

Interview with His Holiness Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, Global Humanitarian and Founder of the Art of Living

Yoga & Meditation in the Context of World Politics & Economics

By Japan SPOTLIGHT

It is a sunlit weekday morning in early April in Tokyo when the cherry-blossoms are in full bloom. In a bright corner room in the Shangri-La Hotel, the carpeting is covered with spotless white linen. Shoes have been left at the door and we are awaiting the famous spiritual leader Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. He walks in softly, greets us with a gentle smile and asks us to be seated. After he finishes greeting some overseas visitors and the hotel staff who have been waiting to meet him, the interview begins.

(Interviewed on April 6, 2017)

Complementary Nature of Science & Spirituality

JS: Thank you so much for your time in spite of your busy schedule. We would like to have an interview with you regarding yoga and meditation in the light of the current economic and political state of the world. You have a Masters degree in modern science and also in ancient Indian philosophy. I had the opportunity to listen to you both at the event in Asakusa and at the Indian Embassy. You sounded very confident in espousing the complementary nature of science and spirituality. Could you please explain a little more about this?

Sri Sri: Science is about knowing “what this is”. Spirituality is exploring “who I am”. They are not conflicting with each other. In fact, they complement each other. In ancient oriental science and wisdom, they always said, “Start to know first about earth, water, air, ether and then talk about consciousness.” Science stops at space, while spirituality begins at consciousness. So they are very complementary.

JS: Unfortunately I missed the opportunity to listen to the dialogue between a medical scientist and yourself at the University of Tokyo. That must have been very interesting. I experienced meditation and yoga by following your instructions in Asakusa and I thought there should be some scientific logic which supports such a positive experience.



Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, Global Humanitarian and Founder of the Art of Living

Sri Sri: There are a number of researches which have been done into the benefits of meditation: how meditation helps to make the hippocampus healthier, how meditation changes the structure of the brain in just eight weeks, increases the grey matter in the brain, improves the nervous system, and improves cognitive ability. You cannot accept something just because it is ancient; it should go through the test of science. Similarly, just because something is science, it need not mean it is good for your health, good for your life. We always need to keep a scientific temper and drop prejudice about ancient things.

Confusion in the Current World

JS: Looking at the contemporary world, there is lots of confusion, conflict and violence. What is your impression of the current world?

Sri Sri: The modern world has actually shrunk into a village. Today there are no borders; communication is flowing all over the world. So, there is an advantage from that. Media is not controlled by anybody; there is now a democracy in media. However, there are also disadvantages. These are stress, lack of trust in each other, broken families, corruption in institutions, and greed which is destroying the environment. There are many such challenges in society today. Topmost of these is crime. There is domestic crime, societal crime, terrorism. Crime originates when stress levels hit the roof and the wrong indoctrination is given to people. Here again, I would say that education about peace is essential. Nobody teaches you how to be peaceful, neither at home nor at school. There is no peace education;

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if you are upset, if you are angry or disturbed, nobody comes to tell you, “Hey, calm down.” Nobody gives you techniques to strengthen your mind. As a result, see what is happening. In Japan, 25% of youth want to commit suicide. This is very high. It is because they have not been taught about their breath, mind and emotions. This is what yoga and spirituality teaches you about. It teaches you about the body, breath, mind and emotions. It harnesses all these four levels. This is why I consider this education as most important.

JS: I was impressed by what you said in Asakusa. You asked, “Do you know how you can be unhappy?” You said there is a theory that can be applied to anybody: the best way to be unhappy is to worry about yourself, to think, “What about me? What about me?” It had a big impact on me. I think that is the kind of thing that should be taught.

Sri Sri: Yes, correct.

Economic Confusion & Yoga

JS: As our organization is working on the economy, today we observe an increasing income gap between rich and poor. This seems to be a source of frustration and anger. Perhaps yoga and meditation can help in reducing this frustration?

Sri Sri: Yes, correct. For poor people, survival is an issue. For survival, for their poverty, they often point fingers at others who seem better off. With yoga and meditation, what happens is that it instills self-confidence in them. What they were not able to do before, they are able to start doing as they gain self-confidence and courage. It brings up the dynamism in them. We have been teaching these courses to the downtrodden and the poorer sections of society, as well as the rich sections of society. The impact on rich people is that their hearts open up, making them more charitable and engaging in charitable work. For poor people, they start trying to find ways to become more self-reliant.

JS: Apart from the income gap, capitalism seems to have reached a serious deadlock. How do we resolve this?

Sri Sri: Whether it is capitalism, socialism, communism, or whatever “ism”, without humanism they do not work. What is needed today is to introduce humanism, whether it is into capitalism, socialism, whatever “ism”. Then the shift happens and the system works better.

JS: I think, as you said in Asakusa, it is necessary to create centers of happiness. We should teach there that material success is not necessarily everything for happiness.

Sri Sri: You know, that is something people are realizing today. When they get to the top of material success, they realize that this is not really what they wanted. That it is not all that there is. Material success is not bad. You should have it. However, you should also have happiness along with material success.

Some Technical Questions About Yoga

JS: I am very curious to know how often we should practice yoga and meditation. I felt very refreshed in Asakusa after your guided meditation. However, in a few days my old state of mind was back, sometimes with anger and anxiety. How often can we refresh our mind by practicing meditation?

Sri Sri: Not as often as you drink tea; maybe half of that time (laughter).

JS: You said that five days of serious meditation every year would be necessary.

Sri Sri: Five days of advanced meditation. Practicing some silence, participating in a silent retreat, rejuvenating body, mind and spirit. That will make a very big difference. I would say for a busy businessman, give yourself half an hour every day. A little exercise, a few minutes of some breathing technique, then meditation. Once in a while, once or twice a year, take four or five days off. When you go for a holiday, you are tanned and tired when you come back. However, if you take a holiday which is combined with the techniques of yoga and meditation, it gives you very deep rest and recharges you when you return. It also helps you to enhance your intuition and innovative tendencies.

JS: On breathing techniques, I am not so good at sports. In order to master breathing techniques, should we practice?

Sri Sri: No, it is not a very difficult thing; it is very simple, quite simple. You can learn it in three days — a couple of hours each day for three days.

JS: After the breathing and meditation, I felt, you know, that I am part of the world. I felt that my



egotism was gone and there was a feeling as if I was merging into the world. Would that be the right feeling?

Sri Sri: That is good. You have had that feeling as a child. You feel one with everybody. Barriers would be gone. Judging disappears.

JS: Oh, I see. That is very important.

Sri Sri: Yes, very important.

The Aging Society & Yoga

JS: Japan is becoming, as you know, an aging society. You mentioned about memory in the elderly, Alzheimer's, and that yoga and meditation can be very useful in addressing that.

Sri Sri: Yoga and meditation, and along with that they should also use Ayurvedic herbs, like turmeric. These things help the brain. We are into Ayurveda also. Art of Living uses the best herbs suitable for various conditions. It is an old science: 5,000-year-old wisdom. We are also promoting that along with yoga and meditation.

JS: It is very important to keep aged people in good health. If they are healthy, they can work and contribute to society. I feel that can be an important outcome of practicing yoga and meditation.

Sri Sri: Yes, correct, it is very important. Also, mental alertness and happiness. People, even if they are aged, nothing should stop them

from being happy. As we age, we should become happier. This is contrary to becoming sad and depressed as we age. This is not good for either oneself or for society.

Yoga Could Promote India-Japan Relations

JS: One last question. You said that Japan has many good things to promote to the world. I was touched by the title of your presentation “Ancient Indian Wisdom as Promoting Global Peace”. That kind of concept is very necessary. I feel we need this in Japan. Our concepts are short-lived like the beauty of the cherry-blossom and I feel that is not healthy. I think promoting yoga and meditation is a good opportunity for collaboration, both in business and foreign policy, between India and Japan. What do you think?

Sri Sri: Yes, I think so. Japan and India can share many things.

JS: Unfortunately, on the business level, there does not seem to be much progress, but with the help of your yoga promotion, maybe we can have more opportunities to work together in the future.

Sri Sri: Yes. You know, we have a program called “World Forum for Ethics in Business”. We have formed a world coalition for business and ethics. Every year we hold a conference in the European parliament which is co-sponsored by them. We identify an organization which has displayed the best business practices and give an award. We also have programs for business leaders called TLEX — “Transformation in Leadership”. These workshops — synergy workshops — have transformed businesses. About 500 companies have so far taken this program. It includes yoga and meditation, team-building and communication skills. The program has earned international accreditation and many universities around the world are offering TLEX as part of their curriculum. This could be a way to make progress in joint business collaboration.

JS: Thank you so much for sparing your valuable time for this session.

Sri Sri: Thank you.

JS

Written with the cooperation of Mohan Gopal, who is an engineering and management graduate from India working in Japan since 1991 as an IT industry professional. His career has spanned sales, marketing, teaching and consulting. He has been a volunteer with the global social organization the Art of Living Foundation for the past 20 years.