

Shuchita Chaitanya

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SPEAKERS

Shuchita Chaitanya, Aysha Moneer

A Aysha Moneer 00:02

Hi, this is Aysha. Today is April 22. It's a Thursday and we are starting our interview for the Religions Texas archive. To start, if you can state your name and where you're taking this call from.

S Shuchita Chaitanya 00:26

Excellent. Namaste Hari Om. My name is Brahmacharini Shuchita Chaitanya and I'm taking this call from Austin. We have a Chinmaya Mission Center, which was started by Swami Chinmayananda Ji. And it's a global organization and our Austin branch is here. We have a temple, we have Sunday school and things like that. So, that's where I'm taking the call.

A Aysha Moneer 00:54

Great. Tell me a bit about yourself and your background, your upbringing and any formative experiences during that time?

S Shuchita Chaitanya 01:08

Okay. I was born in India, but I moved to America when I was three. I lived in D.C., Orlando, and most of my life in Texas. I think I would consider it a typical Hindu Indian upbringing -

very conservative background. My dad and my mother were very religious and involved in rituals growing up. So, I was always exposed to all of that. But I think it was when I went to college that I started to seek the "why." Until then you're busy with your SATs and IB program [laughs], anything that someone of that age would be doing. But after that, I think I started asking a lot more questions about the philosophy of the rituals.

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Shuchita Chaitanya 01:59

I did classical Indian dance growing up, bharatanatyam. And in bharatanatyam, you do a lot of Hindu Puranic depictions, stories from our scriptures. It remains a story, an art, a creative or artistic representation. When I was going to Sunday school, I would listen to the stories and chant the Shloka as we say - the verses from our scriptures. In college, I wanted to know what all of that meant. So I went back to our monk in Dallas, Swami Sarveshananda Ji and asked him a lot of questions. Throughout college, I think you get exposed to a lot of the world that you may not have when you're just living at home and also coming from a conservative background. So I started to question, "Why do things happen the way they do in this world? Who am I? What's my purpose in the world? And what do I want to do with the rest of my life? What are goals worth pursuing that there's some chance I can be happy?" Those questions continued. I stayed in touch with Chinmaya Mission through youth programs, summer camps, camp counseling, all of those things.

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Shuchita Chaitanya 03:22

Finally, after grad school, I went to UT School of Public Health. I wanted to focus solely on these questions without being distracted. So, that's when I went to Sandeepany Sadhanalaya, which is a ashram or a monastery in Powai, India, in Maharashtra. It is a two year course where you study what we call the the Prasthan Trayi, which are the three main texts for us, which is the Bhagavad Gita, the Upanishads, and the Brahma Sutras. So, we study the scriptures and try to see if there's something that can give us solace in this world, some balance, how to live in a way that we are balanced and happy and we can spread that happiness to others. So, I obviously enjoyed my studies and we were given the opportunity to take up yellow robes, which means that we're monks in training. That's when we are given a new name. You get the title Brahmacharini and then the name - Shuchita, and the last name, Chaitanya, we all share that same last name once we take yellow robes. Those who are known as Swamins or monks are in orange robes, and that's several years after you're on this path of training. So, after that they placed me here in Austin. I was very happy to be in Austin - southern girl coming back to the south [laughs]. I have been enjoying my time here. It's been a wonderful community, lots of love. They were open, welcomed me with open arms. Before COVID, dozens of people had me over to their homes - getting to know them and seeing what I could do to serve the community.

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Aysha Moneer 05:23

That's great. Thank you for that background. You said throughout the years, you kept in touch with Chinmaya Mission - do they have branches, or was that a temple you went to growing up? How did that connection happen?

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Shuchita Chaitanya 06:15

Yeah. There's a variety of branches when you talk about Hinduism and sanatana dharma. The organization that I attended and belong to is Chinmaya Mission. Like I said, it's a global organization and it was started by Swami Chinmayananda Ji. In Texas alone, we have a center in Austin, three in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, and we have a Houston center, we have a Beaumont center. So, we have several centers all across Texas. Then we have our regional camps for high schoolers, college and young professionals - you see all of us coming together nationally - because nationally we have fifty plus centers. So, yeah.

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Aysha Moneer 07:08

Okay. So, you said you went to grad school after college and decided to pursue public health? When did the shift from a public health career to becoming a monk in training happen?

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Shuchita Chaitanya 07:31

I grew up in Dallas. I feel like I've lived in almost all the big cities of Texas. I shifted to Houston for grad school. I think I have also always had that question in pursuit of what makes me happy, "What can I do that makes me feel like I have purpose, and there's some balance of happiness?" That's what took me to public health, something where you look at the wellness of human beings at a very macro level and see what are the interventions that can take place to provide that balance and peace to people's lives. So, I did a lot of research on healthy relationships, dating violence with teenagers, and mental health for adolescents. My area was always that. As I started going to these weekly study groups by Chinmaya Mission, young adults groups, we would bring in what we see in our professional world, and say, "Okay, now what do the Scriptures say about this? Is there a possibility of permanent happiness and how do we seek that? How do we continue in this world with every challenge as it comes?" Any kind of work you do on a public sector, I'm sure you also know, your heart can be in the right place, and everything can be for the right reasons, but there's always going to be challenges.

So we would try to reconcile that. For me, that reconciliation had to be taken a step further. I couldn't accept that this is just the way it is. I think that's what really pushed me.

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Shuchita Chaitanya 09:24

When I was in public health school, there was a lot of national tragedies that happened. Things that I thought were preventable and it was very difficult for me to understand why things happen the way they do in this world and why the money goes to different places than it's needed. All of these conflicts were coming up. So, I think that really pushed me to say, "Wait, is there even a possibility of that ideal that I'm searching for?" That's what took me to the Vedanta course. When I went in, I didn't think I wanted to become a monk in training. I went in with questions and a possibility for hope that things could get better. At the course, it shifted from looking at the world and the uncertainties and imbalance and conflict in the world to turning that inwards, and saying, "Okay, if there's that imbalance in the world, what can I do to have that balance internally so I don't add to that chaos?" So, that question of, "Who am I? What am I made up of? Am I this mind my, this intellect?" And when I say I want to make an impact or have purpose, "How long am I thinking? Am I thinking I want to have an impact on one person on one day? Or am I thinking about a legacy?" All of those things kind of - it makes you zoom out. I feel like in grad school, and all of the specialties that we do, we zoom in so much that we don't let ourselves see the big picture. That's what the Vedanta course helped me do because in our scriptures time is cyclical and that cyclical way of looking at how the world runs is a major paradigm shift. To think, "Okay, this has happened before, and we've survived. How did we survive? Can we learn from history? Can we learn from our scriptures and Puranas?" And if we can, "Can we live it?" Because there's always a gap between what we know we should do and what we actually do.

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Aysha Moneer 11:46

Yeah, definitely. At what point did you take the step to go to India? And what commitments did you have to make at that, at that point when going to that training? Do some people go and come back without deciding to go through with it. What's the process like for that?

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Shuchita Chaitanya 12:11

Yeah, absolutely. For me, I had always sought the advice of our gurus. And Swami Sarveshananda-Ji being our guru, I would pray and ask, "Is this my time to go to the course? Is it my time to figure this part of my life out?" Of course we had the guidance of Swami

Sarveshananda Ji in Dallas. I grew up there, so he knows me inside and out. So, he could help me figure out some major decisions and had helped me figure things out before. I would ask him, "Do you think it's time? Do you think I'm ready?" At that point, I was teaching third grade. So, it was really tough for me to say bye to all my kids.

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Aysha Moneer 13:04

How extensive was the course you were in while you were working? Was it night classes? How did that look?

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Shuchita Chaitanya 13:19

When I was working, I would only do study groups. So there wasn't necessarily a course that I would take. I would go for weekly study groups, I would go when I had questions I would go and kind of figure things out on the side. You know, because work took over life. We had a lot of national camps that happened. So, I would go for our national camps. There's almost one every month. So yeah, it was just me wanting to keep religion at the center of my life, so I could use that as that pillar of strength. After some time and dialogue with Swami Ji and praying, I decided that I would like to go to India and take this on. It's just two years. At that point, I realized two years can sound like a lot, but it can go by very quickly when you're doing something you love and you genuinely are wanting to be there. So, I went. There's definitely people who left in the first week for whatever reasons - I think the weather differences, food differences, so many things can happen, other commitments back home. By God's grace, I was able to not have anything too challenging happen on the home front, so I could continue at the course for two years. Even afterwards, there's no requirement to take yellow clothes and become a monk in training. Many of my friends went back to regular life - they're back teaching, they're back doing grad school, getting PhDs, married. So, everyone can choose what to do afterwards. There's always that option.

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Aysha Moneer 15:19

How was it like when you finally decided to take the yellow robes? What was the process of thinking about accepting yellow robes? How did it feel when you finally decided that that was what you were going to do? And then, I guess, if you could speak a bit to how your life and after that changed.

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Shuchita Chaitanya 15:42

I always tell people that at the end of the day, it doesn't feel necessarily that I am doing that, it's that everything in this world has aligned and brought me to that point, and given

me that opportunity. So, I'm always grateful to our gurus. They ask, "Would you like to?" And you say, "Well, if you want me, I'm ready to dedicate whatever time to this study and to seva," "seva" meaning "service." I just remember [feeling] immense gratitude. It was a very humid day in Mumbai and it was packed. So many people come for that ceremony. All of our leaders come and they give you a new name. They give you where you're going to be for the next whatever years. New address, new clothes, everything. So I think I was just very overwhelmed with a lot of gratitude. When they told me I was going to be in Austin, I was just like, "Okay, that's all that was in my head," [laughs]. I didn't even remember my new name. I think people told me like five different versions of my name and I was like, "I don't know what my name is, but it's okay. Somebody will eventually write it down and I'll know." My name is Shuchita, so many people said "Shuchitra, Suchitha, Sucheta," and I was like [laughs], "It'll come to me when it comes to me," [laughs]. But, it was just a lot of gratitude [that day].

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Shuchita Chaitanya 17:20

You take yellow with your friends, we call them guru bhais and guru bahan, they're sisters and brothers. So, that was also overwhelming. I mean, you're still you after you take yellow clothes. There isn't any kind of wiping of memories or anything like that. So you come back as the daughter of your parents, you speak to them in the same way. You still like the music that you like, you still like watching movies. I remember coming back and I was driving with my cousin and he was like, "Am I allowed to play Bollywood music with you in the car now?" and I was like, "Yeah bro, it's fine," [laughs]. So you still have those interests. I think the biggest shift is priority for yourself. At this point, we don't have to worry about our jobs, a salary or all of those things - where you're completely dedicated to your spiritual growth and serving the community you're in. So there's no distractions anymore. Before something I would do once a week or on the weekend is now, hopefully, my way of life. So, that's been wonderful to be able to say that this is my so-called "job." It's been an opportunity to study the scriptures, to reflect on the scriptures, to have dialogue with others about what our scriptures say, how we interpret it. So, it's been wonderful, and I feel like my convictions about my religion are growing. You're not done after the Vedanta course, you're just beginning. You have those foundations, and you spend the rest of your life going through every verse, going through every story, and looking at the symbolism, sharing that with others. It's been a blessing.

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Aysha Moneer 19:26

What does your community involvement now look like?

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Shuchita Chaitanya 19:33

I think though everything is virtual, it's similar because we have online Sunday school, that happens every Sunday with over 400 kids and about fifty plus teachers. They're so dedicated, they show up, they teach, they lesson plan, everything like that. I teach adult classes on Shrimad Bhagavad Gita at that same time, so while the kids are in Sunday school, the adults are with me. Even weekly, we have that temple. With the temple comes a lot of rituals that we partake in, just yesterday was Ramana week, Ram Ji's birthday. So, we had a special ritual at our temple, a puja. So it's a lot of attending events, doing rituals, and then teaching classes. There's some counseling that you do on the side where people are excited to share the happy things that are happening in their lives, and you pray for them. When they have challenges, we pray for strength for them to be able to get through. So you pray with them. That's basically what my role is. There's some administration, there's a lot more teaching and serving the community.

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Aysha Moneer 20:50

You said you started before the pandemic hit. How long did you have to connect with people in the community? How was that shifting into the shifting in virtually?

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Shuchita Chaitanya 21:14

Yeah, there's Swami Shivatmananda Ji. He has been in Austin for almost a decade and he was the Swamin here at Chinmaya Mission in Austin, and when I came here, he shifted to San Antonio because we have a new center there now. So, he was already shifted when I came. I had five months to get to know the community. We have something known as Bhiksha, which means you're begging for alms. It's traditionally done by monks and monks in training going house to house to beg for food. They don't necessarily cook, a certain group of monks. For us, we go to people's homes, they feed us food, we thank them, and we spend some time with them. If they have questions about our scriptures, the kids have any questions, we spend time with the family. And as soon as I came, I was very excited to get to know the community. So, I would do five or six houses a week. Every week, I got to go to people's homes, spend time with them, joke with them, laugh with them, whatever it was. I was grateful I got to meet dozens of people right before the pandemic.

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Shuchita Chaitanya 22:40

I remember clearly we were on spring break. That's when we had to go online. That weekend - we have amazing Sunday school coordinators. There's what's known as Bala Vihar, and all three of us figured out how to do Zoom calls, how to set things up. By God's grace, it seemed almost seamless, shifting from in-person to online. I think I'm grateful that I took advantage of

that bhiksha, and went to people's homes at that time, because now I had to cancel so many bhikshas that were planned afterwards. I haven't seen them in over a year. Hopefully [with] vaccinations and things like that, we'll be able to do bhikshas again, and I can go meet people, and I'm sure kids have grown a lot in more than two years, especially the babies. I remember going to someone who had just had a baby, it was this small and they sent me pictures and videos, and now they're like babbling a lot. I was like, "Man, I've missed seeing so much of their lives." But I look forward to visiting again and them walking around and asking questions.

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Aysha Moneer 23:58

That's great that your transition was seamless and that you had at least a bit of time to get to know the community. You mentioned that the classes was an easy shift for people. In terms of people coming to see you for counseling, how does that change now with Zoom? Obviously, it's a bit more difficult for people to be engaged or you feel like it's an effort to be online, especially if it's an intimate conversation. How does that happen?

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Shuchita Chaitanya 24:39

Well, that's actually a really interesting question. So, with Bala Vihar, the shift was seamless, but the challenges were still there, especially with engagement. I have to applaud our teachers, they work two or three hours every week for a one hour lesson plan and they do a great job at it. Not being able to come physically, I always think, when we have challenges in life, it's our place of worship that gives us strength. When we go to our temple, we can sit, we can pray, we can meditate, we can ask for that peace and surrender to come. When that isn't available, it just is really heartbreaking to tell people they can't come to the temple, but they have really taken advantage of Zoom. Many people actually have found it easier to open up about things when there's that space. They're on the other side, if they need to tear up or go through something they have that privacy and can come back and talk. So, it's been different for some people, they're like, "We just miss being there," for others, it's like, "It's okay. We know that this has to happen."

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Shuchita Chaitanya 26:02

We still have our monthly chats and check in on the kids, especially the ones who have to go to college and have chosen to be on campus, parents are always going through some anxiety about that. So yeah, I think people are still reaching out, we've done a few sessions where I don't just start off with our class, I always check in and say, "Hey, I know this stuff happened this week, I hope you all are doing well. Feel free to chat me, email

me," and they do. They chat, email, we talk on the phone. So, people are reaching out. I think one of the biggest lessons all of us have learned is the importance of vulnerability. A lot of people have chosen to be vulnerable, to surrender and ask for help. That's a lesson that we will hold with us for the rest of our lives. So, I think we're all grateful for that.

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Aysha Moneer 27:10

Great. I do want to be mindful of your time. So lastly, this as an open space for you to either go back on anything that we talked about, that you want to either expand on or anything we missed, anything I didn't ask you that you'd like to mention.

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Shuchita Chaitanya 27:37

Yeah, I just think the importance of religious life and spiritual growth has really come to light during the COVID pandemic. I'm just really grateful to be where I am, especially coming in right before the pandemic hit. It's an inspiration for us to see how much others are leaning on their love for God and support from God. To have Chinmaya Mission in all of our lives, and to have our guru's grace and blessings in all of our lives, I think we've really been grateful for that. I don't think there's a way to have made it through all of this and continue to smile and serve others without having that strong backbone of religion. Being a Hindu, you see the world for what it is and you are still able to smile at it. It's a gift and we're grateful for that.

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Aysha Moneer 28:49

Great. Thank you so much. I will go ahead and stop the recording now.