



\*Based on the training sessions with Sacinandana Swami on February 16–18<sup>th</sup>, 2013, London

## 1) THE TREE OF LIFE – KEEPING YOURSELF STRONG

### INTRODUCTION: Strong Communities Grow from Strong Individuals

No community in history has ever survived if it had not cared for its members. The extent to which we genuinely care for each other determines how spiritually nourished our members and we ourselves are.

In order to take care of others, we must know how we can nourish ourselves. Only strong people can take care of others. If you are weak and have many problems in your own life, you will simply not have enough energy to care for others. Strong communities grow from strong individuals.<sup>1</sup>

There are many symptoms of strong individuals, but the two foremost amongst them are tolerance and trustworthiness. Tolerant people are not easily disturbed, they can deal with problems and not be severely affected by them. On the other hand, if the shoelace of a weak person breaks, it is a major

tragedy for him or her. Especially when we live in communities where we need to be tolerant because not everyone is the way we want them to be.

Trustworthiness is the second important quality of a mentor. In order to become trustworthy, you must walk your talk. Your inside must be identical with your outside because others can sense if you are being honest. Only when they see that you yourself are applying what you are trying to inspire them to do, will they trust you. On the high waves of the ocean of material life, trustworthiness is a safe harbour for the ships of our relationships.

### HOW TO BECOME STRONG: The Tree of Life

The Tree of Life is a simple model which shows how we can lead a vibrant, inspired spiritual life and help others to do the same. It consists of three steps which bring your life to a



<sup>1</sup> See also Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura's explanation of the necessity of being strong physically and mentally in the Śrī Caitanya-śikṣāmṛta (chapter 2.1, p. 67).

level from which you can live in a deep connection with the Lord. We can always only do one thing at a time and we need to visit these three steps daily.

Life can be compared to a tree. If all the three areas of our life are well taken care of we can “stand tall and not fall” even in the midst of difficulties. These three areas are: individual nourishment, a supportive lifestyle, and our contribution to the lives of others. Just as a tree needs to have deep roots, a strong trunk and a flourishing crown, we all need to have roots in eternity, a supportive life style, in which physical, emotional and social needs are met, and the fruits of contributing to the lives of others.

### THE ROOTS – Spiritual Cultivation

The tree of life would dry up and fall to the ground if its roots were not deep. In the ancient Vedas these roots refer to one’s own relationship to God (*sambandha*) and the practices of spiritual life (*abhideya*), like reading and realizing sacred texts, chanting the holy names, visiting holy places and worshipping the Lord through prayer ceremonies and attending to him in various other ways. Although the roots of a person often remain “beneath the earth” so to speak – they are the most important.

The roots of the tree of life are not visible to others. In order for your personal relationship with the Lord to be nourished, it must be kept private. If you take the flame of a candle out into the storm it will extinguish. In the same way the fruits of your spiritual life – your deep realizations and insights – will vanish if you take them out into the public.



### THE TRUNK – Physical, Emotional, Social and Mental Well-Being

One’s lifestyle is of similar importance – only if one lives properly, can one think and act properly. According to Āyurveda, a person’s mental and physical well-being stands on three pillars: a healthy diet, good sleep and a beneficial lifestyle. Lifestyle is composed of physical and mental cultivation. Mental cultivation includes truthfulness, refraining from theft, giving up bad association, simplicity (not taking more than you need), religiosity, celibacy, refraining from unnecessary talk, forgiveness and fearlessness, purification of the heart and an attitude of service. Physical cultivation includes cleanliness, regular exercises and engaging the senses in service.

### THE CROWN – Contributing to the Lives of Others

Finally, our contributions to the lives of others are those by which we enrich the lives of others. They are like the fruits from the crown of the tree, and may be small like giving inspiration to others or large like managing a project or even a country.

**Exercise:** Check the three areas of the tree of life in your own life: How deep are your roots? How strong is your trunk? Do you have fruits on your crown?

