

## Center Representative Conference

### SRF/YSS 2018 Convocation

Brother Tyagananda, Brother Devananda, and Brother Sarvananda

(DISCLAIMER: These notes are our best attempt to capture the essence of what was said at this class. There is always a degree of human error involved when taking notes and we have transcribed them to the best of our ability.)

#### Brother Tyagananda

Brother began the conference with a prayer and some beautiful chanting. He noted that the theme of the conference would focus on three essential elements for SRF organizations-(temples, centers, and circles): Humility, Harmony, and Cooperation.

He reminded the devotees to remember the words of Rajarsi Janakananda;

“To you, the Center leaders, to you, I’m very grateful for the way you’re holding together Self Realization Fellowship. All of you, I know, are trying to uphold the perfect example of ideals. Let your light so shine that all will be inspired to emulate your spiritual blessing. The rewards are great.

When the Center Representatives monks started talking about what we should address, we felt that it was time to talk with you again about service, serving the guru. Many devotees come to the path so enthusiastic. You serve for a while and then something happens. Then you stop? Why? Serving the guru’s work is not easy. It can be very challenging, but that is the test. How? When we serve his work there are challenges, but we hang in there. We keep serving.

What broke Master’s heart is when devotees who promised to serve him would go away.

Problems and challenges are an integral part of our sadhana. If we want to find the guru in this life, we have to have this commitment. We need to stay with humility, harmony, and cooperation, not walking away. The artist Sade had a song called, “Hang on to Your Love”. Do you remember, she was a singer from the 80’s? The lyrics are so beautiful. “In heaven’s name, why are you walking away, hang on to your love.”

As an expression of our active love for the guru, we serve him. Especially when it’s not convenient, we continue serving. We have to ask, “How can I make my love stronger, not walking away? “

One devotee told me that when his center was busy buying a building, everyone was walking away. He wanted to quit. He went down on his knees to God, and said, after that, walking away was not an option.

Brother Mokshananda came into the ashram. His family wanted him back, but he stayed with the guru. Master told him, “Loyalty is the highest spiritual law”.

Loyalty begins where personal convenience ends. Those of you here are the dearest of the dear to guruji. Those who serve with their love are so special. Nothing is closer to my heart.

Guruji used to talk about the inner circle. He was sad when there was a big event with food and thousands came, but when it came time to serve, almost no one showed up. Master wrote to Rajarsi, "Everyone wants to ride on the golden chariot but very few want to help build it."

If we are able in this life to have a deep, heartfelt commitment to guruji, to believe and feel, your life can be so transformed. Be workfully committed. You will never know how fast you progress to God and the goal of Self Realization Fellowship.

With service, Guruji is giving us the greatest opportunity to accelerate our spiritual evolution. With Brother Mokshananda, Brother Balananda and others who served, we have seen it clearly. The ones who serve their spiritual groups, they are the ones who grow spiritually. It is worth it because the rewards are unbelievably great. Daya Ma said that the ones who worry that if they serve they will fall to pieces; these are the ones who don't find God. Never be afraid of hard work. The people who slack or dodge it- they do not progress on the spiritual path. I've seen it over and over.

Some devotees set limitations. I will only do this but no more. He or she who thinks only of his own comfort, thinking that if she serves, she will fall to pieces, will not get very far. But she who gives her whole heart finds the life divine.

When I entered the ashram, the ladies at Hidden Valley ashram were doing lots of devotional service...hard labor. I was coming from Europe where I'd never worked in my life, not even cleaning my room nor doing laundry. Brother Turiyananda was there, and he said, "he won't last ten days". The monks worked hard. We often said, "For God and guru."

We worked in the desert from early to late often with little to eat. Once they gave us a cheese sandwich which probably had been prepared five days before.

Early on, I was Br. Simone then, one monk said, "Oh, there are such blessings here!"

And I thought, "Why don't you just shut up." I thought, "Sooner or later it's going to pay back, the blessings of the guru."

And here I am! That was in 1986, 32 years ago, and I tell you, it was worth it! So then I go the Center Department helping all the devotees who did not want to serve. (Laughter)

There will be problems. As devotees, we know that they are opportunities for us to grow spiritually through humility, harmony, and cooperation. These words are emphasized in the Center Department on line guide for operating SRF centers. Brother Devananda will be talking shortly about the best way to communicate.

But do use the Center Online Guide. (The Center Online Guide is a digital library for those who serve-center leaders, service readers, etc. For the website, user name and password, check with your center or call SRF Member Services. )

Guruji used to say, "I've done all this organizational work. As a young man, he was averse to organizational work. He said that organizations are like hornets nests. Whatever the leader does or does not do is criticized.

Just ask him, "Guide me to be humble. It's all in your hands. "

Keep on serving. Keep on referring to the guidance we have prepared. Keep the large spiritual perspective. We are here to become something, not just only playing harmoniums.

The Center Department has three supervisors: Brahmachari Jason, Brother Nikhilananda, and myself, Brother Tyagananda. There is never just one big boss in charge.

(Brother then introduced all of the monastics serving in the Center Department.)

Please come to see us in the Center Department and make an appointment with your center representative. Remember, do everything for God. We are working for him. Serving is just as important as your spiritual meditation. Serving God is just as important. Those who are dry will find more life in service, and involvement with the center.

In thinking, "I'm working only for God!" your love becomes so deep. So give all of your heart, and have no other objective but to serve and love him.

Brother Devananda

We're going to talk about how to integrate spirituality and lead through communication. Have you ever been talking to devotees and they didn't agree with you. A nun once went to Guruji to complain about another nun who she thought was strong willed and didn't always agree. Guruji said, She's strong willed, but all of my disciples are strong willed, because I am strong willed.

We have to learn to get along. Guruji advised us to practice kind speech. You need to be willing to talk things out. Guruji observed two disciples arguing. One turned and walked away from the other. Guruji called to her. He said, "Please come back and talk."

He often said, "Fools argue. Wise men discuss. That is a good example for all of us of the willingness to discuss.

We don't like to deal with difficult people who want to do that. The Gita says, "O Arjuna. surrender not to unmanliness; it is unbecoming to thee. O Scorcher of Foes, forsake this small weak-heartedness! Arise!"

Sometimes we need to have a talk with someone who is really difficult. The law of karma tells us that what you give out you will get back. But when something happens, we often ask, "Why did this happen? It's not right." How can we be spiritual and deal with conflict?

We need to know how to be kind and caring and then deal with people. Guruji told us that getting along does not mean giving up on our ideals. But how can you maintain your ideals without being offensive?

Someone may meditate a lot, but no one wants to work with them. That's not a good sign. Once, I was connecting with a coordinator who was dealing with a difficult person. I asked him, "What do you think you're supposed to learn from this?"

He said, "I need to stand up and face this person in a good way. Misbehavior in a group cannot be allowed to continue. There's a destructive and constructive way. If you have someone who is harsh and a bully- they're pushing people away. There is room for everyone, but you don't need them in key positions.

Look at what you are creating, because it can create a magnetism. If you say, "I can't work with this person ", that's creating inharmony. You are not leaving a person in a place where you can deal with them.

One of our devotee's sisters moved to another city. She tried to help the center there. She was treated with such disrespect that she never went back. That is very unusual, but we don't want to turn people off. If you are in a leadership role or have been a member for many years, look at your style for communicating with the members. When you invite people to serve, it is very important to ask them, "Would you be open to feedback and guidance?" If they are not open, you don't want them in that position.

If you have someone who is showing up late or not showing up, or just not doing well, it's your job to help them and to work with them.

For 18 years, I served in the monks' personnel department. At that time, it was also like the SRF information center. Because the community was so big, we would get a lot of calls. I would be in the middle of counting money or some other task and someone would call. I would say curtly, "What do you want?"

After a few years, I realized that how I treat people is my work. So I changed my attitude. People are our job. Caring about the people around us is our job. The best type of yogi is he or she who feels for others. How we treat the people around us is more important than getting things done.

People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care about them and their spiritual lives. Conflict is normal, but how we deal with it matters. Maybe there is a tense conversation and you're stirred up. How do you handle it?

Calm down. Become aware of your own feelings. Have you ever had a conversation when you were upset? How did it go? We don't like to admit, "I might be a little bit angry. I'm spiritual, so I'm not supposed to be angry." Give yourself some time. I use journaling.

We need to find out what we are so that we can become what we want to be. First, we have to deal with us. This is true in your relationships. Calm down first so that you can have a constructive relationship

I began the process of trying to communicate in a spiritual way when I was at Lake Shrine, and we were building a new temple. I had a mentor, a devotee who was my communication counselor. I was in charge. I had an issue with someone that I was avoiding dealing with. Finally, I started making myself face the person but in a constructive way.

On one occasion we were at an outing, waiting outside for fireworks at a high school. The people next to us were smoking and the smoke was blowing on me and the nearby children. I am allergic to smoke. I thought, "Just let it go". Then, I forced myself to talk to the group. I began with, "Hi, how are you. I know you are not aware, but the smoke is blowing on us and on these children. Would it be okay if you moved to another place a little further away?"

They answered, "Yes. We'd be happy to."

I did not approach them with, "Hey. Do you have any idea what you're doing?" Most people are reasonable as long as you are calm and kind. Your heart has a brain. Be calm, kind, caring and clear.

If you are meditation and you start to think about an issue, you start thinking, "Why did they do it? And their tone of voice! "You have to deal with yourself and your feelings first.

I highly recommend not using email for serious issues. You may write it in anger, then read it later and say, "Oh my gosh! I was really angry. I wish I hadn't said it that way." The phone is better, if you know the person, but in person is best.

For instance you can say to someone who is serving and late, "You are coming late. It's causing some problems. "Explain how it is causing problems. Communicate in a clear way. If it is very sensitive, meet in person.

Years ago, I had moved to a new ashram. The office I was in did not have a phone, and I really needed a phone. I asked the person in charge of that, "May I have a phone?"

He replied, "There are a lot of people who want things here", and walked away.

I thought, "I need to meet this person." I was thinking about it in meditation. I knew I had to deal with it. Finally I approached him and asked, "Do you have a few minutes?" Then I asked, "How are you doing?"

He replied, "My life is falling apart here. I can't finish anything because I have too much to do." He went on for about thirty minutes. After that, because I was listening, I told him, "I had no idea the pressure you were under, but I really do need a phone."

He answered, "Yes, I should have put that in. "That afternoon he spent two hours putting my phone in. That's the power of good communication. You have to be willing to listen but also clear about what you're going to say. This is especially important if you are leading. If you are responsible for an area, be sure to ask people how they are doing.

Have you ever had someone correct you when you knew they didn't care about you? If I know they care, I'll do anything for them. It's important to make a connection with people.

Communicate in a kind way. "Are you aware of that? Just try to do better in the future."

For coordinators, it's your job to create harmony and to make sure that you are not creating disharmony. Sometimes you have to be unpopular if you make a difficult decision. I have had to remove bullies who refuse to listen or to change.

To review: Work through your own feelings first. Journaling works. Get calm. If you do meet with the person, be calm and caring. Don't do sensitive things through email. Maybe small things can be addressed that way. Always ask at the beginning, "How are you doing?", and then be calm and listen. The Center Department is here to help you. Be sure to call for guidance. You may not be appreciated or liked by some, but you are playing an important role. While getting along with yourself, you should also practice the art of getting along with others. It is a great, but challenging and difficult art.

There are several practices that are necessary in order to know how to get along with yourself.

Master said, "Anyone who is extremely emotional or is restless with bad habits can never get along with himself. If your conscience tells you all the time that you are wrong, how on earth can you expect to get along with yourself?"

And when you meet others, you will find that they will not extend their trust and their goodwill toward you. Because a person who goes against his conscience mistrusts himself, and that reflects in his character. Man's conscience speaks to him all the time and is constantly prodding him to change and to behave rightly. So always listen to your conscience, the voice of your inner self; it is there to help you get along with yourself."

Brother Sarvananda

I'm recalling Master saying, "Thou hast given this monk a large family." What does a healthy spiritual family look like?

When I was in Brazil, at a conference in Rio, the devotees were asked to share challenging situations and how they overcame them. There was a lady who had been in charge of accounting. A man came in with

lofty ideals. He felt that anything having to do with money was the root of all evil. He got hold of her ledgers and burned them.

He realized later that he needed accounting. When she told this story to the group, she was so funny in the telling that she brought the house down. If this had been a business, he could have been gone today. In this spiritual family he was able to get away with this. One of the takeaways is don't take it too seriously.

Meera Ma asked Master what his secret was for working with people.

He told her, "Don't expect them all to do their best. Just be grateful for the smallest little things they do."

So she always expressed great appreciation for even the little things.

Everyone goes through different karmic periods or has bad day. Ask yourself, "What am I like when I am on my best, on a good day?"

Some people may be going through a major karmic test. You may want to cut them some slack. Often that happens in a family. People go through a difficult period, and everyone pulls together.

How many would like to be admired by Daya Mata?

Ma said, "I admire the person who has deeply felt conviction but lest I am wrong, maybe I should listen to what you have to say."

She said that one time she was with a group of nuns and spoke strongly to one in front of the group. She went to her room and realized that she hadn't needed to do it in front of the others. So she went to her and apologized.

If you are new in leadership, you may make mistakes. The point is will you let it slide or will you say, "I'm sorry"?

I had the privilege a few months ago of travelling to some meditation groups on the east coast, three fairly small groups.

The first group was a tremendously strong group. On Sunday morning they have a meditation that begins at six a.m. and goes until 11 a.m., five hours. Then they have their reading service. When you meditate together as a group this deeply, the chances are you will have 96-98% fewer harmony problems. Just being together in meditation at that level brings them together in harmony. And I must say, they have never called me once about any harmony problem. This is such a good group!

Sometimes in SRF, the group gets so interiorized after meditation we may approach others like zombies. This group is not like that. Even though a visitor may be a stranger or attends only once, the group warmly welcomes them. At that group, they went out of their way to make people welcome. I thought

to myself, "This is a group that Master will be pleased with. (Your scribe is proud that he is speaking of the Washington D.C. Center!)

When we watch the film, "Glimpses of a life Divine", there is a journalist who talks about having interviewed presidents and a couple of popes. He says that Master saw through his misguided ambition and still loved him. I love to see when people come and go that friendship is still there, that we are not trying to convert, but just to reach out to people with love in the same way.

The second group was in a community that has a reputation of being kind of out there. They are very colorful people. (I only know that he is speaking of Woodstock, NY because he mentioned this story at parent day at SRF Summer Day Camp.) One of them made a sign that said, "A saint is a sinner who never gave up." Each person in the center had the icon, and on this sheet every devotee at the center was a different saint with their picture photo-shopped onto the body of a saint. Again, don't take yourselves too seriously.

The last group met in the basement of the home for a long time nuclear family. There was a husband, father, niece, but you couldn't tell the difference between who was in the family and who was another devotee. Remember, you are not an organization. You are a spiritual family.

Early on, when I first came here, I wasn't looking forward to coming to the hotel and putting on a suit and a scarf. I came to the hotel with some trepidation. I came to the first group meeting, and I saw, these people are so loyal and sincere. Many devotees have come from all over and many come more for the meditation. Do remember to come to the meditation room located in the Catalina Room between sessions.

Just you remember that you are Master's faultless jewels and treat each other with love and respect as Master does. There is a quote from Ma that I will close with.

"The spirit of Christ manifests in us when we look for the positive qualities in others instead of judging them; when we forgive instead of harboring feelings of resentment; when with deep faith and an open heart we set aside our preferences to seek attunement with God and pray, "Father, not my will, but Thine, be done."

For Daya Mata, this was a labor of love for her, this path. Draw others to love for her and Master by your example.