

I offer my humble salutations at the divine lotus feet of our beloved Bhagavan Sathya Sai Baba.

Honored guests, Members of the Prasanthi Council, Delegates, Brothers and Sisters,

We are most fortunate to be here, at the divine calling of the Avatar of this age. We have come not on our own will but on the Will of God Himself. We recognize that we are just actors on this stage of life, acting not out of our own will but because the ONE that is all of us is moving within each of us, playing out the role assigned to us. We believe that there is only ONE, and we ask that the ONE to lift the veil of ignorance so that we can experience and be aware of that ONE. As the Bhagavad Gita says, not even a blade of grass quivers in the wind without the ONE willing it. Everything is part of the ONE's Song, the Universe. *Uni* means *ONE* and *Verse* means *Song*. This universe is the ONE's song, and we are all musicians playing that song.

What compels this belief in us? Our interactions with Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba, the embodiment of that One. Each of us have interacted with Him in some way —some personal and some from afar, some in dreams and meditation, some dramatic and some not so dramatic. Each of you can recall the first time you laid eyes on Swami, the first half hour or so of that *darshan*, that first interview. Each of you can remember special moments —thing He said, things He knew, things He did. You may not have understood their significance at the time or they may not have had an immediate effect, but they did later on. He interacts differently with each of us.

But who of us knew when we first saw Him 5, 10, 20, 40 years ago that we would be here today? Only one PERSON did, at that time, the Avatar, Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba. Only He, with the full powers of the Avatar, the author, conductor, and singer of this Song, knew how it would unfold. And only He knows the rest of His Song.

So why are we here? He has drawn us here to discuss the Sai International Organization, to decide what steps to take to make it into the Sai Ideal International Organization. We do not know exactly what will come out of this World Conference. We do not know the future. But we know that we have to play the part that Swami has given us in the Divine Song to the fullest extent possible, putting our heart and soul into it.

And what are we supposed to do? Today and tomorrow morning, we take part in study circles. The topic? In a nutshell, how this Organization can more effectively promote its purpose and aim, which is to help individuals remove the obstacles that keep humanity away from God, that separate humanity from Divinity, that hold us from experiencing the ONE.

Pages 6–7 of the agenda list four discussion topics: (1) our expectations, (2) the uniqueness of the Sai organization, (3) the Attributes of the Sai Ideal Spiritual Organization, and (4) its rules and guidelines. You have not been given specific questions to address, for that may have narrowed your discussion too much. Each of your countries has different issues and different cultural considerations, and asking you to focus on a few specific questions would have been too confining.

However, a group of us did look through available documents and guidelines of the Sai Organization throughout the world, and these investigations have guided the following remarks and questions that you might address.

The objective of the Sai Organization

First, we know that the aim of this Organization is to help remove the obstacles that keep humanity away from God. Those are Swami's words. The Charter of this Organization says the same thing, but differently: the Objective is to help the individual become aware of the Divinity inherent in the individual and to conduct oneself accordingly. Moreover, Swami has mentioned this idea that our goal in life is to experience God in one way or another in almost all His 1500-odd recorded discourses.

In your deliberations, then, discuss whether all members of the Sai Organization know of this objective, whether the programs and practices of the Sai Organization are oriented toward achieving this objective, and what the Sai Organization should do differently in order to better achieve this objective.

As you deliberate, don't just simply let a sense of complacency and inertia and comfortableness with the current state of affairs lure you into saying everything is alright the way it is. We all have a tendency to like the status quo. Instead, take a fresh look at our Organization and to think about how we might improve it.

The uniqueness of the Sai Organization

Second, think about the uniqueness of this Sai Organization. Swami has said: and I quote,

The Sathya Sai organization was set up solely to enable members to manifest their love in all their activities. Without boasting about it, we can claim that there are no organizations in the world like the Sathya Sai Organization.

Manifesting our love in all our activities is indeed a spiritual activity, leading us to our goal.

The conference agenda asks us to compare ourselves with other organizations —religious, service, philanthropic, political— and ponder on the differences. In your study circles, then, talk about whether our programs and practices do make us unique —and whether the public views us as unique.

Here's an example. In some countries, the website of the Sai Organization says we are a Service Organization and mentions our spiritual nature at the end. Based on that home page, the public might think we are another Red Cross, or Salvation Army, or Oxfam. Is this the right message for the public, and even for our Sai Organization members?

Perhaps this viewpoint came from Swami's statement that "Service is the life breath of the Organization." But think about it. Is breathing our purpose, our goal? No. Breathing is simply a means to an end. We breathe to stay alive so that we can focus on the purpose of life: moving toward experiencing the ONE. Similarly, we do selfless service because it is one means to strive toward experiencing the ONE.

Also, our Sai Organization has programs and practices to lead us on other paths. We all recognize three basic paths, leading to the same goal of experiencing the ONE: the path of service or action, the path of devotion, and the path of wisdom. We all use a mixture of these paths. Thus, to bill the Sai Organization as a service organization misses the point and sends the wrong perception.

We are a spiritual organization, and that is all, with the chief goal being to help the individual on the path toward experiencing Oneness.

Another point to consider. We are not a religious organization, are we? Everyone says we are not. We are not a branch of the Hindu religion, a Christian Church, or a Jewish sect. Our Charter gives as one objective: *to make devotees of religions more sincere and dedicated in the practice of their religions.*

Thus, here are some questions you might consider in your study circles.

What view the public has of your Sai Organization. What view do the members have? What feeling does a guest get from your Sai Center or regional meetings? Would a spiritual seeker visiting a Center meeting in *your* country feel comfortable, no matter what religion they came from? Does your Center study many religions with the goal of seeing that, at the core, they all reflect Bhagawan Baba's teachings?

In your study circles, ponder these questions, and recommend different practices and programs so that we can indeed become a Sai Ideal Organization.

The attributes of the Sai Ideal Spiritual Organization

The third topic for discussion is: the attributes of the Sai Ideal Spiritual Organization, with respect to its structure, function, programs and practices, and leadership. In order to get some overall perception of

these attributes, a group of us studied all the documentation that we could find —center manuals, country guidelines, zone guidelines, websites, and so on. And this naturally folds into the fourth topic of discussion: rules and guidelines and how they are communicated to its members, officers, and the public.

We found large differences in this documentation; here are just a few.

- From no guidelines to a 3-page list of “basic understandings” to a small 20-page booklet to 150 pages.
- From a broad overview of the leadership to details on the format of emails.
- Different methods for selection officers —selection, election, appointment.
- From many details on incorporation of a Sai Organization in a country to no mention of it.

It was not always clear exactly who the document was for —different sets of audiences would need different information. Do you expect members in a Sai Center to digest 150 pages? No, clearly that document was meant for officers. But, then, is there a document for Sai Center members that explains the spiritual nature of the Sai Organization, sets the context with a bit of history, lays out the principle rules and regulations, and talks about selection of officers (as opposed to election) and a few other important topics? It seems to me that such a document is of utmost importance.

Here are some thoughts for discussion in your study circles:

1. Have your members seen the Charter of the International Sai Organization? Do they need to see it? Does the Charter need changing?
2. Do you have —or do you need— guidelines for Sai Centers that provide a good perspective on the spiritual nature of the Sai Organization and lay out all the fundamental rules and regulations that a member should be aware of? Are your members aware of all the guidelines?
3. Do you have —or do you need— a *different* document with more information, for office bearers at the regional, country, or zone level?
4. We have sometimes found out that Center members did not even know of the existence of Center guidelines. Should there be periodic study circles on the objectives of this organization and how they are to be realized, using the Center guidelines as a basis?
5. Should the Prasanthi Council provide guidance, or oversight, for the development of guidelines, rules, and regulations?
6. How can we rewrite guidelines for devotional meetings so they are relevant to the culture of our country?

Getting back to the attributes of the Sai Ideal Spiritual Organization, everyone agrees that the nine-point code of conduct and ten guiding principles are a basic standard. But a host of worldly issues are handled completely differently in different regions of the world. And yes, we need to consider worldly issues. We are a spiritual organization, but we operate in the world. We can mention some of these starting with Sai Centers, which are at the core of our Organization.

1. *Membership in a Sai Center.* Are records kept of members? Are they published, for all to see, or is the list only for use within the Center, for communication purposes?
2. *Selection of officers in Sai Centers.* In some countries, Center officers —President, Vice President, and wing coordinators— are selected by the Center members themselves, in a selection process, not an election process. Every effort is made to secure consensus, and the process by which this is done is spelled out thoroughly in the guidelines as a *selection*, not an *election*. In some countries, officers are elected, and in other countries, appointed.

Would consistency across all Sai Centers be appropriate. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each methods for a spiritual organization.

3. *Incorporation, owning of property, and finances.* All Sai Organizations obey the fundamental principle given to us by Swami that we should have as little to do with money and that money is never solicited. Beyond that, financial and legal issues are handled in quite different ways, sometimes depending on the laws in a particular country.

For example, the guidelines for one large country state that Centers cannot incorporate and are not part of any non-profit. This periodically brings requests for change, for financial reasons —sometimes, use of some property for a retreat or service project will be relatively free for a non-for-profit organization but costly for others. Other guidelines don't mention incorporation or say that this is a local issue, dependent on the country.

4. *Relationship with other organizations.* One issue that continually comes up is the relationship with other organizations, mainly regarding service or what we can call public outreach, although we do not, as an organization, proselytize and try to draw in members. As we looked at the documentation for various Sai Organizations, a number of questions arose, which you could address in your study circles.

- Can a Sai Organization work with another organization? What are the ground rules for working together?
- What is the stance of the International Sai Organization on reaching out to the public, in the form of public meetings, service projects jointly with others?
- Is it OK to invite religious and other spiritual organization to participate in *akhandā bhajans*?
- Should the Sai Organization take part in interfaith events? Should it organize them?

I am sure that each of you has some organization issues that need resolving or discussion. You facilitator will be guiding your study circle with some questions prepared ahead of time. But suggest your own issue to be addressed at appropriate moments of the study circle.

Conclusion

In closing, let me say this. We all know the objective of this Organization: to enable individuals to become aware of the Divinity in them. But how do we *ourselves*, the leaders of the Organization, do that? Becoming Aware is not our doing! It happens only by the Grace of that ONE, embodied in our beloved Sai. We cannot force it to happen. And it is said that it happens when we are able to give up all our desires, even the desire for experiencing the ONE, and simply surrender. One person told me yesterday that it amounts to *abandoning* everything.

Each of us strives for this state of non-striving in a different way. My way consists mainly of service/work. Feeling guilty about not meditating, doing yoga, and other such practices, I once asked Swami in an interview, “Swami, how can I change my spiritual practices to get closer to you, to experience God?” His reply: “*Don't change anything. Keeping doing what you are doing. Experiences will come when they are supposed do.*” Coupled with a statement He made to me at a different time, that He would give me lots of work to do, this was tremendously reassuring. So, I was simply go about doing the work that God puts before me to the best of my ability, trying not to be attached to the result, trying to remember that all this work is to serve the God that resides in the other person, and trying to remember to repeat the Name of God when my mind is not engaged in other things.

As we deliberate on how this Organization can improve, let us remember that we ourselves don't know how to achieve its main objective, and we really need guidance from within. Swami, as we talk about leadership, and structure, and guidelines today, please help us to be aware of your presence within each and every one of us and help us to perform out deliberations with your divine love.

Om Sai Ram