

Babuji



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Authors

Yvonne Weier & Geoff Dowson

Layout & Design

Carlos Gil Sobera

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A portrait of Sri Sainathuni Sarath Babuji, a man with dark hair and a beard, wearing a white shawl over a light-colored shirt. He is looking slightly downwards and to the right.

Sri Sainathuni Sarath Babuji

A Paragon of the Beatific Path of Sri Sai Baba of Shirdi

Vijayadasami is one of the grandest festivals celebrated in India. It is the most significant day of the calendar for devotees of Sri Sai Baba of Shirdi, as on the day of Vijayadasami in 1918 this unique Saint took *mahasamadhi*. This day is made more memorable as it was on holy Vijayadasami, 7 October 1954, that the stunning marble statue of Sri Sai Baba was installed in the Samadhi Mandir in Shirdi. The birth of Sri Sainathuni Sarath Babuji, a renowned devotee of Sri Sai Baba, exactly on the day when the statue of Divine Grace 'came to life' adds an unparalleled significance to the celebrations. The way in which the course of Sri Babuji's life unfolded makes this a typical 'Sai-incidence' rather than a simple coincidence.

Sri Babuji, whom people affectionately call 'Guruji', was for countless Sai devotees in India and abroad a living paragon of the beatific path of Sri Sai Baba of Shirdi. "Baba is both the path and the goal," he would say. By his own impeccable example he guided and inspired thousands on the path of Sai. His abounding love for Sri Sai Baba shone forth in all aspects of his life and expressed itself in everything he did. It is that power of love that he taught and transmitted. His whole persona conveyed, with great simplicity and naturalness, a palpable and immediate experience of the sacred and the luminous.

Sri Babuji entered *mahasamadhi* on 13 November 2010. His samadhi (Sannidhanam) in Saipatham, Shirdi, is a place of prayer and meditation, vibrant with his sublime presence.

Book of Life

How did Sri Sai Baba enter Sri Babuji's life and conquer his heart? His auspicious birth date speaks of the mystical link with his beloved Sai, for quite incredibly, Sri Babuji was born on Vijayadasami, Thursday, 7 October 1954, at St. Isabel's Hospital in Mylapore, Madras. He was the eldest of the five children of Surendra Babu and Venkata Ratnamma and grew up in the Nellore District of Andhra Pradesh.

"My love for Sai Baba seems almost innate," he once remarked. "Already when I was a little boy I had an indescribable attraction for Baba. At my grandmother's house there was a picture of Sai Baba among the many gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. To me Sai Baba looked different from the other deities; he seemed so real, human and tangible; yet, his whole demeanour seemed to emanate an ineffable sense of mystery. He was so familiar, yet so strange. Maybe, it was that 'familiar strangeness' that created the attraction. But I didn't know anything about Baba. It was only later, when I met my Guru, that I came to know who Baba is."

Sri Babuji says, "Our life is a beautiful book gifted by nature. But we do not know how to read and understand the meaning of its content. So it remains an indecipherable enigma and we

simply turn the pages until we come to the last leaf. We need somebody to teach us how to read and understand our book of life. Unless we learn how to read it properly, we cannot understand the aesthetics of its content and the nuances of its language." It was Acharya E. Bharadwaja, who taught Sri Babuji how to read his book of life. The medium of instruction in which he was taught was Sai Baba. It seems rather symbolic that Sri Bharadwaja was also Sri Babuji's English lecturer at the college in Vidyanaagar. Sri Bharadwaja was an ardent devotee of Sri Sai Baba and a man of great intellectual and spiritual calibre who had been blessed with profound transformative experiences. He had been conducting regular satsangs and many students were drawn to him in search of spiritual advice. Disillusioned by the hollowness of much of the spiritual scene and the shallowness of the common spiritual jargon, Sarath Babuji was at first rather sceptical of these satsangs. His experience at the hands of Sri Bharadwaja was soon to change his perspective. The eager student was consumed with questions about the meaning and nature of existence and was acutely troubled by an abstract sense of 'something missing'. The close association with Sri Bharadwaja fanned and channelled his thirst for spiritual knowledge and experience. The young Babuji served his spiritual guide with unflagging love and devotion for over fourteen years.

A major inspiration in the early years of Sri Babuji's spiritual quest was the life of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi, the renowned sage of Arunachala. His biography touched the young seeker deeply and awakened him to the possibility of realization in this human life. Sri Babuji spent various periods of time in blessed solitude at Arunachala in Tiruvannamalai, engrossed in the depths of spiritual enquiry. During that period he was inspired to do a thorough study of Sri Bhagavan's life and teachings, resulting in a fascinating manuscript, full of revealing and endearing details which throw light on aspects of Sri Bhagavan's life.

After his graduation in 1974, Sri Babuji spent a uniquely fruitful month in the presence of the great Avadhuta Saint,

Sri Poondi Swami, as a renunciate, though he did not take any formal *sannyas*. His perseverance and one-pointed quest for fulfilment, and his constant cry for Baba's grace were answered during this, the most transformative period of his life.

Much later, when asked what influence Sri Ramana Maharshi, Sri Poondi Swami and Sri Sai Baba had had in his life, Sri Babuji replied, "Maharshi made me see the vessel of my being, Poondi Swami emptied it clean, and Baba filled it." It is to the grace of Sri Sai Baba of Shirdi that he attributed every nuance of his fulfilment, and each facet of his existence. It was the life and teachings of Sri Sai Baba which, above all, served as the catalytic backdrop for all his spiritual endeavours and their fruition.

Instead of leaving the world, Sri Babuji rejoined it: he began working to earn a living and took up post-graduate studies in sociology, receiving a Master's degree in 1976 from Sri Venkateswara University, Tirupati. During that period, he would often visit Tirumala, the sacred temple site of Sri Venkateshwara, and spend time there in the forests of the sacred hills. At one time he had the opportunity to stay at Tirumala for about six months. Sri Babuji's deep connection to Tirumala can be traced back to his early years. Already at age four, while standing before the deity of Sri Venkateshwara, he saw an ancient sage in place of the statue, beckoning him forward. Sri Babuji retained a deep reverence for him ever afterward.

It was not until 1977 that Sri Babuji got his first opportunity to visit Shirdi, the home of his beloved Sai Baba, in the northern state of Maharashtra. In the same year he embarked on a journey to various holy places in North India and visited the Kumbha Mela. Upon his return to the south, Sri Babuji moved to Venkatagiri where his father was then working as the headmaster of a school. There, Sri Babuji set up a primary school which he closed after three years when he entered a period of solitude. Throughout his time in Venkatagiri he held daily satsang. These lively satsangs forged a loving bond among the people associated with him and kindled their fire of devotion and enthusiastic commitment to the path of Sai.

Sri Babuji had been in constant contact with Sri Bharadwaja, who had moved to Ongole. It was his wish to remain without any household entanglements so he had not given any thought to the question of marriage. However, his guru advised him to marry and be a householder like himself. He had even chosen a bride befitting his disciple's spiritual absorption and way of life. Sri Babuji followed his guru's advice without a second thought. The chosen bride was none other than Sri Bharadwaja's sister-in-law, Anasuya, who was then living in his household, attending and assisting her ailing sister, Sri Bharadwaja's wife. The wedding took place in Ongole, in 1982, as it is customary to perform the marriage at the bride's location. Sri Bharadwaja assumed the role of the bride's father and did the ceremonial *kanyadan* (giving away the bride) at the wedding ceremony. It was, indeed, a rare gift for a disciple to receive from his guru.

Anasuya Ammagaru, who shared Sri Babuji's profound devotion to Sai Baba and was deeply committed to her own sadhana, embraced his way of life and served him devotedly as her beloved husband and Sadguru. A daughter, Sruti, was born to them on 8 October 1987. Anasuya Ammagaru and Sruti have both been dedicated to implementing Sri Babuji's principles and remain an inspiring testament to his profound love and wisdom.

After the marriage, Sri Babuji moved to Ongole. There, he established Sai Baba Central School (1983), an English medium school which proved remarkably successful under his auspices. It is one of the best schools in Andhra Pradesh and has the prestigious recognition of the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE). The school's motto 'Love of Learning – Learning to Love' and the principle that 'true education should ignite a spirit of enquiry in young minds' have been the leitmotiv of the school.

In 1988, Sri Babuji created *Saipatham*, the Telugu magazine which made a major contribution to spiritual study through its research of both published and unpublished material relating to Sri Sai Baba. Under Sri Babuji's inspiration several original works were translated, rare photographs recovered and made available and interviews conducted, all of which amount to

a unique collection of valuable information on the life and teachings of Sri Sai Baba. For the most part, he was the sole contributor of the many fascinating and informative articles in the *Saipatham* magazine.

To the Sacred Abode

Sri Babuji was drawn again and again to the home of the great Saint. In his many stays in Shirdi, both short and prolonged, he used to bask day and night in Sai Baba's proximity. In 1988 he rented a simple room in a building consisting of a row of ten rooms covered with zinc sheet roofing. After his guru's *mahasamadhi*, in 1989, Sri Babuji gave up all activities connected to the school and the magazine and made Shirdi, the sacred abode of his beloved Sadguru, his home.



*Sri Babuji at Sri Sai Baba Mandir, Shirdi, 1999
Door directly facing the tomb and statue of Baba*

Theirs was, perhaps, the first family from Andhra Pradesh to settle in holy Shirdi. Later, some devotees who were eager to be in his proximity, acquired all ten rooms and shared them generously with visiting *gurubandhus*. Sri Babuji continued to be a tenant in the same room.

He was always uncompromising with the principle of meeting the daily requirements of his family from his own earnings. His income, including travel expenses, derived from a monthly honorarium from the Sai Baba Central School, which he had donated to a registered society called 'Sai Baba Foundation'. This was, and still is, managed by a group of devotees who continue to run both the school and Saipatham Publications.

Bees Swarm the Nectar

Despite being of a reclusive nature, Sri Babuji's radiant presence steadily drew people to him. In the early days he used to dispense homeopathic medicines, as a free service, and was well known as Doctor Saheb or Dr. Babuji. Many experienced miraculous cures which he always attributed to the grace of Sri Sai Baba alone. Later, when he began travelling, he stopped giving medicines.

More and more people started to come to Sri Babuji, seeking his guidance and blessings. They found their prayers being answered, their problems getting solved, diseases being cured and obstacles removed. Quickly the word of their astounding and wonderful experiences spread. Sri Babuji's small and humble home was becoming inundated with people from all walks of life, from near and far, including many foreign countries, who had come to have his darshan. Just as a bee is drawn to a flower, they felt drawn to Sri Babuji's graceful presence. He did not preach about divine nectar, but made those around him taste it! "It is the love that touches us," a devotee remarked, filled with emotion. "Once we taste that unconditional love we can never forget it."



Sri Babuji at his home in Shirdi, 1992

Saipatham

As the number of visitors grew, the practical situation became increasingly difficult. There was a dire lack of space for devotees to gather and participate in bhajan and satsang. During the heat of the day and the cold of the night, crowds of visitors used to stand and sit in front of the neighbours' houses and occupy their verandas. Sri Babuji was concerned about the inconvenience to both the visitors and the tolerant neighbours.

Seeing these difficulties, one of the devotees responded graciously and generously by purchasing a piece of land nearby and building a bamboo structure to enable the devotees to gather for *parayana* and bhajan. But after their satsang they used to go over to Sri Babuji's home to have his darshan and, wanting to be close to him, they actually ended up being there most of the time. So the difficulties remained. In 1996, this

finally caused Sri Babuji to move into a couple of small rooms, originally built as guest quarters, next to the satsang premises. After a few years a room was built on the first floor in the same building and Sri Babuji moved upstairs. The compound was named 'Saiyana', meaning 'Sai vehicle'; Sai as the vehicle or path to fulfilment. To avoid erroneous association with various businesses which had taken the same name, Saiyana was later renamed 'Saipatham', the name of Sri Babuji's old residence. Several other devotees bought sites on the surrounding land, which led to the organic development of a colony of privately owned houses. Sri Babuji himself never owned any property and continued to be a tenant at Saipatham. In 2003 he moved to Guru Charan, a local devotee's house a little further down the lane, where he rented the apartment upstairs.

It is somewhat ironic that people generally refer to Saipatham as the 'ashram', because Sri Babuji was persistently wary of any involvement in establishing organized ashrams, institutions and the like. He reminds us, "Baba himself lived for more than fifty years in Shirdi and what institutions did he found?" Saipatham is truly remote from an ashram in the usual sense, but it does indeed reflect the original designation of an ashram as a place of spiritual endeavour and the dwelling of a renunciate, saint or spiritual seeker.

At Saipatham, donations are neither expected nor accepted. There is no common dining area (except during festivals) or accommodation; visitors make their own arrangements for food and lodging.

Aparigraha and Anugraha

The offering of *dakshina* (donation) is a common custom in India. So it is with some astonishment that we find at Saipatham, by contrast, signs which read 'Donations in any form are not accepted'. It was Sri Babuji's firm principle not to accept any donations or gifts from anybody – a principle that continues to be followed at Saipatham. *Aparigraha* (non-acceptance of anything gratis from others) and *anugraha* (bestowing

of grace) were the two abiding principles of Sri Babuji's social and spiritual interactions.

A Unique Environment

Saipatham lies in a lane off Pimpalwadi Road, some five minutes walk from the Sai Baba Mandir. Take a look behind the gates and you will encounter a unique environment that is galvanising and influencing the lives of countless people near and far.

Saipatham is where Sri Babuji lived and where people flocked to be in his proximity. It is the place where devotees gather for Sai satsang. The large bamboo-roofed satsang hall and the adjacent Sannidhanam with Sri Babuji's samadhi invite all for prayer and meditation and are open at any time of day or night. On the white marble dais of the satsang hall there is a life-size portrait of Sri Sai Baba giving darshan. In keeping with Sri Babuji's wishes, the hall is a simple, open structure with minimal ornamentation, graced by Baba's portrait. The Sannidhanam expresses the same quiet simplicity and aesthetic poise. Throughout the day a soft chant of Baba's name quietly infuses the air, emphasizing the atmosphere of silence and sacredness.

In the morning and evening devotees and visitors gather at Saipatham for satsang, consisting of *parayana* (devotional reading) about some aspect of Sri Sai Baba's life and teaching, silent meditation, Sai *nama* (chanting of Sai Baba's name), *naivedya* (food offering), and *arati* (light offering) accompanied by the singing of two of Sri Babuji's favourite *arati* songs. Every night a chapter from the Marathi *Sri Sai Satcharita* (Sri Sai Baba's life) is read by local devotees.

Sri Babuji, who would always enjoy and encourage Sai *nama*, says, "Don't let the chanting of Baba's name be mechanical; it is calling Baba to the tune of our being. Call, call out 'Sai Baba! Sai Baba!' from the depths of your heart to the heights of your soul's yearning." It is during that time, the time of 'calling', that Sri Babuji usually came to the dais in the satsang hall to join

the devotees in Sai *smarana* (remembrance). For the devotees this was the highlight of the day, awaited with much excitement and anticipation; a time when they had the opportunity to receive his darshan, bask in his luminous presence and be showered with his blessings.

Reaching to the Core

Counting the hours to be with you again
I long to see you there sitting in that space
Draped in white, espousing your Master's dream
I understand it seems, yet can't explain at all
So I touch your feet and stare at the glow around your hair
Your body slowly melts into a softness that is felt
Reaching to the core.



Sri Babuji, Bodhan, 2000

Each person's experience of darshan is unique, but perhaps a glimpse or an impression can be drawn from one person's perspective:

"As dusk breaks into a chorus of 'Sai Baba, Sai Baba', anticipation grows for that glimpse of Sri Sainathuni Sarath Babuji ('Guruji' to all). Waiting patiently with a longing that quickens the heart. Staring intently at that point from which he is expected to appear. At the first sight of this resplendent figure of purity there is a stirring and rustling as people rise to their feet and do namaskar. With natural, graceful movement he ascends the steps to the dais, greets Baba reverently in time-honoured fashion and motions for all to be seated. Now himself in seated posture, hands tapping to the rhythm of bhajan. With eyes unveiled, this image of serenity travels the hall with his very particular darshan glance. In that, all are embraced, all feel that he is with them alone. Their faces light up in the joy of his presence. As his outward expression of bhajan ceases, the inner glow lingers in one and all. Observe the quiet repose of this being, draped in white, closed eyes drawing all together in this mastery of silence. The sharing of this majestic stillness, in which all things are possible, has drawn people from all corners of the globe. In silence their needs are expressed. In silence their needs are received. In this the impossible is made possible, the unattainable is attainable. In the absence of time he rises gently, pays obeisance to Baba and steps lightly from the dais. Flowing steadily away with the same graceful motion like the ebb and flow of the tides."

Even when there were multitudes Sri Babuji was completely present with each and every one. His infinite silence and resting in Sai opened their hearts to the inflow of grace. One is reminded of a poignant sentence from Sri Babuji's book *Arati Sai Baba* in which he writes, "If we sum up Sri Sai Baba's life, it is the spontaneous flow of grace in the form of spiritual and temporal well-being, suffusing those who take refuge in him."

All along the path, back to his home, people would line the road to have just one more glimpse of him; to get a newly bought book or pen blessed by the touch of his hand; to tell

him of their problems and plead for his help; to receive a gracious look or a nod of assurance; or to grasp an opportunity to bow to his feet.

“I Don’t Give Darshan, I Receive Darshan”

On major occasions such as Gurupurnima and Vijayadasami thousands of devotees would throng Saipatham, waiting eagerly for Sri Babuji’s darshan. Once in a satsang Sri Babuji commented, “I don’t come to the satsang hall to give darshan, I come to *receive* darshan. Who am I to give darshan to anyone? It is the exalted state of Sri Sai Baba that pulls us all to have his darshan with love and devotion. When I sit in front of all the devotees to have darshan of Sri Sai Baba, I am reminded of the Vedic chant about the thousand-headed being: *Sahasra sheersha purusha, sahasraksha sahasrapath...* The Purusha, the Supreme Being, who has a thousand heads, a thousand eyes and a thousand feet... With thousands of heads and thousands of eyes Sri Sai Baba is giving darshan and bestowing his gracious look. I feel that I am having darshan of that universal form.”



Sri Babuji’s darshan in Saipatham Satsang Hall, Shirdi, 2009

Baba's Prasad

Sri Babuji's dress was simple: a white cotton lungi and shirt, and a white top cloth draped over his shoulder; his deportment was that of a simple householder. To his devotees he was their Sadguru and God – but Sri Babuji was always clear in his attitude towards them. From time to time he used to articulate this in satsangs: "Sai Baba said, 'Remember *rinanubandha* (the law of karmic indebtedness). If anyone comes to you, it is on account of *rinanubandha*.' Baba is my *rina* (karmic indebtedness) and my *anubandha* (loving bond). It is because of Baba's will that you come to me. So I look upon you all as Baba's prasad. It is my duty to duly share with you whatever I have which Baba has bestowed."

Concretizing Fulfilment

In Bodh Gaya, Roger Housden came to meet Sri Babuji. At that time, Roger was doing research for his forthcoming book *Travels Through Sacred India*. He had travelled widely and met many gurus in the East and West. He asked Sri Babuji what may have seemed an indelicate question, yet was met with a magnanimous response. "Guruji, so many people come and prostrate to you and seek your blessings. How do you feel when they touch your feet?" Sri Babuji received the query very appreciatively with a broad smile and replied, "I don't feel anything! I don't even think that it is to me that they do namaskar (prostrate). Everyone has his own abstract sense of fulfilment, and constantly seeks to make it concrete. It is to that sense of fulfilment that everyone always surrenders. As it is abstract and abstruse, one cannot experience it concretely. So one struggles to actualize it. To some, a Sadguru like Sai Baba triggers this sense of fulfilment and stands as a concrete symbol for the abstract image. Not only that. To them, a Sadguru is also the means by which they can concretize their own sense of fulfilment. As a part of their efforts to concretize it, they seek a Sadguru and surrender to him. Even though, outwardly, they

seem to surrender to the Sadguru, in reality, it is to their own sense of fulfilment that they surrender.

“If you understand this process and mechanism, you will realize that all these people who are prostrating to me are not really touching my feet. They are, in fact, trying to feel the touch of their own state of fulfilment. You asked what I feel when people do namaskar. Yes, if at all I feel anything, I feel that those namaskars are offered not to me but to Sai Baba, because Sai Baba is the concrete image of my own sense of fulfilment and perfection. Besides, most people need to seek a guru who triggers and epitomizes their abstract sense of fulfilment. So, it is their need for a guru that makes some see a guru in me and treat me as such. But for myself I don’t need devotees or disciples; so I don’t see them as such.”

Summarising the satsang he had with Sri Babuji, Roger aptly writes in his book: “A genuine guru will never actively seek disciples or even try to build an organization – why should he, if he has no needs of his own? He will not even necessarily call himself a guru – he is only such because others call him so. While they are drawn to him by the power of his inner realization, he is not actively seeking to attract people. ... He simply responds to the needs of others. He will be all things to all people, depending on their perception of him. The guru in India rarely just concerns himself with mature souls whose interest is self-realization.

In Bodh Gaya, I watched Sri Sarath Babuji of Shirdi sit for hours receiving people who had come to hear of his stay. They



Sri Babuji, Shirdi, 2007

wanted his grace to receive a boy child, to settle some marital problems, a dispute at work, an illness, or to find the funds to send their children to an English Medium School. To each of them he gave his blessing, and a picture of his own guru, Shirdi Sai Baba. The guru does not distinguish between so-called mature souls and anyone else. Everyone is equally worthy of attention in his eyes, since we are all a unique expression of the Divine." (Roger Housden, *Travels Through Sacred India*, New Delhi, Harper Collins, 1996, pp. 174-75.)

Window to the Sky

As to what a real guru is, Sri Babuji gave the following analogy in a satsang: "The guru is like a window through which we can see the limitless sky. We are conditioned by the four walls which enclose our existence, and our spiritual search starts when we recognize this. We need a window. First we look at the window, but when we start looking at the sky, do we actually look at the window? We look at the sky itself. The window is a see-through mechanism. The guru is like a window, through him, we look at the unlimited, unconditioned state."

"Subham – Baba Will Take Care"

On occasions, Sri Babuji would receive visitors individually; this is what people refer to as *udi darshan* or *pada darshan*. He gave Baba's *udi* (ashes from the fire that Sri Sai Baba used to keep and which is still maintained continuously to this day) and the devotees had an opportunity to prostrate at his feet (*pada namaskar*). When somebody once asked why he gave Baba's *udi*, Sri Babuji replied, "The *udi* is a symbol of Baba's grace; it is the touch of my Beloved."

All manner of problems and worries could be expressed at those times, and questions asked, either verbally or in silence. Sri Babuji listened with complete attention. He was usually silent in *udi darshan*; his response being mostly a gesture or word of assurance like "Baba will take care" or "*subham*",

pointing to Baba's picture, or a benign and gracious look or affectionate smile. A relaxed and powerful presence filled with immense love permeated both his silence and his interactions.

Experience and Expression of Love

The open and carefree yet caring atmosphere around Sri Babuji fostered a sense of ease and sharing, exemplifying Baba's principles of simplicity, love and meaningful living. It is Sri Babuji's all-pervading presence that calls forth a sense of belonging and provides the fabric of existence at Saipatham. Daily structures, strictures and routines are held to a minimum. Things unfold naturally and the place as a whole continuously changes and evolves. Various activities and responsibilities are taken up spontaneously as opportunities to learn and expressions of love. How amazing that everything gets looked after without any organizational structure! A unique situation in which love is the driving force.

During festivals large numbers of devotees come together to take joy in the presence of their Sadguru and each is blessed a thousandfold. Celebration is an expression of the heart which gains power in being shared with a multitude of others. The multifarious experiences and expressions light up the spirit and fill each vessel to overflowing. "It's like when you have a young child," Sri Babuji explains, "and others show their joy in the child – your happiness is increased. Like this, the more people that come to love Baba, the more joy I feel." Such occasions are often accompanied by several days of fervent Sai *nama* as well as the opportunity to receive Sri Babuji's darshan and satsang through the various video presentations.

The festivals celebrated at Saipatham are Gurupurnima – the celebration of the Guru – which Baba himself had mentioned; Vijayadasami, which is Sri Sai Baba's Mahasamadhi Day and Sri Babuji's birthday; and Sri Babuji's Aradhana. During these times, on their own initiative, some devotees generously take up the *seva* of feeding the thousands of *gurubandhus* that gather.

An Idle Mind is a Devil's Workshop

There was never a dull moment around Sri Babuji. Wherever he was, the environment was abuzz with activity. He liked people to be occupied and industrious. "Unless there is a dire spiritual need which gives the ability to apply ourselves entirely to spiritual practice – and that is very rarely the case – the mind should be engaged in some activity. Otherwise we will simply be brooding and our mind will become a devil's workshop!" Thus Sri Babuji encouraged full engagement with life and its challenges, inspiring a spirit of learning and adventure.

Helping Ourselves

Sri Babuji's approach to work and service was quite different from the common notion of karma yoga (selfless activity) or *seva* (service). He said, "Through *seva* or activities that are not directly of benefit to ourselves, our self-importance, self-preoccupation and self-interest are not getting nourished, our ego is getting starved. But I don't give people a task and tell them that this is *seva* and that it will weaken their ego and that therefore they will become more open to Baba's grace. Whatever it is, they simply do it out of love. They don't calculate the benefits or ask themselves whether it is worthwhile to do this or not. That would be business-mindedness: 'What will I get for what I give?' It is just a spontaneous expression of their affection.

If we do whatever we do for the Beloved, all our activities become an expression of our love for Him. Nobody is asked or expected to engage in any work and nobody is doing *seva* in order to help me or anybody else. It's for their own benefit. As long as we think that we are helping somebody, we are on the wrong track. The motivation has to spring forth from our own need, and if the need is there, we will look for opportunities and find them."

In the presence of the Sadguru it is not the work in itself that matters, but our inner process. "Some of the *vasanas*, the

complexes that we have," Sri Babuji explained, "will only be dissolved in activity and interaction, since that is where they got formed."

The Gift of Shirdi

In the words of Sri Babuji: "No one leaves Shirdi empty-handed." Sri Babuji encouraged everyone to make good use of the unique opportunity of being in Shirdi and spend as much time as possible at Baba's *mandir*; to take darshan at Sri Sai's samadhi and expose themselves to his powerful influence in the places where he had stayed, such as Dwarkamai, Lendi, Chavadi and Gurusthan; to participate in the *aratis*, do *pradakshina* at Gurusthan and to immerse themselves in Sai Baba's life and teachings.

Above all, he urged them to always remember why they had come to Shirdi and not get distracted from their purpose. He cautioned against wasting time with such things as gossip and excessive sleep. Once when asked how to best spend one's time in Shirdi, Sri Babuji said, "Relax and don't waste a moment!"

Love of Sai – The Very Fabric of His Life

The beloved name of Sri Sai Baba was always in Sri Babuji's mind engraved, as it were, by the constant call of the heart during years of sadhana. Nothing seemed to delight him more than hearing the chanting of Sai Baba's name. His thought, speech and action were completely at one, turned and tuned to Sri Sai Baba, submerged in love at his feet. It is this love which was the very fabric of his life.

Whatever action he engaged in, even the smallest, he first offered it to Baba with a namaskar, with utmost reverence and love, with his whole being. Never was it mechanical. When he bowed down in front of his beloved Sai it felt as if the whole universe was bowing with him.

In his book *Arati Sai Baba* Sri Babuji explains the meaning of namaskar as follows: "Namaskar symbolizes the state of the ego's readiness to lose itself. Gestures like uniting one's two

palms together and prostrating while doing namaskar suggest the said state of merger or union. Thus, namaskar is not a mere deferential gesture of greeting. It is a meaningful technique handed down by the masters of mystic wisdom as a means of effacing the ego. Literally, the term namaskar is said to be a compound of three root words – *na* (no) and *mama* (I) and *askara* (scope) = no scope for the I. Thus, it is a state of mind in which the self is effaced by an expressive recognition of the divine magnitude.”



Sri Babuji, Shirdi, 2008

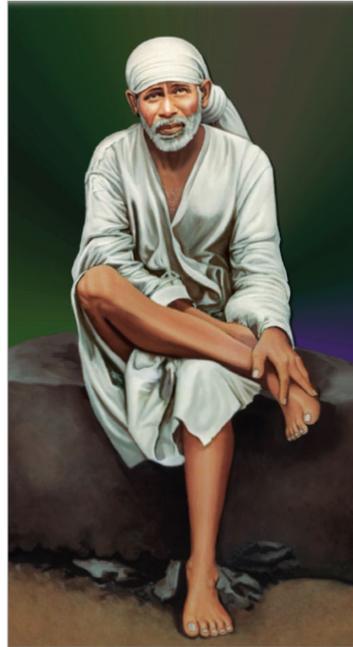
Undivided, Undistracted, Unambiguous

No symbols of any religion nor images of any gods or goddesses were seen around Sri Babuji except those of Sri Sai Baba. No other name is chanted except the name of Sai Baba. He stressed the need for undivided emotional focus on one’s object of adoration. There is no need for a Sai devotee to resort to anything else when there is complete and total reliance on Sai Baba and his grace. In this, he upholds an attitude akin to the *ekantabhava* spoken of highly in Indian devotional literature. Reliance on Baba’s grace – and grace alone – is the elan vital of Sri Babuji.

Path of Sai

What is this 'path of Sai' that Sri Babuji embraced so avidly? For one such as Sri Sai Baba who advocated so little, can we talk, at all, in terms of a path? Does not a path suppose a teaching? Did he teach? Perhaps the most real teaching is that of example, that which is demonstrable.

During Sri Sai Baba's lifetime, the devotees around him did not approach Baba as a teacher, or as one with a philosophy to propound. He was so powerful that the very experience of being in his presence and the awe that engendered *was* the teaching. As Sri Babuji elucidated, "The moment they went to him, they saw the power, they were aware of their helplessness, they sought help and they got it. And by getting his help they also got his message – every *leela* (divine act), every incident, every experience that you read, conveys a



Sri Sai Baba of Shirdi

message, the message which some other saints taught verbally. Nobody felt any lack that Sai Baba did not teach, because they were so fulfilled. The only thing which runs throughout the gamut of his life and teachings, is love. Implicit love. Love is the principle."

We know Shirdi Sai Baba through the many wonderful accounts that abound as to how he lived, and how he was with different people, how he protected them, rescued them from distress, fulfilled their desires, and graced them with spiritual denouement. The uniqueness of the path of Sai was expounded in the following way by Sri Babuji: "Sai Baba doesn't ask us to

give up our desires, or to destroy our desires. He fulfils them. He exerts his influence and creates circumstances in such a way that the desires are brought to the surface and can be fulfilled – rather than suppressed or indulged – and once they are fulfilled they lose their pull. If we fulfil them by our own effort, they may intensify or give rise to more desires. But when Baba fulfils our desires, he does so in such a way that our nature is influenced in the right manner and the needed changes come about.”

Sai Baba himself said, “My devotees come with different kinds of desires – maybe for health, for money, for a job, for a promotion, for children, for many things – and I draw them all with this pretext.” Sri Babuji enjoined, “...by fulfilling their desires he kindles the love in their hearts. He gives them different kinds of experiences, and in such an order that at one point they come to know that He knows what is best for them. From that sense of being taken care of springs gratitude and that develops into devotion. Then the love towards Baba slowly grows into a greater and greater fire, until it consumes all other emotions.” It is this fire of love, which he kindles and fans in the heart, that brings about the dissolution of the knots that bind our existence and limit our experience of happiness. And it is the power of love that leads to transformation and fulfilment.

A Bhakta or a Jnani?

Some people may presume from outward appearances that this is a *bhakti marga* (path of devotion) and Sri Babuji is a *bhakta*. He himself refused to be labelled in this way and indeed lies beyond these cliched definitions.

Sri Babuji was an unparalleled authority on Sri Sai Baba’s life and teachings and had a brilliant understanding of both spiritual and secular life. At a young age he used to engross himself in extensive study of the Vedas, Upanishads and the Puranas. He was widely read in the scriptures of other religious and philosophical traditions and had a particular affinity with the Buddhist texts. Sri Babuji’s extensive personal library, which includes some very rare books, is a testimony to his intensely

enquiring mind. He had a distinctive ability to delve deeply into a subject and find the 'pearls at the bottom of the ocean'. Even as a boy, his perseverance and probing nature were extraordinary. Often, he was found working in his study day and night, without rest, to achieve a resolution. "If you take up something, take it up completely!" he would say emphatically. "If you enquire, really enquire!"

Satsang with Sri Babuji

Sri Babuji didn't give lectures or teach in a formal sense. Sometimes there would be an opportunity to meet with him in small groups, in an informal atmosphere, usually at his home, or while travelling. Then, he would respond to questions and engage in dialogue either in Telugu or English. Satsang with Sri Babuji was an extraordinary experience. He was a fountain of authentic knowledge (*jnana*) – fresh, immediate, always spontaneously emerging – knowledge wedded to love, all-embracing, unconditional love.



Sri Babuji, Chennai, 2001

Sri Babuji's clarity of perception was remarkable. He would often respond to spiritual enquiry from a radically new perspective, and illustrate a point by addressing whatever the interest of those present may be. To one person he might speak in metaphors of child and mother, to another using analogies from the computer world and to someone else with examples from the teachings of the Buddha. Whether intricate philosophical concepts, practical matters of everyday life or psychological mechanisms of the heart-mind, he spoke to each person precisely according to their own understanding and needs, free from any dogma whatsoever.

His questioning of our assumptions and his attention to detail often made us marvel at what we had blindly missed or simply disregarded. With a lightness of touch he challenged, if not uprooted, our limiting beliefs and cherished certainties. He was ever open and original, and never content with the trite and obvious. With Sri Babuji there was no place for self-deception. In the mirror of his crystal clear presence one was brought face to face with oneself. "Start from where you are, from the reality of your own experience," he emphatically said. "Otherwise you will be simply beating about the bush!"

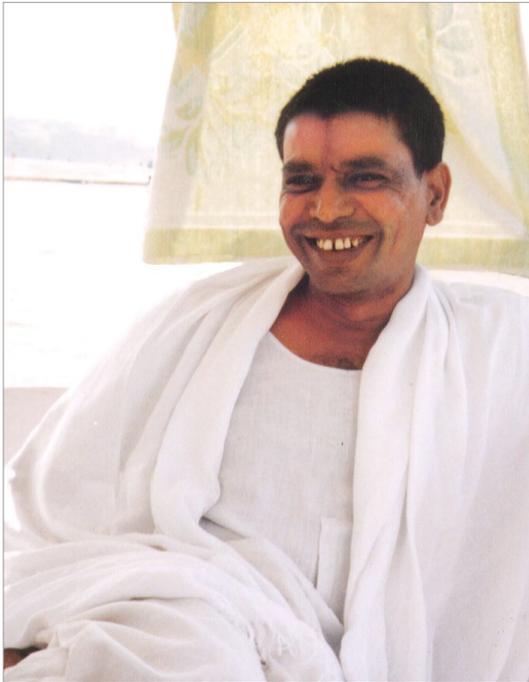
Sri Babuji's keen sense of humour, ready wit and playfulness made his satsangs sparkle with peals of laughter. He would often joke affectionately about our frailties. "Humour removes the wall of self-importance," he said. It was also the bridge between him and us who are in awe of him. He sometimes used to tease, "Don't worry about becoming 'spiritual', first become human!"

He responded to questions in words and in silence, and communicated what was needed at that particular moment. What really transpired in satsang is beyond the grasp of our mind. Sri Babuji used to say, "The real transformation which happens in your heart is not due to what I say in satsang. It's not the spoken word which actually affects you. Satsang is just a pretext to spend some time together and share our love for Baba."

Sri Babuji taught in such a natural way that those who came to him hardly realized they were being taught. "I teach nothing, I try to make you learn," he said, when asked about his teaching. He artfully placed us in situations necessary for the integrated unfolding of our emotions. "This is needed," he said, "to generate a backdrop for a fulfilled and complete experience of life."

Spirituality Alive!

In a simple and natural way Sri Babuji presents a much needed realistic approach to the mystical, an original and refreshing vision and an affirmative attitude to life and the fullness of its experience. "Spirituality should fill our lives with enthusiasm for the quest for truth and make us totally alive, spirited!" and his dynamic being was a continuous illustration of this.



Sri Babuji, Allahabad, 1995

His approach is therapeutic and pragmatic, rather than speculative and metaphysical. "Do not reject this life as 'maya', as something unreal and worthless. The true spiritual journey should lead us to the reality of our actual experience of fulfilment which should be concrete, tangible and personal." Sri Babuji's way is free from dogma or narrow orthodoxy. "Spirituality is discovering the art of living. Skilful living can be learned and cultivated but the art of living is different. It is the spontaneous and full participation in life. It springs forth from love."

His most constant message is that Baba will and does take care of everything. "What is truly needed will be fulfilled." Sri Babuji encourages us to find out what we really need and to ask for that, so that our lives have a clear direction and meaning. "Concretization of one's own abstract sense of fulfilment is at the base of all our spiritual and worldly endeavours. As such it is futile to draw a line of separation between the so-called spiritual and worldly, because all kinds of aspirations, ambitions, desires and emotional pulls are different expressions of one's abstract sense of fulfilment. That was why Sai Baba never discouraged his devotees from asking him for the fulfilment of worldly desires and protection against mundane problems. Baba made it clear when he said, 'Saints exist to give devotees spiritual and temporal welfare. I give to my devotees whatever they ask for, until they ask for what I want to give them!'"

Sri Babuji sees spiritual life as a dynamic process of continuous discovery and unfolding. He says, "Spiritual practice has to happen twenty-four hours a day and not only at a special time that we allot for it: one hour of meditation every day! All the situations of our day-to-day life can be seen and used as opportunities for learning. That is to see the whole world as the guru, to see the whole life as the guru, to learn from everything and everyone. Basically there is no difference between the worldly and the spiritual. It all depends on our attitude. Something worldly can be spiritual and something spiritual can be purely material."

Baba Smarana

Sri Babuji was often away from Shirdi, spending time in solitude, immersed in Baba *smarana* and engaged in writing, reviewing and designing works related to his beloved Sadguru. Open to change and new discoveries, as was characteristic of him, he began to use computer technology for this purpose and quickly became proficient. Sometimes he travelled in different parts of the country, but mostly he was in places to which he had a long-standing connection, such as Tirumala, Tiruvannamalai and Chennai.



Sarnath, 1995



Tirumala, 1995



Tirumala, 1995

Protecting the ‘Tree of Love’

For many devotees, a question that arises is, “How can what has been awakened in the heart stay alive and continue to grow?” Sri Babuji used to stress that what was of most importance was satsang, “The tree of love that has been planted is still young and needs to be guarded and protected until it becomes big and strong. You have to provide it with some fencing. Once it grows into a big tree there is no more danger. The animals that would have harmed or eaten it when it was small, can now rest under its shade. Satsang is the protective fence.

“The word satsang derives from ‘*sat*’ meaning ‘truth’ and ‘*sang*’ meaning ‘communion’. Hence, real satsang is to be in communion with truth. Another way for satsang is to be in the company of those who have realized the truth (*sat-purushas*). And the third way is to be in the company of like-minded

people with whom we are sharing and discussing truth. It is good to do satsang in all three ways. When we are alone with ourselves we do the first type, enquiring into truth and into what we really need. Whenever we have an opportunity, we meet and take the guidance and blessing of those who have realized the truth. If it is not possible to be in the company of saints, it is important to be in contact with like-minded people, sit together, reflect and talk about truth and those who have realized the truth. This is satsang.

“There is no need to create an organization. Let it be most informal. Let emotional attachment, connectedness and friendship grow with like-minded people. Try to transform your social contacts into spiritual contacts. Share! Try to talk to others in their own way, in the way that they can understand, in the way of human experience, and not in abstract philosophical terminology.”

Inspired by Sri Babuji’s great love for Sai Baba and propelled by their shared love for their Guruji, thousands of devotees regularly gather for satsang in their own homes or satsang venues. Over the last few decades Saipatham satsang *kendras* (centres) have sprung up all over Andhra Pradesh and in many other parts of India, as well as abroad.



Sri Babuji's darshan after vigrahapratista, Hyderabad, 1998

Various initiatives have been taken up, such as free clinics, homeopathic dispensaries, blood donation camps, feeding of the poor, care of the disadvantaged, educational enterprises and ecological projects.

In some places satsang *kendras* have been the foundation stone for the construction of Sai Baba *mandirs*. Sri Babuji's presence at the inauguration of a *mandir* was a rare experience for the devotees, and to see him install a statue of his beloved Sai Baba (*vigrahapratista*) was a joyful boon for the multitudes that gathered.

The Compassionate Guide

In their connection to Sri Babuji, many people – some who never even saw him or met him in person – are aware of visible changes in their lives: a sense of protection and security, changes in their attitudes and views, the transformation of their hearts and minds. There are countless wonderful and awe-inspiring experiences of devotees, which he unambiguously ascribed to Baba's grace alone. Sri Babuji's presence continues to be widely felt; devotees feel accompanied and guided in their lives, many experience him in dreams or visions, others as silent intimations or as a mysterious 'knowing' that He is there for them. Sri Babuji said that a Sadguru uses his power with unconditional love and compassion to help us reach our destination. What does it require of us? Simply to entrust ourselves into his care. Total reliance on the guru is the 'path of Sai'. "Give the reins to the Sadguru and rest assured" is Baba's advice.

A Glimpse of Who He Is

Talking of the Sadguru, Sri Babuji once said, "It is not possible to know who he is. Even if you stay twenty, thirty, forty years, your whole life, the fact is you do not know him, he always remains a stranger. But at the same time it is as if you had known him all your life. He is so familiar to you, more familiar than anybody else in your life. You feel he knows the intimate corners of your heart. That combination, that paradox of strangeness

and familiarity gives you a joy, a thrill, a sense of mystery. It pushes you towards that mystery and makes you explore and experience it more and more."

Whenever we try to write down something about Sri Babuji, we realize it is only a glimpse and nothing more. We know that whatever we say about him is incomplete: it can't come close to, let alone encompass the ineffable mystery of who he is. However, one thing we are sure of is that whoever enters the gates of Saipatham is hardly a breath away from realizing the effusion and infusion of his boundless blessings.



Saipatham Shirdi with Satsang Hall and Sannidhanam, 2012

Glossary

aradhana

The formal celebration of the death anniversary of a saint.

bhajan

Devotional singing.

darshan

Vision of a saint in the sense of both seeing and being seen.

ekantabhava

Devotion to only one god or goal.

gurubandhus

Fellow devotees; those bound (*bandhu*) to the same teacher (*guru*).

Kumbha Mela

The grandest religious festival of India, held every three years in rotation among the four sacred river cities of Haridwar, Allahabad, Nasik, and Ujjain.

mahasamadhi

Respectful term for the death of a saint.

parayana

Devotional reading of a scripture or holy text.

pradakshina

Walking clockwise around a sacred object as a form of devotion.

prasad

Something given by a saint or one's guru and thus considered to be blessed.

Sadguru

A fully enlightened spiritual master capable of guiding others towards realization.

sadhana

Spiritual discipline or practice.

Samadhi Mandir

The temple in Shirdi where Sri Sai Baba's tomb is located.

samadhi

Meditative state of absorptive union; the tomb of a saint or holy person.

Sannidhanam

The tomb of Sri Babuji at Saipatham in Shirdi. (*Sannidhi* means 'nearness' or 'presence' in Sanskrit.)

sannyasa

Renunciation; monk-hood. The last stage (*asrama*) of human life in classical Hinduism.

satsang

Company (*sang*) with the wise, those who are united with true Being (*Sat*); hence a gathering for this purpose.

subham

A form of blessing given by a guru or an elder assuring all will be well; (lit. 'auspicious').