

# A Place to Just Be

ANJALI MADHOK

The writer is studying in the eighth grade and the following article was originally presented as a speech in school. We have chosen this article for this month because it illustrates what a treasure Gurudev has given us in the form of Chinmaya Mission. In order to retain the original flavour of the article, hardly any editing has been done.

The Editor

"ANNE-JOLLY MAD-HAWK?" calls the substitute teacher. She's taking attendance, and failing at pronouncing my name. Not a huge surprise – it's rare that I meet someone who gets it right the first time.

"It's Uhn-julee Mud-oak," I instinctively correct her. People have been mispronouncing my name for as long as I can remember. Ironically, the name 'Anjali' is one of the most popular baby girl names in India, it's sort of like the 'Sarah' or 'Sally' of America.

After ten years at Breck with mostly the same kids in my grade, even they have learned that it's unusual to have a teacher who says my name right the first time. By about second grade, when the teacher said my name wrong, I didn't even bother to correct her, the rest of the class would cover for me.

"It's UHN-JULEE," they would say, rolling their eyes as if it were a well-known fact. My name could sometimes bring me unwanted attention when I was younger, though now I've

**SUBHA VARMA PATHIAL**

Newberg, OR, U.S.A.

Love, no doubt, is the only solution for man's problem of existence.

*Sri Swami Chinmayananda*

grown accustomed to it. So much so, that whenever a teacher looks at the attendance list, pauses for a few seconds, and makes a puzzled face, all I have to do is raise my hand and say, "That's me."

It's little things like this that can sometimes make me feel out of place here in the United States. People don't go around discriminating who I am or that I am Indian or anything, but sometimes I feel like I'm almost too different from the rest. From my name, to how I look, to how I act, there are days when I feel as though I'm that puzzle piece that just won't fit anywhere.

It's not like when I visit India I'm suddenly "back home". People there can tell that I'm not one of them either. Although my family looks Indian when we visit, the way we carry ourselves sets us apart from the others. At times we have been cheated and treated unfairly because people can tell that we are from the United States.

"What? Twenty dollars per person!? But you're only charging a few rupees for those people!" my dad once exclaimed on a visit to India, interspersing bits of Hindi into his sentences.

"Sorry, sir, tourists, twenty dollars, citizens, seven," replied the man behind the dirty counter in a thick Indian accent.

It was hard to believe that behind this man, this gate, and the never-ending rows of security lines lay the sacred Taj Mahal. Although my parents were slightly disappointed that they were charged so much that day, I think it got to me the most. It just didn't seem right. "We're Indians too," I thought, "What makes us so different from the 'citizens'?"

Even at my relatives' homes in India, I can always feel that something is a little off. For example, when I spend time with my cousins, things aren't exactly ideal. Unlike the cousins I have in the United States, we don't just start chatting things up right away. Typically, it begins with being shoved into a room with only them as company. Somehow, our family thinks that will help us 'bond'. Next, we end up spending time with each other. This consists of me attempting to use my Hindi skills as they struggle through their English. There's only one way I can describe this situation: awkward to the maximum. I always feel like I'm 'The American' in India. So if I'm



Anjali (extreme right) with some of her Balavihar friends at the Mission centre.

American in India, and Indian in America, then where exactly do I fit?

The one place on earth where I'm completely accepted is at Chinmaya Mission Twin Cities in Chaska, Minnesota. Despite the half-hour drive both ways, it is well worth having a place where I perfectly fit.

When I was very young, my mom created a Minnesota branch of the worldwide Hindu/Indian organisation, Chinmaya Mission. One of my earliest memories is from when I was two years old, seated on a green, fuzzy carpet. Golden

yellow lamps were glowing in our cool basement. Ten children, I was one of them, sat in a circle as my mom told a story from the *Gita*. This memory is what launched the Minnesota branch of Chinmaya Mission. We have now expanded into our own centre with around 160 families.

The Mission is a place for kids in preschool through twelfth grade to learn about Hinduism, Indian culture, and themselves. It also has study groups and teaching and service opportunities for older kids and adults.

**In memory of  
ARVIND MAZUMDAR**

A true devotee finds no charm in the objects of the world.

*Swami Chinmayananda*

Although I do enjoy and appreciate those parts of the Hindu centre, the main reason I love it so much is that I fit in so perfectly. At school, people typically honour that I'm Indian, but I still feel a little too different every so often.

"Can you speak Indian?" people have asked me countless times.

"No, but I can speak Hindi," I always reply.

I adore the centre simply because it's the one place I can just *be*. I can be myself without having to worry about what I'm saying, doing, or thinking. All of the times when I wasn't accepted in India or America melt away when I'm at the centre.

You don't have to be Indian to understand this. We all wish we had a place where we could just be, and especially being an eighth grader, at a time when image is everything, I've never appreciated it more. People make judgements about us

based on the littlest things – from the things we say to the type of shoes we wear. And, sure, we can't help making judgements, but isn't it nice to just have a place without any of it?

We have all been categorised at some point or another. "Oh, you're the athlete, so you are an expert at all sports and know everything there is to know about exercise!" or, "You're a girl, therefore you like everything that encompasses pink flowery things." My category just happens to be, "You're the only Indian in the grade, so you know all about Hinduism and diversity."

A lot of the time, categories are not fun, especially when we have to live under them for most of our lives. I'm lucky I have one place free of categorising. Hopefully, we all have that special place – whether it's someone who helps you to feel free, or something

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A true devotee never comes to demand anything from the Lord except love for Him.

*Swami Chinmayananda*

that you do that helps you forget about your 'category'.

I believe that it's important for everyone to have a place where they can belong and be 'uncategorised'.

Sometimes at the centre, because I know everyone will be okay with it no matter what, I go a little overboard on the whole acceptance thing. I once walked down the hall with a friend and asked her if she ever felt the need to 'just wiggle her body' and proceeded to do a funny dance move. A woman in her mid-forties happened to see us and just laughed kindly. If I had done that anywhere else, I would have been guaranteed to get a weird look. Everyone at the centre tries to be exceptionally kind, because for everyone who goes there, it's our getaway from real life. Everyone protects this special space.

My friend Arista, who also comes to the centre, once reminded me, "We have a

whole family here. We have a couple of hundred siblings and parents and grandparents and cousins."

Throughout my years of middle school, the centre has given me something I haven't been able to find anywhere else: a place to just be. It has been a place where I can be myself without having to worry about what anyone else thinks of me.

It has been a place where I am accepted without question and nobody makes judgements about each other. It is a snippet of a perfect world. A world where everyone is simply accepted, where nobody has to worry about how they're acting, and a world where words and actions can carelessly twirl through the air and bounce off our shoulders. Of course, it's unreasonable for me to expect the whole world to be as perfect as this, which is why having one place like it is perfect enough for me. □

SWEET THOUGHT

When we try to reach the outer limits of the finite and enter the realm of the Infinite, it is God's grace alone that functions.

Swami Chinmayananda

Sri Krishna Sweets

## Chinmaya Kaivalya: A Seeker's Paradise

PARVATHY RAMAN

In our quest for eco-friendly Mission centres, we zeroed in on Chinmaya Kaivalya in Salem. A ten minutes' drive from the railway station brought us to the *ashram* which faces the Yercaud hills on one side. Swami Krishnathmananda explained that Salem is surrounded by hills and the name originates from the word '*sailam*' in Sanskrit, meaning 'hills'.

As we entered the gates early in the morning, we were greeted with the waft of incense and the chanting of *mantras*. A *pujari*, freshly trained in the Purohit Course, was performing the daily *pujas* meticulously. There were two shrines flanking the entrance to the main hall – Lord Ganesha and Hanumanji on one side and Lord Siva on the other.

We climbed up the steps. The office rooms and the book stall were tucked away on the two sides. Then we entered the main

hall with the breath-taking view of Lord Brahma Krishna seated in the grand *darbar* hall, ready to welcome and bless all who came seeking Him. On the two sides of the hall were shrines for Pujya Gurudev Swami Chinmayananda and Pujya Guruji Swami Tejomayananda.

We were led up to our room on the first floor, furnished tastefully, with windows facing the hills. The spacious lobby on the first floor serves a dual purpose – a balcony where people can be seated to view the main shrine and the functions held below, and also a library with bookshelves lining the walls. The balustrade is made of '*yālis*'<sup>1</sup> carved in wood and held together by the brass stems of traditional lamps used in a creative and innovative way. On one side of the lobby is an enclosure for a digital library.

We were offered breakfast in a small kitchen-cum-dining

<sup>1</sup> A mythical creature with the head of a lion carved on the pillars of ancient temples.

A photo feature is presented on our back inner cover.