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RELIGIONS

## Harmony can be learned

An interview with the great Hindu Sri Sri Ravi Shankar about breathing techniques, atheists and religiously motivated conflicts.

by Evelyn Finger

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**DIE ZEIT:** Your Holiness, Mr. Shankar, you are famous for your serenity. You even made a philosophy of life out of it that you impart in your courses. What do you do when you feel stressed?

**Sri Sri Ravi Shankar:** Honestly, I dropped such feelings a long time ago. I have not been stressed in the past 30 years.

**DIE ZEIT:** Thirty years without stress? But only recently you had a debate with radical Islamists.

**Sri Sri:** Yes, and I also spoke at the World Economic Forum.

**DIE ZEIT:** Can you tell us which techniques you practised with the fundamentalists and the business leaders?

### **SRI SRI RAVI SHANKAR**

is India's most popular spiritual teacher and one of the world's most famous Hindus. Born in 1956 as the son of a Brahman, he has become a symbol of tolerance. Together with the Dalai Lama he co-founded the International Association for Human Values. His foundation The Art of Living is active in deprived areas around the world with 5,000 projects but also offers workshops for managers. Shankar was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

**Sri Sri:** A technique for deep relaxation called Pranayama. It soothes the nerves and makes your mind clear. All human emotions have a certain rhythm of breath that will change as your emotions change. But if you use the Sudarshan Kriya, all patterns of sorrow, anger and pain will be replaced by softer emotions and the level of stress hormones will be reduced. For business people I advise short meditations with breathing techniques like Nadi Shodana or the Sudarshan Kriya.

**DIE ZEIT:** Kriya is a Sanskrit word that can be translated as 'perfect act'. In the West, we have become familiar with this term through yoga, but you are not a yoga teacher. You could even be considered as the Hindu Pope. How would you explain Hinduism to someone who has never heard of it?

**Sri Sri:** Hinduism is the oldest religion on our planet. It only has one God, the God of Love who has many names. He can be celebrated in many forms. This is the freedom of our worship.

**DIE ZEIT:** Hindus don't have a conviction of faith. And we still don't know which of the Gods is the most important – Vishnu, Brahma or Saraswati?

**Sri Sri:** Hinduism has many books and prophets. All that is represented in modern society is already there: freedom, independence, equal rights and even democracy.

**DIE ZEIT:** Why aren't there any congregations in Hinduism?

**Sri Sri:** Because it's a way of life, not an organised religion.

**DIE ZEIT:** What is the difference compared to all other large religions?

**Sri Sri:** I am not interested in the differences, but in what we have in common. We should pick the good things from all old traditions to make this world a better place. Anything that helps us become a loving and friendly person shall be put to use. As a rational person I would seek truth.

**DIE ZEIT:** You have written The Book of all Religions. We had always thought that each religion had its own book?

**Sri Sri:** All religions witness the existence of the one and absolute truth. It's just our ignorance towards the Holy Scriptures of our neighbours that creates conflicts. With this book I wanted to convey basic understanding of the different scriptures in an effort to unite heads and hearts. Today it is called inter-religious dialogue. In early days all religions thought that only they were in possession of the truth.

**DIE ZEIT:** Many practitioners still think so.

**Sri Sri:** Because they have still not shifted from linear to spherical thinking.

**DIE ZEIT:** What is spherical thinking?

**Sri Sri:** Let's take my trip to Berlin as an example. How do I get there?

One will advise me to travel in Western direction, one will send me eastward. But both will claim their direction is the only one. This is linear thinking. Spherical thinking means to realize that conflicting opinions can both be correct. If you come from Hamburg, Berlin is further in the South, from Dresden it's to the North. It all depends on your own position.

**DIE ZEIT:** We have an old saying in the West: All roads lead to Rome. If we have understood you correctly, you think that all roads lead to God. What about atheists? Can they also learn something from Hinduism?

**Sri Sri:** Absolutely! Three of Hinduism's six philosophical schools don't even deal with God. They are about the body, mind and creation.

**DIE ZEIT:** Which part of your Art of Living is for atheists, then?

**Sri Sri:** Any human who breathes can profit from our breathing technique. Atheists are only human. They also look for peace and want to love and be loved and they care for our planet. They believe in themselves and in the world. This belief is where atheists and religious people come together.

**DIE ZEIT:** So why is there a dispute between atheists like Richard Dawkins and the Evangelicals in the US?

**Sri Sri:** Most conflicts in the world come from religion. So let me tell you where intolerant religious people go wrong. They lack spirituality. I always use this metaphor: religion is the banana skin and spirituality is the fruit. Often we throw away the fruit instead of the peel. Then religion is only about formality, universal values are missing and fanaticism grows.

**DIE ZEIT:** Is this a plea to eliminate religion?

**Sri Sri:** No, it's for religious tolerance, also towards philosophy.

**DIE ZEIT:** What do you mean by spirituality?

**Sri Sri:** The conviction that God is not an abstract idea but something that can be experienced in your heart. If religion is not about seeking and instead shuts itself from rationality and scientific thinking, then it becomes narrow.

**DIE ZEIT:** What is your message for Christians who demand reforms from their churches?

**Sri Sri:** They are right because reforms are vital even if the Scriptures contain this or that rule. This world keeps changing and hopefully our faith will keep up. Especially the Catholic Church has some experience with this. In Galileo's times they thought the earth was a disc. Later the church joined hands with science.

**DIE ZEIT:** Many Hindus in India still stick to the caste system that harshly defines religious duties and social borders.

**Sri Sri:** Hinduism as I see it has only one task to make us affectionate and righteous.

**DIE ZEIT:** What about religion and politics?

**Sri Sri:** Faith is something personal. It should be kept out of politics. Otherwise we will have a similar situation as in Pakistan or Afghanistan where people get their hands chopped off in the name of God or even get beheaded.

**DIE ZEIT:** Isn't it the nature of faith to be unable to have any discussions?

**Sri Sri:** No. We shouldn't consider religious laws as absolute but we should support values like compassion and love, justice and liberty.

**DIE ZEIT:** So why are there different religions at all? Recently you had been on a panel with a Protestant theologian and it seemed that you both meant the same when you used the term God.

**Sri Sri:** Of course God is always the same, whatever name you may give him. He is omnipotent and omnipresent. He manifests in his creation and in every human being, also in you and me. The outward appearance might differ but the inner essence is always the same.

**DIE ZEIT:** Conservative Christians say that we have to insist on outward appearance otherwise Christianity will become obsolete.

**Sri Sri:** I don't think that openness is weakness. We can see how prejudice disappears from today's world and how this makes people stronger. Unlike in the past many have stopped closing up when they meet someone of a different faith.

**DIE ZEIT:** You are a Hindu and have always been politically active. You speak at conferences for world peace. You reconcile in faith-based conflicts. In addition to your anti-stress programmes for trade and industry you have started educational programmes in India that have been recognised by Unicef. What do you teach there?

**Sri Sri:** Dialogue. I come from Mahatma Gandhi's tradition and we already had inter-religious prayers when I was a child. So I learned a bit about the Bible, Islam and Buddhism. I never had to make an effort to accept different faiths because I had grown up with these differences.

**DIE ZEIT:** Hinduism consists of so many influences that foreigners sometimes have a hard time understanding it.

**Sri Sri:** Isn't this wonderful? You might find a picture of Jesus in the house of a Hindu. Hindus also visit Buddhist temples. Let me tell you a story. When President Nixon came to Japan he met with a Buddhist priest and a Shinto monk. Nixon asked the Buddhist how many people in Japan were following Buddhism. He answered: "Eighty percent." Then Nixon asked the Shintoist the same question. He answered: "Eighty percent." Nixon exclaimed: "How is it possible that both of you say eighty percent?" They smiled and said: "It is possible."

**DIE ZEIT:** What can the modern world learn from East Asian religions?

**Sri Sri:** Peaceful coexistence. The world has ten large religions, four from the Middle East and six from the Far East. Four of them – Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Bahaism – have Abrahamic roots. But the other six – Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism, Taoism, Confucianism – are quite different from each other. Yet, there have never been any huge conflicts between them. The world can follow this example. It hurts me to see what is happening in Israel and Palestine. Israelis are constantly in danger and Palestinians are suffering. There is fear and aggression everywhere. A bridge is missing there.

**DIE ZEIT:** You have also interfered in this conflict.

**Sri Sri:** Yes, because I see myself as a bridge builder. I have invited Israel's Chief Rabbi to our big World Culture Festival at the Olympic Stadium in Berlin next weekend. Our foundation holds courses in Palestine. Later this year we will have a conference in India for Imams and Rabbis. We plan peace talks on neutral ground. As Hindus we are close to both Muslims and Jews and so I think we can mediate.

**DIE ZEIT:** You teach how to make an effort and overcome hatred and fear. What has cost you an effort?

**Sri Sri:** Ignoring other people's cynicism in their reaction to peace talks. Some think it is naïve. Another issue I had a hard time to come to terms with was the Indian Maoists' willingness to use violence. Only over the last few years we were successful in reducing it. It was similar with the radical Mujahedeen in Kashmir and Bihar. In Ivory Coast, on the other hand, we were able to bring Muslim and Christian groups together. We were awarded with a prize by the government for it.

**DIE ZEIT:** You have also been on a peace mission in Iraq. Did you travel there with your white dress? Not even wearing a bulletproof vest?

**Sri Sri:** Yes, but the government put twelve military jeeps at our disposal. I told them we had not come to hide behind tanks and security forces but to talk to those Iraqis who were causing the problems. They said no. When Tony Blair was there, there was a bombing in the green zone. And you want to go to the red zone! It's too risky! We responded that we were ready to take the risk and that God would take care of our security. Eventually we went into the red zone and spoke with extremists but also with normal Iraqi tribal leaders and with poor people. As a result we were able to initiate computer courses for women and medical care for traumatized war victims.

**DIE ZEIT:** How do you make something like this happen, aside from God's help?

**Sri Sri:** You need strong will. If something seems to be impossible I am always tempted to go for it. When someone says 2,000 guitarists cannot play on a single stage I will say: Yes, they can.

**DIE ZEIT:** What breathing techniques do you recommend for German politicians?

**Sri Sri:** Politicians are not of a separate species. They face the same stress as everyone else. Anything that will help a businessman or a social worker will also help a politician.

**DIE ZEIT:** Some critics say that you are just a Guru who wants to make people happy with doubtful advice. What was the hardest lesson you had to learn as a religious leader?

**Sri Sri:** Facing the prejudices from people who wanted to pigeonhole me with patience and without anger.

**DIE ZEIT:** Can you please complete a sentence for us? Religion can be revolutionary if ...

**Sri Sri:** ... if it is scientific. Or: when it doesn't lack rationality. Just pick what you like best.

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