

Sri Swami Sivananda Saraswati

A doctor, a pharmacist, a healer of body and soul. Swami Sivananda Saraswati had always been destined for greatness, ever since a young age where he excelled and others marveled at his intelligence. Though he has moved on to another life, his legacy of kindness and spiritual guidance still remains fresh in the minds and hearts of many across the globe.

Though there are many very similar biographies of different qualities published as David Miller notes, the material from them stems from two main sources, the auto-biography of Swami Sivananda as well as Swami Venkatesenanda's biography of Sivananda. (Miller 2003:343) The material in this article which pertains to Swami Venkatesenanda's biography of Swami Sivananda is solely the commentary of David Miller's.

Sri Swami Sivananda Saraswati was born in the village of Pattamadai in Southern India, to a pair of devotees of the god Siva. They named their son Kuppuswamy. His father P.S. Vengu Iyer was a revenue officer and his mother Srimati Parvati Ammal was a stay at home mother/wife who birthed three boys, Kuppuswamy being the youngest. According to biographers, he was a mischievous young boy who showed some signs of a renouncer at a young age. Kuppuswamy loved helping those less fortunate and dedicated much of his own rewards or delights to others rather than simply enjoying them himself. He later went on to the Rajah's High School in Ettayapuram, where he excelled, receiving many commendations for his good grades and hard work. Once he completed his Matriculation examination he moved on to the S.P.G. College in Tiruchirapalli. At the

college in Tiruchirapalli he dabbled in debate and theatre even taking part in a staging of “A Midsummer Night’s Dream”. It is here that his medical career began, commencing with his education at a medical school in Tanjore. There Kuppuswamy enjoyed a thorough education, being at the top of his class in all subjects. He spent much of his vacation time at the hospital observing and studying as much as possible.

After completing his medical education he began a medical journal named *The Ambrosia* while practicing medicine in Tiruchi. This medical journal lasted approximately three or four years until Kuppuswamy tired of his simple work as a journal writer. Craving a broader window for his journal and also his life, he managed to set himself down in Malaysia at an Estate Hospital in or near Seremban. The hospital to which he would be the new manager and head physician was in a state of disarray Kuppuswamy arrived. His employer Mr. A. G. Robins was a very headstrong man and refused to let Kuppuswamy resign when he was bestruck with misfortune or when he felt that he could not manage any longer: Robins was fully aware of Kuppuswamy’s importance at the hospital as well as in the community. Kuppuswamy had established himself as a caring individual as well as a capable doctor, and his aid extended beyond simple medical help. At times Kuppuswamy would give entire paychecks or pawn his own property to help those in need around him. However, it seems that as Kuppuswamy became more comfortable in his career, he began to realize that spirituality and his hunger for cosmic understanding were burgeoning. This caused Kuppuswamy great unease at his job in Malaysia and eventually he returned to India, where he began a new life as a renouncer. David Miller suggests that in his last years as a doctor in Malaysia

that Kuppuswamy had begun to read the Upanisads and the *Bhagavad Gita* prompting him to question much of the world; which in his experience as a doctor, he believed that life for many ended in pain, suffering and sorrow (Miller:355). It is likely that in witnessing some of the most fragile states endured by people in the hospital which he managed led him to seek deeper meanings to the world which science and medicine failed to answer.

Leaving all his worldly possessions in Malaysia 1923, Kuppuswamy renounced the life of ease and became a sramana. Wandering around India Kuppuswamy visited various sites of religious worship. At the end of his search for a guru he rested in Rishikesh. Here he received his initiation into an ascetic life by Paramahansa Visvananda Saraswati on. Swami Vishnudevanandaji Maharaj performed the *Viraj Homa* ceremonies and later named Kuppuswamy, Swami Sivananda Saraswati. For a while he opened and operated a free dispensary, helping travelers on their pilgrimages or attending wholeheartedly to those who were ill or injured. Although his service to the sick and the poor continued during his Sadhana, Sivananda knew that his own truths lay in the attainment of self-realization.

During the years 1925-1930 Swami Sivananda ventured out on a pilgrimage to Kedarnath and Badrinath, in the mountains north of Rishikesh. Sivananda writes very little about this experience in his auto-biography and even his dedicated sevak (servant) Swami Venkatesananda wrote very little about what transpired in those years. Venkatesananda's only accounts were that Sivananda ate only bread and drank Ganges

water, observed intense meditation daily with little time for rest and relaxation.

Sivananda's realization, the goal of his Sadhana, occurred sometime between 1929 – 1930, the exact date Sivananda kept to himself. It is common for many Hindu ascetics to do just that, as well as keeping their realization and its details private. After his Sadhana Sivananda became social once again. He attended many religious conferences, performed rituals and still attended to people's medical needs. Unlike before his pilgrimage, Sivananda now had deeper understanding of what his purpose was and he did not question himself at the foot of the masses. Instead he basked in the love they gave him and attempted to repay them with whatever service he could.

Many people followed Swami Sivananda's life and work. Sivananda published many works, ranging anywhere from commentary on the Vedantas to a ten part publication on the Science of Yoga. His commentary on the Vedantas is truly one of the most important works Swami Sivananda has published. These works have gone on to inspire people all over the world to more profoundly analyze the sources of their knowledge. His nearly 300 publications, which vary in subject, are only the beginning of the influence to which Sivananda exerts on modern Hindus today. Much of his following started when he began the Divine Life Society in a small cow shed on the bank of the Ganges in Rishikesh 1936. The society grew exponentially, and is currently operating in dozens of countries across the world. Through the practice of yoga as well as monastic asceticism he captured the attention of much of India as well as the western world.

References and Further Resources

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