Gurudev Continues Efforts to Restore Peace in Venezuela

Continuing his efforts for peace and dialogue, Gurudev’s second visit to Venezuela was marked by meetings with Juan Guaidó, the political leader of Venezuela and president of the national assembly, and with María Corina Machado, one of the opposition leaders. Both sides have assured Gurudev that the dialogue would begin again in the best interests of the nation. Gurudev requested President Nicolás Maduro to release political prisoners. “The suffering is mounting continuously. I urge political leaders to come to the table, talk, and resolve the conflict as soon as possible,” said Gurudev.

Millions of Americans Meditating as Gurudev Continues Efforts to Restore Peace in Venezuela

Millions of people from all walks of life, religions, ages, races, genders, and political persuasions joined Gurudev in a guided meditation at “America Meditates” which was simultaneously organized in 299 nations across U.S. on July 24, 2019. The main event which was held at Denver City Park, Denver, Colorado, was marked by inspiring talks by leaders and uplifting music by celebrity artists. While thousands were physically present at the event, millions of others joined online from over 116,000 locations in 106 countries. As Gurudev always says, “When so many people meditate together at the same time, it brings so many positive vibrations, a lot of coherence in the atmosphere.”

World Renowned Vastu Experts Gather for the First Global Vastu Conference

Under the aegis of The Art of Living, the first Global Vastu Conference was held at its International Centre in Bangalore on August 17th and 18th, 2019. Highly sought after and esteemed Vastu experts, such as Dr. Hampi Chakrabarti, Dr. C. Kaushalya Yojana (DDUGKY), and Padma Koty, participated in the conference. The conference aimed to bring together at the same time, it brings so many positive vibrations, a lot of coherence in the atmosphere.

The Art of Living has entered into a partnership with The National Institute of Rural and Tribal Youth (NIRD&PR), Government of India, to undertake development activities for the panchayats and rural communities in India. They will jointly execute an Action Research project for Sustainable Development through Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) across 133 Gram Panchayats of Jharkhand, in the tenure between 2019-2022. This initiative would be employed to orient the Mukhiyas and other elected representatives to have a clear vision about strengthened panchayat and work on the fundamental requirements like motivating behavioural change among individuals and society, facilitate gram panchayat offices to be kept open every day and staff to be available, harness the power of youth for overall development, target a 100% attendance in gram sabhas, make the standing committees more active, ensure all eligible children go to the nearest anganwadi centres, implement the 73rd Amendment of the Constitution of India completely and, mainly, improve the life and livelihood of the people through panchayats. All participants were certified at the end of the training.
Temple Waste Management Project: Precious Compost from Floral Waste

Behind every Art of Living Project is a holistic cause-effect-solution approach. Consider the Temple Waste Management Project of the SSRDP (Sri Sri Rural Development Program) that is helping temples convert their floral offerings into compost, thereby averting pollution of water bodies while enabling the wastepaper disposal of flowers and leaves by devotees with love and respect to the deities of these temples. Further, the compost is used by the temples themselves for their agricultural farms. A win-win-win solution for the devotees, the temple authorities, and the water bodies!

The SSRDP Trust acts as a bridge between urban and rural India for such cultural interactions, knowledge, technology, and human values, focusing on rural empowerment. The Solid Waste Management (SWM) Project is part of the SSRDP’s Green Environment Program to create an infrastructure for rural income generation based on initiatives to revive, maintain, and keep a clean, green environment. The Temple Waste Management is one such SWM project.

What was the origin of this project? When Gurudev was approached about the suggestion of converting the large quantities of floral waste of temples into galal (organic color) or agharthi, he expressed that floral offerings to the Divine carried the sentiments and deep reverence of the devotees and should ideally not be put to such end-uses. He advised that it would be better to convert it into manure and use it for fortifying the earth. And this became the guiding principle for the Temple Waste Management Project.

Thus today the discarded floral offerings that would have ended up in water bodies and caused pollution are being converted to high-quality soil conditioning fertilizer. These composting plants have been installed at various temples across India and have the capacity to generate 200-400 tons of organic manure in a day. In approximately eleven days, 80 per cent of the organic matter is decomposed and converted into compost. It is worth noting that in temples in south India, banana leaves are also being composted.

The sales proceeds of the compost make these projects viable and at some temples the compost is sold to rural farmers while local youth get employment opportunity at the projects. The participatory approach of keeping in mind the sentiments and sensibilities of devotees and the temple environment has resulted in the generation of tons of valuable compost! With the methodology of the project being reliable and replicable, it can be expected that more and more temples across India will join this praise-worthy initiative.

Encouraging Farmers to go the Natural Way

Padmini Koty

Shobha is one of the successful farmers in Maharashtra trained in natural farming by The Art of Living’s Sri Sri Institute of Agricultural Sciences & Technology Trust. Ever since she and her son underwent Agri TTP under the guidance of Dr. Prabhakar Rao just last year, they have been reaping good profits by adopting natural farming techniques like mixed cropping and mulching to grow a variety of crops on their agricultural land.

After completing her training, Shobha was eager to share her new found knowledge with others in her area. On talking to them, it struck Shobha that though the local farmers were interested in giving natural farming a try, they did not have the confidence to start this new system. Worse, how to start was not clear, for example! So, she decided to develop a model farm and prove to the local farmers that indeed does Sri Sri Natural Farming reduce farmers’ investment, it also increases their produce. In fact, it enables them to plough back their entire earnings into their crops unlike chemical farming which entails huge expenditure on fertilizers and takes away a significant chunk of their income. Natural farming protects the soil from degradation whereas repeated use of chemicals depletes the land and makes it unfit for nurturing over time.

“I learned that if you really want to grow something, you don’t need chemicals. You just need to observe nature and understand how it works, like our ancestors used to. Natural farming enriches the soil and reduces the cost of investments,” says Shobha.

Shobha has seen an increase in production of both vegetables and sugarcane on her farm. This has helped strengthen her belief in natural farming and she is now encouraging the villagers and workers of the farm to think about this technique. She is the local trainer at the farm in natural farming techniques and is teaching them all about making natural fertilizers, pesticides, and manures. She gives inspirational talks to the farmers, telling them about the advantages of natural farming. She motivates farmers to try natural farming on a small patch of land to start with - if they have five acres of land, they could begin with just half an acre and see how it works out for them, comparing the difference between natural and chemical farming. She goes to the village three days a week to spread awareness and conduct training sessions.

Sri Sri Natural Farming borrows from the wisdom of the Vedas and our ancient Rishis a methodology that comes from a deep knowledge of how nature enables life through mutually beneficial relationships. “Most farmers here had lost their connection with nature, but now many of them are getting motivated to go the natural way,” says Shobha.

Minding the Money Matters

Prakash Balwani lead an illustrious career as Vice President-F&A with Reliance Industries Ltd. and headed the Accounts Payable department at Mumbai-based ING Vysya, specializing in investments of more than 20000 Crs. A financial wizard, he has graced several roles in his experience of more than 40 years. Recently, post his retirement, he has busied himself as the COO of The Art of Living Social Projects. Between pushing project prospects and ensuring no muddling in money matters, he keeps the team on track with an unflinching eye.

Dr. Hampa Chakrabarti in conversation with Prakash Balwani.

What are the best financial practices that an organisation like The Art of Living can adopt for implementation of its social projects across India?

We are accountable to society and to the donor for judicious use of the money that they have entrusted us with. To ensure this, organisations can adopt a few practices, like, first, separate accounts should be maintained for receipt and expenditure of each project and also for each source of funding. Second, it is important to track the process of using funds for the projects for which the money has been spent. Third, the original vouchers and bills should be retained for a certain period of time. Next, for soft projects i.e. other than brick and mortar project, like a skill development program or a program for awareness on menstrual health and hygiene practices, documentation, like photographs, participant details, attendance sheets, etc. need to be recorded. Here too locations should be done with utmost care. Above all, there should be strict compliance with all commercial laws.

What are the key points to be kept in mind for making the budget of a project?

It might be an uphill task to make an absolutely accurate budget, nevertheless, we can make it reasonably accurate by ensuring a few things. It is very important to first study the finer requirements of the project and then take guidance from a subject matter expert. Thereafter, all possibilities of expenses in the project should be detailed out carefully. Based on this, quotations for every expense should be collected from the market. Along with these necessary steps, few crucial aspects should not be missed. The, like, rental factor should always be considered. While planning towards a project that you plan to start today might not hold good the next year, more so for long term projects. Today an item might cost you Rs.100, next year it might become Rs.150. So if you don’t plan for that, your budget will go off. You should be careful not to be in a shortage of funds at the end of the project. The time taken for obtaining various approvals from different agencies, government and others should also be considered. However, no matter how carefully you chalk out a budget, you cannot predict everything in advance; some or the other development will surprise you. Thus, some provisions should be made for the contingencies of finance, time or manpower.

How can a field volunteer engage in better financial management at his/her level?

A field volunteer needs to feel total belongingness with the work that he is doing and the finances that are at his/her disposal. When he/she incubates the culture of ownership and accountability and knows that there is an accountability that lies towards the donor and the society at large then every penny will be spent wisely with thorough consideration.

How to safeguard a project against financial pilferage?

By putting the detailed expenditure process and authorization matrix to spend the money in place. Besides this audit tools can be available during learning concept and stage. How to ensure that the money, who will request for the money and who will be authorised to approve the expenditure, all these should be unambiguously defined in advance.

What can the two very different environments of a corporate and non-profit learn from each other?

Ah! (long sigh) There is a day and night difference between the two environments. Nonprofits can learn a few things from the corporates. Like the corporates, the NGOs can implement yardsticks and mechanisms to monitor that the activity is finished within timeline. There is a difference in attitude, i.e., in a corporate somebody is accountable for the task to be finished as required and within time; whereas, in an NGO, most people function with the thought process of ‘we are doing something, let us see how much we can do’. This difference should be mitigated. In the corporate sector, a fixed authority is given to someone at every level for liability. NGOs too can have that in place.

What corporates can learn is that like the NGOs they can work keeping the attitude of service on their mind. A corporate sees the growth of the organisation and the growth of the employee, mostly in terms of money. Here they can learn from a non-profit to also look into the parameters of satisfaction of the society they are working in. Now, of course the corporates have been mandated to work for the society under the CSR activities, but the service attitude has to come to the forefront, from within. Very few corporates think for society dimension of CSR in their business model.

Most of our projects are operational in rural India, mostly by volunteers. Sometimes having proper invoices for every penny spent becomes a challenge. What is the solution in such cases?

Effort should be made for procuring proper invoice for every expenditure. We as NGO are accountable to the donor and the society. Therefore, even a field volunteer when he/she spends money, should be very careful about the fact that the money is spent in the right place. Everybody should exercise due diligence while making any expenditure and keep proper record of it. If, let’s say they buy stationary from a village shop that does not have an invoice with proper GST registration, the volunteer should at least get a voucher signed. But the occurrence of such cases should be reduced to a minimum. In every project we need to educate our field volunteers about these things. One may not be able to do everything perfectly, but there is a means to control the finances.

Learning from the EXperts

Who will request for the money and who will be authorised to approve the expenditure, all these should be unambiguously defined in advance.
SEVA Snippets

Wave of Bliss Sweeps the Nation

Over 75,000 people from diverse backgrounds participated in the pan India Happiness Program from August 16 to 18, 2019. Participants joined the program from over 2500 locations and learned the powerful Sudarshan Kriya and life-transforming practical wisdom directly from Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar himself.

Desilting by Volunteers Creates Water Storage Capacity of 7.3 Cr. Liters

Volunteers of The Art of Living with the support of CSR and Overseas Volunteer for a Better India (OVBI) carried out desilting of nalas and a river in Panaji Gosi, a village in Partur Taluk, Jalna, Maharashtra. Volunteers cleared 47,443 Cu. M. of silt from nalas, 207 Cr. M. of silt from Deep CCTs, and 26,939 Cu.M. of silt from the Naagartash river, to create a water storage capacity of 7.3 Cr. Liters.

Desilting of Nalas in Mauda Creates Water Storage Capacity of 160 Cr L

In 2018 The Art of Living family in Nagpur led by Manish Badyani and Sandesh Shirkhedkar started desilting canals in Mauda Taluk in Maharaashtra as part of a conservation project. With CSR funding, contributions from the State Government, and support of the local villagers, a total of 80 km of desilting in 29 nalas across 38 villages of Mauda has been carried out until now creating a water storage capacity of 160 Cr L.

Sri Sri Natural Farming 2019

A successful collaboration between The Art of Living and the State Government of Jharkhand, a project is now in its second phase. A total of 500 families have been involved so far. The training is provided by a team from New Delhi and the services are also supplied by Jharcraft. Apart from the handloom sector, women are also being trained in other fields such as towel making, blanket making, and earning a livelihood, alongside carrying out their household duties.

Sustainable Indigenous Seed Innovation Conference 2.0

Hosted in collaboration with the University of Leeds, UK, and supported by the UK Government’s Department for International Development (DfID), the Sustainable Seed Innovation 2.0 conference was the fructification of the Position Paper that was the outcome of the 1.0 conference. The conference brought together farmers, experts, scientists, and policymakers to address the key points in indigenous seed innovation. They assimilated the inputs from the conference and acquainted themselves with the impactful work being done by The Art of Living in indigenous seed innovation. They presented the copies of the Position Paper and undertook to take the information and learning in it into consideration while formulating future policies on Natural Farming.

SEVA Times

Rural Women Weave their Way to Financial Freedom

Women undergoing Solar Technician Training at the Center, says that initially it was a challenge to motivate the rural women to undergo training at the center. He and his team had to work hard to mobilize women and girls of the village to upgrade their skills and become economically independent. The persistence of Junal and his team has paid off and today, women trained at the center earn around Rs. 4000 per month, depending on the time they are able to devote to weaving after completing their household chores. Bed sheets, blankets, towels, cloth, and saris are some of the products woven by them which are in great demand. Jharcraft, a government undertaking that aims to create sustainable livelihood opportunities in the rural areas of Jharkhand, provides handloom machines to these women at subsidized rates and also purchases their finished products. The raw materials i.e. threads etc. are also supplied by Jharcraft.

How to Handle Workplace Politics

What is politics?

Different people have different mindsets, and they air their opinions. For a while, these opinions remain and then it all changes. Some people praise you and the same people will make nasty remarks about you – all this is very common. You should take this for granted or you will become bitter.

Words of Wisdom

“Politics is mud. You can I tell them? And if someone has said something nasty about you – all this is very common. You should take this for granted or you will become bitter” – Dr. Prabhakar Rao (Trustee, SSIAST & the organizing force behind both the Seed Conferences.)
Purging with Peace

Aditya Nath Chaubey was born to a God-loving, businessman father and a housemaker mother. Pursuing his higher studies in Varanasi, politics was a far cry for someone like him. But a time came when he could no longer bear to see his fellow student leaders indulge in dirty mudslinging politics and misuse the savings they were left with. Aditya had started hating his life by then and nothing seemed to bring back hope or positivity. In such a time when Gurudev said, “If you do good deeds, the impact of the evil deeds that you might have done will disappear on their own,” these words struck him as that tiny flickering light at the end of the tunnel, and in spite of the sceptic voice inside him, he held on to it dearly.