

# God, Love, Service and Practice — The Curriculum of Sathya Sai Baba and the Re-vitalization of Our Schools

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**Abstract:** Emerging from East Indian or Bharatian culture, Sathya Sai Baba (1926–2011) was a prolific world teacher, a master who spoke of the mysteries and magnificence of the Self and who devised an educational system to re-vitalize our schools, centred on four great themes — God, Love, Service, and Practice. For Baba, insight not applied was as worthless as knowledge not practiced.

**Key words:** Self-realization, spirituality, character, curriculum, schools, Sathya Sai Baba

## 1. Introduction

Culture is the forebear of tradition, and tradition propagates culture. It is the way that culture reveres and sustains itself. And perhaps the seed of self-perpetuation in a culture, its vitality, is its spiritual energy and teaching. What does the culture say about the spirit, the potential and the destiny of its adherents? What does it say they are capable of, and who they are? To what heights would it raise them? These are great questions, and different cultures give different answers. This paper examines the spiritual traditions of East Indian culture, sometimes called Bharatian culture, as revitalized by Sathya Sai Baba.

Sai Baba was a mystic and a sage born in Puttaparthi, India, in 1926; he died in 2011. He was characterized as a “world teacher”; schools, colleges and universities were founded on his teachings; and hundreds of books in English alone have emerged about him. His published discourses and books amount to at least 14 volumes of commentaries in *Summer Showers in Brindavan*, 21 volumes of his *Vahini* (Stream) series, and 42 volumes of *Sathya Sai Speaks* — the last alone totaling 12,000 pages. The discourses run from 1953 to 2010. Perhaps no other mystic in history left as rich and full a legacy of outpourings related to the theme of re-organizing our schools and our world.

The essence of Baba’s message was a critique of modern education that largely left out God, Love, and service — that emphasized bookishness, but not personal experience, that craved insight but did not practice it, that soared millions of miles into space but not an inch into the nature and power of one’s own Self.

## 2. God

The centrepiece of Baba’s communication was always God, though God went by a thousand names: “Some have faith only in Love, some believe only in Truth, some swear they care only for Goodness — but all these do

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not know they are referring to God alone by these names. They too are pilgrims to the same sacred shrine” (Vol. 7, p. 178). Importantly, that shrine was *within* as well as without. It was the light of life within each person, the infinite Intelligence, the essential Spirit. “When the road ends, and the Goal is gained,” Baba said, “the pilgrim finds that he has traveled only from himself to himself, that the way was long and lonesome, but the God that led him unto it was all the while in him, around him, with him, and beside him! He himself was always Divine. His yearning to merge in God was but the sea calling to the Ocean! Man loves, because He is Love! He craves for melody and harmony, because He is melody and harmony. He seeks Joy, for He is Joy. He thirsts for God, for he is composed of God, and he cannot exist without Him” (Vol. 8, p. 39).

To Baba, life’s purpose was to discover these truths and to live them — no mean feat, for it amounted to self-realization, perhaps the most fundamental way of re-vitalizing schools, any schools. To assist in the discovery and the living, right education, of course, was paramount. Said Baba, “An educational system that keeps children away from God — the only refuge, the only kinsman, the only guide and guard — is really a system where the blind are engaged in blinding those who depend on them” (Vol. 8, p. 140). He might have added that an educational system that leaves out Love, or Joy, or Melody, or Harmony was equally blinding.

Contemporary education fell far short of the ideal, Baba asserted. It is fashionable now to know all the questions and none of the answers, as if the answers cannot be found. Fashionable, too, to think that truth is beyond our ken, that self-realization is a myth. Few laud love; in fact teachers fear the word, and even fewer know how to instill equanimity.

Baba spoke of a Pundit, a cultured academian, who engaged a boatman to ferry him across the flooded Godavari River: “When the journey over the river started, [the academian] began a lively conversation with the boatman. He asked him whether he had any schooling, and when the reply came that he had none, he said sadly, ‘Alas! A quarter of your life has gone to waste. It is as if you have drowned those years in the Godavari.’ He then asked him... the time.... The boatman confessed he did not have a watch nor cared to have one. The Pundit deplored that and said, ‘Half your life has gone into the Godavari.’ His next question was about newspapers; did the boatman read any, what was his favorite paper? The boatman replied that he did not read any nor did he care to know the news. He had enough to worry about already. The Pundit declared forthright that three-quarters of the boatman’s life had been liquidated.

“Just then the sky darkened with storm clouds, and there was an imminent threat of rain. The boatman turned to the Pundit: it was his turn to put a question. He asked, ‘Can you swim?’ And when the frightened passenger confessed that he could not, the boatman said, ‘In that case, your entire life is now going to merge in the Godavari!’ This is the case of the educated in India today. They do not have the training that will help them in distress, or in dire need, to win back their mental poise” (Vol. 3, pp. 66–67).

For Baba it was the case of the educated in North America, too, where real education began where modern education left off, for the modern curriculum was poverty-stricken in matters of the Self and Spirit.

Baba related an allegory that captured the difference between what was and what might be.... A king went hunting in the forest, but he overran his retinue, and fell into a forsaken well. Luckily as he plummeted, he grabbed a root sticking from the well wall, and thereby defied death. After hours of anguish, he heard a holy man reciting the names of the Lord at the well mouth. The king cried out, and though he was far below, the holy man faintly heard his distress, and he threw down a rope and told the king to hold on tightly (Vol. 5, p. 61). The question now before the king was — root or rope?

For Baba, the root is the life most people lead, if they can even hold on; the rope is the way out. The root is

the strength of the human unallied with one's spiritual essence; the rope is the strength of Spirit, linked with the Divine. The root is the conscious mind with all its prejudices and preconceptions, all its misunderstandings and half understandings; the rope is the superconscious or higher mind with its infinite wisdom, potential and power. The root is the help given by the mass consciousness; the rope is the upbearing given by the higher Self, the secret of extrication from this world. The root is the way of struggle and grasping, of imminent threat, and fear of lack and loss and death; the rope is the way of ease and release, of constant empowerment, and delight in abundance, fullness, love and life. In the end, the root is a deceptive attachment, and the rope, the uplift to self-realization.

### 3. Love

The key to self-realization, Baba emphasized again and again, is love: "Love is the seed, courage is the blossom and peace is the fruit that sages grow in the garden of their hearts" (Vol. 7a, p. 260).

Love is the ancestor of all spiritual values. It gives birth to them, and then is energized and vitalized by them; it incubates them, and then is magnified and immortalized through them. It does this with qualities like patience, persistence, happiness, courage. It joins with what it has already created, and in the process it receives back the life it gave — just as we receive love, loyalty and trust by giving them to others.

Patience, persistence, happiness, and courage are all offspring of love, but they also enable and invigorate love. Love is sharing, and it must share to be itself. It needs its own creations; it needs them to interact with in order to flower — just as teachers need students in order to evolve. Without people to help us as we help them, we are all sterile and incomplete.

Patience is a daughter of love, and love desperately needs this child — because without patience, love has no time. It has no time for those who need time to develop, to unfold, to adjust, to see the light. It has no time for the slow, the insecure. No time for those who are not ready for instruction. Without patience, we, who are love's potential, will become irritable, intolerant, angry, demanding, selfish and short-tempered. Without it, we cannot be kind to ourselves (the impatient can absolutely savage themselves!) Without it, we cannot even listen, and to listen is the first obligation of love.

Persistence is another child that love desperately needs in order to blossom — because without persistence, love has no stamina. Love is not the affection of a milli-second, a mere whim that is offered now and withdrawn in annoyance or distraction a moment later. Real love is abiding and lasting and faithful — thus it must have persistence.

But the most obvious creation of love is happiness, for happiness cannot be where love is not — they are constant companions. Without happiness, love is an impostor. If what we do does not make us happy, we are called to re-examine it, re-conceptualize it, redo it, until it is animated by affection.

Love also created courage so that we might never be thwarted by fear. Without courage, love is afraid to be born. Courage is the great facilitator: it makes possible all virtues, including love. We need it to speak when our colleagues are misguided; we need it to be kind when the world would be cruel; we need it to be ourselves when conformity is foolish. We need courage to stand amidst breaking worlds when our concept of self is most endangered. We need it to trust others and to love others — because trusting and loving make us vulnerable, and *that* may make us afraid. It takes courage to be honest, to pursue the truth, even to be reliable under adverse conditions.

Self-evolvment is not for cowards. A study of the world's enlightened beings shows that they are truly

courageous — and that they are love itself, and love's family of enabling, ennobling and expanding virtues.

Directly or indirectly, love was behind every quality. In one Baba story, Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity, purity and generosity, the embodiment of grace, beauty and charm, asked her husband Vishnu, the preserver and restorer, if humanity would ever turn to God once he had gifted them with a comfortable living. "I have endowed them with two qualities which will draw them towards Me," Vishnu answered: "Greed and Discontent" (Vol. 8, p. 146). One is drawn to love through these states because they always render one dark, dreary, degraded and despondent, *and in supreme need of Love*. Likewise, one is drawn to love through fear, because the comfort and kindness of love is the only remedy for the torment of dread.

To Baba love was the underlying reality of the whole universe, the very essence of life "as burning is of fire, wetness of water, sweetness of sugar" (Vol. 15, p. 206). "Be lamps of Love — that contains all," he said (Vol. 7b, p. 86). "Scatter the seeds of Love in dreary desert hearts; then sprouts of Love will make the wastelands green with joy, blossoms of Love will make the air fragrant, rivers of Love will murmur along the valleys, and every bird will beat and every child will sing the song of Love" (Vol. 7b, p. 30).

Love was utterly unselfish, unchanging, unsullied, and it was pure, spontaneous and ever expanding. It knew no fear, and it shunned falsehood. "Love does not crave for praise," said Baba; "that is its strength. Only those who have no Love in them itch for reward and reputation. The reward for Love is Love itself.... Love is the only comprehensive code of conduct," the very light of life (Vol. 9, p. 86), a light without "boundaries, prejudices or favorites" (Vol. 7b, p. 76). And a light without boundaries made everything light.

Baba was a foremost proponent of the Advaita or nondualist philosophy, an important element of Bharatian culture, which professed that everything was one, that there was only God, only Love, only Light. Dharmaraja, the eldest of the Pandava brothers in the great epic, *The Mahabharata*, tended to see things non-dualistically. He and his brothers had been bilked out of their rightful portion of the empire and exiled from the city of Hasthinapura into the forest by their evil Kaurava cousins. Naturally, Dharmaraja might have seen things dualistically — his brothers against them, his side against theirs, good against evil. But one day Krishna asked him where his brothers were, and he said some were in the forest and some were in Hasthinapura. Surprised, Krishna said, "Dharmaraja! What has happened to your brains? All of you, the five brothers, are here in the forest as you know. None is in the city of Hasthinapura." Dharmaraja responded, "Pardon me, Lord! We are 105 brothers in all." Krishna feigned confusion. He named the five and asked why Dharmaraja had added a hundred more. "My father's sons are five; his brother, the blind Dhritharashtra, has a hundred sons," replied Dharmaraja. "When we fight with them, we are five and they a hundred. But when we don't, we are a hundred and five" (Vol. 14, pp. 236–237).

The essential Spirit, the Divine core, of the 105 was the same, and Baba called it the *Atma*. "Once the *Atma* is cognized," he taught, "all is Unity; you will find that all is really One." The ancient Bharatian scriptures had instilled that truth, but modern audiences had ignored it and were "struggling in the quagmires and cesspools of faction and fear" (Vol. 6, p. 32). In this struggle they were, of course, seeing themselves as fundamentally different, and with tragic consequences. "When the four bulls that grazed in the jungle were united and watchful of each other's safety (for they felt they were all One) the tiger dared not approach them," said Baba; "but, when discord broke among them and created out of the One, four separate individuals, they were attacked one by one, and destroyed by the tiger. That is the fate of those who feel separate" (Vol. 6, p. 32).

Baba emphasized non-dualism another way. "Night and light cannot co-exist," he said. "The Sun was proud that he had no enemies left. But, someone told him that he had one enemy left, viz., Darkness. Then he sent his rays, the emissaries, to seek out the foe, but wherever they went, they saw only Light; the darkness was nowhere

to be found. They returned and reported: ‘There was no such thing as Darkness upon the earth; we made the most rigorous search!’” (Vol. 3, p. 198).

This is part of turning all things to light, part of preferring the interpretation that elevates. From the viewpoint of light, there is no darkness, and darkness can never be. From the viewpoint of clarity, there is no confusion. From the viewpoint of purity of intention, there is no duplicity. From the viewpoint of love, there is no fear, no hate, no scorn, no cynicism.... There is only one, only light. The great unifying factor in non-dualism, in fact, in all of life is *love*. “Love binds all hearts in a soft silken symphony,” said Baba. “Seen through the eyes of love, all beings are beautiful, all deeds are dedicated, all thoughts are innocent, and the world is one vast kin” (Murty, 1994, pp. 192–193). The deeds are dedicated because if they be good, they are part of love; if not, they call for love. And the thoughts are innocent because if they be good they must be innocent, and if not, the thinker simply does not know who he is, or he would never have thought the way he did.

For Baba love was much more than a concept; it was *an ideal put into action, an experience*. “Compassion is not mere display of kindness or sympathy to someone in distress. It calls for complete identification with the suffering experienced by another and relieving that suffering as a means of relieving the agony experienced by himself.” Baba then told a story of a calf caught in a bog while trying to reach a pond. A crowd of “urchins” were delighting in its struggles and its inability to free itself when an ascetic passed by, plodded into the mud, lifted the calf onto his shoulders and set it down at the pool it sought. Why had he saved the calf, the urchins asked, and the ascetic replied that the struggling animal had caused him immense anguish, so to relieve himself of the agony, he relieved the calf of its agony (Vol. 19, pp. 89–90). The unity of the feeling — the ascetic’s and the calf’s — reveals the essential Oneness. To the ascetic the calf’s pain was his pain; there was only one pain, the one he was feeling. True compassion, true love, is essentially a unifying force, for love sees not division, but unity, and unity is inherently harmonizing, melding, connecting.

One time, the three brothers, Krishna, Balarama and Sathyaki, when they were little boys, four to six years old, strayed into the jungle alone, and when darkness fell they had to spend the night there. “Even at that age Krishna would do nothing without a deep purpose behind it,” said Baba. Krishna warned of ghosts and ghouls and demons in these woods and said the brothers would need to be on guard all night — Sathyaki from 7 to 10, Balarama, from 10 to 1 am, and Krishna, from 1 to 4.

Sure enough, a demon did appear, and pounced on Sathyaki who “resisted heroically” exchanging hammer blows, biting and clawing. At last, the demon retreated, leaving Sathyaki “badly mauled, but happy.” The other two, meanwhile, were still sound asleep until Sathyaki’s turn at 10. Again the demon attacked, and again a slugfest ensued, with Sathyaki emerging pummelled but victorious.

Then Krishna began his watch. Stated Baba, “The demon came roaring like a wounded tiger and advanced ferociously at the little Divine Boy. Krishna turned his sweet, charming face at him, and rewarded him with a lovely smile. That smile disarmed the demon; the longer he came under its influence, the weaker became his vengeance and venom. At last the demon became as docile as a lamb.” The other two brothers woke and were amazed at Krishna’s victory “won by the weaponry of love.” Baba concluded with a striking epigram — “You cannot destroy anger by anger, cruelty by cruelty, hatred by hatred. Anger can be subdued only by forbearance; cruelty can be overcome only by non-violence; hatred yields only to charity and compassion” (Vol. 11, p. 299).

Little wonder that Baba declared, “If you develop love, you don’t need to develop anything else” (Jones, 2008, p. 81). It was a universal ideal and an indispensable element in knowing the Self, in living a fulfilled, happy life, and in being a caring teacher.

What is there that a teacher does that cannot be related to love? If we are loving we will treat students and colleagues with respect. If we are loving we will settle for nothing but absolute fairness in assessment, tempered always by kindness. If we are loving, we will be crystal clear in our expectations. We will embrace our subject matter enthusiastically, constantly expanding our mastery of it. We will return assignments promptly, provide feedback systematically and thoughtfully. We will help whenever we hear a call for help. We will welcome student criticism. We won't limit our time for our students or colleagues. We won't seal ourselves off at home, forbidding all contact there. We won't separate our life into moments we can help and moments we can't. We won't withdraw our gifts of time and energy when we don't see immediate results. We won't hold grudges for perceived slights.

The entire teaching experience can be characterized as an exercise in love. And when something is wrong, applying love to the problem will invariably solve it (or dissolve it as a problem). A teacher who has trouble because she does not provide written requirements or clear verbal requirements can solve the problem by being more considerate. A teacher who dislikes herself, her own subject matter, the room she is in, the assignments she gives, the penalties she devises, is encountering a problem of affection. Why solve incoherence in a teacher? Because it is considerate to do so. Why remedy inaudibility? Because it is caring to do so. Why ask for student evaluations? Because it respects them and us. Ask always what would a considerate person do, and our difficulties will recede. If an assessment procedure is unfair, or a punishment unjust, both are unloving.

A curriculum that devalues the historical and geographical setting in which it exists, or that degrades universalism in favor of sectarianism, or that disregards the beauty of a single human soul is short of one thing — love.

#### 4. Service

For Baba, the fundamental purpose of humanity and source of satisfaction and helpfulness in a reorganized world was service — service born in the womb of love. “There is no discipline equal to Service to smother the ego and to fill the heart with genuine joy,” he affirmed. “To condemn service as demeaning and inferior is to forgo these benefits. A wave of service, if it sweeps over the land, catching everyone in its enthusiasm, will be able to wipe off the mounds of hatred, malice and greed that infest the world” (Vol. 9, p. 95). The elements that best nurtured service were not so much gifts and donations as zeal and zest (Vol. 9, p. 97). Ostentation was completely out of place in service (Vol. 17, p. 77). And so was judgement, judging others if they deserved the service. “Find out if they are distressed; that is enough credential,” he advised (Vol. 7a, p. 209).

No doubt, Baba was thinking of service and the higher goals of humankind when he said: “Those who argue that the spiritual path is for the individual one, and that society should not be involved in it, are committing a great mistake. It is like insisting that there is light inside the house, and saying it does not matter if there is darkness outside” (Jones, 2010, p. 142).

There can be cowardice in such a declaration. You know, I don't want to be ridiculed; I will keep my spirituality inside me. If I'm challenged, I won't even admit that I have it. “Officer, do I know this man Jesus? Never seen him before in my life!”

What Baba seemed to be communicating was that an enlightened soul is always a beacon for *everyone*. He does not use his spirituality selfishly; he shares it. He does not separate himself from others, nor does he ever forsake others. His love can never be closeted, his compassion, never limited.... Love's impulse is to expand *to all*; the Sun's dharma, its bent, is to reach out to infinity. A lamp does not summon a shade to curtail its glow; only humans put shades on lamps.

Baba did warn against a mad rush to preach the truths he espoused, especially to those unready or unprepared to receive them: “If you pour spirituality into the ears of those who are tortured by hunger, it will not be assimilated. First, quench the hunger. Give them God in the form of food. Give them God in the form of clothes. Give God in the form of peace to those who are afflicted with anxiety. Give God in the form of medicine to those who are suffering from ill health. Give God in whatever form which will assuage fear, pain and sorrow. It is only when this is done that spirituality can soak into the heart. In you act contrariwise, instead of spiritual feelings you will be promoting atheism itself” (Vol. 15, pp. 315–316).

Nothing was beneath the true servant. Several times Baba pointed to Krishna as a true exemplar. On the eve of a magnificent celebration, Krishna suggested to Dharmaraja, the Pandava chief in *The Mahabharata*, that he be given the task of cleaning the dining hall after the guests had feasted. During the Battle of Kurukshetra that climaxed the epic, Krishna was “merely” Arjuna’s charioteer. At dusk after the day’s fighting, he led the horses to the river, washing them and soothing their injuries, and then mending the reins and harnesses and preparing for another day’s struggle (Vol. 15, p. 167). On a third occasion, Krishna approached Dharmaraja respectfully and asked that he might wash the feet of the attending scholars and priests (Vol. 20, pp. 140–141).

## 5. Practice

For Baba, as for most teachers of the Self, liberation from human attachments and limitations was a goal of life, a fundamental aspect of a reorganized world. Liberation occurred when one knew who one was, when all misconceptions had been cleared, all inhibiting habits had been removed. Said he, “The secret of liberation lies, not in the mystic formula that is whispered in the ear and rotated on the rosary; it lies in the stepping out into action, the walking forward in practice, the pious pilgrim route and the triumphant reaching of the Goal. The best Guru is the Divine in you; yearn for hearing His Voice, His Counsel” (Vol. 7b, p. 26). But remember, any knowledge not put into practice was worthless, like a “lamp in the hand of a blind man” (Vol. 17, p. 33). Especially near the end of his life in 2011, Baba constantly stressed the need for application. Instead, his devotees, who by then numbered in the millions, preferred just to listen to his lectures, approving, of course, but never applied, applauding, but never acted on.

“When the word ‘Lamp’ is uttered, darkness does not vanish,” he said; “when a patient is told of the properties of a drug, his illness is not cured by attentive listening; when a man suffering the agonies of penury is told of the various ways in which funds can help him to overcome it, he does not feel a bit relieved; a hungry man is hungry, even after hearing a tasty description of a magnificent banquet” (Vol. 7, p. 37). If everything that Baba taught was only heard and not applied, it was useless. If it was not extolled out of the depth of one’s experience, it was valueless. “An ounce of practice,” he said, “is worth more than a ton of preaching” (Vol. 13, p. 36).

Again and again he told stories of lack of practice. “Once the deers of the forest gathered in a great assembly and discussed their own cowardice in the face of the pursuing hounds. They argued, ‘Why should we, who are equipped with fleeter feet and sharp antlers be afraid of these insignificant dogs?’ At last a resolution was moved and passed that no deer should henceforth flee before hounds, but, even while the cheering was going on, they heard the distant baying of the hounds, and not one stayed there; all fled... as fast as their legs could carry them! The resolution could not be put into practice!” (Baba, Vol. 3, p. 100).

History was full of those who knew the truth but did not practice it. No example was more pointed than that of the evil Ravana, arch-villain of the foundational Bharatian epic, *The Ramayana*, and the one who, driven by

lust, kidnapped Rama's wife, Sita. Ravana had ten heads which symbolized the ultra-intellectual, master of the 6 Sastras, 4 Vedas, and 64 types of knowledge. "In terms of learning," noted Baba, "he was on a par with Rama [another Christ-like figure to the Hindus]. But what is the use of all this learning? He became a slave to his senses. As he could not control his desires, he not only ruined himself, but also his entire clan." Repenting before he died, he said, "Though I was the master of all knowledge, I did not put it into practice.... I achieved whatever I wanted, but only three of my wishes remain unfulfilled. I wanted to convert the salt water surrounding Lanka [his preserve] into sweet water. I wanted to make those who suffer in Hell enjoy the comforts of Heaven. I wanted to connect Hell and Heaven with a ladder. But I went on postponing them and ultimately could not accomplish them."

What was the use of repenting in the end, Rama wondered. "The moment he wanted to do good, he should have done so immediately." (Baba, Vol. 31, pp. 277–278)

## 6. Conclusion

There is a much greater complexity to the message, meaning and communication of Sathya Sai Baba than I have conveyed here. After all, he compiled nearly eighty volumes of texts and discourses over more than half a century, he spoke to countless aspirants and visitors, and he had hundreds of books written about him. Perhaps a first tentative step in applying his curriculum is daring to simplify it. In seeking a new society, he said in countless ways, in re-organizing our schools and our world, humanity at its peril could never relinquish God, Love, Service and Practice.

Different cultures and educational philosophies have different expectations and hopes for their prodigies. All, perhaps, consider the matter of value and potential of students, but fewer consider their Spirit and destiny. And fewer still conceive of the heights to which they may be drawn and the majesty of their own Selves, in the way Baba did. To him the possibilities of expansion were limitless. That perhaps is the application of his message. Love is the heart of teaching mastery, the embryo of self-realization, and the seed of well-being. It is also the source of peace for teachers and their wards. There are three kinds of teachers, Baba once said: "Those who complain, complain, complain; those who explain, explain, explain; and those who inspire" (Jones, 2008, p. 55).

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