



Pop Quiz: Students Question Amma

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They are currently more than 5,000 students studying at the four campuses of Amrita University. And with more departments being added all the time, each year more and more students enrol. In order to give the Ettimadai, Eranakulam and Bangalore students a chance to interact with their chancellor—Amma—different batches of them are given the opportunity to spend a few nights in Amritapuri each week.



During their stay, the students go for darshan, participate in bhajans and typically have a question-and-answer session with one of the brahmacharis. But this week something new happened: Amma decided she would answer their questions herself. The only problem was Amma's schedule. Amma already packs twice as much as possible into every day—darshan, bhajans, satsang with the ashramites, reading letters, solving problems, dealing with all the Ashram's institutions...



But Amma, the ultimate multi-tasker, knew just what to do: hold the question-and-answer sessions while giving darshan. So, for an hour and a half on Thursday and on Friday, that is exactly what Amma did.

The student's questions covered a wide range of concerns—everything from how to attain God to how to be a good journalist to "Why can't we wear jeans?" Amma responded to the spiritual and the mundane alike with her trademark charm and honesty, not just providing answers but also pushing the students to go deeper in their analysis of the worlds around and within them.

The students took over the area in the temple directly before Amma and asked their question over the sound system.

A boy studying engineering at the Bangalore campus asked Amma if it was right that so many people had "run away" from mainstream life to come and live in the ashram.

"You are studying at a university to become an engineer. Is that running away from life?" Amma asked him. Amma then explained how just as one getting a PhD needs to go to a university to study with experts in his chosen field, so too those desiring to master the mind need to come to an ashram and study with a Satguru.

"Spirituality is life management," Amma said. "The ashram is a place where the Guru teaches the

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disciples how to manage their mind, how to manage their life. Here one learns how to face all the various situations in life without losing his mental equipoise.

"One has to study driving before heading out on the main road, don't they? If one drives without properly learning how first, he will only wind up in the hospital. This is why people come to ashrams—not to run away from life."

"There are hundreds of thousands of children who cannot go to college for various reasons," Amma said. "If those children were to suddenly say that your going to college is running away from life, would they be correct? This is not escaping from life. The people living here, in fact, are the ones who are really coming out of hiding."

A girl studying at the Ettimadai campus asked Amma if she had any advice for overcoming the tension that comes with university life.

"Live in the present," Amma said. "If you really listen to what the teacher is saying, then it will penetrate deep within and then you will easily remember at the time of the exam. Then there won't be any reason for tension. The problem is that we are not listening properly. When the teacher is lecturing, our minds are not in the present but in the future, worrying, 'Oh, this is so difficult! Ayyo! How will I possibly remember all this come exam time?' But if we listen deeply, we will remember and there will be no stress."

Amma also suggested that the students spend 10 minutes a day in meditation, imagining that all the cells in their body were becoming relaxed and that everything inside and out was becoming peaceful.

"If a pond is full of ripples, we will not be able to clearly see the sun reflected in it. In the same way, when the mind is agitated we have no clarity. Meditation helps calm the mind and gives peace inside and out," Amma said.

There were a number of questions about how to contribute to society as professionals upon graduation, whether as engineers or journalists.

"It is not enough that you excel in your profession" Amma said. "Set aside a few hours a week for serving the poor or set aside some money from your earnings. Try to work an extra hour with the intention of directing that money to the poor."

"There is a higher purpose in life other than just being born, growing up, getting married, retiring and dying," Amma told the students. "One who lives like that is really not much different from a worm living in excreta. If we don't spend some time in life helping others, all our achievements become just like a list of zeros. But when we help others, it is like putting a "1" at the head of that trail of zeros. Helping others is what gives value to life."

"When a turtle crawls it leaves a trail. We should also leave a trail. Our trail should be our good deeds. When we look back in reflection on what we have accomplished in life, we should see the tracks of our good deeds."

"Research is also a good seva," Amma told the engineers in regard to selflessly pursuing scientific advancements for the benefit of society.

Amma told the journalism students that their fundamental principle of journalism is dharma. She said that their job was like a war, a war against adharmic factions within their own society. Amma then said that they also had to gracefully negotiate the pressures of their partisan editors and publishers upon taking work at a newspaper or channel. Amma also said that as journalists they should never create controversy for the sake of controversy and that if they did have to reveal a scandal that they should see to it that they saw to its proper conclusion.

It was a girl from Bangalore who asked Amma why Amrita University students are not allowed to



Photos from



wear jeans and instead had to wear a formal school uniform.



Amma said that education is to cultivate the culture of the heart and to see everyone uniformly. "In Sri Krishna's time the rich and poor studied in the *gurukula* side by side. The Guru saw all as equal and treated the prince and the pauper as one and the same. But in today's world this is not the case. The rich will come in expensive clothes and the poor in tattered clothing. The poor students will feel sad; they may even develop an inferiority complex. The egos of the rich students may also increase."

Amma told the students that they could wear casual clothing once or twice a week, but then asked them why they were in such a hurry to throw away their own culture as if it were garbage.

"If you go to Europe or the U.S., you won't find people wearing saris or dhotis," Amma told them. "They have their own culture, and they are proud of it. But we are blindly imitating the West. We should be proud of our dress, food, music, family relations and culture and heritage."

This drew a loud round of applause from all the students.

Amma continued, "It is okay to adopt certain things from the West, but let's not brush our culture away like rubbish. In fact, we are not adopting the good habits of the West—like their strong work-ethic—but are only adopting the very things the West is spitting out.

"When we blindly follow Western culture, it is like Shiva dressing like Brahma. Blindly imitating another culture is dangerous."

Amma then said that in all her world travels, she has not seen a country that is imitating the West as much as India. "With our songs, our clothing, or behaviour, our food, our cinema—in every way we are imitating," Amma said.

"The people of Western society thought that by indulging in worldly life, they could enjoy more freedom, but now they are finding out that that is simply not true. It has only served to destroy their mental strength. We should develop a pride for our culture."

Amma then told the students that she was not forcing any ideas upon them, just sharing her outlook. "It is up to you to accept or to reject, but you should remember this now and then," Amma said. "Don't try to become the image in the mirror. Become yourself. When you try to imitate the image in the mirror, you become a stranger to your self, you become an orphan."

It was a boy from Ettimadai who boldly told Amma "I don't want any other birth. I only want my soul to remain with Lord Krishna. Amma, what should I do to make sure this happens?"

Amma told him that if that was his particular desire, then he did not need any particular advice, as he already was Sri Krishna.

This inspired some laughter from the other students. Amma explained further. "In Sanatana Dharma, the creation and the Creator are not two. God is in everyone. It is only that the mediums for expressing that divinity vary. God is not on a throne up above the clouds. God is inside. To understand this properly we need to study the scriptures. But as most people are not able to do this, you should try to cultivate childlike innocence. Childlike innocence is the bait to attract and catch God."

One of the most touching moments of Amma's sessions with the students took place when a student referred to Amma as the chancellor, her official position at Amrita University. Amma told him, "I am not a chancellor. I am only doing seva."

—Sakshi



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