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# Guru offers simple advice for a complicated world

**Spiritual leader Sri Sri Ravi Shankar sees a better society if we are at peace with ourselves and good to others. A key tool is breathing techniques.**

By Steve Padilla  
August 18, 2007

He made it sound so simple. Indian spiritual leader Sri Sri Ravi Shankar brought his message of hope and love to Los Angeles this week, and again and again offered the same advice: *Be at peace, be good to others.*

During brief remarks and then in a wide-ranging and lengthy question-and-answer session with a rapt audience in Westwood, the bearded and robed guru repeatedly revisited his central theme as questioners sought guidance on how to navigate the world.

"Your holiness," a man asked, "what would you have us do?"

As he often does, Shankar smiled. "Remember," he replied, "that you are not alone." Translation: Reach out to others.

"So smile and serve," Shankar told the man. "Smile more, serve more."

Shankar addressed an audience of about 300 people gathered Sunday in the Billy Wilder Theater at the Hammer Museum. His presentation was part of India Splendor, a six-day festival celebrating Indian cinema, art, spirituality and culture.

Through his Art of Living Foundation, which he founded 26 years ago, he promotes breathing techniques that he says foster contentment and peace. This, in turn, will improve society as a whole, he says.

Shankar is often called a "spiritual leader" -- as opposed to "religious leader" -- and his breathing techniques would seem compatible with many religious traditions. As he did in Westwood, he cites Hinduism and Buddhism in his lectures, and one of his many books is titled "Waves of Beauty: A Series of Talks by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar on Beauty and the Bible."

With his white robes, flowing hair and beard, and accent, he brings to mind Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, famous to many Westerners as the guru to the Beatles. Indeed, Shankar once studied with the yogi; Shankar is not related to musician Ravi Shankar.

An impish man, he smiles constantly. And even when he's not smiling, it still *feels* as if he were smiling.

And he loves a joke.

When a woman asked him to name the most spiritual city he had visited, he replied, "Are you from Los Angeles?" This got a laugh.

He added that spirituality can be found all over. "I feel it everywhere -- always feel at home everywhere," he said.

Another woman asked how politicians can be made more spiritual. "I'm looking for advisors on this," he replied.

"I thought you had answers for everything," she said.

"Unfortunately, not for this one." Still more laughs.

After a pause, he added that politicians feel as powerless as anyone. "We think the politician is creating the problem," he said. "Really, it is the whole system."

He has had plenty of experience with politicians, and travels the world constantly. His foundation says courses on his breathing techniques have been taught in more than 140 countries. People are charged for the classes, though they sometimes are offered free of charge as part of the foundation's philanthropic work.

Before Shankar's address, a video was played highlighting his work. The video featured footage from a celebration at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C., where various officials, including members of the House and Sen. Joseph R. Biden Jr. (D-Del.), praised his peace efforts. Just last month he visited Iraq, where he met with Prime Minister Nouri Maliki.

He is known for tossing out pithy remarks such as: "Truth is spherical."

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But he also doles out practical advice and challenges his listeners, as he did Sunday. Two assistants hustled around the theater passing microphones to those eager to speak.

One woman, who said she tries to surround herself with spiritual people, confessed to having problems with negative people. How does one avoid shutting down when around them?

"Assume the role of a teacher," Shankar advised. "Each person can be a guru."

He went on to offer, as he often does, an analogy: "A doctor does not shy away from sick people. He doesn't say, 'You have a flu; stay away from my clinic.'"

Negative people are "wounded" and need help, he said. So offer it. The remarks foreshadowed something he would say later. There are two joys in the world: getting and giving. "We have to move from the joy of getting and receiving to the joy of giving," he said.

Shankar occasionally stood but mostly sat on an office chair that an assistant had draped with a saffron-colored cloth. He sometimes spoke in a whisper, as when he answered a woman who said she works with children on skid row. How, she asked, can such children be given hope?

Shankar said his breathing techniques would be a start, along with games designed to lift the spirit. "Sometimes I have only an hour," she said.

"That's enough," he said gently, still smiling. "That's enough."

One man asked if people should remain spiritual but reject the idea of God.

Shankar paused. "I want to stay away from controversies," he said, getting a slight laugh. "The most controversial thing today is poor God."

He conceded that "God is an individual taste" and steered clear of a direct answer, but added, "I am not an atheist."

Later, when asked about an afterlife, he said, "Nobody's going to fry in hellfire."

One man, Andrew Sudol, got his own laugh with a question that was so L.A. "I used to work in the film industry before I took the Art of Living course," he began. Did Shankar have advice for the movie industry, which relies so heavily on portraying violence?

Shankar, who had said backstage that people tended to ask the same questions at such events, seemed stumped. "I have to think about it," he said.

He finally said banning violent movies would never work. Instead, filmmakers should tell the stories of great people, such as Mohandas K. Gandhi.

Then came a question that was almost painful to hear. A woman, her voice nearly breaking, noted that humanity has long been reminded of the value of love and peace. Why must that message be repeated so often?

"What is it that I lack," she asked, "that I cannot see what you're saying?"

To Shankar, the message was already getting through. "The moment you want to see means you've already seen it."

It came time to end the program with a brief meditation. After diplomatically reminding everyone to shut off cellphones -- "The phone will meditate first and we will follow" -- Shankar said incoming breath energizes the body and outgoing breath brings relaxation.

"Let's take a deep breath," he began, and softly led people through a series of commands as the room grew quiet. Be aware of your body, he said, reminding his listeners that the body "is a gift from nature, from God."

The lights dimmed. At his direction, the audience chanted the syllable "ohm." It was a powerful sound, loud but soothing.

Then a cellphone briefly chirped, but even that did not ruin the moment. The theater, already quiet, somehow seemed to become quieter. At least for a few minutes, all was at peace.

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