



Taking Sannyas Swami Chetanananda



Swami is a title that means “master of one’s self.” The title comes out of a tradition based in India that first emerged in the eighth century under the influence of a very important non-dualistic teacher named Adi Shankara, who traveled over India reinvigorating the teachings of the Vedas and particularly the Upanishads, the sacred scriptures of South Asia. A swami is not exactly a religious figure. In my opinion, the sacred literature of South Asia, the Vedas and the Upanishads, the Aranyakas and the Tantras, are not religious literature. Instead, they are the basis for a long running conversation about what it means to be a complete human being. This body of literature suggests something to us about the reason why we’re here, which is to grow.

A swami is somebody who has pursued this goal, this quest to grow, and has come to a place within themselves where they no longer have any personal needs to fulfill or any personal agendas to pursue. They no longer have any of the conditioning accumulated in their family system that limits their perspective in persistent ways. Coming to that place, the person accepts an initiation as a swami.

So, I went through such an initiation, called sannyas, in Maharashtra, India, in May 1978, with Swami Muktananda presiding. I took sannyas in the Saraswati order, the same tradition in which Rudi had become a swami.

The experience wasn’t exactly easy. It was about 118 degrees outside. For [five] days we didn’t sleep but did shraddha rituals for the dead. Thought that series of rituals, I was paying respect to my ancestors for

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generations, up to and including my parents, even though they were living at the time. The thinking is that after the sannyas ritual was over, I wasn't going to be around to do those rituals for them after they died. I also did the death rituals for myself because, before becoming a swami, you have to complete all your worldly obligations. In India, the shraddha ritual is the last obligation. Once all your obligations are fulfilled, you throw away your clothes, have all your hair cut off, and get an entirely new name. The person that you were is considered to be dead. You tear up your astrology chart, which is like the story of your life, and throw it away.

During the sannyas rituals, you also renounce everything you can possibly renounce. Then, at the last moment, you renounce all your promises. To be truly liberated, to be really free, you have to be free from all renunciation. The point is that purity and impurity are not really issues to be concerned about.

Then, at the very end of the sannyas ceremony, you turn and walk away to go leave the world and head for the mountains to live in a cave someplace far away from humanity. The Shankaracharya, [the head of the Saraswati order who was there,] called us back and said, "Come back. Don't go away. Humanity needs you to stay and help people." So, swamis are people who have renounced themselves, renounced their own life, renounced the world, and renounced renunciation itself, but are called to remain in the world to serve.

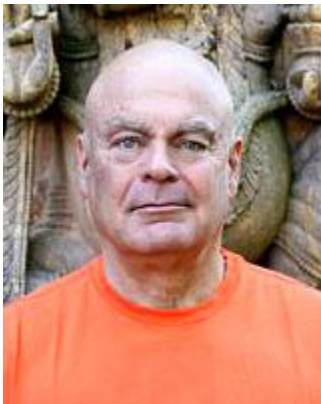


After taking sannyas, a swami wears orange clothes. The orange cloth is the color of fire and the symbol of transformation. It means that the person has become wrapped in a funeral fire and no longer thinks of themselves as a "thing," a body and person, but rather as a continually self-transforming process. In the Saraswati order, a swami also takes a new name ending in "ananda," or

bliss, because they are a wave of potentiality moving in infinite space. My name, Chetanananda, means “the bliss of consciousness.”

I took sannyas as an expression of my devotion to my guru, Rudi, and my commitment to the teachings and the practice of the lineage that had, in the very short time I had been connected with it, totally transformed my life. For that I felt enormously grateful. I also took sannyas to express my commitment to continuing to serve the lineage and the teachings and the practices and the people who participated in that experience, not only with Rudi, but with me, and the people who might come in the future—all of you.

Swami Chetanananda



Swami Chetanananda ("Swamiji") is the abbot and spiritual director of the Movement Center. He encourages his students to discover the amazing possibility that resides within them, and to connect and live from it each day. A teacher in the lineage of Bhagavan Nityananda of Ganeshpuri, he is a powerful presence and a source of great nourishment for those who come in contact with him.