THE COFFEEs OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL
SRI SRI RAVI SHANKAR

19 October 2016
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THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

Bringing New Perspectives to the OECD
Short Bio

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar

Born in 1956 in Southern India, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar was a gifted child. By the age of four, he was able to recite parts of the Bhagavad Gita, an ancient Sanskrit scripture and was often found in meditation. His first teacher was Sudhakar Chaturvedi, who had had a long cooperation with Mahatma Gandhi. He holds degrees in, both, Vedic literature and physics.

He founded The Art of Living as an international, non-profit, educational and humanitarian organization. Its educational and self-development programs offer powerful tools to eliminate stress and foster a sense of well-being. Appealing not only to a specific population, these practices have proven effective globally and at all levels of society.

In 1997, he also founded the International Association for Human Values (IAHV) to coordinate sustainable development projects, nurture human values and coordinate conflict resolution in association with The Art of Living. In India, Africa and South America, the two sister organizations' volunteers are spearheading sustainable growth in rural communities, and have already reached out to 40,212 villages.

A noted humanitarian leader, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's programs have provided assistance to people from a wide range of backgrounds – victims of natural disasters, survivors of terror attacks and war, children from marginalized populations and communities in conflict, among others. The strength of his message has inspired a wave of service based on spirituality through a huge body of volunteers, who are driving these projects forward in critical areas around the globe.

As a spiritual teacher, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar has rekindled the traditions of yoga and meditation and offered them in a form that is relevant to the 21st century. Beyond reviving ancient wisdom, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar has created new techniques for personal and social transformation. These include the Sudarshan Kriya which has helped millions of people to find relief from stress and discover inner reservoirs of energy and peace in daily life. In a mere 31 years, his programs and initiatives have touched the lives of over 370 million people in 152 countries.

As an ambassador of peace, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar plays a key role in conflict resolution and spreads his vision of non-violence at public forums and gatherings world-wide. Regarded as a neutral figure with a sole agenda of peace, he represents hope to people in conflict. He has received particular credit for bringing opposing parties to the negotiating table in Iraq, the Ivory Coast, Kashmir and Bihar. He was appointed the Chairman of Reception Committee for the 500th anniversary celebrations of the Coronation of Krishnadevaraya (by Government of Karnataka, India). Sri Sri Ravi Shankar is also a member of the Amarnath Shrine Board (appointed by Government of Jammu and Kashmir, India).

Through his initiatives and addresses, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar has consistently emphasized the need for reinforcing human values and recognizing humanity as our highest identity. Fostering interfaith harmony and calling for multi-cultural education as the remedy for fanaticism are significant parts of his efforts to achieve sustainable peace on our planet.

His work has touched the lives of millions of people around the world, going beyond the barriers of race, nationality and religion with the message of a "One-World Family"; that inner and outer peace are possible; and that a stress-free, violence-free society can be created through service and the reawakening of human values.


Twitter: @SriSri
Thank you for inviting me here to be with you all, it is a real pleasure for me to be here in this prestigious institution which is committed to better policies for better lives. The topic I will focus on today is ‘Ethics for a Sustainable Globalised Economy’.

Why ethics? And why should we be ethical? This is not an easy question to answer. Young people today want to make quick money without thinking about ethics. When sensibility and sensitivity converge, then ethics becomes a reality in life. Sadly, the wrong notion that one must be unethical in order to progress in business is a mindset that youngsters possess around the world. But when young people are shown how you can be prosperous following ethical means it really opens their eyes. With this vision we started the Global Forum for Ethics in Business. We focused on showcasing concrete role models to young people which can become their guiding light and demonstrate that we can be both ethical and progressive.

1 The original transcript of the presentation by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar has undergone minor editing to ensure that the text published in this brochure is presented in a reader-friendly format.
When we brought everyone together in our youth forum and showed what happens to people who rise unethically and how fast they subsequently fall, it made young people become more aware of what they should be and should not be doing.

With this idea we have been promoting ethics in business. There is one thing that is very common today and that is stress. Stress permeates our societies and is present in almost every field. When people are stressed, their perception is blurred and their expression is regretful. We need to help people get out of stress and our efforts have focused on this goal over the past 35 years — whether it is in prison, or in schools, or in colleges.

So the question is how do we free ourselves from stress and smile more? Scientists today say that a child smiles 400 times per day while adults only smile 17 times. We need to create a lighter atmosphere based on trust. Trust remains the backbone of business and it increases when we are free from stress. Our Art of Living Foundation conducts stress-busting programmes for all age groups. We have, for example, programmes for children in schools, for prisoners in correctional homes, and for top executives and CEOs. These programmes are based on the fact that our breathing is linked to our emotions and to our energy levels. Using natural breathing and meditation techniques has helped millions of people around the world.

My most recent experience was with the FARC guerrillas in Colombia. In fact, last year I was in Colombia working closely with victims of the FARC revolutionary army. The Colombian government decided to give me an honour, the highest civilian award, which I received last June. I also met with President Santos and he expressed how grave the situation was at that time. It really looked like the peace process was not going anywhere. I offered to take a chance and to speak with the FARC guerrillas in Cuba. At first they were not very receptive to my presence.
They believe in Marxist philosophy, while I come from a Ghandian background. They were however gracious enough to meet with me and over the course of three days of deliberations we did some meditation and breathing together. On the third day that I was there, they held a press conference during which they declared a unilateral ceasefire and announced that they would adopt the Ghandian principle of non-violence. The peace talks continued over several months and the peace process was signed. We have now seen that there have been some setbacks but I am sure that the peace process will move forward.

Why is this overall example important? Because it shows that a calm and meditative mind is very useful. When I held a session at the UN last year, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said that this kind of meditation was indeed needed before all negotiations so that people could think with a calm mind. Scientists today have declared that anyone who meditates, even for only 8 weeks, shows signs of changes in their brain structure, their grey matter increases, they focus better, their retention power is better and they are able to express themselves better. When it comes from scientists it tends to carry more weight and authenticates what we have been saying for centuries. In my experience, after teaching meditation techniques and breathing exercises to terrorists and to prisoners, they tend to experience a tremendous change in their outlook.

More recently, we conducted a programme with young people from the Muslim Brotherhood in America. The transformation that they expressed will touch anyone’s heart. Their whole perception changed after doing a few minutes of silent meditation and breathing. They were able to think from a broader perspective.

To succeed in ethics for a sustainable globalised economy, we need to focus on changing people’s attitude from, ‘what I can take’ to, ‘what I can give’. If everyone thinks in terms of how I can contribute to the global economy, rather than how can I snatch from the global economy the scenario changes completely. There is a joy in contributing which is a mature joy and this, in turn, contributes to a mature society. In this way, instead of draining resources we contribute to a sustainable growth. The four pillars of society, government, media, faith based organisations and NGOs, all have to work together to bring a sustainable growth and a happy and harmonious society.
QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION:

Q1. I teach yoga and meditation. When I arrived in France 25 years ago, it was a very dismal scene for this kind of work. But I am very happy to say that this year, I taught four mindful workshops here at the OECD Forum, and that was a first. I think that was a big accomplishment and I am very happy that the OECD had the foresight to bring that to the Forum. You spoke at the French Assembly today. How was that experience? I find that there is a difficulty, particularly in France but in other countries as well, about how we can help people flourish. It is as if when somebody is flourishing they are not productive – they can't be both at the same time. I have found this in my own work, particularly when working with companies and government organisations.

A. Can you be happy and productive at the same time? I would say yes. In fact they go hand in hand.

Q2. One of your approaches to ethics is to assess the needs that we have as human beings and as businesses and, in particular, how to reach our deeper needs, not only the material kind. You focus on shifting from the personal level to the collective level.

A. What you need is two things. To focus on your personal development and on your ability to connect with everybody around you, irrespective of gender, background, social or educational status. How you are able to connect with people and take on challenges. How you are able to receive and to provide constructive criticism.

Social interactions depend on two things, personal strength and the skills to communicate with society. Keeping this in mind, we have designed different programmes. One of those is the transformation leadership programme and another is the achieving personal excellence programme. We work with numerous companies around the world that use these programmes as part of their training. These 3-day workshops are designed for individuals to discover their own strengths and to better understand and master communication skills.
Q3. The majority of the audience here today are women. Is that often the case when it comes to your audiences? Are women more interested than men in the messages that you communicate?

A. I would say yes. But at the same time we do increasingly see a lot of men attending. We also offer numerous inter-cultural programmes. For example, we held one event in New Delhi recently called the World Culture Festival during which we hosted 36,000 artists – mostly women I would say. The event was attended by nearly in 3.7 million people.

Q4. You have a very positive outlook in your teachings and your messages. What worries you in the world?

A. Vested interests and prejudice of all types. Whether it is prejudice about gender, religion, race, educational or social status. This keeps the population divided and mistrust grows because of this prejudice.

Q5. One of the things I have observed at this organisation, and in society in general, is an incredible thirst for recognition by the outside world, by significant figures, by peers. It is almost as if this thirst is never fulfilled. What would you recommend to people to transform this desire into inspiration?

A. It is quite difficult to know. Competition is good, but it also takes a lot of wisdom for one to compete with oneself rather than with someone else. Healthy competition is competing with yourself and with your own performance; ultimately, how you can become better. Investing 100% in everything you do can bring you a sense of freedom and satisfaction. You may not be able to compete with someone of a very high level – but if you do put in 100% it will bring a sense of relief. When running, for example, you must always be focused on your own track. In an
organisation such as this one where there is pressure, first of all, one must have the confidence to handle the pressure. Secondly, we must say ‘I am going to do my best and keep it at the best level that I can achieve’. Looking at one’s own area, one should always ask ‘have I put in my 100%?’

Q6. What is your definition of ethics and how do you address this issue when you speak at big companies. How do you remind people about what ethical behaviour is?

A. Very simple. You don’t do to others what you don’t want others to do to you. Companies do not want to be cheated, so they should not be cheating their customers. It is as simple as that.

Q7. A lot of what you have talked about today sounds like Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Is there a particular reason why you did not use that term? Are there any differences between your philosophy and CSR? In relation to giving 100% of oneself and being happy with that, I personally think it is a very nice thing to say but sometimes our best is simply not good enough and we fail. How would you address that?

A. Nobody can say I gave my 100% and nothing has worked. Something will happen for sure. You cannot hold others responsible for your own poverty; that is only an easy way out. There is a shortage of labour around the world today. If people really want to do some hard work, they can get a job somewhere. I would not prescribe to the idea that you should sit at home and someone will simply give you a job. You have to hold responsibility for the state of life you are in. As far as children are concerned, we must help them in their education; we have opened 425 free schools where 53,000 children are provided with free education. Opportunities should therefore be given. But I do not agree with people who have not used their opportunities, who want to have an easy life and choose poverty.

There are of course parts of this world where there is hunger and poverty. To tackle these issues we must of course employ CSR and companies should have a bigger heart and be more participatory. In this respect, our training programmes are of immense benefit.
Q8. You mentioned that we must always have in mind the question of ‘how can I give and contribute?’ How is this applicable in a trade negotiation? At the negotiations table if you are the only one with that kind of thinking, you will fail. Trade negotiators protect their national interest as long as possible and until the deadline looms – then you give in little-by-little. This is why trade negotiations tend to last very long.

A. You are of course right, when you are negotiating, you must negotiate hard. There are two things we must keep in mind, we must never do business with our heart and lead our lives with our minds. Do business with your head and try to gain as much as possible, but always through ethical means. Ethically you can be an aggressive business person. At the same time, when it comes to contributing to society’s welfare you must come out as a very generous person.

Perhaps you could tell me how the OECD could partner with us? Are there any areas where we could come in and teach harmonious resolution, trust building and social responsibility? We have a huge volunteer force that dreams of a better world. For example, in Mexico our foundation conducted a programme for 3,000 young people to help them have a better life. The programme was so successful that the government has asked us to conduct this workshop for 150,000 children and young people who are troubled and who have been involved in drugs and violence. We call these the Happiness Programmes and they aim to do exactly that, increase happiness. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has repeatedly warned about the rise of depression around the globe. Today, 40% of schoolteachers in Europe are depressed. This depression passes on to the children. We must find a means to help people be happier and more vibrant in life.
Q9. You mentioned that one of your biggest worries is prejudice. How do you fight against it?

A. If I had an idea I would not say it is a big worry. It is true that I need more ideas for getting people out of prejudice. We have been trying numerous things but unfortunately it is still there.

Q10. As you may know, at the OECD we work a lot with our minds. We tend to produce very interesting and in-depth reports. We have many experts that know their subjects very well. How would you advise OECD experts, who are very good at showing that they are right, to humble themselves and to perhaps believe that they may be wrong? How do we deal with our egos here?

A. Experts should take pride in their ability to adapt, to change and to be open-minded. Perhaps the OECD should create an ‘open-minded’ award for those who are flexible and open to new and more ideas. This concept itself can be very empowering. I often recommend to schools and colleges to give awards to those who are compassionate and equanimous. Today, what has happened is that pride has been attached to ego. If we focus on attaching pride to compassion, to open-mindedness, to innovative and flexible ideas, then perhaps the whole scenario may change.
Q11. Have there been any cases in which your programme has not been very successful? Or perhaps a time when it has failed altogether? If so, what was the reason for this?

A. I usually do not look into a particular programme’s success or failure. One incident I would like to talk about is the Sri Lankan issue. We came very close to a solution but were unable to reach a successful conclusion. There were lapses on the side of both the Tamil Tigers and the Sri Lankan government. Sadly, I had to depart but I often think whether the outcome would have been different if I had spent one more week with them.

Q12. The pace of digital technologies is moving very fast today. Do you believe that is a force for good or bad in the sense that people are very distracted and not open to meditation?

A. Technology is just a tool, it is up to us to decide how to use it. We use a knife to butter our bread or to stab someone. It is a tool that can be used for destruction or comfort. Its purpose should be to provide comfort to the human race, but unfortunately in the wrong hands it can become very destructive. One example is video games in which children shoot at others. In real life of course this has dire circumstances.

Q13. How do you see the role of governments and policymakers in leading by example?

A. Governments are not machines. They are made up of people like you and me. When they are stressed and lack clarity, policies become disastrous. They therefore need clarity in mind, purity in heart, sincerity in action. When policymakers see their role as a service, rather than a profession, they are able to accomplish much more for the people.

Q14. You have focused a lot on Ghandi and your Ghandian influence. How do you see the relationship between your philosophy and religion? Do you see your thoughts as particularly Hindu and if so, do you see any difficulty in taking your ideas to people with other creeds?

A. I represent Hinduism, one of the most ancient traditions in the world. It teaches us that the world is one family. The main principles are: harmony, diversity and liberty for all. At the same time, our teachings are non-denominational. Our programmes are therefore universal in nature and do not come into conflict with any faiths or religions. I am of the opinion that every child should know a little bit about all the religions of the world. This can provide a broad perspective and is a vaccination against fanaticism and radicalism. People who believe they are going to heaven and everyone else is going to hell, create hell for everyone.

Q15. Not everybody practices yoga or meditation. You have done some extraordinary work in institutionalising these practices with your workshops and your programmes. What advice would give us in order to feel better in our daily lives?

A. Devote a little time to yourself. I have written a small booklet entitled ‘25 ways to be happy’ which can be downloaded online. We all know about dental hygiene, this is what a call mental hygiene, keeping our mind free from negative impressions and being able to see well with a fresh eye. I propose clarity in mind by self-enquiry, purity in our heart by seeing a bigger context to life and spontaneity and sincerity in action.

All photos: OECD/Andrew Wheeler
The Secretary-General is delighted to present:

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar

A Presentation On
“Ethics for a sustainable globalised economy”

19 October, 15h30-17h00,
Chateau Room C