more positive way. Converting our beliefs into experience -- faith without works is dead. Meditating with intention and concentration, being regular and faithful and also, cultivating divine love. Even when we don't feel the response in our meditations having made our efforts as an offering of love and devotion is a great blessing to each one of us.

Brother closed with the following quote by Paramahansa Yogananda: "Many lack faith in God unless they receive evidence of His powers. Faith is very important because receptivity to Divine Power is shut off by negative thoughts and doubts. Faith grows as you exercise it and when you have faith you can do everything. If you can hold onto an idea long enough and do not give up when opposed by contrary evidence, even if the whole world says it is impossible, and if you can fight the negative thoughts of people while keeping your own thoughts strong while working towards your goal, eventually it will manifest."