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**Workshop “Spiritualities and identities in the dialogue of civilizations”
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Let me recite a mantra from the Vedas: a popular exaltation for civilizations to come together, to work together, to make decisions together and to act in harmony so that they can enjoy the fruits of life, the fruits of Mother Earth, collectively, jointly; and where sharing and caring should be the way of life. Community ownership of the means of production and distribution is very, very fundamental to this way of life. I will just recite one or two mantras and then I will start what I have to say. (...)

Exalting human beings to come together as individuals having their own identities, not letting their identity to be submerged in any other identity. Each individual soul of the living being on the path of liberation but liberation here is not only individual; individual liberation should also have a social dimension, social liberation. The idea is that God is there in every particle of the universe -- an all-pervasive God, the creator. And God is there inside of me, inside of you and inside of everything. And what is God? God is not like somebody sitting, giving. God is like a force, the force of truth, the force of love, compassion and justice. So whichever heart, whichever mind has this element of compassion, truth and justice has the divine presence. We are all joined by God, we are all brought together by God, by living a life of truth, love, compassion and justice. Individually and collectively, we can attain bliss, we can attain total happiness.

I was not born into a religious system which believed this philosophy, in fact I was born into a very orthodox Brahmin family of south India, Andhra Pradesh. And when I lost my father at the age of 4, my grandfather brought me up. And he was a devout Brahmin, worshipping so many gods, goddesses, everyday, two hours in the morning, two hours in the evening, and I would follow him as a child. And I wanted to ask questions about gods and goddesses. Why does this god have one head, another two, another three, another four? I was not allowed to ask. Why has this god the face of a monkey, another the face of a lion, another the face of an elephant? Why? But no questions were allowed. In which language do they communicate, if a monkey, lion... Which mouth do they use if they have three heads, which mouth is used for eating, for speaking? All sorts of childlike questions but questions not allowed ... Also there could have been many metaphorical presentations of all these different gods, goddesses, Vishnu, Shiva, but nobody knew it, nobody explained it to me. I was just told as a child to follow the religion because it was meant to be followed blindly. Blind adherence, superstitious belief system, dogmas, having no rational, no scientific basis. That became part of my religious practice. Up to the age of 17.

Then at the age of 17, I met the chance to form a movement called Arya Samaj (The Society of Moral, Ethical People) and there I was encouraged to ask questions. More questions. About God, about the soul, about matter, about everything, about the creation. And I got liberated from idol worship, from ritualistic religion, also from the caste system. And I came to realize that there is one God and that we are all equal children. No one's the child of a higher God or another person, the child of a lesser God. No, we are children of one and the same God the creator. Him or her or it or by any name, God is not partial to anybody, not partial to Hindus, or to Christians or to Muslims. God is not partial to those who chant his name and to those who do not chant his name. If you live by the laws or the attitudes of love, truth, compassion and justice, then you live by the divine laws. That's it. So I got liberated, religion got demystified and I had a new identity. So I was no longer a Hindu in the traditional sense, the

way the Hindus believe, go to the temples and worship gods and goddesses, have rituals, have the caste system. And that day as I grew, as I evolved, instead of having a Hindu identity, I had just one identity left with me, as a human being. Today as I stand in front of you, don't get confused with the colour of my dress, as Hindu, Swami or anything. It's very misleading. I'm a simple, ordinary human being. A social activist. A spiritual activist. But when I started worshipping my god, it meant that I should be more truthful, and more compassionate and more loving and more just within me. No need to go to any temple or mosque or church or any other place just within; *mander* whatever is inside of you is the temple. God resides there. So I save a lot of my time, money, energy, everything. Liberated. And liberated from the caste system.

I was born in a Brahmin caste system but I regard everybody as equal children of God, therefore no caste hierarchy, lower or higher, no racial prejudice and though I am born as a man, I think women are born equally, therefore no gender inequality. All forms of discrimination which are obtained today in the world or because basically of a religious mindset, which says that Whites are superior to Blacks, men are superior to women, the Brahmins are superior to Shudras and so on... This is a game of power. This is not the power of love. This is the love of power. So we have to fight this. We have to have a paradigm shift. As Jesus said, as great heroes of the world said, as Gandhi said, as Buddha said, we should have the power of love within us, that is the divine power. And not be guided by the love of power. The present-day globalisation led by the World Bank, the IMF, the WTO and all the multinationals, transnationals, and the national governments which are playing as tools. They stand for the paradigm of pure materialism. When I was invited by the WB president, James Wolfensohn, to their office in Washington DC for a dialogue, I told him that your globalisation is nothing but the glorification of greed as god. That is globalisation. And greed means grabbing. Not sharing, not caring. And therefore few individuals are trying to become the owners of all the land, all the air, all the water. That is privatisation. Their concept of liberalisation, privatisation, globalisation means one Bill Gates with two other persons can own assets which are more than the GDP of 49 countries of the world, just 3 individuals. That is globalisation. If air and water, everything part of the cosmos, of the universe, part of the creation created by the creator and we are all his equal children to participate equally, how can we allow one individual to own the land, or water or air or anything? There can only be community ownership of land, water, forests, not State ownership, don't confuse community ownership with State ownership, nor individual ownership. And the concept is beautifully put in the Vedic literature-- the whole world a family. What happens in the family? It's just a portrait of what happens in the market. ...Everything has become a commodity, everything has a price tag, and the rich becoming richer can go on buying, owning, using, misusing, polluting. They are not accountable to anybody because they own it. They don't consider this creation to be sacred and therefore this is not acceptable. In a family, the opposite happens. The youngest child, who does not go out yet to work gets his or her share first. Spontaneous, no calculations. And the breadwinner of the family takes his or her share the last. This is spirituality at work in a day-to-day life. It is not survival of the fittest. It is not Darwinism or social Darwinism. It is spirituality in action. And that is what we need to celebrate at the universal level. At the world level. At the global level. Sharing and caring and the poorest of the poor getting their share first. Those doing hard work with the sweat of their brows should get their share first. Community ownership alone can guarantee that. No private ownership of any means of production can guarantee that. So we need a paradigm shift from a model of development which is exclusively based on greed and grabbing, privatisation. Where our form of globalization, our new form of globalization will have spirituality, the divine values, the

spiritual values of truth, love compassion and justice. Justice is the most important. All of us equal, all of us having our freedom.

And therefore now I am working for a movement called Movement for a Spiritual Awakening and this is not the new age type of spirituality, doing some breathing exercises, some yoga and feel good and not disturbed by inequity, injustice happening outside. No, not that. Feel very disturbed. Feel challenged. By any injustice happening anywhere in the world. That is the divine within us, love, truth, compassion and justice. It will enable us to come together in solidarity and change all these iniquitous social, economic, political orders to equality and freedom. And when I say freedom I stand for the freedom of religions. More than freedom of religions, I stand and propagate freedom from religions. All the organized, institutionalised, hierarchical religions of the world are playing the game of power. Their leaders there is a nexus between politicians and the business people. And therefore, we the ordinary people should walk out of all these power play, power game. We should not mortgage ourselves. There is no need to accept one Scripture as the last word. Try and be your own prophet. Try and be your own guru. That is how we can assert our human freedom, men and women equally, Dalits and Brahmins equally, Blacks and Whites equally. And one day with this equality in society we will overcome the gross and glaring inequality in the world of economics which is the inequality of the rich and the poor, the North and the South, which is unacceptable.

So I thank you all so much. I particularly rejoice my association with the Centre Lebret and with AREDS which are active in Tamil Nadu and this beautiful organization in France and Switzerland. And let me tell you about my very close colleagues who are working together in this Movement for Spiritual Awakening, we call it social spirituality. Which is another name for socialist spirituality. Socialist spirituality with God in the center and with all his equal children. Compassion for the animals also, the birds also, plants also, everything is sacred. No consumerism. Consume but not to be condemned to buy, not be condemned to consume. More and more. Simple life. Walk lightly on planet earth and share its pleasures with everybody. That is the simple thing. That is the globalization we aspire for. My close colleague, a Christian priest called Rev. Valson Thampu, an eminent Gandhian called Nirmala Deshpande, a great intellectual and social activist called Rama Mani. We have all been working together and we want to join hands with everyone here. Such a beautiful gathering here. People who share so much in common and who want to enter into a new world, who refuse to accept the world dictated by the Bushes and the Blairs. We don't want their world, we want to create our own world. Thank you.