

in lectures, *satsangs*, question-and-answer sessions, or cozy *darshans* at the home of a devotee. Sometimes the teachings are given neither as specific verbal lessons nor as nonverbal transmissions. They are given simply by example. One can recognize a home in which he is staying by the fact that lights are on only in one room. “If everyone is sitting here together,

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*“Facebook is great, but you must also make time to face your book. Facing your own book is what is needed most.”*

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why waste the lights in other rooms?” He regularly switches off lights in other people’s homes, even if he is the first to leave a room.

“One thing, just one thing,” he implores people around the world who are cooking for him. In Indian tradition, the guest is God. *Atithi devo bhava* is one of the most fundamental tenets. It literally means “Adore the guest as divine.” That rule applies whether the guest is an invited friend or a suddenly appearing stranger—they are to be viewed, welcomed, and treated as divine. When that guest is their guru, many Indians are overcome with exuberance and cook lavish, extensive meals of dozens of items. “One thing,” he pleads with devotees wherever he goes. Where most people would salivate at the idea of dozens of mouthwatering items—from freshly fried snacks to homemade milky desserts—Pujya Swamiji has no taste for them. “I cannot enjoy my meal with so many items,” he explains.

“One thing—that’s all I want. Something light, fresh, organic, and healthful” It is not merely that his dietary habits are simple, as one would expect for someone who spent his childhood fasting in the jungle, which left him without a taste for rich food. The emphasis he places on this simplicity all over the world is intended to show people—not by lectures but simply by example—that joy is not to be found in objects of the senses. A *pakora* or *samosa* or *syrupy gulab amun* does not hold the

magic key to fulfillment and contentment in life. “We must eat to live,” he says, “not live to eat. When we eat to live, we eat things that are life-promoting—freshly cooked, healthful, organic, simple food. When we live to eat, we eat things that we think will give us pleasure. But then we have to keep eating, and eating and eating, because that pleasure is so fleeting. Soon we are fat and diabetic and still running after pleasure in *puris* [fried Indian bread].”

His simple ways of living—how he eats, how he travels, how minimal his needs—have changed everyone with whom he’s ever stayed. He leaves behind a trail of people turning vegetarian, giving up frozen and fried food, and learning to eat salad at the age of forty or fifty, or children who are now eating fresh vegetable soup and *kichari* because “that’s Swamiji food.”

His lessons of simplicity extend beyond the culinary.

### ONE PERSON, ONE CAR, ONE FLOWER

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**I**n the early days, crowds of people would meet him at airports around the world. Bouquets of flowers were lovingly thrust toward him as he exited customs or came through the arrivals door. He would lovingly greet everyone quickly before heading into the car that had come to take him home. Finally, in the mid-1990s as the numbers had continued to grow, he made an announcement during a lecture program in London.

*It takes probably nearly an hour for each of you to get to the airport. That is two hours of driving time. Plus you naturally arrive early at the airport so you can be ready and poised at arrivals when I walk out. Thus, say, a total of nearly three hours. You park your cars in the expensive lot and pay probably five pounds to park. Then you buy bouquets of flowers costing several pounds each. And we don’t even have any time to spend together. I emerge from the plane and go straight to the car. We are together later that same day or the next day at discourses and satsang programs. If fifty people*

OPPOSITE *Meditating at Jung Frau, the highest point in Europe, in the Swiss Alps. “High altitude should lead to high attitude and high gratitude,” Pujya Swamiji told the yattris on the alpine train ride up the mountain.*



come, that is a total of approximately 150 human-hours and hundreds of pounds sterling on parking, gasoline, and flowers, not to mention the harm to the environment from all the unnecessary driving. Save those hours. Save those pounds. Put them to good use for humanity. From now on, there shall be only one person in one car to receive me at the airport, and that one car shall not park in the lot. Rather it shall wait on the curb outside arrivals and I will walk out. Further, that one person shall bring only a simple flower.

He proceeded to impose the same rule in cities across the globe. The only slight amendment came with 9/11, when new rules forbade cars from waiting for extended periods on the curb outside arrivals at the bigger airports. Thus, he permitted one car and two people—one person waits inside at arrivals while the other parks the car at some free lot (or on the side of the road) outside the airport until the driver receives a phone call that

Pujya Swamiji has arrived, at which point the car is driven to the curb to receive him.

It is not only devotees who have had their lives touched as he travels throughout the world. Innumerable people have received seats on flights that were oversold due to his ever readiness to give up his seat when airlines ask for volunteers. Frequently, before they had even announced it, if the boarding area seems particularly crowded, he will inform the gate agents, “If you need a volunteer, I’m ready.” He has fed fresh chapatis and *theplas* to countless passengers seated near him on airplanes as well as to harried flight attendants. As Pujya Swamiji doesn’t eat any food that isn’t home-cooked, families everywhere know to send him on flights with packed food. They also know to pack extra, as he can never eat without first feeding those around him. In fact, the first introduction to Indian food for many Western travelers may very well have come via the food they received from his hands on an airplane. Ticket agents, gate agents, and customs officials inevitably are smiling after he leaves their counter. On an early trip to Australia, the customs officer asked him (inexplicably, as he had just walked off the plane so it was obvious that he had just arrived), “Have you come here *to-day*?” Due to the officer’s heavy Australian accent, with which Pujya Swamiji was unfamiliar, the young sadhu thought he had been asked “Have you come here *to-die*?” “Oh no, sir!” Pujya Swamiji exclaimed. “I’ve come here to *live*.”

## OM CHRIST

As Pujya Swamiji’s impact and the demographics of his devotees have extended far beyond the Indian Hindu and even beyond the Westerner turned Hindu, a question that arises is the applicability of Hindu teachings to the non-Hindu. Pujya Swamiji is emphatic that the wisdom is universal, that it applies as much to those who worship God in the form of Jesus Christ or



TOP A youth camp in Toronto, Canada.  
ABOVE Feeding the poor in Durban, South Africa.

Adonai as to those who worship Him in the form of Krishna or Shiva. The temptation for non-Hindus is to believe that in order to truly benefit from the ultimate truth of Pujya Swamiji's teachings, they need to change their religion. So, occasionally Christians and Jews request a "conversion" ceremony or offer to renounce the faith of their childhood in order to seek absolution from the despair of adulthood. "I'll believe whatever you say I need to believe. I'll worship whomever you say I need to worship, just please help me find peace," they plead. Pujya Swamiji encourages them gently to continue worshipping God in the way they always have, to renew their faith in their own religion, and to attend church or synagogue more regularly. He assures them that peace and bliss are equally available in every religion; all that is required is faith and commitment.

Typically the non-Hindu devotees are thankful for his assurances and implement his teachings along with a renewed commitment to their own religion. However, now and then a devotee is adamant, or his or her suffering seems too extensive and excruciating for a solution as simple as "go to church."

Several years ago a woman came to meet with Pujya Swamiji in Chicago. She was an American Christian, a good friend of the family hosting him. Her life was unbearable, and she was desperate for an answer. "Do you think your guru can help me?" she asked. "Of course," the family had assured her. "He can do anything." As she garnered strength to come and meet with him, she did some research on Hinduism, mantras, and miracles. When she finally came to Pujya Swamiji, she had it figured out. "I need a Hindu mantra. It will solve all my problems," she announced. Pujya Swamiji tried to convince her that there was no need for a Hindu mantra. Any sincere, earnest, and pure prayer would surely be heard and answered by God. He urged her to pray to Jesus Christ and take positive steps to turn her life around. She was firm. "No, it

must be a Hindu mantra. I have heard that they have great power and I must have one. I will renounce Christianity. I will become an official Hindu. I will do anything. But I must have a Hindu mantra."

Pujya Swamiji realized that she was obstinate and open to neither negotiation nor entreaty. Therefore, he told her to rise the following morning at 4:00 a.m., and he gave an elaborate list of rituals to be followed with regard to waking, bathing, abstaining from food, having *darshan* of the rising sun, etc. Finally he told her to bring special flowers and special herbs. The usual ritual for receiving *mantra diksha* is not nearly so abstruse. It requires little more than a bathed body, a pure heart, and earnest devotion to the guru. However, Pujya Swamiji knew that this woman had envisioned a great ceremony that would culminate in her magic mantra. In order for it to be effective, he had to play with the drama of making it as enigmatic and complex as possible.

She listened sincerely and took copious notes as Pujya Swamiji elucidated the steps she must take the following morning before coming for her initiation. She silently bowed as she left, tears filling her eyes. "Thank you," she said. "For the first time in years, I have faith that help is around the corner. I know this mantra will fix my life."

The following morning, a full half hour before Pujya Swamiji's morning silence ended and before the appointed time, she arrived. She had followed all the instructions explicitly and carried carefully wrapped bundles of the specific flowers and herbs he had requested. Pujya Swamiji led her into the temple and made her sit down in front of him. He unwrapped the flowers and herbs she had brought, offering them, along with water, to the various deities in the temple, accompanied by lengthy and elaborate mantras. He chanted far more mantras than were required and conducted a significantly more extravagant *puja* than normal. He needed her to believe that no stone was left unturned, no