

Om Sri Sai Ram
Regional Center Officers Orientation and Training Meeting
DEVOTION WING

What are the duties of members and office-bearers?

"You know that the State requires you to take a solemn oath, when you take up an office or enter upon an assignment. Similarly, each member and office-bearer must take an oath, from the very depths of the heart, before engaging themselves in the activities.

"Swaami, Save me from any act of commission or omission which will affect adversely the three qualifications You have laid down. Bless me with the skill, intelligence and enthusiasm necessary for the task I am dedicating myself to carry out for my own uplift. Guide me along the correct path; shower on me Your Grace so that I may earn a fair name in this attempt; guard me from temptation and wrong steps."

What are the three qualifications?

- (1) Of course, they must be eager aspirants for spiritual progress.
- (2) They must have full faith in the Name that the organisation bears and in spreading that Name, in the manner suited to Its Message and Majesty.
- (3) Besides, the member must have won recognition as a good person.
That is all the qualification needed; nothing else counts."

Baba, Sathya Sai Speaks Volume 7, p98

Devotion alone confers the Supreme gift; devotion alone destroys the disease of mundane existence; devotion alone stirs the yearning for the Divine devotion alone is the means of Liberation. To realise the Supreme, the path of devotion is the only Royal road. It is the panacea for all worldly ailments and for the disease of birth and death. Devotion is the most effective means for awakening the spiritual urge.

Sathya Sai Baba

Excerpts pertaining to Devotion wing from
Operations Manual for Centers and Groups, International Sathya Sai Organization
August 2012

http://www.region7saicenters.org/saidocuments/Usa_Sai_Center_Resources/CenterManual2012Sep.pdf

The Organisations named after Me are not to be used for publicising My Name or creating a new cult around My worship. They must try to spread interest in recitation of God's Name, meditation, and other spiritual exercises that lead man Godward. They must demonstrate the joy derivable from devotional singing and remembering the Lord's Name, the peace that one can draw from good company. They must render selfless service to the helpless, the sick, the distressed, the illiterate, and the needy. Their service should not be exhibitionistic; it must seek no reward, not even gratitude or thanks from the recipients. [1968.2.23] Sathya Sai Baba

The main objective of the Sathya Sai Organisation ... is to help humanity recognize its inherent divinity. ... So, your duty is to emphasise the One, to experience the One in all you do and speak. Do not give any importance to differences of religion, sect, status, or color. Have the feeling of One-ness permeate all your acts. Only those who do so have a place in this Organisation; the rest can withdraw. [1975.1.6] Sathya Sai Baba

2.6 Devotion Wing

Devotion has been defined as supreme single-pointed intense attachment to the Lord. [1972.4.8] It is the easiest way to win His Grace and to realize that He ... is, in fact, everything. [Mahasivarathri 1955] Devotion is the easiest and most effective path, for it is a spiritual discipline of the heart ... [1976.11.14] - Baba
Typically, a Center should have a weekly devotion meeting that includes devotional singing, prayer, and

meditation (or silent sitting). The Center should also have a weekly study circle, which may be combined with the devotion meeting - the combined meeting could last for 1.5 to 2 hours.

The Devotion Coordinator has overall responsibility for the various elements of the Center's devotion program, including the following (various aspects may be delegated to others):

- Maintaining Center premises and an altar that is simple, universal, and in accordance with guidelines
- Coordinating devotion meetings, study circles, and practice of devotional singing
- Establishing and maintaining a program of newcomer welcome and orientation
- Maintaining a library of literature, audiotapes, CDs, and DVDs - in some regions, this task may be the responsibility of the Education Coordinator.

2.6.1 General principles

A Sathya Sai Center is a spiritual center where universality of faith and practice of human values are emphasized. Sathya Sai Baba's teachings are universal. He came not to start a new religion but to tell us of "*this universal unitary faith, this spiritual principle, this path of Love, this virtue of Love, this duty of Love, this obligation of Love.*" [1968.7.4]

Accordingly, we must conduct Center activities, especially our devotion programs, in a way that makes spiritual seekers from all faiths and all walks of life feel welcome.

- The Center premises should be neutral to all religions and religious traditions. Quotations from Sathya Sai Baba may be placed on the walls, together with universal quotations from the major World Religions. Sai Baba has said that no picture is necessary, but if you must have one, have one of Him.
- No Center program should include rituals or practices that relate to one faith or religion in particular. The aim should be to create harmony between Sathya Sai Baba's teachings and local traditions.
- Over focus on the use of Sanskrit does not consider the fact that Sathya Sai Baba's message is universal and is to be shared with all, regardless of one's religious orientation. Accordingly, it is strongly recommended that the Center's devotional program be conducted in a manner that persons from all the different faith backgrounds can easily understand and relate to. The focus must be on unity, with appropriate consideration given to cultural relevance.
- As Sai Baba's devotees, we study and respect all religions. Study circles on other faiths are encouraged to emphasize the unity of all faiths.
- The one rule given to us by Sathya Sai Baba is that men and women should sit separately at all Center activities.

He said, ... at devotional singing and other meetings, men devotees should sit apart from women devotees. The rule is applicable to all members —whether Indians or non- Indians, in India or elsewhere. It is a part of the spiritual discipline that is necessary for devotees. ... If even Arjuna found it difficult to control his senses, how much more necessary is it for us to have some regulations to control our own minds? [1980.11.22]

- Center devotion meetings, including devotional singing and study circles, are open to all -members, newcomers, and visitors.
- The section on *cultural relevance* on page 8 and Appendix 4 on *universal devotion meetings* on page 25 contain material relevant to the devotion wing.

2.6.2 Devotion meeting

Where my devotees sing, there I install Myself. [1960.9.27] *Group devotional singing has a different purpose from silent individual prayers. It is a mutual effort of spiritual practice to overcome the six foes of man: lust, anger, greed, attachment, conceit, and hatred.* [1975.4.1] *Singing the name by a group of people can help the process of liberation not only for the members of the group. It will benefit those who listen and even those beyond the circle of listeners —the whole world can benefit from the vibrations.* [1982.1.26]

- Sathya Sai Baba

The weekly devotion meeting, with its devotional singing, is the highlight of the week for many devotees. It can be an intensely spiritual activity in which the focus on each song and its meaning brings one closer to the Lord. Achieving this state requires cooperation from all — those preparing and coordinating the program, the lead singers, the musicians, and the participants. It should be kept in mind that:

- Cooperation is essential for the most spiritual benefit. The aim is to experience unity.
- Selfless service is what we give to the Center during the devotion meeting. Singers, musicians, etc. must concentrate on this selfless service and leave out the concept that their performances are a chance for personal aggrandizement.
- Knowledge and wisdom can also be achieved through understanding the meaning of the words and concepts in the speeches and songs.
- Devotional singing must be done with great discipline; punctuality, concentration, and mutual respect must be observed.
- Devotion involves offering our best efforts to the Lord.
- The Center may develop its own format for the devotion meeting. Some ideas on developing a format for a universal devotion meeting are in the Appendix on page 25. A typical devotion meeting will be 60 to 90 minutes (perhaps up to 2 hours if there is a speaker and a study circle). Generally, devotional singing (called *bhajans* in India) forms the heart of the devotion meeting.
- The Center (Devotion Coordinator and President) may appoint a person to coordinate all aspects of devotion meetings. It may also be appropriate to appoint a Devotional Singing Coordinator, to handle all aspects of devotional singing, including practice.

Below, are listed some points about the meeting as a whole and also about devotional singing.

- Completely prepare the meeting hall at least 15 minutes before the devotion meeting starts. Keep the altar simple—some flowers, the *sarva dharma* symbol, perhaps a picture of Sathya Sai Baba. There should be plenty of chairs so that those who do not want to sit on the floor can be accommodated. If there is a consensus about this among the members, an image or symbol of the local main religions may also be placed in the devotional area. Guidance on these issues may be requested from the presiding body.
- Microphones are recommended for the leading voices and the main instruments (tablas, harmonium, guitars; other instruments may be used). There should be at least one microphone for the women lead singers and another for the men. The musicians should have their own microphones.
- The complete program should be available to all, with words of the songs to be sung. A white board or flip-chart may be used to display the program and the numbers of the songs in songbooks (available to all). Alternatively, use a computer-projection system, with which the words of songs can be displayed, obviating the need for songbooks.
- The removal of shoes is not necessary, though this custom is often observed.
- Devotees should take their seats several minutes before the meeting starts and can use the time to internalize the silence that precedes the meeting.
- Females sit on one side of the hall; males on the other.
- In Prasanthi Nilayam, *Arathi* and *Samastha Loka* are sung at the end of the meeting. A region or zone may decide not to sing *Arathi* or to sing it in the local language.
- *Vibuthi* may be made available to all, either by distributing it after devotional singing or by making it available as people leave the hall.
- After the devotion meeting, it is best that people leave quietly in order to allow the joy and peace produced during the meeting be retained in everyone's heart to remain.
- Devotional singing:
 - o The devotional singing session is normally between 30–45 minutes, depending on the Center and the total length of the meeting and its content.
 - o The most gifted singers should be lead singers, so that the audience gets the most spiritual benefit from the session. The larger the Center, the more important this guideline becomes. Don't go to the extreme; chances should be given to people who are aspiring to lead and who are attending practice sessions. In small Centers, this guideline is relaxed, depending on the situation.
 - o Some Centers reserve a song or two for children or Young Adults to lead. It is also permissible to have a session in which only Young Adults lead.
 - o When singing, alternate between men and women lead singers where possible.
 - o Maintain continuity between songs—reduce the interruptions to a minimum.
 - o Songs may be sung in lead-repeat style or in unison. In the lead-repeat style, the song is generally repeated twice, the first slow and the second faster. The first time, repeat each line twice; the second time, repeat each line once. For long songs, do not repeat each line twice during the first time.
 - o Sing songs that reflect the local culture (e.g. sing in the local language), and encourage singing songs from different religions.

2.6.3 Devotional singing coordination and practice

The following points may be observed.

- A devotional-singing coordinator, appointed by the Devotion Coordinator and President, is in charge of all aspects of devotional singing, including selection of songs, selection of singers and musicians, and arranging devotional singing lessons. This responsibility could be rotated among several people.
- Devotional singing lessons may be held on a regular basis (e.g. monthly), depending on the need. Anyone may attend. The lessons could focus on whatever is needed —singing in tune, learning about rhythm, learning new songs, training in singing with a microphone, instruments etc.
- In a large Center, musicians and lead singers should practice the songs beforehand, to make sure that there is agreement on the key in which a song is to be played, how often the lines may be sung, etc. This practice session could be done 1/2 hour before the devotion meeting starts.
- Do not introduce more than one new song in a devotion meeting. This song should be practiced beforehand with a substantial number of members so that it is not entirely new.

2.6.4 Study circles

Knowledge about what this author says or that sage teaches is not what your study circle must aim to acquire. Not information but transformation, not instruction but construction should be the aim. Theoretical knowledge is a burden unless it is practiced, when it can be lightened into wisdom and assimilated into daily life. [1974.3.3]
Sathya Sai Baba

Sathya Sai Baba tells us that spiritual growth is best achieved through an integrated practice of devotion, study, and service. He says that the proper study is: reading, reflection, and regular application in daily life. The study circle is the main group activity in the Sathya Sai Center. Guidelines on study circles can be found on the International Sathya Sai Organization website:

www.sathyasai.org/files2010/studyCircleGuidelines2004.pdf

The website www.sathyasai.org/devotion/study/study.html contains additional useful information, as does the book *Pathways to God*, by Jonathan Roof.

Here is a list of important points about study circles in the Center.

- The Center should aim for weekly study circles, of 45 minutes to 1 hour. So that everyone can make substantial contributions, it is best to limit the size of the study circle group to 15 - add more study circle groups if necessary.
- The study circle can be part of the weekly devotion meeting, along with devotional singing, or it may be at a separate time.
- Study circles are open to visitors. A Center may also have “public study circles”, which are designed to educate the public about some topic.
- The resource materials for study circles are, generally, (1) the writings and discourses of Sathya Sai Baba, (2) The *Sathyam*, *Sivam*, *Sundaram* series, and (3) material developed by the Organization.
- A Center could devote a series of study circles to reading a discourse or one of Sathya Sai Baba’s *Vahinis*, spending one session on a page or series of paragraphs. Alternatively, a study circle may be about a specific topic, drawing from many resources. Examples of topics are:
 - o The purpose and transformational effect of belonging to a Sai Center.
 - o Understanding some aspect of the rules and regulations of the Organization.
 - o The relevance of the Nine-point Code of Conduct or the Ten Principles.
 - o The spiritual significance of and benefits of practices such as silence, vegetarianism, eschewing alcohol, ceiling on desires, meditation, and repetition of the Name of the Lord.
 - o The meaning and effect of various mantras, like *So-Ham* and the *Gayatri Mantra*.
 - o Themes of different religions, with the aim of understanding the unity of faiths.
 - o What Sathya Sai Baba says He has come to give us: liberation (self-realization, *moksha*).
- It is best to appoint a *facilitator* for study circles, to be responsible for the overall function of the study circle, coordinate the choice of topics and study material, encourage attendance, ensure that participants know the rules, moderate the study circle (if several study circle groups are needed, a person to moderate each can be appointed), etc.

- Each week, a *presenter* may make a short introduction of the topic, in 5-10 minutes, to act as a catalyst in sharing thoughts and opinions. The presenter must come prepared with the reading for the topic and may also have a few questions prepared to stimulate discussion. It is best if each member takes a turn at being the presenter.
- During discussion, each member in the circle (say, in clockwise fashion) has a chance to speak for a few minutes (if they wish to). All should feel open to respond without fear of rebuttal, and there should be no judgment of right or wrong. Criticism of others' viewpoints is not allowed.
- Individual discussions of the effect of the topic on personal daily life is a good way to emphasize Sathya Sai Baba's point that study circle is meant for personal transformation, not just for gathering information.

2.1.6 Center library

The maintenance of the library is the responsibility of the Devotion or Education Coordinator, depending on the Zone in which the Center resides. The following points should be considered:

- The library should contain at least one copy of material published or sold by the Organization. This includes the *Guidelines for the International Sathya Sai Organization* and this *Operations Manual for Centers and Groups*.
- The Center should subscribe to *Sanathana Sarathi* and other newsletters of the region, country, or zone. Current issues along with subscription information should be available.
- A variety of free literature on Sathya Sai Baba and the Center's programs, including reprints of appropriate articles and discourses, should be available at all meetings.
- The Center is encouraged to have a selection of books, audio tapes, CDs, DVDs, and photos available for sale or loan. Items are restricted to those sold by the Publications Division of the Sri Sathya Sai Sadhana Trust, the International Sathya Sai Organization, or an Institute for Sathya Sai Education. Approval should be obtained from the presiding body for any other items.
- Besides the items mentioned above, the library may include important texts of the major religions.
- Items must be made available at the lowest possible price, and sales should not overshadow or dilute the spiritual atmosphere of the Center. The Center must comply with all relevant laws of the country regarding sales of such items.

2.6.5 Welcoming newcomers and visitors

Do not proclaim that you are a sect, distinct and separate from those who adore God in other Names and Forms. Thereby, you limit the very God whom you are extolling. Do not proclaim in your enthusiasm, "We want only Sai; we are not concerned with the rest." You must convince yourselves that all forms are Sai's, all names are Sai's. There is no "rest", for all are He. [1968.5.17] Sathya Sai Baba

We welcome visitors and newcomers from all faiths and religions, we study religions to understand the underlying unity of all faiths and religions, and we view all spiritual paths with respect. We focus on Sathya Sai Baba because His teachings, our experiences in attempting to put His teachings into practice, our experiences with Him, and the way He lived His life - all these have had a transformative effect on our lives.

Visitors to the Center should get an impression of universality and a loving environment. The meeting place, the meeting itself, and the way the person is welcomed should help reinforce that impression. Here are some important points about welcoming visitors.

- Visitors may attend any activity of the Devotion or Service Wings.
- Have certain people assigned the task of welcoming visitors, perhaps a Welcoming Committee. Members chosen for this task should be open minded; have a broad vision of religious and spiritual subjects; have relevant knowledge of Sathya Sai Baba's message, teachings, and works; have good knowledge of the workings of the Organization; and have a welcoming, positive demeanor.
- Welcoming should allow for mutual acquaintance. The visitor may be requested to tell when and how they happened to learn about Sai Baba, why they approached the Center, and what their expectations are. Welcoming members should offer some explanations on the behavioral rules and habits internal to the Center and give essential information about the structure and aims of Organization.
- *All* members of the Center should be aware of visitors and help them —where to sit, how to find devotional songs in the songbook, the nature of a study circle, etc.— or answer any question they may

have.

- The Center or the presiding body should have a Newcomers Booklet, and it should be available to hand out to visitors, along with other appropriate booklets, pamphlets, and videos.
- Depending on the number of visitors, the Center may establish a weekly, biweekly, or monthly Visitors Session, perhaps 1/2 hour before or after a devotion meeting, in which the fundamental principles of Sathya Sai Baba's teachings can be discussed, and also the purpose and structure of the Organization.
- Members should avoid proselytizing, asking a visitor to become a member, flaunting personal rewarding experiences, and showing off bookish knowledge and learning.
- The welcoming function does not include spontaneous offering of *vibuthi* and photos to the visitors.

2.4 Cultural relevance

The best Center meetings are those that (1) provide spiritual upliftment to Center members and (2) are welcoming to people in the community in which the Center resides. To satisfy point (2), Center meetings have to have a spiritual basis but not be oriented to any one religion or language.

It is essential to remember that the Sathya Sai Organization is universal, spiritual, and non-religious. It is therefore strongly advisable to exhibit only the *Sarva dharma* logo at the Center meeting and a picture of Sathya Sai Baba in the devotion area. If necessary, and if there is a consensus about this among the members, an image or symbol of the local main religion may also be placed in the devotion area. Guidance on these issues may be requested from the presiding body.

The festivities recommended to be celebrated are Baba's Birthday, *akhanda bhajans*, *Guru Purnima*, and festivals of the predominant local religions. These festivities may be open to the public. In case a Center has a number of members who follow a particular religious tradition, the main festivities of their religion could be celebrated (e.g. Buddha Purnima, Christmas, Passover, Easter).

4 Appendix. Universal devotion meetings

1. 3 *Oms*
2. Devotional songs (30 min.)
3. Prayers (optional)
4. 3 *Santhis*
5. Meditation (optional)
6. Prayers (optional)
7. Spiritual talk (optional)
8. Study circle (optional)
9. Announcements (optional)
10. Prayers (optional)

Above is a possible schedule for a devotion meeting. Almost all aspects of it are optional, including the order of items. For example, some Centers will end with items 5 and 6 so that people may leave the Center in silence.

The meeting should be arranged for a balance between two goals:

- (1) it helps Sathya Sai Center members along their spiritual journey and
- (2) it is a balanced meeting, representative of the culture of the country, universal in nature, and thus not oriented to any particular religion.

Notes

1. The altar area should be inviting to all people; it should be appealing to people of religions as far as possible. Swami has said that no picture is necessary, but if you have to have one, have one of him.
2. Men and women should sit separate. This directive comes from Sathya Sai Baba. There is no need to take shoes off if that is not done in the culture of the country, and chairs should be available for those that want them.
3. The meeting format is flexible. A Center can have any format with which they feel comfortable, especially

- when considering the various cultural needs of their devotees/location.
4. Devotional songs could be in the language of the country, in Sanskrit, in English —whatever the group feels comfortable with. When a newcomer is present, the Center should sing songs to which the newcomer can relate.
 5. Tradition in Prasanthi Nilayam may call for a *Ganesha bhajan*, a *Guru bhajan*, and then others, but this is not necessary at the Center meeting. The audience in the Center may be entirely different from that in Prasanthi Nilayam. Any sequence of devotional songs will do, as long as attendees can focus on the direct and inner meaning of the songs, establishing a connection with the Divinity within.
 6. Songs may be sung in the leader-response style, in unison, or a mixture of both.
 7. Prayers in a language foreign to the country should be kept to a minimum. If a Sanskrit prayer is said, consider repeating it also in language of the country and making the translation available to all.
 8. Practices that are not part of the culture of Center members and would be foreign to visitors should be kept to a minimum.
 9. The optional meditation could be a silent meditation or Sathya Sai Baba's light meditation. The length would depend on the Center members, probably no more than 5–10 minutes.
 10. The spiritual talk, 10 minutes or less, could be a reading of and discussion of some paragraph from Sathya Sai Baba's discourses or the *Vahinis*. It could be a reading from the text of some religion and then a discussion of how it is similar to and reinforces some teaching of Sathya Sai Baba.
 11. Study circle is an important part of devotion. As Sai Baba said, "A study circle does not mean only just reading and discussing and taking information into the head but also putting into practice what is learnt. ... What is eaten should be digested, and then only should you eat again. In the same way, you should listen (eat) in the study circle and put into practice (digest) what you have learnt." [1985.1.30] The study circle can be held during the weekly devotion meeting or as a separate meeting.
 12. The *vibuthi* prayer is optional; consider singing it in the language of the country. *Vibuthi* may be passed out or received at the back of the meeting room as devotees leave.
 13. *Arathi* need not be sung, but if so, consider singing it (also) in the language of the country.
 14. In Prasanthi Nilayam, after *Arathi*, one sings *Samastha Loka* three times. The following song illustrates how this can be adapted to fit a different culture. Some Centers sing this as the last item in their devotion meeting:

MAY THE LOVE WE'RE SHARING:

May the Love we're sharing spread its wings, fly across the Earth, and bring new joy to every soul that is alive. 2X

Samastha loka sukhino bhavanthu; may all the people in all the worlds be happy.

Samastha loka sukhino bhavanthu; may all the people in all the worlds know you, Swami.

Excerpts pertaining to Devotion wing from
GUIDELINES for Centers and Groups
International Sathya Sai Organization
http://www.region7saicenters.org/saidocuments/Usa_Sai_Center_Resources/Guidelines2012Sep.pdf

Devotion wing

The Devotion Wing focuses on group devotional singing, study circle, prayers, meditation, retreats, and other activities designed to strengthen one's faith, devotional fervor, and understanding and practice of spiritual principles.

One can be liberated now by the spiritual practice of singing the glory of the Lord and listening to the Name being sung. ... It can help the process of liberation not only for the members of the group ... the whole world can benefit by the vibrations. [1982.1.26]

I insist on group singing of the Names of the Lord. [1968.7.8]

The Lord has said, "Where my devotees sing, there I seat myself." [1957.7.11] Sathya Sai Baba

Study Circle is not just reading books. It means taking a point and each person discussing what it means to them. Like a round table conference. ... The study circle looks at the different facet, ... but, as in a diamond, there is one facet that is flat, and from it, all can be viewed. To discover the top facet is the task of the study circle.

[Hislop, *Conversations with Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba*, pp 165–166]

Center library

A variety of free literature on Sathya Sai Baba and His Teachings is available at Center meetings. This includes pamphlets and reprints of appropriate articles about Sathya Sai Baba, as well as copies of selected Divine Discourses given by Him. A catalog of Sai literature would be useful. Centers may maintain a library focused on Sathya Sai Baba and His Teachings, with books, audio and video recordings, and sample copies of and subscription information about periodicals such as *Sanathana Sarathi* — the monthly magazine published at Prasanthi Nilayam in India.

For additional information and clarification, please refer to:

FAQs Sathya Sai Organization of the United States
http://www.region7saicenters.org/saidocuments/Usa_Sai_Center_Resources/06aug13FAQs.pdf