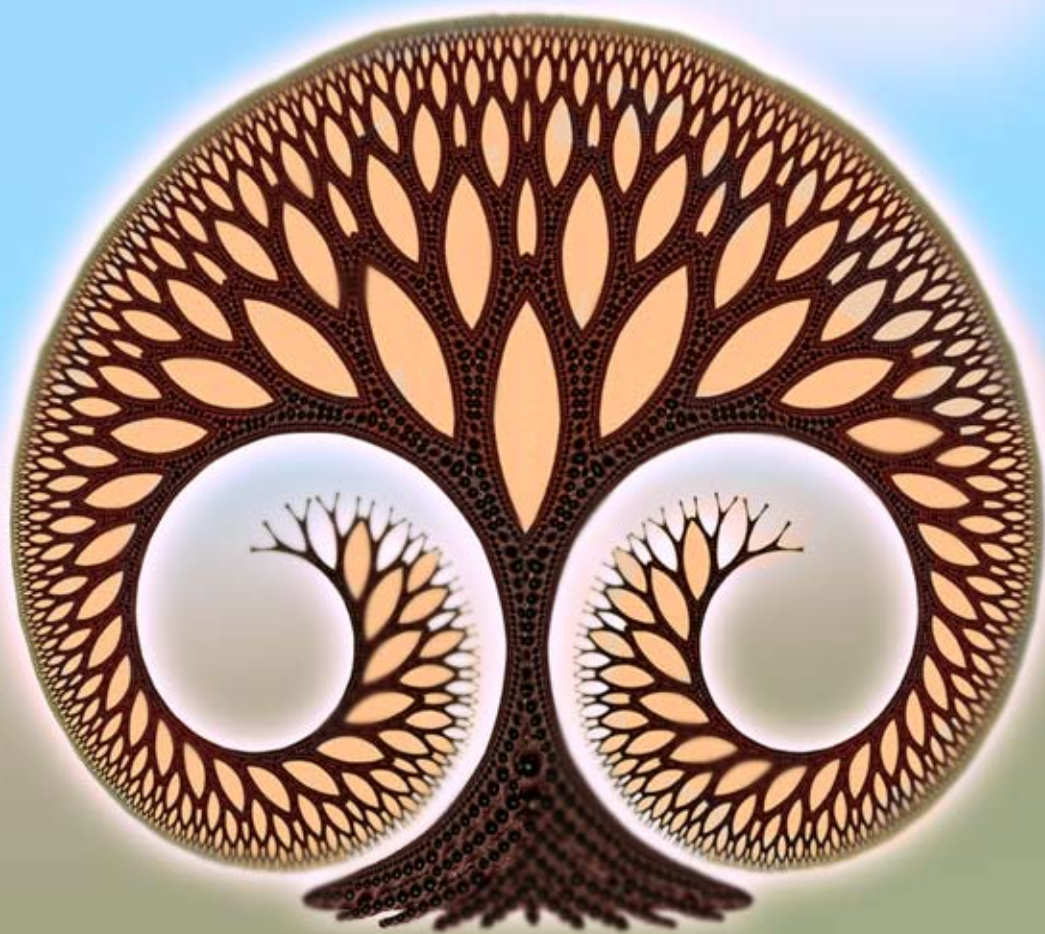


Grace In The Home

WISDOM FOR ALL AGES



❧ *H.H. PUJYA SWAMI CHIDANAND SARASWATI* ❧

Grace in the Home

Wisdom For All Ages



**His Holiness Pujya Swami
Chidanand Saraswati**



Swami Chidanand Saraswati, 2001

Grace in the Home

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Dear Divine Soul,

For there to be Grace in the Home, there must be Grace in the Heart and Grace in the Life. Thus, may this book inspire you, guide you, uplift you and transform you so that the Divine Grace may always shine upon you.

May you be blessed with Grace in the Home, Grace in the school, Grace in the workplace, and Grace in every aspect of your life.

With love and blessings,
In the service of God and humanity,

Swami Chidanand Saraswati



Acknowledgements

Advice, guidance, wisdom and spiritual truths are eternal and timeless. They have always been true and they will always be true. Only their context and ways of application may change slightly to fit the times, places, and circumstances. Therefore, I humbly offer my gratitude and acknowledgments to the great *rishis*, saints, and seers who have been imparting these truths for millennia, and especially those who have been bringing this wisdom into modern day applicability. A few of the specific examples or parables I use have been told to me by these great saints, and I am sure you will find their examples inspiring and enlightening as well.

Most of all, though I would like to acknowledge my dear youth who have come to me with open hearts, pouring forth the truth of their lives. It is from listening to their stories, their questions, and their concerns that I have come to realize much of the truth behind the dilemmas faced by families today.

Shree Hari



Life is multifaceted, comprised of numerous stages, phases and aspects. Each stage has its own inherent dilemmas and obstacles. In fact, all of humanity faces problems, but every problem has a solution. One's inner voice and discrimination (*vivek*) can lead us to the correct solution. Yet, how to attain this wise inner voice? We

can acquire a clear, sagacious inner voice through reading the scriptures and through association with the saints.

Through the grace of Pujya Swami Chidanand Saraswatiji, the Samadhan Saraswati (River of Wisdom, River of Answers) is flowing abundantly for all of humanity. Through this River of Wisdom and Answers we can find the solutions to the problems which plague us in our lives. Through delving into this divine river, all those who love life and who want to live life to its fullest will be enriched, benefited and inspired.

I offer my *pranams* and salutations to Pujya Swami Chidanand Saraswatiji for this commendable achievement.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rameshbhai Oza', enclosed within a circular flourish.

Rameshbhai Oza
(*Bhaishri*)

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Introduction

Some people might wonder how a renunciant, a saint who has lived nothing other than divine purity could possibly give advice on the trials and tribulations of married life. They might wonder how one whose youth was spent in silence and meditation high in the Himalayas could possibly guide today's adolescents regarding drugs, drinking and dating.

I do not have the answer to *how* His Holiness Pujya Swami Chidanand Saraswatiji succeeds in giving life-changing advice, fundamental answers and deep, profound guidance to those living out their years of university, marriage and child-rearing. He simply does it. "*It is God's blessing*" is His only explanation for the depth and breadth of His understanding. This simple *sanyasin* who has lived, breathed and known only purity, celibacy, simplicity and God is revered across the world as one of the wisest divine guides to people of every age, in every phase of life, suffering from every problem which plagues our human existence.

I cannot count the number of times I have heard a teenager exclaim, "I can't believe Pujya Swamiji even knows about all that!" or, "I can't believe I told him everything. I thought I'd be too embarrassed to talk to him about it, but He was so understanding."

Couples across the world marvel at His perfect, intuitive awareness of both the specific day-to-day issues in married life as well as of the larger, deeper, more fundamental conflicts. His wisdom is not limited, however, to a mere exact understanding of the dilemma. Rather, He also has the solution.

There have been many times when I've seen couples on the verge of divorce, couples who have given up hope for improvement and have resigned themselves to taking the step of separation. In some hope for divine intervention – perhaps at the suggestion of a friend or relative – they come to see Pujya Swamiji. Not one of them has ever followed through with the divorce! Whatever occurs during those minutes in His room reverses years of bitterness, frustration and contempt. The couples emerge, softened, as though veils have been lifted off of hardened faces; they seem as though they have been touched by something of another world.

People travel from every corner of the earth just to seek a few minutes of His counsel. Husbands and wives take leave from work and spend hours or days in transit to come and lay their irreconcilable differences at His holy feet. Parents drag their irascible and intractable youth across oceans and continents in order to let Pujya Swamiji give them His divine touch.

Everyone leaves from His room with a smile on their face and a dance in their step. Couples who have been on the verge of divorce emerge hand-in-hand. Youth whom parents had deemed “hopeless” pledge themselves to new lives. Problems which seemed insurmountable and unbearable dissolve into the wisdom which flows like a divine river from His mouth.

His wisdom, clarity and vision have no limits. At any given moment His meeting room is filled with a wide variety of people who have come for an endless variety of reasons. One may find spiritually advanced seekers who have come for assistance in progressing to the next level of God-realization; one may find young students brimming with enthusiasm about learning the secrets of Indian culture; one may find Chief Justices who have come to ask private, special advice on a morally difficult case; one may find successful professionals from the USA or Europe whose businesses are thriving but whose hearts and souls feel

empty; one may find scholars or philosophers puzzled over a deep, esoteric point who have come to seek His sage advice. Or, as in the cases which form the matter of this book, one may find families – students, couples, parents – in distress over their inability to overcome the trials and tribulations of everyday life, or who are faced with a particularly trying dilemma. All of these people have come to Pujya Swamiji to have Him ignite the spark of the Divine in their lives.

After merely one meeting, all who come to see Him are changed forever. So many people come to meet Him on the advice of a friend or just because an “inner voice” drew them to Parmarth Niketan or to a lecture He was giving abroad. Then, they find that the darkness which has plagued their minds and hearts is suddenly turned to light.

Pujya Swamiji has a true, divine gift for both clarifying the problems which afflict people in their daily lives as well as for providing immediate, matter-of-fact solutions to these seemingly insurmountable dilemmas. I cannot explain the profound effects His words of wisdom have on all those who hear them.

Yet, if you ask Him later what He said, what He told a specific teenager who had gone astray, what advice He gave to the couple who was heading toward separation, He always says, “I don’t remember.” How can He who has the memory of a computer, He who remembers every phone number He’s ever dialed, He who remembers the names of children He’s never even met, suddenly forget potent and profound advice that saved a marriage or a family?

“Because,” He says. “It was not me speaking. It was God. He spoke right through me whatever was needed at the moment, whatever was right for that situation.” Then, just like a ripple in the vast, deep, divine ocean, it is gone.

Thus, this book is truly a treasure, for it is not a book of philoso-

phy or of platitudes and cliches. Rather, it is a book in which we have tried to capture the spontaneous, divinely guided words of Pujya Swamiji, whether spoken in general “counseling sessions,” or in private talks, letters and e-mails which devotees have voluntarily shared for the sake of this book.

The way in which this book came into being has reinforced for me its crucial need and the unique niche which it will fill. This book began as a small booklet prepared for an international conference in Trinidad. Pujya Swamiji was requested to be one of the main speakers at a large, international conference in Trinidad/Tobago and had graciously accepted the invitation.

E-mails started coming from the conference organizers – general emails asking speakers to please send the “abstracts of the papers.” I ignored these emails as I knew that Pujya Swamiji was not going to present a *paper*. Rather, He would shower the audience with sixty minutes of divinely inspired wisdom, inspiration and insight.

But then, after a month or so, the pleas from the conference organizers began to have titles like “Urgent Call for Papers.” Again, I disregarded these as I assumed that they were not really meant for Pujya Swamiji, but rather for the academic scholars and other presenters who would be reading their lecture from a paper.

One can certainly request Pujya Swamiji to speak on a particular subject, but His mind is as fluid, deep and rich as the ocean. He easily and effortlessly shifts back and forth between profound, esoteric knowledge, matter-of-fact advice, and inspiring truisms like “how to be in peace not in pieces.”

Thus, I knew that in Trinidad, as in all the other parts of the world, Pujya Swamiji would stand, deliver a breath-taking, compelling, uplifting lecture on whatever topic God told Him, and then sit down, unable to recall the brilliant points He had just made. So, I sent a short note to the conference organizers,

politely explaining the situation; I was confident that they understood the difference between the way saints deliver lectures and the way scholars deliver lectures. I was sure that they must not be specifically referring to Pujya Swamiji and the other saints in these repeated “Call for Papers.”

Then, approximately a week before He was due to leave India for His journey abroad, a personal letter came from the director of the conference. It said, *“The topic assigned for Pujya Muniji Maharaj’s lecture is **Family, Marriage, Parenting and Children’s Issues**. I know that he does not prepare his lectures in advance or make any notes. However, we are publishing a book of all the speakers’ papers for distribution during the conference. I know that Pujya Swamiji’s words – even if they are not the same as the lecture he delivers – will be of great value to everyone. Therefore, we humbly request His Holiness to just prepare an article on the topic for us to print.”*

So, by the grace of God, I had the honor of sitting at Pujya Swamiji’s holy feet as He fulfilled the request of the conference organizers. He spoke and spoke and spoke. The words flowed, ceaselessly, poetically, as though from the Source of Knowledge itself.

They had asked for a 3000-5000 word paper. However, by the time I finished typing the words He had spoken, it came to almost forty pages! Everyone who read it was greatly touched and guided by the wisdom within, and everyone urged Him to make this available to an audience larger than just the conference attendees in Trinidad.

So, in the five days prior to Pujya Swamiji’s departure, we printed a small booklet, titled *“Family, Marriage, Parenting and Children’s Issues: Challenges in the Modern Age”* based on the name given to His lecture topic.

The response to the booklet was phenomenal. Children, adolescents, newlyweds and adults wrote letters, called and spoke to

Him in person about the profound effect His wisdom had had on their lives and their families.

But everyone wanted more – more details, more specifics about different phases of life, more examples of how to overcome the trials and tribulations of life. Children asked: “Why do we have to study hard? I don’t even care about school.” University students wanted to know: “How do I maintain purity and *dharma* while living in the dorms? How do I stay true to myself and my upbringing, but still make friends and have fun?” Parents wrote and asked: “How do we instill good values in our children? How do we balance East and West? How do we talk to our children about things we’ve never even experienced? How do we make them trust us?” Husbands and wives asked: “How can we live in peace, loving each other, instead of fighting all the time? How do we handle conflict and disagreement?”

So, to answer these questions and many more, Pujya Swamiji graciously agreed to expand the book. In your hands is a treasure chest of divine answers, insight and wisdom – there for you regardless of which phase of life you are living.

One of the characteristics that makes Pujya Swamiji so unique is His ability to apply deep, profound, esoteric wisdom to daily life. There are many saints who are learned in the scriptures, who are erudite masters of philosophy. Yet, it is not merely His philosophical, spiritual mastery which stands Him apart from the rest. Rather, it is the way He brings this wisdom alive for people; it is the way He uses this wisdom to help people overcome the obstacles in their lives and progress towards God.

Pujya Swamiji’s philosophy is “Like the sun, we must keep giving and giving, with no discrimination, no expectation, no hesitation and no vacation.” The gift of His wisdom in this book (and in life) is a tribute to this philosophy. Every piece of Himself – whether it is the divine vision of His eyes, the divine wisdom and insights of His mind, the divine touch of His hand,

the divine sound of His voice – is all ceaselessly put to use “*in the service of God and humanity.*”

I have never heard of a saint who can so seamlessly and successfully weave together ageless scriptural philosophy with down-to-earth counselling on modern day issues.

If you have had the privilege of seeking His counsel personally, then you know how blessed you are. If not, then at least through this book, may you find guidance, answers, insight, and inspiration, and may you catch a glimpse of the saint whose mere presence on this Earth carries us to peace, to bliss and to God.

Sadhvi Bhagawati
Rishikesh (Himalayas)

** Note: Readers will notice that there are occasional references to aspects of Indian culture, particularly with regard to marriage tradition. As the initial paper/booklet was prepared for a world conference on Hinduism, the flavor initially of course pertained to Hindu families living abroad. I have kept all of the original aspects in this newer, expanded version as well because issues of acculturation to the West with regard to marriage are prevalent for Indians living abroad. Therefore to dilute that advice and wisdom didn't seem to make sense. Non-Indian readers should not think, though, that due to a few references specifically for Indians that the book is only for people from the Indian subcontinent. Issues and conflicts that arise throughout our lives are universal. Child-rearing is a universally difficult task. Maintaining a loving, respectful, deeply connected relationship for decades in the face of life's inevitable trials and tribulations is a universal challenge. Therefore, the vast majority of this book is universally applicable. Further, the vast majority of Indian teachings and insights have a great deal to offer non-Indians as well. Hence, non-Indian readers will find that even those insights which may have roots in Indian tradition are of great benefit for them as well. There are, however, select pieces (particularly with regard to marriage of the children) which the reader will note apply especially and perhaps uniquely to Indians living abroad.*

Chapter 1

History to Modernity: The Root of the Problem

Introduction

Our Indian scriptures and ancient tradition give specific guidelines on how to have a healthy, happy and *sattvic* life in the *brahmacharya* (student) and *grihastha* (householder) *ashram* stages of life. For millennia people have studied, married, raised children and lived satisfied married lives according to these guidelines; then, they have moved together into the *Vanprastha* (retirement from worldly obligations) *ashram* stage.

However, in today's world, the migration to the West and the subsequent adoption of Western modes of living and thinking have frequently created conflict, struggle and strife among Indian families living abroad.

The solution to this situation is *not* to abandon the timeless, eternal wisdom of Indian tradition, but rather to find a way of remaining true to these ancient ideals while thriving in a Western lifestyle. The key is to find a balance between the East and West, the old and

the new, the values of our ancestors and the values of our peers.

Too many people living abroad believe that the solution to success in the West is to abandon Indian ethics and adopt – full-heartedly – the Western lifestyle. However, this is a two-fold tragedy. First, in the forsaking of their roots, Indians find themselves (and their children) rootless, foundationless and directionless. It is through maintaining an awareness of and dedication to one’s culture that one’s children will have a strong, solid foundation of ethics, morals, values and ideals on which to build their lives.

But, there is also a second tragedy when Indians abandon their culture in favor of the Western ideals. Indian culture is not only for Indians. It is not only important for Indians. The wisdom, answers, and insights don’t pertain only to Indians. Rather, these timeless truths are as applicable to Westerners living in New York in the present age as they were to Indians living in small villages thousands of years ago.

These days more and more Westerners are coming to India, thirsty for Indian knowledge. Each year our ashram is flooded with more and more Westerners. They are not in India merely for a vacation. Rather, they have come in search of these invaluable insights and these universal teachings.

Thus, this book is not only for Indians. It came into being due to repeated requests from Indian parents for guidelines on how to live in the West – how to adopt Western methods of living while maintaining Indian traditions, how to live lives in accordance with both modern standards and with the wisdom of our scriptures.

It is based – in large part – on Indian ideals and ethics. However, just as you will not find the word Hindu in any of the Indian scriptures, so you will not find any advice in this book which is of benefit only to Indians.

The problems faced by Indian families living abroad are basically the same problems faced by all families living in the West, or in Westernized cultures. They are problems of balance – how to balance a career with a family, how to balance love with discipline, how to balance spirituality with other aspects of familial life. So, the answers are not only answers for Indians; rather, the Indian wisdom and insights have a great deal to offer the entire world.

In this book we will address the issues affecting both the parents and the children. This book is a guide for both. It is the children who will be tomorrow's parents. Therefore, these two sides are inter-dependent and must be addressed as distinctly separate, yet overlapping and interwoven issues. This book teaches children how to be divine children and how to help their parents become divine parents. Similarly, it guides parents on the path of being divine people, divine spouses and divine parents.

Values

I'm going to talk a lot in this book about Indian values and Indian culture. Therefore, before we begin I will outline what exactly I mean when I talk about our values and traditions. The Indian values which are so important to hold on to include the following:

1. **Piety:** Indians tend to be raised with piety and devotion. Nearly every home has a temple, and daily the oil lamp is lit with reverence.

2. **Giving:** Traditional Indians are raised with the value of giving first to others before taking for themselves. This is best exemplified in the mother who will feed everyone (including all the neighbors and guests) before feeding herself.

3. **Seva/Service:** There is a great importance placed in Indian culture on doing selfless service or *seva*. This is work that is done for the benefit of humanity rather than for oneself or for one's own family and friends. It is work done without any expectation of reward.

4. **Non-violence:** At its root, Indian culture is a culture of *ahimsa*, or non-violence. In fact, it is in this way that Gandhiji won independence for the nation. Non-violence pertains to all aspects of Indian life – from living as vegetarians to remaining peaceful even in the face of violence.

5. **Inclusiveness:** Indian culture is a culture that loves all and includes all. We condemn no other path or religion. Our scriptures teach us that the Truth is One, but the paths are many.

6. **Purity:** Indian culture places a lot of importance upon purity of body, mind and soul. The body is seen as a Temple of God. Indians typically refrain from activities such as promiscuity and drug use which defile the body.

7. **Respect for Elders:** In a traditional Indian home, the elders are

greatly respected, and people typically bow down to their own grandparents as well as to elders in the community. Children are taught to touch the feet of elders in order to seek their blessings.

8. Emphasis on the Family: Indians traditionally place a great value on the family – not just the immediate family, but the entire extended family. Large family gatherings are frequent and the family serves as the axis for much of life.

Of course, these values are definitely not only Indian, nor do I mean to suggest that only Indians embody this value system. However, due to the tradition and the culture of India, these values have become representative of traditional Indian *sanskaras* (ethics and values). Although they are “traditional,” they are of crucial importance today for everyone. Whether one is Eastern or Western, these values will lead one to a happy, peaceful and meaningful life.

Further, this is in no way a complete list of the Indian value system. Rather it is a list of the ones which I feel are of most importance to maintain in the present age, whether one is living in India or is living abroad. It is also a list of the ones most likely to be tossed aside when one embraces a modern, materialistic lifestyle.

History Speaks

Indian culture historically provided the following “prescription” for married life and child-rearing:

1. Marriage was arranged by the parents after great consideration. The parents took counsel from the elders and other respected people in the community; they kept in mind family tradition, values, culture, etc. The choice was then accepted without quarrel by the bride and groom.
2. After marriage, the man worked outside the home and the woman gave birth and raised the children.
3. The husband provided financially for his family and remained steadfastly dedicated to giving them the best he was able.
4. The wife provided her husband with a warm, welcoming home environment; she performed daily *puja* for his health and success and raised the children with all the essential *sanskaras*.
5. The family performed *puja* together (not elaborate, but simple worship of the *kul devta*) and they attended temple together regularly.
6. The male children were sent to a *gurukul* to study under the guidance of a guru. Here they learned not only high standard academics, but also discipline, values and *yoga*/meditation.
7. The female children might be schooled in the village, or they might stay home and learn from their mother how to take care of the home.
8. In more modern times, with the unfortunate decline of the *gurukul* system, both the boys and the girls typically go to a local school. Yet, the education is the same: academics combined with

a strong ethical and moral education, combined with discipline and *yoga*.

9. The cycle continued as the parents searched for suitable spouses for their children.

10. After their children were married and financially stable, the parents moved slowly away from worldly life, into one more devoted to God, to prayer, to *seva*, and to simplicity.

Moving Into Modernity

However, this system is far removed from the lives being lived by most Indians abroad. The problems arise when parents, who may have been raised in India (or by very traditional parents, in a very traditional way) try to impose these ideals on their children, who are living in the modern age, surrounded by modern Western values.

Yet, Indian values and ideas are not anachronistic nor obsolete. Rather, they hold within them answers and keys to many of today's social dilemmas. These systems and traditions were passed down from our *rishis*, saints and sages, and they are as applicable – in theory – today as they were more than 5000 years ago. However, the way the theory is fervently put into practice may not be appropriate for a life lived in the West or in Westernized India.

The problems come when parents randomly – or based on pressure from friends and family – hold tenaciously to certain traditions

while abandoning others. Guidance must be given to parents as to which of the traditional values can and should be maintained, and which ones must be adapted or discarded. in order to provide themselves and their children with the best possible chance of success in the West.

In this way, not only will our own families find peace, but we will also be able to share this wisdom with the Western world.

We will begin our journey with the student years, the years which prepare us for the rest of our lives.

Chapter 2

Student Life

Penance or Parties?

It seems that there is a dichotomy in students' attitudes about the time of education. They either think that it's a time of jail, a time in which every precious moment of their lives is usurped by "vicious" professors with "unreasonable" demands, or they think their student years are a license to unlimited freedom and decadence, the last time in their lives to have fun.

Student life is neither of these. Rather, it is a time for you to enrich yourself completely and thoroughly so that whatever path in life you choose, you will be well-prepared.

I know that frequently the subject matter of classes in school may not seem relevant or interesting. So frequently I hear students complain, "But why do I have to learn this? Why do I need to get good marks in that class? It doesn't matter for what I want to do." There are two answers to this.

Study for Your Future

The first is that you don't know what you will want to do. Sure, you may say now that you hate math and you could never possibly consider any occupation which would require it. Fine. But, you have sixty, seventy, or eighty years of life ahead of you. Please do not limit yourself now, based on your preferences at twenty. No one knows the path on which God will lead him. No one knows where life will go. We must leave every door of opportunity open.

Also, the properties of certain subjects pertain to other subjects as well. It is impossible to learn how to multiply if you don't understand how to add. Similarly much of what you learn in school builds upon each other like bricks in a building. If you try to skip over the first floor, or to build the building without a right-hand corner, it will be wobbly and fall. Therefore, be sure that every brick laid in the building of your education is firm, solid and in place correctly. Then, and only then, will your foundation be solid and your future stable and strong. You may not notice one individual brick in a completed, towering building. But, you can be sure that if you removed the brick, the building would lose its balance.

Learning How to Learn

The other important aspect is that school is not only about the particular subjects. Rather, the time in life in which you are a

student is about learning how to learn. It's about disciplining yourself. It's about having to make choices, and seeing their consequences. It's about taking responsibility for yourself. It's about how to focus on the subject at hand. It's about how to listen attentively and remember the salient points. It's about how to organize your time.

So, don't fret too much if you don't like a particular class or if a certain subject seems particularly tedious and trying. First, try to find at least one thing interesting in it. If that's impossible then at least realize that you are building bricks in the foundation of you. You are laying stones in a well-rounded, educated, disciplined, organized, and knowledgeable person.

The skills that you learn in school, the study habits you develop, the discipline you exert – all of this will stand you in great stead throughout your lives. If you don't learn it now, then when will you?

Study, Study, Study

Your mantra for these years should be: *Study, study, study.*

However, don't only study academically in school. Study also in life. Study how to be good people. Study how to be honest and pious. Study the secrets of your parents and grandparents and the scriptures. Whether it's the *Gita*, the *Bible* or the *Koran*, they are all filled with great wisdom and insight. They all give keys to a divine life.

Be kind to people. Respect your parents. Give first to others and then take for yourself. Try to feel love in your heart for everyone. These are some of life's most important lessons. These are the lessons that will really open doors for you in your life and stand you in good stead whatever you do and wherever you go.

In our scriptures, there are two types of knowledge: *apara vidya* and *para vidya*. *Apara vidya* is lower knowledge, meaning academic knowledge or professional knowledge. It is really knowledge of facts, figures and skills. *Para vidya* is higher knowledge, or wisdom. It is spiritual knowledge, it is understanding, it is depth and insight, it is the knowledge which will guide you through your life. However, although one is termed "higher" and one is termed "lower," both are crucial. *Apara vidya* will help you be successful and prosperous, while *para vidya* will help you be peaceful, joyful and wise.

In Indian tradition, the first twenty-five years of a person's life are the years of *brahmacharya*. This refers to a time of abstinence, a time of study, a time of total devotion to the path of learning and becoming. It is a time of pledged celibacy and restraint from all attractions of the senses. The student delves thoroughly into academia, yoga, scriptural studies, and moral studies. His entire nature is sculpted during these years. During many of these years, traditionally the student would live with the guru at the *gurukul*; however, the practice and ideal of *brahmacharya* is not contingent upon living at a *gurukul*, nor should it be discarded simply because one lives in the West. Rather, it is all the more important there.

The reason behind the vows of purity and celibacy for these years

is to allow oneself to focus. As soon as boys and girls begin dating, their focus shifts. It is more difficult to concentrate on their studies. They rush through homework in order to talk on the telephone. They doodle and daydream in class. They write each other love notes. They lose their sleep.

While teenage romance and excessive social engagements are usually innocuous and temporary behavior, they cause the focus of these years to shift away from what is really important – getting an education. Additionally, it can set the pattern of an entire life focused on excessive socializing.

So, as much as possible, one should try to uphold these *brahmacharya* ideals. You will have decades and decades of married life to fulfill your sensual pleasures; you've already had lifetimes and lifetimes of it. Give yourself these years to abstain. Give yourself these years to develop your character, your potential, and your strengths.

The Five Rules of Student Life

I occasionally have to remind my youth that they are students, and that the definition of student is not one who manages to fit in a couple of hours of school work around a day of enjoyment, sports and friendship.

Yes, it's wonderful to have fun. It's wonderful to be with your friends. It's wonderful to engage in extra-curricular activities. But, please remember that these years are your student years. What

does that mean? What are the “student” years?

It is beautifully said in our scriptures:

*Kaak cheshta bako dhyaanam. Shwaan Nidra tathaiva cha.
Alpaahaari griha tyaagi, vidhyarthi pancha lakshnam.*

This *shloka* tells us exactly how a student should behave, think and feel. Embedded in the *shloka* are five essential traits of a student.

1. Your actions should be like a crow. A crow is spontaneous and immediate in its actions. When the call comes, the crow flies. Crows are always alert, always flying, always searching. Similarly, as students, you must never be idle, you must always be ready.

2. Your attention should be like a flamingo. Have you ever seen a flamingo? They stand on one foot, eyes closed as though they are deep in sleep or meditation. Yet, the second a fish swims by, they instinctively and immediately plunge their long beaks into the water to catch their meal. Their aim is the fish – nothing else. The flamingo is undisturbed, unshakable no matter what the circumstance, unless and until the fish comes. You, my young birdies, must be that focused on your studies. Your aim is the acquisition of knowledge and a successful completion of your academic career. Nothing should draw your attention away.

There is a beautiful story in the scriptures in which Dhronacharya, the guru of the Pandavas, is teaching the five brothers archery. He points to a tree in the forest. On the top-most branch of the tree is a small bird.

He tells his students that this bird is their target. Then, he asks his students to describe what they see in front of them. One brother says, "I see a forest full of beautiful trees with the sun streaming in between the branches." The next one says, "I see the mountains and the stream and the trees." The third brother says, "I see a large, majestic tree with lush, green leaves and thick branches in a grove of other lush, green trees. There is also a squirrel on the tree." The fourth brother says, "I see the tall trunk of this particular tree, with all of the branches emerging from the trunk, and the beautiful leaves on the branches." Arjuna, however, replies, "I see nothing but the bird sitting on the branch; on the bird, I see only its eye where I must shoot my arrow." Dhronacharya applauds the clarity, vision and focus of his star pupil.

This is the sort of focus you all must cultivate. These student years are filled with distractions and temptations. However, do not shift your eyes from your focus of obtaining a good quality education and developing your own sense of discipline and assiduousness.

3. Sleep like a dog. This does *not* mean to sleep all day, the way so many dogs do! Rather, if you watch a dog sleep, you will notice that he is always alert. Sleeping, yes. But, at the slightest noise, the slightest intrusion, he jumps to his feet to protect his master. He sleeps for his strength and health, but he is never dulled by this sleep, nor does he ever stay asleep for one extra second if his duty calls.

In contrast, I have seen so many university students who could sleep through an earthquake. There may be one hundred people in the house for a special morning *puja*. There may be loud Vedic

chanting, *bhajans*, *kirtan* and the constant hustle of people in and out, up and down the stairs. Yet, that youth will emerge hours later, wipe her sleepy eyes, and come down for breakfast, without ever realizing that a large program took place.

Sleep is not about losing yourself into such a state of non-existence that you become totally unaware of the world around you. Sleep is rest. It is a time for your body and mind to become rejuvenated and restored. However, it should not be a black hole of unconsciousness. Be careful not to spend too much time in the intoxicating grip of sleep, or you will find that you accomplish a lot less during your life than you would like.

4. Eat Less. The student diet too frequently consists exclusively of pizza and ice cream. Foods which are not good for you, like fast food, deplete your body's energy, sapping you of essential vitality. Excessive indulgence in sugary and/or oily food is not only bad for us physically, but it also diminishes our mental and emotional capacities. It makes sluggish, lethargic and prone to rapid mood swings. In these years you need all of your physical, mental and emotional strength harnessed in the service of your studies.

However, this maxim also means that we should eat less with all of our senses, not just with our mouths. During university time, students frequently overstimulate their senses with loud music, high-speed adventures, and sensual pleasures. However, with our senses so overstimulated we are unable to concentrate clearly on the subject at hand – our studies. Therefore, restrain all your senses. Imbibe only that “food” which will nourish you and strengthen you.

5. Have a study corner. You should have a place that is dedicated only to your studies. It may be as small as a desk and the corner of the room occupied by the desk. It may be a whole room. But, regardless of the size, it must be *only* for your studies. Don't use it for playing computer games or for talking to your friends on the phone. It should be a place which is held sacred for your studies.

S-T-U-D-E-N-T

It is very difficult for students, living in university dorms, to uphold the perfect model of *brahmacharya* for these years. So, what does it mean to be a student? To me, your student years are a time of: **Seriousness, Trial & Error, Understanding, Devotion, Encouragement, *Nav Jivan* and Tenacity.**

S – Seriousness

Your educational years should be enjoyable and full of rich, new experiences. However, this is not a time to just sit back, relax and wait for the world to carry you along. It is a time in which you must be serious about your studies, serious about your goals and serious about your future. If you become lax about your schoolwork, it will be easy to slip behind. Then, it becomes like quicksand. Once you are behind, it is so difficult to catch up that the task becomes daunting and one is tempted to just say, “forget it.”

Therefore, it is crucial to stay on top of things from the beginning.

Most importantly, don't miss a class. In university especially, it is very tempting to just "sleep in" one day or to skip one class in order to catch up on work for another. **However, going to class, paying attention and taking notes is the single most important thing you can do.** No amount of catch-up reading at home or copying from a friend's notes will make up for what was missed in class.

Be serious about your studies. Make them your priority. Be serious about your classes and your work.

T – Trial & Error

The time of youth and student life, especially when you live away from home in the dorms, is a time of trial and error. You are just discovering who you are, what your priorities are, what your dreams are, and what your values are. When you live under your parents' roof, you live (mostly) according to their rules and their set of values. But, once you are on your own, you must figure this out for yourself. You must weigh that which you learned at home against that which you are seeing amongst your peers and in the outside world.

You will make mistakes. Of course you will. Don't worry. Don't be afraid of making them. It is our mistakes that teach us, our mistakes that make us strong, our mistakes that give us the resolve and the fortitude to say, "never again." It is only through making mistakes that we can ever really know, "Oh, that was a mistake." Just as the word "light" would be meaningless without a "dark" against which to compare it, so we cannot be sure of that which

is right, unless we can contrast it to that which is wrong.

This is not a license to go out and engage in reckless, hedonistic, or decadent behavior. This is not a go-ahead to make mistakes on purpose or to do things which you know are wrong. You don't have to put your hand in fire just to "make sure" that it really burns, or to put your finger in a light socket just to "see what happens." You already know fire burns and you have already been taught not to put your fingers in light-sockets.

So please, my little birdies, be careful. Take what you've been taught into consideration. If you were holding a small child on your lap and the child continuously tried to grab hold of the flickering flame of a candle or lamp, you would not let him. No matter how enticing the fire is to the child, or how many times he tries to grab it, or how upset he becomes at your refusal, you would still not let the child put his hand in fire.

Similarly, your parents have tried to keep your hands out of fire. That which they have taught you has been through their own experience, their education, and their culture. Take this to heart and realize that your parents – more than your roommate or the people in your hall or the cool kids at the party – have your best interest in mind.

However, you will still have to find your own way. They can not hold your hand through life, and in these years you will have to make your own choices. You will have to experiment and decide what is right and what is wrong for you.

Before you make any decision, before you jump into any situation, just stop for a moment and ask yourself, “How will I feel tomorrow if I do this? How will I feel about myself when I look in the mirror? How will I feel when I close my eyes and talk to God?” If you know in advance that you will regret it, if you know that you will repent, then please don’t do it.

U – Understanding

This is the time in your life in which you must cultivate understanding in your hearts. If you don’t cultivate it now, it will be very hard to embrace all peoples later.

Try always to walk in other peoples’ shoes. Before you criticize or condemn anyone else, ask yourself what it would be like to be in his or her situation.

D – Devotion

Although your time in these student years will mostly be taken by your academic work, you must always remember that a rich spiritual life and a deep connection to God are the greatest education, the greatest wealth and the greatest success anyone can obtain. You may get the best marks, the most prestigious degree, the top career and the highest salary, but without a connection to God in your life, all else is in vain.

There was once a man who was selling a horse. He told the prospective buyer, “My horse is the most beautiful horse you’ve ever seen. His skin is the shiniest, his coat is the brightest, his mane is the softest, his legs are the longest. He is large and strong and regal looking. He won all the

contests of beauty and speed.” The prospective buyer asked the man, “Tell me, is there anything wrong with the horse? He sounds perfect.”

“Well,” the horse-owner said. “There is one small defect. The horse is dead.”

Without a spiritual connection, without a deeper meaning, without the presence of God in our lives, we become like the dead horse – beautiful on the outside, prosperous and successful, but missing that divine heartbeat that keeps us going.

If you put two zeros together, you get 00. This is nothing. But if you add a 1 in front of them, you get 100. If you have four zeros, you still only have zero. Even if you have a hundred zeros, it is still equal only to zero. But, if you add that 1 in front of them, then the number multiplies and grows. 0000 is nothing. But add a 1 and you get 10,000!

That “1” is God. We may accumulate and acquire all the zeros in the whole world, but if we don’t have a “1” then we are still only equal to zero.

So, be Number 1 in school, be Number 1 in your extracurricular activities, be Number 1 in all your endeavors, but don’t forget the real Number 1. The real Number 1 is God. It is only He who can turn 0000 into 10,000! If you keep Him as your Number 1, your life will be magic.

E – Encourage

Encourage whom? Encourage yourselves. These years are times

in which it is easy to become discouraged. So frequently I hear my youth bemoaning, “But, Swamiji, I can’t do it. I’m just not smart enough,” or, “Swamiji, maybe I’m not meant to be successful,” or, “Swamiji, I’m so afraid of letting my parents down.”

You must keep your spirits high. You must remember that you are divine and wonderful. You *can* do it! Whatever you want to do, you can do!

Look at Hanumanji. He was able to jump across the entire ocean. He was able to carry an entire mountain in his hands. Why? Because of his faith in Bhagwan Rama. You, too, must cultivate that faith. It doesn’t have to be Bhagwan Rama. That’s no problem. Whatever name or form of God you pray to is fine. But, have faith. If a small monkey can fly across oceans and carry mountains through faith in God, then you too can succeed beautifully if you keep Him in your heart.

There is a beautiful story told of a young princess who needed a husband. The princess was very smart and the best debater in the kingdom. So, her father decided that all of her suitors would come and debate her. He who won, he who proved his superb intelligence would win her hand in marriage. All the best debaters and scholars in the kingdom came to take the test and win the beautiful princess. However, none of them could equal her in wits, and every one of them was defeated.

Angered, humbled, and embarrassed a few of the suitors decided to play a trick on the princess. They went out and found the most ignorant, moronic man they could and instructed him how to win the princess’ hand in marriage. They told him that he must maintain total silence.

He could use only sign language. The man was of course very enthusiastic about the prospect of marrying the beautiful princess, and so he immediately agreed.

When the suitors returned to the palace, with the imbecile tagging along, they told the princess that they had found a brilliant scholar who was so enlightened that he did not even need to use words to speak. However, they told her, for the debate to be fair, she must also use only gestures. If she was as intelligent as the scholar, they said, then she would also be able to convey the highest philosophy with only the use of her hands.

The princess agreed to the challenge, and began by holding up one finger, implying the existence of only one Supreme Reality. The ignorant man, though, took her finger as pointing toward his eyes, and he feared that she was going to strike him and poke out his eye. So, he decided, "If she's going to try to poke out one of my eyes, I will poke out both of her eyes," and to show this he held up two fingers.

The scholars who were standing by immediately stepped in and told the princess that the scholar meant that although God, Brahman, the Creator was only one, He could not create the world or sustain it or destroy it without the creative power of Maya, and so there must be two.

Next, the princess held up five fingers, in reference to the five elements of which the world is made. She was asking the suitor to give his lofty opinion of this fact. The imbecile, however, took this gesture as a threat to slap him. So, he decided, "If she tries to slap me, I will punch her," and he made a fist.

The scholars intervened and explained thus, "You show the five elements

as separate, like your fingers. Our sage is saying that they must be united, as a fist, in order to perform their function in the world."

Soon, through the cunning explanations of the scholars, the princess had to concede the debate and she married the half-wit, much to the mischievous delight of the true suitors.

However, it was not long before she realized that she had been tricked into marrying a moron and she threw him from the palace. She scolded him that he was not allowed to step foot back into the kingdom until and unless he became the true erudite scholar that he feigned to be.

Dejected and forlorn, the man stumbled out of the kingdom, bemoaning his fate as he knew he could never live up to the princess' words. Having walked a great distance through the forest wracked with misery, he sat down beside a well and cried. As his eyes cleared, he found himself staring at the concrete wall of the well, parts of which had become severely eroded due to the harsh rubbing of the rope whenever people pulled water from the well. The concrete which was rubbed every day by the thick rope had large fissures in it, compared to the smooth walls of the rest of the well.

The man immediately realized, "If daily rubbing of a rope can create a large groove in concrete, if it can dig so deeply into a concrete wall, then maybe my mind can change as well. Maybe daily 'rubbing' of my mind can change it in the same way that the rubbing of the rope changed the form of the concrete."

With that resolve, the man decided he would throw himself into his studies and his devotion. It is this man who later became known as Kalidas, one of the most renowned scholars, poets, philosophers and writers of

Indian tradition. And what does Kalidas mean? It means “devotee of the Goddess Kali.” It was his devotion and his resolve that changed the very nature of his being.

N – Nav Jivan (“New Life”)

The time when you go from being a child at home to being a student off at university is a time in which you are born into a new life. One moment you are a child, and all your needs are taken care of by your parents. They are always there – twenty-four hours a day – watching out for you. They are there to help you, to care for you, to make sure you eat properly and sleep on time. They are there to guide you and to provide a structured, balanced life.

However, once you leave home and move into the dorms or into an apartment, the responsibility becomes yours. There is no one there to tell you to eat your breakfast, or to tell you to go to sleep. There is no one there to prevent you from watching TV all night or from talking on the phone with friends until the early hours of the morning. There is no one sitting up until you come home safely from your evening out.

When you live at home, under your parents’ supervision, a part of you knows that you will always be “caught” and will never be able to go too far astray. Therefore, you may rebel, you may disobey the rules, you may push their boundaries, but deep inside you know that they will always be there looking out for you.

Once you have moved out of the house though, that is no longer the case. Now you are on your own. The responsibility of caring

for yourself is now yours alone.

You are now traversing the threshold from childhood to adulthood. This *Nav Jivan* (“New Life”) can be whatever you make it. The choice is now yours. *“Bolo Jivan kaisa hai? Jaisa banalo vaisa hai. Chahe is ko narak banalo, chahe is ko swarg banalo. Bolo jivan kaisa hai, jaisa banalo vaisa hai.”* It means, “What is life? Life is what you make it. You can make it Hell, or you can make it Heaven. What is life? Life is whatever you make it.”

You can make your life, or you can break your life. This choice is yours. God has given us each a set of circumstances with which to travel the journey of life. How we use these circumstances and how we use our strengths and weaknesses is up to us.

You can make your life into a shining star or into a painful scar. The choice is now yours.

So, take a pledge that you will make your new life Heaven, not only for yourself but for all of humanity. It is said that one of the greatest gifts from God is the gift of human birth. Through this human birth you can do wonders. Do not limit yourselves. Do not underestimate yourselves.

T – Tenacious

Nothing in life comes easily other than love for God! That which we want we have to work for. Your studies will be difficult at times. Sometimes they will seem to require more of you than you are able to give. At other times during these years, your life may

seem to fall apart – that is part and parcel of being an adolescent. Our lives are torn down but then rebuilt again, each time with the pieces more firmly in place, each time with the foundation a little more solid. You must not lose hope; you must never give up.

Today there is a tragic epidemic of teenage depression, drug abuse and suicide. These youth don't know how to hold on through difficult times. In the limited vision of adolescence, they are unable to see the light at the end of the darkness.

My birdies, you must hold on. Whether it is a difficult class, a difficult project, a difficult relationship, or a difficult time, just hold on with faith that God will pull you through. There is a beautiful saying, simple and yet profound. Keep it as your mantra during those times which may seem to be unbearable. The mantra is *“this too shall pass.”*

We move through life, shedding layer after layer of the old, as we don newer and newer layers of maturity, wisdom and experience. That which today seems unbearable will be but a memory tomorrow. Feel it, experience it, learn from it, but never let anything leave you dejected or hopeless. There is always a brighter tomorrow, as we move – day by day – closer to God.

There is a beautiful line in one of our prayers which says, *“Tu akela nahin pyaare; Raam tere saath mein.”* It means, you are never alone. The Lord is always with you. Never feel lonely. Never feel scared. Never feel hopeless. Just close your eyes and realize that God is walking by your side, holding your hand in His.

I heard a story once of a man who was a great devotee of God. Always throughout his life, God was his companion. He loved God more than anything else in all the world. When the man was very old, he lay in his bed one afternoon and had a dream. In this dream, he could see his entire life stretched out before him, as though it was the coastline along the ocean. He could look back and see his footprints – deep impressions in the wet sand – marking the path he had walked in this life. As he looked back further and further, he could see that, in fact, there was not one, but two sets of footprints, side-by-side, along the edge of the ocean. He knew the other footprints were those of God, for he had felt God’s presence beside him throughout his life.

But, then he saw something that woke him immediately from his dream. His heart beat fast and he could not hold back the tears. “God!” he cried out. “I just had a dream, and in this dream I could see the whole path of my life; I could see the footprints I left along the way. Beside my footprints, there were Yours, for You walked with me, and...” Now the man was full of tears and could barely speak. “God, sometimes there was only one set of footprints, and when I looked, I could see that those were the times I had really fallen, was really broken, when I needed You most. How, God, how could You leave me when I needed You most? I thought You promised You’d be with me forever. Why did Your footprints disappear at the times I really needed You?”

Softly, gently, God laid a hand on the man’s head and wiped away the tears. “My child, I promised to always be with you, and I have never left you for a second, not even while you slept. Those times when you see only one set of footprints, those darkest moments of your life, it was those times that I carried you in My arms.

There are times we feel abandoned by God, times we doubt His presence in our lives. It is easy to have faith when all is going well, easy to believe in a plan when that plan brings us joy and fulfillment. It is much more difficult to believe in the inherent goodness of the Planner when the plan causes agony. Do we all not, on some level, feel that when our lives are tough, that we have been left by God? But, it is those times that our faith will carry us through. It is truly those times in which we are being carried by God.

So, remain tenacious. Remain strong. Keep doing that which is right. Study hard, be honest and kind, and live a life of purity and integrity. Never give up.

Be God-Conscious, Not Glamour-Conscious

I know that the world in which you live says that happiness comes from owning the “right” things, wearing the “right” clothes, going to the “right” places, knowing the “right” people, and speaking the “right” language. But, happiness is not there.

The satisfaction that comes from owning something new, or from being a member of the “in” crowd is fleeting. Tomorrow there will be something different to own; tomorrow there will be a new “in” crowd to impress. It is never ending. If you want to find real joy, real peace in life, you must look inside. You must look to God.

If you are Indian, go back to your Indian roots. It is there, embed-

ded in the ancient tradition and timeless wisdom, that the secrets to life lie. It is there that you will find the solid foundation on which to build your life.

If you are *not* Indian, no problem. The gifts of Indian culture do not apply only to Indians. Throughout this book, you will find many of the most important principles of Indian tradition. Try them. Follow them. You will see that the principles are beneficial for people of any race, any tradition, and any culture. I always say that if you are a Hindu, then the Indian scriptures make you a better Hindu. If you are a Christian, then reading and following the Indian scriptures will make you a better Christian. If you are a Jew, then reading and following the Indian scriptures will make you a better Jew. The Indian tradition will help make you a better person, regardless of your religious or cultural background.

I know that when you are young the temptation is to spend your free time with your friends, shopping at the mall, at sports events, at parties, or at the movies. These are fine and they are important parts of growing up. However, you must remember that these superficial activities will only make you feel satisfied and relaxed in the present; they will do nothing towards bringing true, lifelong happiness, peace or understanding. Therefore, be sure to balance these pleasurable activities with ones that actually enrich you and lead you toward a more fulfilled, peaceful life.

What are some of these activities, these pursuits which enrich our lives, making us wiser, more peaceful and divine? They can be any activities which bring you closer to God: going to temple,

going to listen to *katha* or to lectures by saints and scholars, reading inspiring texts, doing *japa*, practicing meditation. Beneficial activities are also activities which are in the service of the world: any kind of volunteer work, helping children, the elderly, the sick or the poor. It is through serving His children that we become close to God.

There was once a princess who was suffering from an undiagnosable illness. She lay in bed, listless, unable to walk or exert herself at all. She had lost all her appetite and her parents feared she would soon perish. Her father, the King, called in all the top doctors and medical specialists, but none could either cure or even diagnose the young princess. They gave her allopathic, homeopathic and ayurvedic medicines. They gave her pills, compresses, powders, massages and mineral baths. Nothing made even a dent in the princess's condition. She continued to lay, limp and mute, on her bed, staring blankly at the ceiling above her.

Finally, in desperation, the King called a revered holy man, a saint who was worshipped throughout the kingdom as having divine knowledge and powers. As soon as the sage saw the princess, he understood exactly what was wrong. "Pick her up and place her in the carriage," he ordered. The King refused. "How can you take this weak, fragile being outside in the carriage?" he demanded.

Yet, the saint insisted. "If you do not follow my orders, your daughter may not recover. Wrap her warmly if you like and place her in the carriage. We will travel alone." The King had no choice; his options were exhausted and none had borne any fruit. He could only pray that the holy man knew what he was doing.

So the princess was wrapped in the warmest shawls and gingerly placed – supported by numerous feather pillows – in the King’s carriage. The holy man got in beside her and instructed the driver where to go. He explained to the princess as they traveled, “I have a few urgent jobs to take care of on our way. You can accompany me.” They soon stopped in a poor area on the outskirts of the kingdom. The sage stepped down from the carriage, carrying large sacks filled with clothing and food. He walked house to house, delivering bags of rice, lentils and wheat to the impoverished villagers.

Soon, he returned to the carriage to find – as he had expected – the princess sitting up straight in her seat, peering eagerly over the side of the carriage.

They drove a little ways, and again the sage stopped the carriage in another poor, rural village outside the wealthy kingdom. “I need your help in this village. There is too much for me to carry,” he told the princess. She barely needed the help of his hand to get down from the carriage.

The sage carried the heavy bag and gave the princess the task of handing the food items and wool sweaters to the grateful villagers. At the first house, she walked slowly, delicately, and meekly put her hand in the large sack to take out the bags of rice and lentils.

However, by the third house she was striding confidently down the path, and by the fifth house she was picking up the young children to hold them in her arms.

As they walked back to the carriage, she insisted on helping the saint carry the sacks of food, and she did not need any assistance to get back

up into the carriage. Her cheeks were rosy; there was a beautiful, radiant smile on her face and a glow in her eyes.

Upon returning to the kingdom, three short hours after leaving, the princess nearly jumped out of the carriage and skipped up the steps to the castle! The King was amazed! How had the saint cured his daughter so completely in such a short time?

The saint explained, "Your daughter was suffering from lack of meaning in life. She was suffering from the disease of being spoiled and having every whim gratified. She was ill from a life being lived in vain. A journey to the poorest of the poor, a few hours of giving rather than taking, the experience of service and selflessness are the only possible cures."

Thereafter, the princess travelled twice each week with the saint, back into the poor villages, distributing food, clothing and other necessary supplies. She used her position as princess to help improve the living conditions of all those who lived in poverty. She dedicated herself to helping all those in need.

And she never suffered from a day of listlessness again.

Every day people in the West go out, go to work, earn money and become more prosperous. Yet at the end of the day, when they return home, they are not happy. What is the true secret to internal peace and everlasting joy? It is a secret that traditional India knows.

In India, in all villages there is a temple. I remember when I was young (and it is still mostly true today, especially in the smaller vil-

lages) that first thing in the morning, everyone would go to temple and take three *parikramas* (walking in a circle) around Bhagwan. The point of this was not merely ritual. Rather, the *parikramas* signified, “God, I am about to go and perform my worldly tasks, but let me always keep you in the center, let me remember that all work is for you.”

In the evening, before returning home once again, everyone went back to the temple. They would pray, “God, if during this day I have forgotten that you are the center of everything, please forgive me. Before I go home to my family, let me once again remember to whom my life is devoted.”

People in these villages have very little in terms of material possessions. Most of them live below the Western standards of poverty. Yet, if you tell them they are poor, they won’t believe you, for in their opinion they are not. This is because they have God at the center of their lives. If you go to these villages, you may see what looks like poverty to you. But, if you look a little closer, you will see that these people have a light shining in their eyes, a glow on their faces and a song in their hearts that money can not buy.

What is the meaning of this? What is the moral behind looking at these villagers? The lesson means acquire possessions if you want, earn money if you want, but always remember what is truly important in life: God. Only He can put the light in your eyes, the glow on your face and the song in your heart. I always tell parents, “Give your children everything, but teach them about God.”

However, it is difficult frequently to know *how* to implement the teaching of God in daily life. Yes, we should go to temple. Yes, we must chant His name (whichever name appeals most to us, whether it is Krishna, Rama, Mahavir, Gurunanak, Allah, Jesus, Adonai, or anything other name). Yes, we must read from His holy words. Yes, we must pray to Him and offer our lives to Him.

However, what else can we do, so many people ask, to really become aware of God – full of God-consciousness – in our daily lives? *We can serve His people!* Through service of the poorest of the poor we come closest to God. It is easy to see the divine in holy people, easy to serve those who look pious, proper and beautiful. But, the spiritual challenge is to see the divine in all, to serve all – from the highest King to the sickest leper – as though they are manifestations of God.

Through this selfless service, we not only benefit those whom we are serving, but we also benefit ourselves immeasurably. Our hearts fill with joy, with peace and with love. Our lives become full of meaning.

Treasure Chest

To the youth who are Indian, you are truly blessed and you must not take that blessing for granted. You are special. You have, flowing in your veins, a connection to one of the richest treasure chests in the world. Your Indian culture, your tradition, your

roots have the answers and the keys to life.

To those of you who are not Indian but who are reading this book: you are also very special, for something has brought you in touch with Indian culture and tradition. Do not take this gift for granted. These keys to happiness, peace and joy in life are not found at the mall with your friends. Sure, go have fun. No problem. But don't forget to also give time to what is really important in life: your connection to God, your family, learning about your heritage, doing *seva* (selfless service for others)

Too frequently, I see the youth rushing past their grandparents or older relatives who are sitting on the couch, in order to get to the television. This is your mistake. The TV will not give you answers, only more questions. It will not give you solutions, only more problems. But, your grandparents – those ancient, beautiful reservoirs of wisdom and insight who sit on your couch – they can really provide you with the keys to life.

I know that sometimes you struggle. But I want you to know that I have no doubt about you: you are truly divine. Sometimes when one is different, the temptation is to let oneself be influenced by others, to become like they are. However, you must be bigger than that. Realize that your job is to spread your divinity, your purity and the universal values of your culture to those around you. I am not saying this is easy. Simply keep it in your heart as the goal, and pray to God for the strength to realize it.

You can really guide, help and change the youth of the world. You

can help them find the right path, the path of service, the path to God. You must realize this though. You must nurture and nourish it, so it grows, blossoms and spreads to those around you.

There is a beautiful story of a beggar who lived all of his life under one tree. Each day he would go out into the villages and beg for some dry bread crumbs to sustain his life. Then, he would come back to his tree and eat his bread or whatever scraps the villagers had given him that day. For forty years the beggar lived under the same tree, pleading with the people to give him food. He'd walk to all the nearby villages, alternating days, begging for his nourishment. Slowly, day by day, he became weaker, and finally one day his body could no longer sustain itself and he passed quietly into death.

When the villagers found him, they decided to bury his ashes under the tree where he lived out his life. As they began to dig, in order to place his ashes deep in the ground, they found a treasure chest full of gold, diamonds and jewels, a mere six inches below the surface.

For forty years, the beggar had lived, barely managing on his dry bread crumbs, sitting six inches above a treasure chest which would have rendered him as rich as a king. If only it had ever occurred to him to explore the depths of the Earth on which he sat, or to delve deeply into the recesses of his home – he would have discovered this treasure chest. But, he did not. Rather, he sat on the surface, suffering and withering away day after day.

Too frequently in life we are also like this beggar – running here and there searching, begging for that which we need to fulfill our

lives. Perhaps we are not begging for food or basic life necessities. More likely we are searching and yearning for peace, happiness or God. We go here, we beg there. We search this place, we search that place. But that priceless peace and happiness still elude us.

If only we would sit still for a moment and go deep within, we would find that treasure chest. We don't even have to dig six inches. Just right within us, sitting in our heart, is God, and through our connection to Him, all of the riches of the world are bestowed upon us.

However, too frequently I see people running in the opposite direction in their fruitless search. They run from this workshop to that workshop, from this new trend to that new trend, yet they are perpetually frustrated in their search. Stop for a moment and look within. Go back to your roots, back to your heritage, back to the temple. Listen to the stories of your parents and grandparents. Perform *aarti* with deep devotion. Go to have the *satsang* and the *darshan* of visiting saints. Take a trip to India rather than to the beaches or ski slopes.

Your culture, your heritage and your traditions are a true treasure chest of meaning, understanding, wisdom and insight. Through opening this box of jewels you will definitely find the happiness, contentment and peace for which you are searching.

Never forget that the treasure chest is inside of you, flowing through your veins. It is not some external "thing" to be obtained or found. Rather, the divine joy is residing within you, in your heart, in your breath and in your blood.

Chapter 3

The Path of Purity and Self-Control

Purity – What Is It?

One of the biggest issues today, whenever I talk to the youth, is purity. They want to be pure, they want to be righteous, they want to be divine, but they feel discouraged. They are young, tempted, and adventurous. This is especially an issue for the youth living in the West, surrounded by Western ideals, values and examples.

So my young dears, what is purity? You always hear your parents, teachers and priests tell you to be pure. But what does that mean? It means being honest, being true to yourself, and not hurting anyone.

Purity does not mean conforming word for word to a set of rules written for an entirely different place and time. It does not mean deciding to live exactly the way they lived in the scriptures and then condemning yourself for digressing slightly from the path. It does not mean devising a set of impossible standards for your-

self – based on the traditional *gurukul/brahmacharya* system – and then berating yourself for being unable to follow it 100% in your university dorm.

Most of what Hinduism says is as applicable today for youth in the modern world as it was 10,000 years ago for youth in traditional India. However, too frequently I see that people are taking the words out of context. Therefore, our youth today are thinking, “This is wrong. That is wrong.” But, as teenagers living in today’s modern society, it is natural to think, natural to have desires, natural to want to see what everyone else is doing.

Unfortunately, due to parents’ misconception of purity and a lack of understanding of today’s world, we are seeing our beautiful, divine youth dying with guilt over having what they think are “impure” thoughts or being in an “impure” situation.

Purity of Thought

All of our actions grow from seeds planted in our thoughts. As we think, so we will act. As we feel, so we will think, so we will act. Therefore, we must be tenacious about cultivating purity of thought.

This is especially important for the youth. You are young, impressionable, and suggestible. Youth is a time of passion, a time of emotion. Therefore, it is especially critical at this time to ensure that your thoughts stay pure.

*Sow a thought, reap an action.
Sow an action, reap a habit.
Sow a habit, reap a trait.
Sow a trait, reap a character.
Sow a character, reap a destiny.*

We must never take a thought for granted. We must never allow ourselves to entertain negative thoughts.

Watch how two life paths could go based only on the matter of one thought:

Let's take two college boys who go together to a party. Both are freshmen, both are relatively shy, and both are eager for people to like them. At this party everyone is drinking alcohol. One thinks, "Look at everyone drinking. It's not such a big deal. Besides, then at least people won't think I'm weird and I can make some friends." That is his thought. Then, the thought translates into the action of him drinking a beer. He likes the way it makes him feel and now that he's had one, he decides there is no harm in having another. So, he has another, and another and another.

From then on, at parties (and then alone in his dorm room) he forms the habit of drinking beer. There is no more the stigma attached to alcohol, and so that one action has become a habit.

The alcohol removes his inhibition and his reserve. So he becomes boisterous and lewd. He sows the character trait of one who is a partier. Therefore, those who also like to drink a lot and be loud and boisterous are attracted to him and become his friends. Through his continued association with these people (and therefore his avoidance of other company

that might condemn his behavior), his character changes into one who doesn't care about school, about his parents or about God. He stops his meditation practice (because it is in those quiet moments he knows he's doing something wrong), and his character takes a turn toward alcohol abuse, disregard for society, decadence and degeneration.

This character sets up the course of his life into failure, passion, lack of control and alcohol abuse. He is never able to hold a good, steady job due to his alcohol abuse and his hedonistic, "I don't care" nature.

On the other hand, take the other boy, who sees everyone drinking and thinks, "I don't even want to touch that stuff. I've heard too many bad stories about people getting addicted or doing things they later regret." So, his thought leads to his action of abstaining from drinking. Even when he's offered, he politely refuses. He sees his friend get drunk and out of control and he decides he will not take the same route.

Strengthened by his resolve as he watches his friend spiral quickly downward, he continues to refuse alcohol at all the parties, thus making a habit. He may feel a little shy, but slowly people come to know that he doesn't drink and he stops getting pressured. His quiet, solid refusal of alcohol leads to a trait of strength in numerous circumstances. He finds himself able to withstand all other situations of pressure as well, since he has formed this trait.

At one party at which everyone is very drunk, one of the girls who was dancing falls and hits her head on a metal shelf. She begins to bleed profusely and everyone realizes she needs emergency care. "Is there anyone here sober enough to drive?" her best friend cries. This boy is the only one who didn't drink. He quickly says, "I am."

The boy rushes the injured girl to the nearby emergency room for treatment. They are told by the doctor that the girl reached the hospital “just in time” or she would likely have had internal hemorrhaging.

Additionally, the doctor gives a stern lecture to her friends for being drunk and he cites examples of how many fatally injured youth he sees every night, whose death or critical injury are due to alcohol abuse.

This boy is heralded as a hero for being sober enough to save the girl. Everyone stops him in the halls and tells him that he really did a great thing. His character quickly becomes one of leadership and strength.

Having developed a character of strength, purity and morality, this boy goes on to live a successful, happy life in which he does not succumb to external pressure or temptation. He has developed the discipline of character necessary to live a wonderful life.

The point of these two examples is *not* to say that drinking one beer will lead to a lifetime of failure and degeneracy or that those who experiment in college are doomed to addiction and despair. In fact, some who experiment in college are actually stronger and wiser for the experience; yet some carry these traits throughout their lives.

The point of these two examples *is* to show the power of a thought – the power of one small, seemingly insignificant idea and how it can change our lives. So many times in our lives we can trace an enormous success or a miserable mistake back to one “small” thought. So, we must be wary of our thoughts, because they have the power to drive our lives.

Whenever you find yourself having a negative thought about another person, or a thought that you suspect might lead you in a wrong direction, just tell yourself “No!” and immediately switch your train of thought. Or, if you can’t get your mind off it, engage yourself in work immediately. It can be school work, correspondence, volunteer work – just anything that will completely engage you.

The Two Paths in Life

The *Bhagavad Gita* says it beautifully. It tells us that in life there are two paths: the path of attraction and the path of dedication. The path of attraction is the path in which we follow our basic instincts, fulfill our sensual desires, and make choices in the moment based only what we “want to do.”

On the other hand, the path of dedication is the path in which we devote ourselves to a higher purpose. We realize that we are on the Earth for bigger reasons than just to eat, drink, reproduce and enjoy ourselves. The animals do that. Every animal eats, drinks, reproduces and plays. People on the path of attraction live their lives like those animals. People on the path of dedication are committed to a higher goal.

You might think, “Well, what’s wrong with just enjoying myself? What’s wrong with attraction? I’m still young.” The *Gita* goes on to tell us the consequences of each path. Attraction leads to distraction, which leads to dissatisfaction, which leads to destruc-

tion. On the other hand, dedication leads to perfection, which leads to satisfaction, which leads to salvation. These are not just long-term consequences. These are minute-to-minute, day-to-day consequences.

I receive so many e-mails and letters each day from youth around the world whose lives are ruined due to their momentary hedonism and decadence. I recently received an e-mail that included the following passage:

"Pujya Swamiji, I wish I could just go back in time and change all my decisions. I feel like my whole life is ruined. I used to think that nothing could happen to me, since all my friends were doing the same thing and nothing happened to them. Now I realize how stupid I was. I hate my husband, but I know that isn't really fair. He did the best thing by marrying me and I know I should be grateful, but I can't be. All I can keep thinking is that if it weren't for him and for Priya (my daughter's name) then my life would be normal again. Swamiji, is it wrong that I think like this? Is God angry at me for thinking like this? Priya is so young and innocent that I hate myself for thinking bad thoughts about her, but I can't help it. Whenever my husband comes home at night I always hide in the bathroom so I don't have to see him right away. I want to kill myself if I have to see him every day of my whole life. Please, tell me what to do. I know I have made so many mistakes but now I am really confused. Please help me. Are you coming to London soon? It has been too long since you were here. I really need your help."

Do not trade the rest of your life for a moment of pleasure.

Choose compassion over passion. Choose tenacity over temptation. Choose service over sensation. Choose righteousness over revelry. Choose dedication over decadence. Choose honor over hedonism.

Power of Japa for Purity of Thought

Also, you must learn to chant a mantra. If you have been given a mantra by a guru, wonderful. Chant it all the time, whenever it comes to you. Yes, have a set time each day (preferably in the morning when you first wake up and at night before you sleep) in which you chant your mantra. Even if you only have five minutes, do it regularly. Every day. This will form a lifetime of a divine habit. You will quickly begin to feel the presence of God in your life. You will feel stronger than the external circumstances. You will know that nothing anyone says has the power to reach your heart. *Japa* will plug you in to the divine power house – it will give you that great, direct connection to God which will guide you through your life.

But don't just chant your mantra during your set "mantra time." Chant it whenever you can. Do not feel that you are "wasting time" by chanting it. A mantra is the broom that sweeps out the dust in your mind, making it clear and sharp. A mantra fine tunes your mind and teaches it to be focused.

Whenever you are driving, or walking, or bored in class, or forced to listen to someone engage in idle gossip, just chant your mantra

in your mind. You will see the incredible magic it produces. Not only will your mind become clear, sharp and pure, but your entire life will change. The mantra is not only a panacea for the brain – rather it is elixir for the body, mind, soul and spirit.

If you have not been given a mantra, no problem. Chant any one that appeals to you. You can chant just “Om” or “Sohum” or “Shivohum” if you want to. Or you can chant, “Ram, Ram,” “Hare Krishna,” “Om Namah Shivaya,” the Gayatri mantra or anything else.

If you get in the habit of chanting your mantra at all times, then whenever any undesirable thought comes to you, just immediately start chanting your mantra and don’t stop until that thought is no more in your mind.

You Are More Than Your Thoughts

On the one hand, as we have just discussed, you must strive to make your mind pure and steadfast. However, I know this is hard, especially for youth. There are so many temptations and distractions, so many desires. Please do not feel bad if you do find yourself having “impure” thoughts. This is totally natural at your age. You are the product not only of your heart and your mind, but also of your body chemistry, and youth is a time in which the hormones and chemicals of the body rise up in such a surge that many youth feel overwhelmed with passion and emotion.

Don't worry. Don't feel bad. Don't feel impure. You may be having the thought or the desire, but the thought is *not* you. The desire is *not* you. It is being *had* by you, but you are a million times more than that. So, make me one promise: you will never hate yourselves, condemn yourselves, or feel impure based on thoughts or desires you have.

You must struggle, strive and pray to purify your mind and thoughts. What we think, so we become. Therefore, it is crucial to control the mind.

However, today we are living in *Kali Yuga*, and one of the graces of this era is that we are actually only penalized for that which we do, not that which we think. Yes, we *must* cultivate purity of thought, for our actions grow from the seeds planted in our minds. However, it is important for you to realize that these thoughts and desires are natural, and you are not accruing "bad karma" based on them.

Don't Jump Into the Ocean of Temptation

So many youth come to me, riddled with guilt and anguish for these "uncontrollable thoughts." You children are all pure and divine and beautiful. These thoughts will come and go like waves in the ocean. But, you must not let them carry you away. I always tell my young friends, "You are not like a light bulb that can be switched on and off at someone else's whim." You are bigger than that, greater than that, and stronger than that, yet so frequently

you tend to forget this. Isn't it true? A friend calls you on the phone and tells you that someone was speaking badly about you, or that your best friend told your secrets to someone else. Your whole day is ruined by this call. Or, the boy you really like from your math class smiles at you in the halls and your day is like Heaven. Isn't it true?

It is wonderful to have emotions, wonderful to feel joy. But, you must take the reins of your life back into your own hands. Too often in life, we give the reins of our lives to those around us. We let others determine our state of mind.

Or, we give the control to our emotions. We let our feelings, our passions, and our emotions run away with our lives. But, please, remember, you are *having* these feelings. You are *not* these feelings. You are not the sadness, the anger or the passion. You are *not* your mind which seems so confused at times. You are greater than all that. You are divine. You are God's part and parcel.

Someone gave me the following piece that beautifully expresses the struggle to separate the Self from the thoughts. It captures both the struggle and the key for resolving the struggle:

I am not this mind, this mind that seems to possess me. I am not these feelings that wash over me, like waves of the ocean, enveloping my being, carrying me with them, drowning me, collapsing my bones under their weight. I am not them.

Because of their pervasiveness, their strength, I think they are me. But are they? Even the boundless, vastness of the ocean cannot

wash over one who sits on the top of the mountain. Even the strongest wave cannot drown those who are safe on high ground.

It is my choice to jump into a raging sea, knowing I am only a novice swimmer, and test how far out I can go. Of course, the waves will then come and take me. Still, though, they are not me. They have taken control over me because I have let them. I have jumped into their domain, left the heights of wisdom, the heights of peace and serenity, for the intractable waters of a raging sea.

But then, can I really say, "Oh, there was nothing I could do? I was the wave." How ridiculous that notion is. Can I not signal to a passing boat? Can I not stop fighting the water and instead let myself float peacefully back to shore? If I fight and thrash and play the ocean's game, it is sure to win. It is bigger and stronger than I, and it has already taken millions into its infinite depths of death. But, if I play God's game instead; if I refuse to indulge in the thrashing of the waves; if I remember that I will float and survive if I let myself; if I have faith that soon a boat will come by – then the worst that happens is I get wet and a little tired.

I must always remember that there was an "I" who chose to jump into the water, an "I" who chooses whether to drown by struggling with a vast power or to live by calling upon the lightness of my being. I am the "I" who chooses, the "I" who will emerge from the depths of the ocean, the "I" who – after a simple towel and cup of hot tea – will be able to tell the story to others, the "I" who will share with people how I freed myself from the clutches

of the enveloping waves.

This "I" feels like the waves when it is in them, but really it has chosen to enter, and it will choose when and how to leave. Therefore, it cannot be the waves.

I am not the waves of the ocean, and similarly I am not the waves of anger, anxiety, jealousy, greed, and lust that are just as vast, just as strong and just as restless as the waves of the sea. Yet, will I sit on the cliff in meditation, watching the waves crash below? Or will I uncross my legs, lower my gaze from the light of the sun and throw myself into the depths of the sea? This is my choice.

Even if I sit high above and watch the waves crash on the rocks, I sometimes feel as though there is no difference between the "me" on the cliffs and the raging water below. Sometimes I feel that even if my body stays safely on the mountain top, my mind and heart are being carried out to sea. It is these times that I must lift my eyes from the water below to the sun above. I must remember that I belong to the sky, not to the Earth. I must remember that because I can see the ocean, because I can name the ocean, because I can watch first one wave crash, then another, then still another, that I cannot actually be the waves.

I can say, "That wave yesterday felt like me. I felt like it was I who was crashing on the rocks." But, today, I am still here, and that water has long since dried from the rocks, the tide has risen and fallen, and now the waves are crashing again. Perhaps they look

like the same waves; perhaps they will again feel like me. But, I must remember that tomorrow I will sit here again, watching new water, new waves, a new sun set. So, it cannot truly be "I" who crashes on the rocks, who is being washed out to sea."

We say, "I am angry...I am depressed...I am lustful." But, this is like saying, "I am that wave that crashed on the rocks yesterday. I am the wave that got me so wet yesterday." Sure, if we stay in the water, we will get wet again today; we will get thrown on the rocks again today. But, that is the choice we make on a daily basis. Simply because we were wet yesterday does not mean we must be wet today. Simply because we jumped into the water yesterday does not mean we will jump again today. Today is a new choice. To get wet again? To get thrown forcefully onto the sharp rocks again? To jump into a raging sea again? Or can we say, "I did that yesterday. I know what that feels like. Today, let me sit on the cliffs, my gaze turned toward the sun."

The Crucial Space Between A Thought and An Action

You are not your emotions and your thoughts. If you try, with great devotion, to control them and make them pure then you will not be penalized for these natural thoughts. However, what you do based on the thoughts is your decision. Between the thought and the action there is a space. Grab that space. In that space you must find the restraint not to act. Have the feeling or thought, if you must. No problem. Acknowledge it. Try to remove it from

your mind through work and through japa. But, even if it seems intractable, still you must realize you have the power not to act on it. Tell yourself, “Okay. I have these thoughts. I realize it. Temporarily I accept them, because it seems that right now there is nothing I can do about them, but I’m *not* going to act on them.”

When Your Resolve Fails You, You Are Not A Sinner

Hinduism says that the goal of life is to transcend our bodily pleasures, to rise above our animal instincts into a life of purity and devotion. Therefore, in almost every situation, one must strive for the fortitude not to act based on our sensual desires and momentary instincts.

However, it is not a cardinal sin to act. You will not “go to Hell” for acting on your desires (I mean the basic, common desires of youth – sensual desires, desires for experimentation, desires for adventure, etc.).

Acting based on your desire, or making a mistake is like driving down the road and taking a wrong turn. Yes, it takes you off track, it depletes your gas, it takes awhile to find the right way again. But your car will not explode!

I have seen too many youth take slight detours, slight turns in the wrong direction and they become overcome with fear. Our youth seem to feel that if they go even one step in the “impure” direction, if they cross that line by even a hair, that they are lost

and impure. But this is not the case.

If you have taken a wrong turn, if you feel like you've made a mistake, if you feel that you are off the path, then stop. Ask directions from people who know, people who have already reached the destination. Look around you. Who is where you want to be? Ask them how they got there.

If you find you've gone astray on the road the key is to pull over to the side and stop the car as quickly as possible. Then, ask for help and get back on the right path as soon as you can. The same is true for the road of life. If you find you are astray, pause. Reflect. Don't continue in the wrong direction. Get help.

However, please do not berate yourself over and over for taking the wrong turn. This doesn't do any good. You just waste more time and more energy, and when you are upset you are not able to find your way again. So, instead of feeling guilty and miserable, just pray for strength and calmly get back on the path.

The Importance of Situations & Associations

Certain situations are fraught with harmful potential. That's why Hinduism says, "keep good associations." But that's not always so easy in college dorms. It's not easy to fill your days only with classes, homework, and *japa*. Youth want to have fun, and go out. Then sometimes, unfortunately, you find yourself in an unexpected situation.

Unfortunately, frequently I see that right from that unexpected situation, your guilt immediately begins. It seems that those of you who get out of the situation right away berate yourselves for even being there. Those of you who only engage in a little wrong behavior but are strong enough to end it before it goes further, you feel guilty for the little you've done. Those of you who let it go too far out of hand, but at least have the sense never to get back in that situation again, are angry at yourselves for letting it happen the first time.

This is not healthy, because then you say, "Well, I'm already impure. I'm already a bad person. I've already broken the rules." So you think that now there is no point in even trying. You decide that "this is the type of person I am."

Therefore, instead of feeling guilty for small things, I want to give you all a different perspective:

To those of you who have only had these thoughts of desire and of decadence, but have never acted at all: *Congratulations for having such will power.*

To those of you who have been in the wrong situation and gotten out quickly: *Congratulations for having the strength to know it wasn't right.*

To those of you who did a little wrong: *Congratulations for having the will power to leave a tempting situation early. This is not easy.*

To those of you who did too much, but don't want to do it again: *Congratulations for realizing the mistake you made and for having the wisdom to know you don't want to make it again.*

Whatever group you are in – you are pure and wonderful. Not one of you has committed a sin for which you won't be forgiven. I promise. I always say, God never opens your old files. Just go to Him, surrender, confess, tell Him that you realize it was not right, and ask for forgiveness. Forgiveness will be granted immediately and your life will begin anew.

Your Parents Are Your Best Friends

First of all, your parents are *not* your enemies. They are your best friends. They have lived through a lot and have a great deal of wisdom. They really want the best for you. Do not be afraid to talk to them. Losing communication with your parents is the *worst* thing you can do. Be calm, explain things to them, and most importantly be honest with them. They can not help you if you lie to them.

I know that sometimes they may not understand or they may get upset. However, you must not give up on them. They want you to talk to them. They want you to be honest with them. They tell me this all the time. But, you have to have enough faith that they can “take” whatever you're going to tell them. You are their life. You are their sunshine. Keeping a good, open relationship with your parents will be the strongest, best foundation you can build

for happiness and success in your entire life.

Drugs & Alcohol – The Big Lie

Drugs and alcohol are *not* as much fun as your friends say. Getting involved in these substances is paving the path to your own misery. If you are looking for a good time, drugs and alcohol will not give it to you. Ask yourself why you are doing this. What are you looking for? Whatever the answer is – whether it's peace, happiness, love, serenity or a wonderful time – you will definitely *not* find it in drugs and alcohol. Look around you. Look at all the people you know (especially those who are older than you) who use drugs. Do they have good lives? Is that where you want your lives to go? Sure, go out with your friends, have fun, but do not start paving the path to addiction and ruin.

The Road to Ruin

Children and adolescents frequently think, “Oh, it's no big deal. It's just a few beers.” However, once you get involved in drugs, alcohol, parties, sex, and the scene that goes with them all, you have set in motion a series of events that will eventually plunge you into a well of despair. You must start lying to your parents. Then you must start hiding from them any signs of where you've been or what you've done. Then you stop speaking openly with them. Then you study less in school because your attention is diverted to other things. Your grades go down, and it is difficult

to recover a good academic record. Then, you are depressed because of your grades and your parents, so you use even more drugs and alcohol, or you go out even more. Your entire nature becomes one of lying, cheating, hiding and running away.

You are beautiful, divine, precious youth. Do not go down this deadly path.

Once a father had three sons whom he feared were going astray. They were beginning to partake of alcohol, drugs and other activities of which their father did not approve. Every time he approached them, they said, "No problem, Dad. We have total control. We can stop whenever we want to." The father, however, was quite wise.

One day he gathered the three sons together and took them into the backyard. He pointed to a small sprout coming up out of the ground. He told one of his sons, "Uproot that sprout." The son looked surprised at the order, but he reached down and pulled the seedling easily out of the ground. Then, the father pointed to a small bush growing by the side of the garden. "Pull up this bush," the father told his second son. The bush was not huge, but still its roots were firm in the ground. The son had to reach his arms around the bush and pull hard to uproot it. Finally he succeeded and showed his father the empty hole in the earth where the bush had once grown.

Lastly, the father pointed to a large tree. He ordered his last son, the biggest and strongest of all: "Uproot this tree." The son looked at his father in dismay. "But Father," he said. "You know one cannot just uproot a tree with one's bare hands." The father insisted. "Just try it. You are strong." So the youth pulled and pulled with all his might. But the tree

did not even budge. His brothers came to help him. Together they pulled and pulled and pulled until their faces were red and hot and their arms ached. But, still the tree did not move at all. Finally, they gave up.

“See,” said the father. “When something is new, barely a sapling, it is easy to uproot. But, let it grow into a tree with its roots firmly in the ground and you will never be able to pull it up again. It is the same with your drugs and alcohol and reckless ways. Abandon them now when they are saplings and small bushes. You will have to work only a little. But, do not be ignorant or over-confident and let them grow their roots into you, or you will never be able to rid yourself of them.”

You Are Children Of The King

There is a beautiful story told about the son of an ancient king of France. All the boy’s friends tried to lure the young prince to engage in mischievous behavior. They tried to coax him to partake in “unkingly” activities. However, this young boy would have none of it. Every time they tried to tempt him, he proudly announced, “I am the son of a king. Therefore, I could never do such things.”

That is how you must live your lives. You must know that you are the children of the greatest king, the king of kings, God. With that consciousness, that awareness of “I am the son/daughter of a king,” you will never go astray.

*Purity of Food: Vegetarianism**

Additionally, a very important part of living a pure, divine life is what we eat. A new car might be the fastest, best car on the market, but if you put mud in the gas tank, it will not move even one meter. Similarly, we can make ourselves beautiful on the outside and attempt to live good lives, but if we are filling our bodies with death, fear and toxins we can not truly be pure from the inside out.

One of the most important aspects of this inner purity is being a vegetarian. I hear so many youth tell me, “But my parents can’t even give me a good reason to be vegetarian. They just say that the cow is holy, but if I don’t believe that the cow is holy, then why can’t I eat hamburgers?”

The importance of vegetarianism far transcends any sort of belief like the cow is holy. In fact, although the tenet of vegetarianism is as important as it was thousands of years ago, the reasons “why” have changed slightly. Some of the meanings and reasons are the same today as when our scriptures were written thousands of years ago. However, many of the reasons are directly related to the world we live in now. While vegetarianism has always been a correct “moral” and “spiritual” choice, today it is even more than that.

* Note: for a more in-depth discussion of vegetarianism please read H.H. Swami Chidanand Saraswatiji’s book titled *Vegetarianism: For Our Bodies, Our Minds, Our Souls, and Our Planet*. Please also read *Diet for a New America* and *The Food Revolution* by John Robbins. The facts and figures were taken from these sources.

Today, vegetarianism is an imperative choice for anyone who is concerned about the welfare of Mother Earth and all the people who live here. Today, it is not only a religious decision. Rather, it is the only way we can hope to eliminate hunger, thirst, rainforest destruction and the loss of precious resources. It is, in short, the most important thing each man, woman and child can do every day to demonstrate care for the earth and care for humanity.

Spiritual/Religious Aspects of Vegetarianism

One of the most important guiding principles of a moral life is *ahimsa*, or non-violence. There is hardly anything more violent than taking the life of another for our mere enjoyment. It would be one thing if we were stranded in the jungle, starving to death, and we needed the food to survive. But, we live in a world where we can get all our calories, all our vitamins and minerals in other, tastier, less expensive and less violent ways. Hence, to continue to kill animals for food is simply to fulfill our desires and our pleasures. It is simply selfish gratification at the incredible pain of another.

Even more violent than their day of death are the numerous days of their lives. The animals raised for consumption are raised distinctly differently than animals raised as pets, or raised for their byproducts (e.g. milk from a cow).

Veal is a poignant and compelling example. This meat is considered a rare delicacy by people across the world. "Tender veal cutlets" are frequently the most expensive item on a menu. Yet, when we look at the way in which these animals become so tender,

we realize that the true price of this dish is far more than what the restaurant charges.

Veal is the meat from baby cows who are separated from their mothers immediately at birth. Cows, as milk-giving/breast-feeding mammals have very strong maternal instincts. It is not a simple coincidence that Hindus worship the cow as mother. A mother cow will keep her calf next to her long after he is born, looking after him, protecting him, and teaching him to fend for himself. But, in order to produce veal, these baby cows are wrested from their new mothers. I have heard from people who have visited these places that – contrary to what the meat industry will tell you – the mother and baby cows cry in agony for hours after being separated.

It is essential that the babies do not develop any muscle, and if they stand near their mothers, their legs will develop muscle. Muscle is hard; fat is soft and juicy. Fat is tender. The only way to prevent muscle development is to prevent use of the limbs. So, these newborn baby cows, screaming for the warmth of their mother's breast, are locked into restraining boxes. Their entire bodies are restrained by chains. If you have ever tried to move a foot or a hand that is chained, you know that it is impossible. Especially if you are a baby with no muscle. They are fed copious amounts of food directly into their mouths, more than babies should theoretically eat, so they will become fat quickly. They are never removed from the confines of the restraining box. And this lasts not one day, not one week, but many months, until they are killed and sold as "tender veal cutlets." So, what is the real

price of this dish?

Now, let's look at chickens. Many people (especially in the West) say they are a vegetarian, but they still eat chicken. The life of a chicken is not any better than the life of baby cows. They are put in crates which are piled high on top of each other. In this way, they are denied space to move, let alone roam around. The crates are never cleaned and the chickens never see the sunlight; the light from the artificial bulbs is enough to keep them functioning.

Chickens – like humans – have natural territory and space needs. Yet, these are unmet in chicken “farms.” Rather, these animals are packed together as closely as possible, such that frequently they cannot even move. To have a true understanding of these conditions, picture yourself in an elevator, which is so crowded that you cannot even turn around, let alone move. Picture as well, that all the people in the elevator are confused and scared. They do not realize there is no way out. So they cry and bite and kick, in a true frenzy, attempting to free themselves from this claustrophobic terror. Next, imagine that the elevator is tilted, on a slant, so that everyone falls to one side, and it is nearly impossible to move back up. In this elevator, the ceiling is so low that your head is pushed down to your shoulders in order to stand. There is no way to straighten your neck. You are all barefoot on a wire floor that pokes and cuts your feet – feet that are ever so sensitive, for you are probably only a few months old. Finally, imagine that this terror does not end when someone comes to open the door at the “lobby” floor. Rather, this is your entire life. Every minute of every day, until you are fried up and served for dinner, with a

side of mashed potatoes.

It would be one thing if we were stranded in the jungle, starving to death, and we needed the food to survive. But we live in a world where we can get all our calories, all our vitamins and minerals in other, tastier, less expensive and less violent ways. Hence, to continue to kill the animals is simply to fulfill our desires, our pleasures. There is no need or utility in it. It is simply selfish gratification at the incredible pain of another.

Integrity and Honesty

How many of us consider ourselves honest people? How many of us can say that we do not tell lies? We would very much like to believe that we are righteous, honest people and that we are passing these values onto our children. But, if we eat meat, we cannot say that we do not tell lies. In fact, our life is a lie. Here is why: if we wanted to be honest and still eat meat, we would have to go outside, chase down a live cow, and bite right into it. Or, we would have to go to one of those chicken “farms,” take the animal while it was still alive, tear its head off, pull out its feathers and eat it raw. Of course, we do not do that. Instead, we order a hamburger. We cannot even call it what it is, let alone kill it ourselves. So, we call it beef, instead of cow. We call it pork instead of pig. We call it poultry instead of chicken. And we eat it packaged in neat, nice ways that allow us to forget what we are eating.

How many people stop and think that the thing between the tomato and the bread on a hamburger used to be a living, breathing creature? That it was someone’s child? How many of us would

eat our cats or dogs between a piece of tomato and a slice of bread? We wouldn't. And that is why it is a lie. We cannot even admit to ourselves what we are doing. How then, can we consider ourselves honest people if we are lying every time we eat? These are not lies that only cause misunderstanding; these are not "little white lies." These are lies that are killing our planet, killing our animals, and killing ourselves.

The Taste of Fear

Additionally, eating meat is violent not only to the animal whose life we are wresting out, but it is also violent to our planet and ourselves. This violence manifests in other, more subtle ways. When animals (humans included) are threatened, we secrete large amounts of hormones. These numerous hormones are frequently referred to as adrenaline. Their purpose is to prepare our body to fight, to save our lives. Have you ever noticed that when you get scared, a lot of things happen inside you? Your heart beats fast, your digestion stops, your palms sweat and your physical impulses become very good and sharp. These are the results of the hormones. They prepare us to either fight or run away, thus are sometimes called the "fight or flight" hormones.

When an animal is about to be killed, its body is flooded with these stress hormones, and these hormones remain in the animal's tissues. So, when we eat those tissues, we are ingesting those hormones (which are the same as our own bodies make). Thus, our own bodies become flooded with these "fight or flight" chemicals, making us even more prone to simple survival instincts.

Our world is becoming more violent each day. More and more people are simply out to get ahead, to protect themselves, even at the sake of others. These are the same characteristics that adrenaline and the other stress hormones prepare our bodies for. Hence, is it not possible that the increase in these characteristics worldwide is directly a result of our increase in meat consumption and the subsequent ingestion of stress hormones?

So, if we truly want to reduce the violence and hate that exists in this world, perhaps we should stop flooding our bodies with hormones that create stress and the readiness to fight, to save our own lives at the sake of another's. Perhaps, if we treat this temple that is our bodies as a temple it will behave and think like a temple. When we treat it like a battleground, how can we wonder that it acts like a battleground?

Vegetarianism and Ecology

Aside from all the compelling moral and spiritual reasons, one can now say that vegetarianism is the only responsible choice in terms of waste and ecology. The natural resources of our planet are diminishing at terrifying rates. More than a third of the world goes to bed hungry each night. We wonder what we can do. Being a vegetarian addresses almost each and every ecological issue.

Are you concerned about world hunger?

- It takes sixteen pounds of wheat to produce one pound of meat. This wheat is fed to the cows who are later killed to make beef. However, it takes only one pound of wheat to produce one

pound of bread. So, if we used our wheat to produce bread rather than feed it to cows in order to make hamburgers, we could feed sixteen times as many people.

- One acre of land can grow 40,000 pounds of potatoes. That same acre can provide less than 250 pounds of beef if it is used to grow cattle-feed.
- If Westerners reduced their intake of meat by only 10% (it means they would still eat 90% as much meat as they do now), we could feed every one of the 50,000 people who die of starvation every day.
- Every day, 40,000 children starve to death, yet every day enough grain is produced in the USA to provide *every* person on Earth with two loaves of bread.
- 840 million go hungry every year.
- We could feed ten billion people a year if we were all vegetarian. This is more than the human population. There is no need for *anyone* to go hungry in the world – the only reason is the selfishness of the choices we make.

Are you concerned about destruction of the rainforests and other precious land?

- A large amount of livestock is raised on forest land. It is estimated that for every hamburger, fifty-five square feet of rainforest land is destroyed.

- Additionally, for one hamburger, five hundred pounds of carbon dioxide (one of the main gases leading to the global warming problem) are released into the air.
- Since 1967, one acre of American forest has been destroyed every five seconds, in order to become “grazing land” for the animals that will become dinner. If the present trend continues, the country that was seen as the “land of plenty” will be completely stripped bare of all its forests in fifty years.

Are you concerned about poverty in the world?

- A pound of protein from meat costs \$15.40, but a pound of protein from wheat costs \$1.50. So, meat costs ten times as much for the same nutritional value. Could we not use that money for much better causes? Is there no more important use for that money than to kill animals?

Are you worried about our rapidly diminishing energy resources?

- The world’s petroleum resources would last only thirteen years on a meat-based diet, but 260 years on a vegetarian diet.

Are you aware of the need to conserve water?

- The production of one pound of beef takes 2,500 gallons of water. The production of one pound of bread takes twenty-five gallons of water. Thus, we would waste one hundred times less water if we ate wheat instead of meat.

Health Issues

There are many health reasons that one should eat a vegetarian diet. Every medical text, every health book in every bookstore or library talks about the undeniable link between high-fat diets and heart disease or cancer. It is well known that people who eat meat-based diets have anywhere from two to twenty times higher rates of death from heart disease and cancer than vegetarians.

A recent British study found that vegetarians had a 40% lower risk of cancer and a 20% lower risk of death from any cause than meat-eaters.

In fact, Dr. Dean Ornish, M.D. a cardiac specialist in California, is the first allopathic doctor ever to be able to “cure” heart disease. Others have slowed the process but never before has it been truly cured. His “cure” consists of a pure vegetarian diet, yoga and meditation.

A health issue less frequently discussed is the antibiotics factor. The animals are loaded up with antibiotics in order to prevent the diseases that their poor treatment causes. The environment in which they are raised is so unsanitary that the animals have a great risk of developing infections. So, antibiotics are fed to them in great quantity. When we eat the animals, we ingest the antibiotics as well.

However, bacteria are resilient. They develop resistance/immunity to antibiotics, whether we take them or simply eat the meat of an animal who has taken them. Then, when we ourselves become

sick and actually need the antibiotics, they do not work, as our bodies have already developed resistances to antibiotics through so many years of ingesting them in meat.

Each year more and more antibiotics become futile and powerless; each year there are more and more resistant strains of bacterial infections. Many people believe that the reason for this is that as we consume low doses of antibiotics for so many years through our consumption of meat, the bacteria all have a chance to mutate and become resistant.

Another issue has to do with hormones. The animals raised for meat are fed large doses of hormones to make them fatter, bigger, and “juicier.” There is substantial evidence that over-secretion of hormones within our own bodies leads to disease. For example, over secretion of adrenaline and stress hormones can lead to heart disease. Over secretion of estrogen has been associated with cancer in women. Yet, when we eat the meat, it’s the same hormones. We are not only eating meat, but we are eating hormones that our bodies don’t need and that may be putting our lives and health in jeopardy.

Across the industrialized world, everyone is talking about what we can do to save the planet. Ecological conservation has become a household word. There are thousands of programs dedicated to feeding the millions of starving children. Yet, while we may talk about wanting to save the planet or feed the hungry, these words are empty if our actions show blatant disregard. We may not be able to carry crates of food to the deserts of Africa. We may not be able to re-plant every tree that has been cut down in the

forest. But, we can refuse to allow it to continue. We can refuse to partake of the cruelty. We can strive to make at least our lives and our actions pure and divine.

Instead of a token donation to a hunger campaign or to an environmental organization, let us make our every day, our every meal, one that protects not only our own health, but also the health of our planet and the health of every person on it.

Purity In All The "Food" We Eat

We tend to think of food as just that which enters our mouth. However, we also "eat" with our eyes, we "eat" with our ears, and we "eat" with our senses.

I frequently hear people tell me that they are vegetarian, that they don't eat anything which is a product of violence. Then, they go out and they watch horror movies, or look at pornography, or sit and engage in idle, derogatory gossip about others. These actions are "food" and affect us just as what we eat.

Close your eyes for a moment and let come whatever thoughts are there. You will notice that the thoughts which come to you are those related to your daily life, the people with whom you associate, the things you've seen or heard, and the places you've been. Yet, sometimes we think we can move about unaffected by what we see and hear. We say, "It's only a movie," or, "It's harmless gossip." However, these are the things which actually determine our entire mental state.

How often do we hear children repeating words, phrases and songs that they hear on TV or in the movies? How can we possibly expect that they will memorize all the words and yet be unaffected by the violence?

Everything we experience, whether directly or vicariously (as in a movie or television), leaves a distinct impression upon our being. These impressions, or *sanksaras*, later dictate the way we feel, the choices we make and the lives we live.

We would never dump mud – or even cheap-quality gasoline – in our brand new Mercedes. We would not feed heavy, greasy, poorly-cooked food to an athlete who was about to run in the Olympics. We would not take someone with asthma to a smoke-filled club. So how can we so nonchalantly dump poison through every organ into our own beings?

There is a famous picture of Mahatma Gandhi which used to be put up all over India. It was Gandhiji sitting with three monkeys. One monkey had its hands over its eyes; another had its hands over its mouth; and the third had its hands over its ears. The caption was “See no evil, speak no evil, hear no evil.” I would add even a fourth monkey with its hands on its head: “Think no evil.” Then we would really be living pure, divine lives.

A Vow For Today

Sometimes people, especially youth, become overwhelmed at the thought of giving up something “for good” or at the thought of

“for the rest of my life.” That’s okay. There is no need to take a vow forever. Just take a vow for today. Just vow that in the next twenty-four hours you will be pure, peaceful and non-violent. Vow that for twenty-four hours you will choose the path of purity, that for twenty-four hours you will refrain from engaging in any activity which you know is wrong – anything which harms you (physically, mentally or spiritually) or which harms any other living being. Pray to God for the strength to keep your promise for twenty-four hours.

Then, tomorrow, vow again...

Chapter 4

For the Newlyweds

Whether your marriage was arranged by your parents or whether it is a marriage based on love, you have been brought together by the divine laws of *karma*. Nothing is mere coincidence; nothing is without higher purpose. You must therefore, right from the beginning, take your marriage as God's plan. He has put you in this marriage for a reason and you must discover that divine plan and live it to fruition.

Divine Path Toward God

Although you will buy a home, have children, embark on careers and progress together through life, you must always remember that the true goal of union is to help each other walk the divine path toward God. Our main goal in life, no matter what external path we choose, is to be one with God, to serve Him and remain forever living in consciousness of Him. When a boy and girl get

married, I always say this prayer for them:

*As you embark upon your beautiful journey of togetherness,
remember that the final destination is one of God-realization.
Thus, join hands in His holy name and let your love for each other
be your path to divine bliss.*

*If your love and your lives are dedicated to Him,
you will be showered with innumerable blessings:
health, happiness, peace and prosperity.*

May you bring love to each other's hearts.

May you bring peace to each other's minds.

May you bring joy and upliftment to each other's souls.

May you progress together along the ultimate path to God.

May you shine the light for each other if one is in darkness.

May you carry each other, if one becomes tired.

May you challenge and guide each other further and further each day.

*And may you rejoice together in the final destination
of God-realization.*

It is crucial that in the early stages, when lifetimes of patterns are being established, that the husband and wife remember they must move toward God. Therefore, right from the start, you must make sure to have a certain amount of time each day (even if its only five minutes) set aside for meditation.

Sit side-by-side at a small temple in your home, eyes closed, minds focused on the Divine. Then, join hands and light the *deepak* together. Light a stick of incense and give each other a warm

embrace. Each day of your lives should begin like this. If you can sit in meditation more than five minutes, wonderful. But, if not, don't worry. Even five minutes will work miracles if it is done in this way. Then, throughout the course of the day, you will be united in God, united in love and united in light. Neither should ever leave the house in the morning without this simple ritual.

This five minute ritual each morning will ensure a lifetime of peace and happiness.

The Seven Steps

As you stand beside each other on your wedding day, you not only take each other's hand into your own. You also take each other's hearts and each other's lives into your own.

The ancient Indian tradition of taking seven steps around a fire is timeless. The details are laid down in the Rig Veda. The ritual is filled with deep significance and importance. In fact, just as the placing of rings on the fingers is seen in Western culture as the decisive moment of marriage, so the seven *parikramas* around the *havan* are seen in Indian culture as the decisive moment.

With each step the bride and groom commit their lives to each other.

With the first step, the husband vows to provide his wife with all the food and necessities of life, and to honor and respect her. The bride vows to fulfill her duties to the home and the children. They

vow to share the responsibilities of the home in all respects. They take this first step towards nourishment and life essentials.

With the second step, they promise to give each other strength and support. The bride promises to care for her husband's family and home, and to speak ever lovingly to him. They take the second step towards strength and fortitude.

With the third step, they promise to devote themselves – body, mind and soul – only to each other. They take the third step towards prosperity.

With the fourth step, they vow to adore each other, to care for each other lovingly and to shower each other with love. They take the fourth step towards health, well-being and prosperity.

With the fifth step, they declare themselves to be one in sorrow and in joy – they will feel each other's pain and rejoice in each other's happiness. They will fill each other's hearts and lives with love and peace. They take the fifth step towards healthy, divine offspring.

With the sixth step, they vow to always remain side-by-side, both in religious worship and in material comforts and sensual joy. They promise to never betray each other. They take the sixth step towards trust and loyalty.

With the seventh step they state that God can see their minds and hearts and knows that they have made these vows in truth. They take the seventh step towards a lifetime of love and friendship.

However, these are not steps which must be taken only once during a marriage. Rather, these are steps that must be taken every day as the couple walks together on the path of partnership.

Before your marriage you were each one. Now, you have come together in the union of marriage. However, in a marriage, one plus one does not equal two. Rather, one plus one equals one! You are now joined, united in the divine, cosmic union. You are not separate. You are part and parcel of each other.

However, in a marriage, one plus one can also equal eleven! You must multiply each other's strengths, and provide such an environment of love and support that both husband and wife soar to heights they would be unable to reach alone.

Communication and Connection

Another important pattern that must be established is one of communication and connection. Remember: you are partners in life, not merely co-passengers on a train. You must encourage each other, guide each other, and lead each other. Remember the prayer I say for the newlyweds. It is not simply "May you peacefully co-habit." Rather, it is, "*May you progress together along the ultimate path to God. May you shine the light for each other if one is in darkness. May you carry each other, if one becomes tired. May you challenge and guide each other further and further each day.*"

In life we tend to be lazy about our spiritual growth, especially

when we are so busy raising children, taking care of the home, and embarking on careers. It is, therefore, the responsibility of the spouse to continually guide the other back toward spirituality. Even if it means taking a job with a slightly smaller salary so that there is time to go to temple together, or so that extensive travel away from home won't be necessary, this is worth it.

Don't Fret The Small Stuff

I heard a wonderful story about a very wise man who had been happily and peacefully married to his wife for sixty years. When asked the secret of his success, he answered, "In the beginning, my wife and I made an agreement. We decided that she would make all the little decisions and I would make all the big decisions. Luckily, in sixty years, we've never had to make a big decision." This is the attitude we should have.

Never Hold A Grudge

One of the most important rules a marriage should have is: we won't go to sleep angry. Any argument must be over by bedtime. If you can't agree or resolve it, no problem. Before bed, just go sit at the temple. Hold hands and ask for divine guidance. Sit in meditation together for a few moments, embrace and then sleep. You will find that this, in and of itself, will solve most problems. If not, no problem, you can resume discussions the next day. At

least give yourself those moments of reconnection before sleep, lest you forget your true, eternal, divine connection. Under no circumstances should you permit anger or resentment in the bedroom. Once it has lasted one day, what will keep it from lasting two days, or three days, or three years? The key is to just end it and move on.

I once heard a tragic story of a couple that had a beautiful relationship. They were the ideal couple. Every morning, the husband would make a cup of tea for his wife, and bring it to her with a kiss on her cheek and say, "I love you." She would wait each evening at the door, ready to leap in his arms when he came home from work.

One day, however, the man was scolded by his boss. He came home in a foul mood. As his wife greeted him with her usual melodious call of, "Welcome home, Honey, how was your day?" he barked at her, "Be quiet! I'm sick of the sound of your voice." Of course, he didn't mean it. He was just in a bad mood. But she was devastated. She decided then and there that he would never hear her voice again.

For forty years they lived together and she never spoke another word. He begged and pleaded and cried. He repented and did everything to make amends. But, she could not get his words, "Be quiet! I'm sick of the sound of your voice," out of her mind. She could not bring herself to move beyond that.

On her death bed, he begged her to once again, please, let him hear the beautiful sound of her voice. But, by then, although she wanted to, she could not. She had lost her ability to speak.

What could have been one of the most beautiful relationships became a tragedy due to a grudge. She was so injured and so unwilling to forgive and move forward that their entire lives were ruined. Each day made her resolve even firmer and made it even harder for her to rescind her vow.

That is why I always say that we must catch everything immediately. Never let any resentment or anger linger. At the temple in your home, you should have a small pot, which should sit at the feet of your image of God. If you have some Ganga water, it is wonderful to put this into the pot, but if not, don't worry. Into this pot, you should put any anger and frustrations you feel for your spouse. Each evening, before bed, offer any lingering bad feelings at the holy feet of the Lord. Say, "God, please take this from me, so I can be filled with only love for my spouse." God will take it – if you really offer it – and you will be free.

Chapter 5

Child-Bearing and Child-Rearing

The Child You Are Given

Bringing forth new life onto the planet is one of the greatest joys and the greatest responsibilities. All over the world you are required to pass a test in order to drive a car or fly a plane. The purpose behind these laws is that one should not be allowed to take others' lives into one's hands without proper skills. However, there is no test given to future parents, no rule on how many children one is capable of caring for. The responsibility is in our own hands.

Too frequently couples have children just by default. They don't plan it or discuss it – they just do it because it's expected. But this is not the way. A child should be a conscious decision made by both parents, and they should begin planning from the moment of conception. Conception should take place in a spirit of piety, a spirit of devotion, and with the prayer that God Himself manifests

in the form of their child.

Our scriptures say that a child is born into a family that will be the most suited for its *karmic* evolution. A soul that is pure and pious and progressing quickly towards God-realization will be born into a pious family, thereby assisting it in this task. Therefore, parents who wish to have a peaceful, calm, joyous child must exhibit these qualities themselves. Why would a child on the path of piety and God-realization take birth in a home filled with hedonism, violence and impurity? This would not be conducive to its evolution.

Thus, long before even the moment of conception, parents must work together to exhibit the qualities they would like to see in their future children. They must cultivate the characteristics of divine parents. Then, and only then, will they receive divine children.

The Child You Create: Values Instead of Violence

There is a beautiful story from the Puranas about Queen Madalasa who spent her pregnancy in prayer, meditation and contemplation on the Lord. She sang divine songs to her children right from their birth and she treated them all as incarnations of the Divine. Each of the Queen's children grew up to be enlightened saints.

In contrast there is the story of the man who was convicted of armed robbery and murder and was condemned to death. On the day he was to be hung, the court asked him for his last wish. The man replied, "To meet with my mother." Thus, as the court always tries to fulfill the last

wish of dying men, the man's mother was called. Upon her arrival, her son gently touched her feet and then, suddenly, leapt up and bit her face, Blood came rushing out of her gaping wound. Everyone was astonished. Why would a dying man viciously maim his own mother?

In explanation, the man replied, "If I am going to die, it is because of her. All that I have become is because of her. When I was a small boy and I used to steal things, I would bring them to her and she would praise me. She never taught me that stealing was wrong, she simply encouraged it. And when she was angry with me, she never explained to me what I had done wrong. She never sat me down and tenderly helped me understand. Instead, she would simply beat me or scream at me. In that way, I too learned violence instead of values. So, I wanted to show the world that if I have become a criminal worthy of death, it is because of who she was as a mother."

I do not tell you these stories so that we may all simply blame our parents for our own weaknesses. Rather, I tell them to illustrate the crucial nature of the effect parents have on children. A child is a great gift and a divine responsibility, and he or she must be treated and raised as such.

Raising Divine Children: Choosing Their Influences

We may all agree that the goal is purity, divinity and peace in the home and for the child. But, how? People ask me, "Swamiji how do we create that environment for our children? What do we do living in the West?"

The key is to look carefully at each and every decision. For example, what are the books you read to your children? What are your child's first learning books? Are they books with titles like "Betty Goes Shopping" or "Bobby, the Mischievous Trouble-Maker," or are they books which will teach your children not only how to read, but also how to live?

The Divine Life Society publishes a wide range of books for children. The Durban, South Africa branch has an impressive, beautiful, extensive array of beautifully-illustrated, easy-to-read books for beginning readers. The titles include "God is My Friend" and "Divine Life for Children." Many other organizations, institutions, authors and publishers offer similarly inspiring books which teach and touch our children rather than numb them or incite them into violence or indifference.

Additionally, with the ease that the internet has provided, these days a world of books are at our fingertips. Don't just choose the closest book or the one your child brought home from a friend's house. Take the time to find books which inculcate the values of honesty, purity, respect, obedience and devotion in our young ones. Instead of reading them stories (or letting them read stories) about mischievous children who are always disobeying their parents and getting into trouble, find books about children who do good work, children who are helpful and divine. These books may not be as easily accessible, but they are definitely available. It only requires a little time, effort and research.

The same is true for television shows and videos. Many networks

are full of violent shows, showering our children with frivolous desires and violent thoughts. However, this is not an inevitable situation. Instead of just giving your child a certain amount of time each day in which he is allowed to watch TV, give him also a certain selection of shows to choose from. Do not be afraid to censor certain shows (especially for children under the age of fifteen). Buy or rent a good selection of videos which have good, peaceful, inspiring messages and let your child watch those.

You will spend hours preparing the little one's favorite meal, so that her body will be healthy and strong. We must be willing to spend the same time finding the "food for her mind" which will help their minds, hearts and souls also be healthy and strong.

Prevent the Effects of Television

Better yet is to significantly limit the amount of television your child watches at all. I know several families who, as soon as the first child was born, removed the TV from the house. Then there was no struggle, no daily fights or bargains.

This is, in fact, probably the single best thing parents can do if they want to, in one step, give their children *sanskaras*, ensure that their children are good students, and mold their child into one who is cultured, peaceful and creative.

Television numbs children's minds and then, when the mind is dulled and defenseless, fills it with violence, pettiness, insatiable

material desires and *adharmic* values. At its best, television is mindless. At its worst, it is downright corrupting. Other than for viewing spiritual videos or occasional special, cultural or educational programs, there is no reasonable justification for the number of hours spent in front of the television each day.

In previous times (and still in much of India today where there are no televisions) children entertained themselves through reading books, doing artwork, learning or practicing music, playing sports, and otherwise creatively using their time. Today, unfortunately, television has become the world's number one baby-sitter. Parents who don't know what else to do with their children just sit them on the couch and turn on the TV. Within seconds, the child is enraptured and the parents have a few moments (or hours) of freedom.

However, we must rise above this. I understand that parenting is tiring and that parents need a break from being twenty-four-hour-a-day entertainers. No problem. For millennia children managed to play and amuse themselves without television. They still can, but you must be willing to take up the challenge. It is, of course, easier to begin at birth. Then the child just accepts that there is no TV. It is more difficult to take this step once the children have become accustomed to watching their favorite sitcoms. However, although it may be difficult, it is an inestimable positive step toward raising divine children.

However, you, the parents, must be willing to give up your television as well. Children are very sensitive to what they see

as hypocrisy in their parents. If you remove their TV, but keep one in your bedroom, then the television will simply become this “private treasure” which the children will inevitably covet even more due to its scarcity.

His Holiness Swami Sivananda Maharaj (the founder of the Divine Life Society), Paramhansa Yogananda (the founder of the Self-Realization Fellowship and author of *Autobiography of a Yogi*), the Mother of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, and so many other revered spiritual leaders have urged their devotees to give up television. When describing the cinema and television, the Sri Aurobindo Mother said,

“It is not only ignorant and stupid; it is ugly, dirty and repugnant. It is deformed, it is wicked, it is very low, and it is indeed the wrong use of the mind which has produced this. It could have been an instrument of education and development, but for the moment it has been an instrument of perversion, and a truly hideous perversion: perversion of taste, consciousness and everything with a terrible moral ugliness.”

We think that somehow our children are immune from the negative influences. “Oh, they know it’s just a show,” I hear so many parents tell me. Sure, intellectually they know it’s just a show. But that doesn’t mean that it doesn’t have a profound influence on their mental and spiritual *sanskaras*, values and development. Its influence is subtle and insidious, and very, very strong.

I always say, “TV is like TB.” It is a serious illness which destroys our bodies and minds. However, while there is a cure for TB, there

is no cure for the negative effects of TV.

I urge you all to take the step of removing the television from the home, or at least using it only to watch special videos and shows. If you must have one, keep it in a central location, and make it a rule that the TV will only be watched together as a family. In that way, at least you are there to monitor what is seen and to counter any of the negative values being propagated.

Of course, you can not control what your child will see at a friend's house, but at least then it will be a rare occurrence rather than a daily influencing event.

The Tone of Love

Another important aspect of raising divine, peaceful children is, how you and your spouse act and speak to each other. We tend to think of children as just little cute creatures who sit there, oblivious to everything, not understanding anything we say. But, this is far from the truth. Children absorb everything – if not the words, then the tone.

So, be sure to speak softly, gently, and lovingly. Don't engage in gossip about others or your children will learn that this is okay.

In order to counteract the violent or superficial/materialistic influences that children frequently receive in school and outside, it is important to make the home a place where piety, peace and devotion are actively taught.

Don't assume your children know that you are pious and loving. Show them. Be calm. Be pure. Express love and compassion to your family and to others. Your actions speak a thousand times louder than words.

In your young child's room, put posters on the walls of positive sayings, devotional pictures, and things of that nature.*

The Tomato Seed and The Olive Tree

While on the one hand it is imperative that we create the most positive, nurturing, pious environment in which to raise our children, it is also crucial to realize that children are much more than simply the product of their environment. They come into this world with their own *karma* and their own *sanskaras* from past lives. That is why we can see two genetically-identical twins, raised in the same home, in the same environment, who live completely divergent lives. One may be peaceful and calm, the other agitated and tense. One may marry early and raise a traditional family, the other may go from spouse to spouse, never finding satisfaction.

Commonly in today's world we see the parents blamed for every mistake and misfortune in their children's lives. This is frequently misplaced blame.

Children are like small acorns, coming into the world full of all the potential to be a tall oak tree. Yes, of course, they need rich soil in which to live, warm sun and plenty of water. But, that acorn has within it everything it needs to grow

into an oak tree. No amount of sun or rain, no type of soil can make that acorn grow into anything other than an oak tree. It will not – *it cannot* – become an apple tree or a pine tree.

Similarly, if you begin with tomato seeds, you can pray that olive trees grow. You can plant this tomato seed in a grove of olive trees and hope that, by association, your tomato seed will grow into an olive tree. You can care for it in exactly the way one would care for an olive tree. But, no matter what you do, you will *never* get olives from a tomato seed.

While they are not as completely black or white as seeds, we must remember that our children are similar. They are not mounds of clay for us to mold as we would like. They have their own destiny, their own *karma* to fulfill. We can guide them, help them find the right direction, and nourish them in body, mind and spirit, but ultimately it is only the grace of God that can change their destiny.

The Downside of the “American Dream”

In the Western world there is a great emphasis on professional success for both men and for women. Children are frequently placed in day care from a very young age so that the mother can quickly return to her job. After school, extra-curricular activities take the place of time spent with parents and siblings. Couples move away from their extended families in order to pursue better career opportunities.

The idea of the “latch-key” child, one who returns home alone after school and looks after himself until the parents return from work, is a tragedy of the modern age. People’s lifestyles have become so lavish and luxury-oriented that high-paying jobs become necessities. The family’s expenditures become so excessive that a two-career home is essential.

Then, when the parents do return from work, they are frequently so stressed and tired that the children receive only their “left-over” energy. Tempers are short, as are the hours between the mother’s arrival home and the child’s bedtime.

This is not to say that women should necessarily stay home and care of the children without pursuing their own career goals. Nor is this to say that there is anything inherently wrong with extra-curricular activities or child care. Additionally, families may have no financial choice but for both the parents to work outside the home.

However, we must take care of our priorities. Too often, our jobs become the priority. We rush through feeding breakfast to our children so that we can get ready for work. We choose a company picnic on Saturday instead of a day with the family. We take on extra projects, extra assignments and extra hours with regard only to how it will propel us forward professionally or economically, paying too little attention to the effect on our families.

Striking A Balance: Simplify

We must simplify our lives, simplify our needs. Is it really worth

that extra income to lose those precious hours with our family? Can't we do without the new clothes or latest model car, so that we can work a little less and spend a little more time in spiritual pursuits or with our families? The greater our own "needs," the more hours we must work to fulfill those needs. What is the point of a beautiful, spacious, centrally air-conditioned home, if our minds, bodies and hearts are burning with stress and desires, if the heat is "on" inside our beings?

We must make our families our priorities. These are the bonds that are for life. Our first and foremost duties in life are to our children, our spouses, and our parents. What is the joy of a flourishing career if we return at night to strife in the home? What is the point of extra income, if we lose our families in the meantime? With whom will we enjoy this extra income?

Every day people go to work, earn money and become more and more prosperous. But their hearts are full of pain and jealousy, and their minds are restless and anxious. Is this real prosperity? So many times I have been sitting in beautiful mansions, with a Mercedes in the driveway, listening to the husbands and wives cry about how miserable their lives are.

There is no end to the desire for external wealth and recognition. No matter how much we have, we always want more. We spend our lives accumulating more and more wealth, more and more prestige, more and more respect in the community. Yet, if we disregard or neglect our family in this pursuit, if we let this become our priority, then we end up losing in the long run.

Too frequently I see couples so concerned about making a good name for themselves in the community that they sacrifice spending time with their family. Then, the children grow up angry, confused, bitter and rebellious. Eventually these children do something – typically in their adolescence or university years – which brings great shame upon the family. Those parents who had spent decades establishing a good “name” for themselves, establishing prestige and respect in the community, suddenly find themselves pitied, shamed and snubbed.

Rather than being so focused on external success and external prosperity, if they had made their children their priority, then as their children grew into divine and pious adults, they would have found themselves envied by the entire community.

By making your children your priority, you will find real prosperity, both within the home and within the community.

The “Benefits” of Successful Careers

Recently, I was staying with a very prosperous family in America. One day after school, the young brother and sister came to me. They wanted to know why they had to go to school. “Why do we need an education?” they wanted to know. I told them that it was very important to keep going to school and studying hard so that they could get a good education and then a good job with which they could help other people. The two children looked at each other. Finally, the boy looked up at me and he said, “Swamiji, what is the point of an education? What is the point of

a good job? Our dad is a doctor with an M.D. Our mom is a psychologist with a Ph.D. They make a lot of money and they say their jobs help other people. But when they come home from work at night, all they do is fight, fight, fight. Didn't they learn anything in school? How can they help others if they can't help themselves?"

What message are we giving to our children? We think they don't notice. We think we can hide from them. However, they absorb everything like small sponges.

So, first we must make sure that the parents are in peace and only then can that peace be passed on to our children.

Focus on the Family – Where Our Hearts Should Be

If something happened to you, the world would continue to function. Your company would open at 8:00 am on the day of your funeral and would go on about "business as usual." However, for the family you had put aside, their lives would never be the same.

Someone sent me a copy of the following poem. Its author is unknown, but the message is one which we should all take to heart.

*I ran into a stranger as he passed by,
"I'm so sorry!" was my reply.
Then he said, "Excuse me too.
I wasn't even watching for you."*

*We were very polite, this stranger and I.
Then we went on our way, and said good-bye.*

*But at home, a different story is told,
How we treat our loved ones, young and old.*

*Later, in the kitchen, as I cooked our meal,
My daughter crept up to me, very still.
When I turned, I nearly knocked her down.
“Get out of the way!” I barked with a frown.
She walked away, with her little heart broken.
I didn’t realize how harshly I’d spoken.*

*That night, as I lay awake in bed,
God’s quiet voice spoke to me and said,
“While dealing with a stranger,
you’re calm and polite,
But with those you love, you’re quick to excite.
Go look right now on the kitchen floor,
You’ll find some flowers there by the door.
Those are the flowers she brought for you.
She picked them herself.....pink, yellow, and blue.
She stood there quietly, not to spoil your surprise,
And you never saw the tears in her eyes.”*

*By this time, I felt sad and small,
And now my own tears had begun to fall.
I quietly went and knelt by her bed;*

“Wake up, sweetheart, wake up,” I said.

“Are these the flowers you picked for me?”

She smiled, “I found them, out by the tree.

I wrapped them in a napkin, just for you.

I knew you’d like them, especially the blue.”

I said, “I’m so sorry that I missed them today.

And I shouldn’t have fussed at you that way.”

And she whispered, “Mommy, that’s okay.

I still love you anyway.”

I hugged her and said, “I love you too...

And I love my flowers, especially the blue.”

So as we prosper, succeed and thrive in the Western world, let us hold tenaciously to one crucial value of our Indian culture: the family.

Violence in the Home

So many people come to me and ask about whether it is okay to spank or slap their children. Or, other family members come to me who are concerned about what appears to be excessive violence toward children.

I want to make this point clearly: *a child should never be physically injured in the name of discipline.* Parents assuage their own con-

sciences by saying that the child “deserved it,” when the truth is that the parents simply cannot control themselves, or they don’t know any other way of discipline.

Even animals never injure their own children. Even these creatures we insultingly call “beasts,” who are without our human instincts for compassion and love, would never purposely harm their own children. How then can we call ourselves “human” and these creatures “animals,” if our behavior is even more primitive and bestial?

People seem to believe that children require physical and emotional violence in order to be “well-trained” or to be properly scolded for their bad behavior. This is, however, a tragic falsehood, and one that leads to nothing more than an escalation of violence in our society.

Violence leads to violence. Peace leads to peace. This is a truth that pertains to countries at war as well as to our youngest children. When we raise our voices, when we become angry and aggressive, so our children raise their voices and their fragile bodies flood with anger and aggression.

We hope that by becoming aggressive, our children will become calm and repentant. This is not the way the world works, however. We think that if we shout, they will be quiet. Yet, this never happens. When we raise our volume, they in turn raise their volumes, and we quickly lose control of the situation and our children.

When we act with anger, we create an environment of anger in

the home. This negative energy persists, like a toxic chemical, in the home long after the actual fight is over. Our children, at the most receptive time of life, are then breathing air filled with violence, lack of control, and negativity. We wonder why our world is becoming more violent each day...it is not such a mystery.

Additionally, when we hit our children (and this includes slaps and spanks, which many people seem to believe do not count as “violence”), we also lose their respect. Children are much more perceptive and insightful than we sometimes believe. As they watch us turn red with rage and then explode in verbal or physical attacks, they know we have lost control. They know we have no other methods by which to teach them. Their respect for us quickly diminishes.

This, of course, pertains to teachers as well. It is so important for children to respect their teachers. How else can young, exuberant bodies sit still for so many hours each day? Yet, when they lose respect for us as people, they simultaneously lose respect for what we are teaching. There are so many important lessons to be learned in school and in life that we cannot afford for children to lose their respect for teachers and parents. For some reason we seem to believe that if we punish them severely they will respect us. This is absurd. Sure, they will fear us. But respect and fear are not even related. We do not want our children’s (or our pupils’) fear. We want their respect.

We complain that our children lie, that they hide from us, that they disrespect us. We ask why. Yet the answer is not a mystery.

Children are like sponges, voraciously soaking up every aspect of the environment in which they live. If they live with lies, they will tell lies. If they live with disrespect, they will show disrespect. If they live in the vicious cycle of action/reaction they will only know how to act and react. If they live in a home in which there is neither tolerance nor understanding, they will learn to keep everything to themselves. However, if they live with patience, with love, with tolerance, and with a tender touch of teaching, they will manifest patience, love, and tenderness as well as learn the lessons we are trying to instill in them.

The keys to divine children lie in changing the nature of how we, as parents, behave. We must never act in anger or frustration. We must wait until we have calmed down and then, gently and tenderly, explain things to the children. How many times have we had exasperating days and come home and taken it out on the children (or one our spouse who then, in turn, takes it out on the kids)? Too many. And what do the children learn from this? Nothing other than low self-esteem and insufficient tools for dealing with their own emotions. We must be sure that they are getting only the teachings they deserve, and not the brunt of our anger from the office or from the traffic on the way home.

Velvet Not Violent Touch

So, the first thing to do is wait until you are in a “teaching” mood instead of a scolding mood, for children need not only the teach-

ing, but they need the “touch.” That touch should be velvet, not violent. With a velvet touch and calm mind, you can achieve anything with children. A beautiful, divine soul, the Mother of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram said, “It is not with severity, but with self-mastery that children are controlled.” Thus, first we must learn to control ourselves, our tempers and our words.

Yet, I also understand that this is not easy. It is not easy to be calm when we are full of rage inside. It is not easy to use a velvet touch when our instinct is to hit.

Perhaps we say, “But I was hit by my parents and by my teachers. That is just the way it should be.” No. We must be better than this. We must not fall into the trap of being like robots, unable to think critically. I, too, was slapped by my first Spiritual Master. He believed it was the way to teach. Sure, at the time I obeyed him. I feared him. But, I can see in retrospect how much more I learned through his silence or through his calm – and sometimes stern – words than through his slaps.

Our scriptures say that a mother and father are enemies of their children unless they teach their children well, unless they fulfill their duties of imparting understanding and values. The scriptures say that parents are enemies of their children unless they provide real education. Education does not mean simply dropping the children off at school each morning. It means ensuring that they are learning right from wrong, truth from falsehood, and integrity from deception.

The children are the future of the planet, and it is our responsibility to help them make that future a bright one. Will we lead the world toward violence, or will we lead it toward love? Will we instill the values of forgiveness in the future world leaders, or will we instill in them the values of retribution and vengeance? Will we lead our world toward greater calmness or toward greater chaos? We must never take for granted the role we play in the future of the world through what we teach our children. Our leaders govern as they were governed, and the first “government” they experience is the home.

The Real Happy Hour

A few years ago, a top news magazine in America published a study focused on improving the family system in America. The researchers searched for the keys to a happy, healthy family life, leading to happy, peaceful, well-adjusted children. Their most important recommendation? Have dinner together! They found that those families who sat down together for at least one meal a day (usually dinner) were more peaceful, happy and successful than the families in which each person fed himself on his own schedule, or where they watched television during the meal. The children who came from families that sat together for the evening meal rarely went astray or suffered from depression.

I would take that recommendation one step further: have *aarti* (or some other prayer/meditation) together before dinner. You

don't need a large temple. One picture of Bhagwan (or any image of the Divine), a small oil lamp and a little incense will suffice. If you don't know the words to *aarti*, no problem. Get a cassette and play it, or sing your favorite devotional song. The point is to gather together in a spirit of prayer, worship, and devotion.

So many people go to the pubs or the clubs for "happy hour" in the evenings. But what kind of happiness is that? The real happy hour should be prayer, devotion and dinner together in the home. This is a happy hour with no hangover, no headache and no guilt. It's a "happy hour" where the happiness lasts much longer than sixty minutes.

If you want to have true happiness in your life, twenty-four hours a day and if you want to give this happiness and meaning to your children, then have this time in the home. They say, "The family that prays together stays together," and it's true.

Sometimes parents bring their children to see me, and you can hear the parents commanding in a hushed whisper, "*Do pranam to Swamiji*," as they forcibly grab their children's necks and push their heads down onto the ground at my feet. The children inevitably rebel and run away (young ones even cry). This is because they have not been properly taught.

Instead of reserving this gesture of respect for rare meetings with saints, it should part of their daily ritual. After *aarti*, the parents should do *pranam* to Bhagwan (or to the grandparents, if they're living in the house). Then, the children should do it to the parents. This daily ritual of respect has profound effects on the overall

sanskaras of the children.

However, these things (dinner together, *aarti*) require time. One must be willing to sacrifice a favorite TV show, or the happy hour at the club, or that last extra client or meeting in the evenings. We must make those sacrifices for the sake of our children, for the sake of our families, and for the sake of our own spiritual development and emotional well-being. _

You Cannot Buy Happiness

The “American Dream” is a good education, a well paying career, a nice home, a large bank account, two children, and frequent vacations to Europe (or to the beach, or skiing, or...).

But this is not happiness. Ask anyone who has all these things whether they are really “happy,” and you will usually hear “no.” That is because in order to achieve these things, they have had to frequently give up the things that bring real happiness: a deep spiritual life, time spent meaningfully with the family, time to do *seva*.

This is not to say that having money isn’t wonderful. Yes, it gives you the freedom to make many choices in life. It allows you to provide well for your children. It allows you to live comfortably. It allows you to make sure that there is money left for your children and for your retirement. But, it is not what will bring deep happiness and fulfillment to your life or to your children’s lives.

It is fine to make money, fine to become wealthy. Even in our scriptures, Bhagwan Shri Krishna and Bhagwan Shri Rama were both kings and lived in palaces. The point though is how that wealth is acquired and how it is used.

Dwarka (the city of which Bhagwan Krishna was king) was made of gold. Yet, so was Lanka (the city over which the demon-king Ravana ruled). What made Dwarka Heaven and Lanka Hell? Bhagwan Shri Krishna lived a life of purity, non-attachment, and giving. Ravana lived a life of greed, lust, attachment, hedonism and parsimony. Whereas Bhagwan Krishna used his wealth and his power to help those in need, Ravana never gave one pinch of gold to help another. Bhagwan Krishna's life was one of sharing and caring. Ravana neither shared nor cared for others.

It is not the gold in the walls that makes a true palace. It is the gold in the hearts of the king and the inhabitants who live there. If there is gold in the heart, then the home is a palace whether there are two rooms or two hundred rooms. If the heart is made of stone, then the home is a slum, even if the walls are lined with diamonds.

Look around you in the Western world. Do you see happiness? Do you see joy? Do you see true satisfaction? Not a lot. Yet, look at the *rishis*, look at the *sadhus*. What do they own? Nothing. But look at the light shining in their eyes...

There was once a king who had everything, all the luxuries money could buy – palaces, chariots, beautiful wives, fancy clothes, sumptuous food – but he was not happy. He sent his messengers out with the order, "Find

a happy man and bring me back his shirt. I will wear his shirt and then I will also be happy.” So the king’s men searched far and wide, but they could not find a happy man.

When they asked people if they were happy, everyone said things like, “Well, as soon as I get this promotion, then I’ll be happy,” or, “As soon as my children are in good colleges then I’ll be happy,” or, “If only my husband were kinder to me, then I’d be happy.” There was no one who could claim to be completely happy, right then and there. Discouraged, the messengers began to wander back through the forest to the king. They had asked all the wealthiest, most successful people in the kingdom, yet none was happy.

En route, they became very tired and thirsty. They saw a man sitting by the edge of a stream. He was singing joyfully to the fish while he fed them small bread crumbs. The men stopped and asked him if he could give them some water and maybe a place to rest for awhile. The man immediately jumped up, brought them back to his humble shelter, and offered them everything he had. He quickly prepared lunch with his own hands and made them all sit comfortably on whatever he had.

As he worked, he sang and seemed to dance around. “What do you do?” the men asked him. “Do? Well, I take care of all the pilgrims who come this way. I give everyone food, drink and a place to rest. I take care of the animals too, whenever I can. I meditate on God and chant His holy name. A few days in the week I walk into the city and give my time to help in the hospital. They always need extra hands. Mainly I do whatever God tells me to do. Whatever money comes to me, I use for others.” The men were stunned and ate their meal in silence.

As they were getting ready to leave, one of the messengers had an idea. He looked up at their selfless host and he queried, "By the way, Sir. Are you happy?" The man, clad in nothing but a small cloth around his waist, said, "Oh, yes, definitely. I could not be happier. My life is so full and rich. All day long, helping people and chanting God's name." The men were ecstatic. They had finally fulfilled their mission for the king. They said, "Sir, please, one last request. Please, give us one of your shirts. Then our king can wear it, and he too will be happy."

The man jumped up and down and danced with amusement. "Shirt? I have no shirt. I have no shirt!" he sang gleefully.

The point is not that being poor makes you happy or that having money (or being wealthy) breeds discontent. The point is that the priorities of your life determine whether you will find happiness or not. Those whose lives are dedicated to serving the world, those whose lives are spent in close communion with God, those who are pure and honest, these are the people who are happy.

Cars or Sanskars?

So, while it is wonderful that you want to give your children material possessions, and it is wonderful that you want to be able to send them to the most expensive universities, what about the real university? The real teachings come at home, at the temple. Cars they can buy on their own, but what about *sanskaras*? Who will give them these?

You have a much greater gift to give your children than just an overflowing trust fund. Sure, give them material comfortable and worthwhile possessions. Sure, make their lives comfortable and enjoyable. But do not do this at the expense of the real gift you have. You have an actual treasure chest of wisdom within you, flowing through your veins. Indian culture, the heritage of our ancestors, the wisdom and insight of the Indian tradition – this is the real gift, a gift that will stay with them forever. It is to their roots, to their culture that these children will turn in times of trouble. If you have not given them this, then they will have nowhere to turn to, other than to the opinion of their peers!

Everyone wants the same things out of life: happiness, joy, meaning, and peace. Yet we look for these in the wrong places. We think they will come in a package, from the store, or as a diploma in a nice frame. But these things will only come from God.

You would never send your children to the grocery store to buy a new dress. You would never send them to the pharmacy to purchase gasoline for the car. You would never send them to the tailor to buy sweets. So, why are you sending them to the stores for happiness and meaning? Your children are no more likely to find real joy in life from material possessions, a fancy car or a prestigious degree than they are to find track shoes at the bookstore.

Direct your children in the right direction. Show them the path to happiness and meaning in life. Know that your true gift for your children is not the newest car, or the latest computer or the most sophisticated stereo system. Your real gift is to give them the gift

of their heritage, the gift of their ancient, rich, timeless roots. That is what will help them through in times of trouble.

Real Education: Swimming or Drowning in the Ocean of Life

Once there was a boat sailing in the middle of the ocean. On the boat were a philosopher, a scientist, a mathematician, and the boatman. The philosopher turned to the boatman and asked, "Do you know the nuances of Vedanta? Do you know the theories of Plato and Aristotle?" "No," replied the boatman. "I have never studied those things. I only know to take God's name in the morning when I wake up and at night before I sleep, and to try to keep Him with me all day long." The philosopher looked at him with disdain. "Well, then at least 30% of your life has been in vain."

Next, the scientist asked the boatman, "Do you know Einstein's Theory of Relativity? Do you know Newton's laws?" The boatman looked out at the reflection of the moon on the water. The light seemed to dance playfully off of the waves, touching first here, then there. He gently shook his head in response to the scientist's question. "No," he said. "I am not learned in that way. I have only learned to be kind, to give more than I receive, and to be humble and pious." "Well," the scientist exclaimed. "Then at least 40% of your life has been in vain."

The mathematician then turned to the boatman. "You must at least know calculus? You must know how to compute advanced equations?" The boatman closed his eyes and entered a meditative trance. "No," he said

softly, a smile creeping across his sun-weathered face. "I do not know those things. I only know God and how to do His service." "Then, your life has been at least 50% in vain!" the mathematician retorted.

The four sat in silence for awhile, when suddenly the waves began to rise up furiously; the sky turned dark, obscuring the blanket of stars. The boat – thin and wooden – began to rock back and forth, up and down, with each thrust of the waves. The boatman fought diligently, using every muscle in his body, every skill he had to regain control over his boat. But, the storm was winning the fight, and with each surge of the waves, the boatman became more and more convinced that the boat could not withstand this beating. As a wave lifted the boat high into the air, the boatman asked his passengers, "Do you know how to swim?" "No!" they all cried at once. The wave dropped the boat, upside down, back into the raging water. The boatman watched sadly as the scientist, the philosopher and the mathematician drowned. "Well," he whispered, "I think 100% of your lives have been in vain."

Are you teaching your children how to swim in the ocean of life? All of the math, science and philosophy will not save them when the waves of life come. Only the knowledge of God, honesty, integrity, spirituality, and their rich culture and heritage can keep them afloat in the ocean of life.

In this life, there are so many things to learn, so many things people say are important. Education is, of course, very important. A doctor can not operate if she doesn't know where the organs are, or how to sew a wound back up again. A scientist can not perform experiments unless he knows which chemicals to use,

and how much of each. An architect can not design buildings without knowing what foundations and supports are necessary.

However, in the big picture, these are not the lessons or the education that truly liberate us. It is not this knowledge that saves us from drowning in the ocean of life. So, parents, please remember to teach your children not only the essentials of school, but also the essentials of spirituality. That is what will really help them swim in the big ocean of life.

Our Homes Are More “Set” Than We Are

Someone once asked me, “*Why? Why do we need to learn how to swim in the ocean of life? Why do we need this knowledge of our culture and heritage? What can it offer us in the 21st century?*” The answer is that spirituality and knowledge of our culture and all the lessons it teaches are what help us to be in peace in life, rather than in pieces. This knowledge teaches us how to be better instead of being bitter. In the West, people have everything. They have TV sets, tea sets, sofa sets, stereo sets – everything is set. But they themselves are *upset!* So, if *we* want to be set in our own lives, we must turn back to God, back to our culture, back to this ancient wisdom. I always say, “Be Western when it comes to professional and academic excellence, but be Indian in your hearts and in your domestic life.” Then, we won’t only own sets; we will also *be* set.

So parents, please remember to make sure that your children know not only math, not only philosophy, not only science. Please

make sure they also know how to swim in the ocean of life. That is your real gift to them.

True Success, True Wealth: Love

If you ask most parents what their concerns are regarding their children, you'll hear, "I want him to get into a good university. I want her to get a good job and be successful." Time and energy are therefore expended in pushing the child academically, encouraging the child to excel, and punishing or reprimanding the child for less than superb performance.

Yet, a degree from a top university, a well-paying job, a lucrative career – these are not the true marks of "success" in life.

There is a story of a young wife who was home alone one day when an old man knocked on the door. She immediately invited him, and his two friends, inside. However, the old man first asked whether her husband was home. Upon hearing that she was alone, the old men said they would wait outside until the husband came home.

Later, when her husband returned home, his wife told him what had happened. "Well, quickly, go and invite them inside," he told his wife. "It is nearly dark."

The woman went out to the garden where the three men were waiting patiently. "Please, come inside. My husband has returned home." One man spoke. He said, "Actually, we cannot all come inside. Only one of us can come in. I am Love. With me are Success and Wealth. Go and

ask your husband which of us he would like in the house. The other two must wait outside."

So the woman went inside and told her husband and daughter what had happened. She said, "I think we should let Success come in. Then, finally, you will get that promotion you have been wanting and dear Meera [the daughter] will get accepted into the best college."

However, her husband disagreed. He said, "I only want the promotion so that I can have a higher income. Let us invite Wealth into our home, then we will not be concerned about promotions or top universities. We will already be prosperous."

The daughter spoke softly. She said, "Mom, Dad, I appreciate that you want us to be successful and wealthy. But, I think that, in the long run, it would be better to have Love. Then at least even in poverty or failure we will have Love."

Her parents smiled at their daughter's wisdom and agreed to invite Love into their home.

The woman went outside and said, "Okay, Love, please, you are the one we selected to enter our home."

The old man named Love stood up and started walking toward the house. However, to the woman's surprise, Success and Wealth also stood up and followed him. "Wait," she said. "I thought you said only one of you could come inside. How come all three of you are coming?"

Love explained, "If you had chosen Success or Wealth then he would have had to enter alone. However, wherever Love goes, Success and

Wealth always follow. So, by choosing Love, you automatically also get Success and Wealth.

So, let us fill our homes with love – love for God, love for each other, love for the community, and love for all of humanity. Then, through that love, through that divine connection, all else will automatically follow. It is when we focus only on Success or Wealth that we find ourselves rich but not fulfilled, successful but not content.

Satisfying Their Every Whim

As parents, we want our children to be happy, we want them to be treated justly, and we want to rectify any injustices they may face. For instance, if our child came home from school complaining about unfair treatment from a teacher, we would immediately phone up the school to reprimand the teacher. If one of our children came to us crying, complaining that his toy was stolen by his sister, we would immediately intervene and return the toy to its rightful owner. This is natural. In many circumstances, it is wonderful to show our children that we are always there for them and that we will always stand by their side. Additionally, it is important for them to know that – in most cases – right does win over wrong and that injustices should be remedied.

However, we must be careful to strike a balance between responding to their complaints and teaching them to adapt to the world. The more children can learn to adapt, the more they can learn to

just smile and move on, the more they can learn to forgive and forget, and the more they can learn to bear discomfort with patience, the better their lives will be.

If we too frequently jump in on their behalf, we deprive them of the lessons of patience, forbearance, forgiveness and adaptation. Yes, in some cases it is important to be assertive. However, a nature of always asserting one's beliefs, wishes, pains and discomforts is not conducive to a peaceful life. The world is unfortunately not always just or fair. It is wonderful to try to make it as just and fair as possible, but it is also crucial to know when to just move on. I read a wonderful quotation. It said, "Expecting the world to treat you fairly just because you are a good person is like expecting the bull not to attack you just because you are a vegetarian."

We do not want our children to become defeatists, of course. We do not want them to be despondent or pessimistic. We must infuse in them a sense that right triumphs over wrong and that being good does bear good results. However, it is equally crucial to teach them that right may not triumph at exactly that moment or in exactly that way. Additionally, it is not their duty (or our duty as parents) to ensure that evil is vanquished. God takes care of that with the glorious law of *karma*.

Too frequently today we see people fighting over such little little things, simply because they have learned to be "assertive." How much smoother our world would flow if, instead of having Assertiveness Training we had Adaptiveness Training. Tall, proud, rigid trees are uprooted by the storm and downed by the rains,

but the willows and those trees which bend with the storm are resilient. We must teach our children to know when to stand tall and proud and when to bend with the breeze. Only then will they withstand the test of time gracefully and resiliently.

Chapter 6

Parenting the Adolescent: How Tightly to Hold the Reins

The Culture Gap

Wherever I go across the globe, the first complaint I hear from the youth in youth sessions is, “My parents won’t let me do anything! All my friends are allowed to go out to parties, why aren’t I? Don’t my parents trust me? This isn’t the Middle Ages. Why don’t they understand that this is not Ahmedabad [or Rajkot, or Chandigarh, or Bihar, etc]?”

Similarly, the first complaint I always hear from parents is, “What’s wrong with my children? Why do they want to do such crazy things? I never gave my parents such a hard time. I would never dare to ask my parents if I could stay out until midnight or go out alone with a boy. What has happened to our children?”

So, what is going on? How to solve this?

First and foremost, parents must realize that their children are

caught between two worlds – the world of their family at home and the world of their peers. This creates enormous pressure on our youth who want to remain true to what they've been taught, yet want to fit in with their friends. Parents, in dealing with their children, must appreciate the conflict that this creates in our youth and be sympathetic to this.

Additionally, parents should realize that this is the West and that (whether we approve or not) Western culture allows teenagers to go out together, to go to parties, to go to the movies, to date. We cannot change Western culture. Nor can we keep our children living in a vacuum. We cannot raise them as though they were growing up in a small village in India. We cannot raise them in the West and then deny them the freedoms being granted to their peers. That breeds resentment in our children. They think that we don't trust them, and that hurts them.

Balancing East and West, Tradition and Modernity

We obviously do not want to begin condoning hedonism and decadence and granting our teenagers free reign. Thus, there must be a balance. The balance should look something like this:

- Meet their friends, find out for yourselves who their friends are.
- Meet their friends' parents. Decide whether you approve of their values or not. If yes, then chances are if their friends are allowed to do it, it's probably okay.

- Ask at the school. Find a teacher you like and ask what is appropriate for someone your child's age.
- Ask friends about their experiences with their children.
- Typically, after the age of fifteen or sixteen, children should be allowed out, by themselves, on weekends. They should be allowed to go to parties (assuming you know who is throwing the party and have the address of where they will be).
- By the age of seventeen or eighteen (just before going off to college), they should be allowed more freedom. Weekend curfews should be later.

By reigning in on their freedom unnecessarily you are only encouraging them to rebel against you; you are only encouraging them to act out in ways far beyond what they would have done if they were not angry. You are only encouraging deception in the home.

I must emphasize here that more important than the specific details of the decisions you make, it is vital to give your children the *sanskaras* and the values which will prevent them from making bad decisions. From the time they are young, you must inculcate morality and ethics in them, through your actions, through your example and through your words.

Keep the link between you and your children tight so that you are the first one they come to with any problem, question or concern. You should be their closest confidante and their best friend.

It is very difficult to build this bridge from scratch during the teenage years. That is why this care must be given to the relationship you have with your children from the time they are young. This close link between parents and children is naturally there when children are very young, but then it unfortunately tends to dissolve over the years. Thus, communication with your teenager becomes difficult.

So, if you keep the connection strong from the time they are very young, their teenage years will be much easier.

The Importance of Communication

We must teach our children from a young age values in the home so that they grow up exhibiting honesty, morality, integrity and self-restraint, therefore rarely make decisions of which we disapprove.

How to do this? First and foremost, we must keep communication lines open. I have had so many youth tell me, "Oh, I could never talk to my mother about this. She would have a fit! She would make such a scene that I could not take it." This perception is not conducive to honest communication. If our children believe that we will "have a fit" or "make a scene," they will not tell us. So, we must have relationships with our children that are open and accepting.

When they tell you things, don't say, "We never did that," or, "How could you possibly do that?" Rather, be understanding

and compassionate. You may not approve of or agree with everything they say, but you must listen with a calm head and a quiet tongue. Then they will come to you. Then they will know that “I can tell my mom anything.” Believe me, they want to tell you, but they are afraid.

Also, don’t complain to your friends about your children’s behavior or share any secrets they may have told you. Children have a way of finding out everything, and they will be broken if they come to know that you were discussing their problems with your friends.

Additionally, parents of teenagers and young adults frequently make a big mistake. They make the biggest issue out of things which really are not such a problem (such as going out or going to parties), so they lose complete control over their youth, who start going out anyway and lying to them, or who become angry and depressed. Instead, the solution is to give them enough freedom that they know you trust them and they don’t feel embarrassed with their friends, and at the same time keep communication lines completely open.

Additionally, the following issues are of crucial importance:

Safety First

First of all, who is driving? If your children do not have a driver’s license, who is driving them? Do you know and trust that person? Does that person drink alcohol? Instead of forbidding your children to go out at all, sit them down and make them understand

the serious consequences of drinking and driving.

- Tell them you will *never* be angry at them for them calling you in the night and asking for a ride home.
- Tell them you will *always* come and pick them up. It is better to lose a few hours of sleep than to lose your child in a drunk driving accident.
- Make sure they always have enough money in their wallets or a taxi and the number of a local taxi company. Tell them you will *always* pay for them to take a taxi home from anywhere.

Looking For Love In The Wrong Place

The second important issue is a difficult one. We all hope that our children will remain virgins until they marry. We hope that they have the strength and the fortitude to withstand the temptations of the flesh.

This discipline and piety must be inculcated from a young age. We cannot abandon our children to the world of television, movies and pop culture and then expect them to uphold righteous ideals of celibacy and restraint. Children practice what they've been taught and what they've seen.

Therefore, it is critically important that from a young age, you plant the seeds of discipline, self-control, restraint and fortitude in them. As they grow, the teachings of saints, readings from the

scriptures, good associations, and your own example will be the water and the sun that nourish these seeds. Then, your children will be strong, beautiful, pious trees.

Additionally, we must ask ourselves, “Why do they engage in sexual activity at such a young, unmarried age? What is the great temptation?” I was once speaking with a teenage girl whose parents had told me she was “out of control.” Evidently she was going out without permission, doing drugs, having sex, and lying to her parents. As I spoke to her, I asked her what was the best moment she had ever experienced on drugs. Her reply was quite telling. She said, “When a boy told me he loved me, just as we were about to have sex.”

She did not say, “Oh, I really enjoy the drugs or the alcohol,” or, “The sex is wonderful.” No. She said, “When he said he loved me.” Then, I asked her why she needed the drugs. Again, she was poignantly honest: “Because unless he was high he would never say he loved me.” Love. This is what our children are looking for. They should not have to go out of the home to find it – it is our responsibility to make that love available in the home.

I asked her later what the happiest moment of her entire life had been. She told me it was when she was pregnant (she was seventeen and unmarried). She said, “I felt such a deep connection to that baby. I felt like my life finally had meaning.”

We cannot ignore these messages: love, connection, meaning. This is what our children are craving, and this is what drives them into the world of sensual pleasure. In movies and on television

they see love exhibited by people when they are drinking or using drugs or in bed together. So, our children run off in search of this love, in search of this connection and in search of this “meaning” of life. The tragedy is that they will never find it in the parties or clubs, but they don’t even know that.

Therefore, it is up to you as parents to make sure that there is love, connection and meaning given to them in the home so they do not have to look elsewhere. You will say, “But of course I love them. They know that.” Yes, perhaps they do. But, is it a love with connection and with meaning, or is it just a love by default since you are their parents? That is frequently their confusion.

What To Do If The Worst Is Happening

Unfortunately, when they do not find enough love, connection and meaning from what we have taught them or from the environment we are providing (including the temple, *seva* activities and social events with the community), then our children seem to slip from our hands. They begin to engage in behavior we consider inappropriate. Perhaps we suspect that they have begun to be sexually active. In this situation, our inability to face the reality is harming our youth.

- Instead of saying things like, “You are not allowed to date or be physically involved,” which will only ensure that they lie to you if they ever do, or instead thinking that if you don’t mention it the idea will never occur to them,

sit them down and honestly discuss the issue. Trust me, this will not be the first time the thought occurs to them. It is definitely something their friends are talking about, if not already doing.

- Explain to them the consequences of unprotected sex – pregnancy, disease, AIDS.
- Explain to your boys that having sex with a girl does not make them “cool,” “macho,” or “strong.”
- Explain to your girls that having sex with a boy does not mean he loves her. Boys will say anything. I have spoken to so many girls whose hearts have been broken by boys who told them, “You’re the one for me. You are my sunshine. I love you from the bottom of my heart...” just to convince the girls to have sex with them. Then, once the conquest is over, so is the relationship. Help your girls to see this.

Most importantly, we must try to fill our teenagers’ minds and lives with activities that are fulfilling, enriching and pure to help keep their thoughts focused. Remember, it is a lot easier to break an *adharmic* pattern of behavior in our children when the pattern is new; it is a lot harder to break the trend when it has become set into their personalities. So, the more time you spend with them in the beginning, when they first seem to be getting tempted by these activities, and the more you help them to see the folly of the path they are on, the less time you (and they) will have to spend later trying to correct mistakes that have been made.

Chapter 7

Married Life: Its Trials & Tribulations

In general, marriage is one of the happiest aspects of most people's lives. Husbands and wives join together at a young age and progress together through the path of life. Husbands and wives serve as each other's best friends, confidantes, caregivers and lovers. They are each other's sunshine.

However, it is inevitable that as we traverse the path of life, hand-in-hand, we will encounter times of difficulty and trouble. There will be issues that seem irresolvable, differences that seem irreconcilable. However, over decades of counseling couples – rich, poor, old, young, Indian, Western – I have found that there is no problem which love, patience, sacrifice and surrender cannot solve.

Let us address a few of the most common issues which spouses seem to face these days:

Treading the Spiritual Path: One is Inclined, the Other is Not

So frequently a husband or wife will come to me and complain, “Swamiji, I am ready to be done with this phase of conjugal love. We have our children. They are healthy and doing well. I am ready to move on into the next, more spiritual phase of life. I am ready to stop giving in to the calls of the flesh. However, it is very difficult because my husband [or wife] doesn’t understand. He/she thinks that I am being cold or aloof. He/she doesn’t understand that I simply want to move beyond these things.” This is a very common situation, especially with couples in their late forties and fifties who have been married already twenty or thirty years.

Alternatively, the complaint may take a slightly different but similar tone. Often I hear, “Swamiji, we have so little free time, that when we do have time I like to go to the temple, to listen to *bhajans* and *kirtan* and *pravachan*. However, my wife [or husband] still prefers to socialize or go out to parties. I wish that she [or he] would be more inclined toward spirituality. Whenever I even try to talk about God or my meditation experience, she [or he] doesn’t seem interested.”

Both of these complaints are symptoms of the same problem: one spouse who is more inclined toward spirituality than the other, one who is more aware of the transient nature of our life here and is looking for deeper purpose and meaning.

This is a very difficult situation, because the one who is pious and spiritual may resent being forced or coaxed into doing things

which he/she knows are not in keeping with the spiritual path. On the other hand, the spouse who is not so spiritually-inclined may feel frustrated and confused by the other's apparent withdrawal or seeming lack of interest.

Communication and Compromise

At this stage, as in any stage, communication and compromise are the keys. First and foremost, there must be communication. If one is feeling more inclined toward spirituality, is yearning to move away from the world of the flesh and the world of superfluous social activity, then he or she must verbalize this to their spouse. Too frequently we expect that our spouses can read our minds. "Why don't they understand?" he or she will complain to me. "Well," I always ask. "Have you sat him [or her] down and explained it all?" The answer is usually "no."

Just as we are human, so are our spouses. We can not impose unrealistic expectations upon them. If we want them to understand a feeling we are having, or a choice we'd like to make, or a shift we are going through, then we must explain it. Otherwise, I hear husbands woefully tell me that they don't know what's going on with their wives. One minute they were loving and affectionate and the next minute they want separate bedrooms. Clearly the husbands are confused and hurt. They can not know that this is simply a spiritual shift in the minds and hearts of their wives. Rather, they feel rejected and criticized. "What did I do?" they ask me.

So, first and foremost: explain the situation calmly and lovingly. Do not condemn. Condemning is not conducive to a healthy, loving relationship. Rather, explain the changes you are feeling. Explain that, in our culture, it is natural and expected to move gently from the “householder” stage of life into one more dedicated to simplicity and spirituality. Explain that as you age, you are finding yourself face to face with the transient nature of this body and therefore you are feeling inclined toward focusing more on the eternal aspects – the soul and your connection to God. Explain that for decades you have lived a life in which your senses were in charge. You have fulfilled your sensual desires and your desires for social engagement and entertainment. Now, you feel it may be time to move forth into a different stage.

It is important though that as you explain this you don’t say, “My way is right. That is what the scriptures say. You are a sinner,” etc. Yes, the scriptures do say this. However, you must not make your spouse feel low or criticized. Later, if they still resist the change, then you can gently bring in external sources that support your feelings. But, in the beginning, let the conversation be natural, rather than giving a lecture to your spouse.

Then, give the other a chance to think about this, to digest it and respond naturally. This will be a process, not a one-time conversation. You must stay compassionate and understanding. Those who have been graced by God with an innate spiritual understanding and an instinctive pull toward spirituality and a life of piety can not condemn those who have not been similarly graced. One must have understanding and sympathy. One must explain

these things gently and with love. You will progress farther on the spiritual path by being compassionate and gracious to your spouse than you will by stubbornly enforcing a “spiritual life” on him or her.

It is also important in situations like this that both husband and wife realize that they may have separate interests, and they must respect the other’s desires. So, if you want to attend a *bhajan/kirtan* program while your spouse wants to go to a social event, that’s okay. You can go to the temple, and he or she can go to the social event. There is no rule saying that husband and wife must always be together on every occasion. Rather than fighting over where you will go, there must be flexibility to go separate ways.

There must also be compromise. If your spouse comes with you to the temple this weekend, then next weekend you should graciously go with him or her to the event they want to attend. Or, if tonight you tell him or her that you’d rather sleep separately, then at least tomorrow be affectionate and loving.

I have seen great miracles worked by those people who remain calm, peaceful and loving while they simply demonstrate a life of spirituality, rather than loudly trying to force it on the other. They are the ones whose marriages become truly pious and beautiful, rather than a bitter divide between husband and wife.

You may think, “Well, but if I don’t force him to be more spiritual, or if I don’t continually urge him to come to the temple, he never will.” This is incorrect thinking. Simply your own spirituality, your example, your love and your understanding will change

him. I have seen so many situations in which a wife wants to live mainly a spiritual life – a life of *brahmacharya* (now that child-bearing is finished), a life of *Aarti*, *bhajan*, *kirtan* and reading of the scriptures. She quietly begins to do these things, while still remaining loving to her husband, not making him feel lower or unattractive or rejected. She will still engage in physical love, if he desires it, yet she keeps her mind focused on God.

Then, when I meet with the husbands, they tell me, “Swamiji, my wife is really a Goddess. She is really divine. I am feeling more and more inclined towards revering her and following her example.” This is how change happens.

Daily Arguments and Stubbornness

Another big complaint I hear is, “We always fight over little, little things. Everything is an argument.” This is a matter of ego. Somehow, somewhere along the way, both husband and wife have decided that they know best and that they will have it “my way.” This gets you nowhere. Our own ego thinks that we are always right, that everyone around us should do things the way we say.

So many times husbands and wives begin to quarrel over something little. Then, it escalates and escalates into a full-blown battle. If you actually stop them in the middle and say, “What exactly are you fighting about?” neither can remember. *This is not the way to live.*

We tend to spend so much time arguing or holding grudges that we forget to love each other and we forget to be thankful for what God has given us. I once was in Australia with Pujya Sant Shri Rameshbhai Oza. We were driving in the car and stopped at a red light. Suddenly, even though all the windows were closed, we could hear a great racket coming from the car next to us. Sitting in the back seat of a brand new Mercedes were two beautiful children, dressed in what looked like brand new clothes. The children were perfectly groomed, but they were trembling with fear and tears were spilling down their cheeks. In the front seat, Mom and Dad were screaming at each other so loudly that even through all the closed windows we could hear the noise. There they were, in a beautiful car, with beautiful children, with seemingly perfect health, and they were screaming. What for? Probably some small issue. Perhaps he was mad that she took too long to get ready and so they were fifteen minutes late. Perhaps she was mad that she had to force him to wear a tie, because he didn't want to. Perhaps he was going to turn left at the previous light, but she decided that the faster route was to go straight. It could have been any one of a million things, but I am sure that this was not the first time they were fighting like that.

Can't we control our own egos long enough to take a deep breath and move on? Must we really assert ourselves so forcefully at every opportunity? Aren't we able to step – even for a moment – into the other's shoes?

We have been given a finite amount of vital energy in our bodies, a finite number of hours each day, and a finite number of days in

our lives. Why should we waste so much energy and time engaged in battles of the will? I heard a wonderful quote once that said, "There is no such thing as winning an argument with your wife. If you have 'won,' then what exactly is it you've won? Only her anger, her pain, and her condemnation."

We tend to work and assert ourselves in life for our own will, for that which we want to happen. However, instead of living and working for our own *will*, let us live and work for "*well*" – the well-being of others and the well-being of the planet.

In a marriage, one of the biggest keys to success is surrender. To row a boat against the current takes you nowhere; you only expend your energy and get tired. If, however, you can swallow your pride and ego and turn that boat around, then the current will gently carry you.

Before we say "no," before we make an issue out of something, let us stop and really ask ourselves, "Is it worth fighting over? Is my way so much better than his way that it is worth our time and energy fighting?" If the answer is no, then just let it go. This does not make you a lesser person, or a weaker person. Rather, it is those who are truly great and strong who can sacrifice their own egos and yield to another's wishes.

Just Try It

Just try it. One day, when you wake up in the morning, tell yourself that today you will not say "no" to your spouse, you will not

argue about anything. Just see how the day goes. It will be magic. Sure, you may end up eating something different for dinner than what you had planned, you may end up going somewhere other than where you wanted, you may end up in the passenger seat for the day. But, so what? What you will gain is peace in the home and peace in your hearts.

I know a wonderful wife who, by the grace of God, is bringing her husband beautifully along the path of piety and spirituality. She does it with love and peace. She will not allow her own ego to stand in the way of peace in the home. Whenever an argument starts, or whenever he begins to get even a little upset, she sweetly chants, “*Om shantih, shantih, shantih*” (“Om peace, peace, peace”) and squeezes his hand lovingly. She doesn’t need to make sure that first she has “convinced” him that he’s wrong, or that she has “explained” to him the error in his ways. She just chants, “*Om shantih, shantih, shantih,*” and changes the subject. This is the way to live.

The Importance of Brahmacharya

I already addressed the issue of when one spouse wants to move toward *brahmacharya* (celibacy and restraint) and the other doesn’t. I emphasized that this stage cannot be forced upon one who resists it, and that one must move gently and lovingly.

However, it is important also to note that this really is the way that we are supposed to live out our years after child-bearing. In Indian culture, the child-bearing stage is called *Grihastha Ashram*

stage of life. Then, after age fifty, we move into what is called the *Vanprastha Ashram* stage. In this stage one's attention and energy should move from the world of the senses to the world of the soul. These are the bonus years of life. Your worldly duties are fulfilled and each year is a bonus to take you further on the path towards God-realization. People begin to work less and eventually retire. They may sell their large, expensive, time-consuming home and move into an *ashram*, or just a smaller, simpler dwelling. Rather than continue to endlessly attend the stream of social engagements, they move toward simplicity, piety and contemplation on God.

One important aspect of this stage is *brahmacharya*, or celibacy. It actually is an important aspect of the *Grihastha* stage as well, once one has had the desired number of children. In our bodies there is *shakti*, or vital energy. This energy comes from our food, from the sun, from our meditations, from having *darshan* of saints or of deities in a temple, from performing *japa* and *seva*, and from association with holy people. Even those who do no spiritual activities still have this energy from their food and sunlight.

This energy is crucial for our physical, mental and emotional well-being. It is the energy which runs all of the systems of our body – nervous, immune, circulatory, respiratory, reproductive, digestive, etc. It is the energy which allows our bodies to heal when we are injured; it is the energy which allows us to recover from illness; it is the energy which clarifies our thought process and makes our minds sharp and alive; it is the energy which propels us forth in our daily lives.

The more of this energy we conserve, the better our bodies and

our minds function. There is a limited, finite amount. The less we waste, the more we will have left over. Excessive sex is the greatest preventable cause of loss of vital energy. When we “release” during sex, we do not only release tension, passion and excitement, we literally – both women and men – release a crucial, vital energy source from our bodies. I have heard some people say that sex makes them feel energized, but mainly this is just a mental delusion. Rather, after sex the body wants to sleep; it feels lazy and sluggish. Frequently we are hungry, because we immediately sense the need to replace that energy.

You will notice that animals, who work purely on God-given instinct, will never have sex if they are ill or injured. Even we, if we are in tune with our inner nature, will instinctively refrain from sexual activity if our health is poor. This is not simply because we don’t feel “in the mood.” Rather, it is because our body is telling us that it needs that vital energy to heal itself. It is urging us not to recklessly discard the divine *Shakti*.

One of the greatest causes of illness and weakness amongst people of middle age is excessive loss of this vital energy. Saints, and others who have done a great deal of *sadhana* and have learned to see these things, can look at someone and immediately know whether they engage excessively in sexual activity. The eyes become sunken and dark circles form beneath them. The entire vibrational energy of the person appears faded, weak, dull and depleted.

Everyone comments on the shine in the eyes and faces of holy people. Part of this is divine connection, of course. Part of it comes

from living a life dedicated only to God, away from the mundane troubles of day to day life. Yet, another part, a very large part of this glow comes from the preservation of the vital energy. Just try it. Abstain for awhile and you will see the difference in your energy level.

Additionally, loss of vital energy is another leading cause of disharmony in the marriage. The reason is that the vital energy stabilizes and balances our nervous system; it allows us to stay calm and focused. It serves, literally, as a lubricant for our nerves. When couples waste this energy, their nervous systems become raw and depleted. They lose their tempers quickly and are unable to think clearly and calmly. Then it becomes a vicious cycle: they begin to quarrel over something little due to the inability to keep a calm head. Then the fight escalates and escalates. Eventually the anger climaxes in some way and begins to dissipate. Then, in order to “make up” and to feel “connected” again, they have sex. This only compounds the problem. Couples who can conserve this energy will find that they fight significantly less, and that they are more tolerant, calm and patient. Therefore, there will be less of a need to “make up.”

However, some people may find it difficult in the beginning to refrain from engaging in sexual activity and releasing the sexual energy. There are two important aspects in overcoming this. The first is simple practice and will power. We release our sexual energy as though it were a habit: the feeling arises and so we engage in sexual activity to release it. We act as though there were no other choice. Yet, there is another choice. That choice is

to refrain, and it is a choice that is a lot less difficult to make than many people think.

The second aspect has to do with which part of our beings we operate from. If we are mostly in contact with our physical and emotional selves – our needs, desires, sensations – then it is more difficult to overcome the call of desire. However, there is more to us than just our bodies, our senses, and our emotions. We are, in essence, spiritual beings, divine beings. Most of us have simply, and unfortunately, lost touch with this reality. Our bodies and our hearts pull us and push us so forcefully every waking moment that we forget our true, spiritual, divine nature.

By shifting your focus off of the physical and onto the spiritual you will find it much easier to transcend the desires of the flesh. People pay so much attention to caring for their physical needs – ensuring they get enough sleep, proper nutrition, comfortable clothing, soft pillows and blankets, medicine when they are ill. Yet, most people tend to neglect their spiritual needs – silence, prayer, meditation, daily connection with God, a mentor or guru.

As you make the decision to enter a time of *brahmacharya*/celibacy, do so with the awareness that you are not depriving yourselves of some basic necessity, but rather that you are giving yourself a great gift, the gift of a shift from the state of physical beings to spiritual beings.

Removing a desire, or the habit of desire, is like removing a rotting tooth. As the tooth (or desire) stays within us, it festers more and more each day, becoming more and more of an “infection.” The

one small, rotting tooth slowly begins to affect the entire mouth. The gums swell, the jaw becomes sore, and the bacteria move to other teeth as well. The longer you leave it in, the more it hurts to pull out. Yes, of course, when you pull it out it bleeds, it is painful, it is slightly sore afterwards. But, quickly the wound heals and the mouth recovers. The speed and ease of recovery depends upon how quickly the tooth is removed; the longer it is left in the mouth the more damage it will create.

Similarly, one small desire, left unchecked, will simply become stronger and stronger and harder to remove. "Satisfying" it is never the answer, for people are never satisfied. Just look at the popularity of the drug Viagra: men who have had active, "satisfying" lives are so distressed by their inability to continue to perform sexually at the age of sixty or seventy or eighty that they are willing to swallow pills in order to continue releasing their sexual energy! Fifty or sixty years of sexual activity has not been enough to satisfy the desire! Thus, one cannot make the mistake of assuming that just "one more time" or "one more year" will lead to satiation. Rather, you must accept that the desire can never be fulfilled and make a conscious decision to shift the focus of your lives from the physical to the spiritual.

Chapter 8

Marriage of the Children

Marriage is always a sensitive issue in any culture. Within Indian culture, especially the culture of Indians living abroad, the issue is especially laden with potential conflict. The parents usually had an arranged marriage and therefore expect to arrange the marriage of their children. However, the children frequently can't comprehend the idea of marrying someone they don't love, let alone someone they don't even know.

Traditional Indian Roles in Today's Western Society

The West is a culture of individuality, of self-assertion, of equal rights and opportunities for men and women. It is a world of two-income households, a world of women postponing family life in favor of their career, and a world of day care for children. In traditional India (and still in much of India today) the roles in the household are fixed and constant: the man works outside the

home to bring in money. The woman takes care of the home and the children. The man's duty ends when he walks in the door from work. The woman's duty never ends. The man views his wife as his Goddess; he takes food from her hand as *prasad*.

Therefore, we now have a whole generation of girls and boys who have been raised to see traditional India in the home and yet who see Western culture wherever they look. At home their mother cooks, cleans and does all the housework. At school their friends and their classes are teaching non-discrimination, new social roles, feminism, etc. At home, their parents are trying to convince them that elders know best in terms of lifelong marriage partners and that arranged marriages are the best route to a long, happy married life. Outside, their friends are talking about "falling in love"; the television shows and movies glorify "following your heart."

It is no wonder they are confused.

From the Girl's Side

Let's look at the issue first from the girl's perspective: she sees her mom working hard at home. Mom is the first to get up in the morning and the last to sleep at night. She cooks, cleans, does all the household jobs, takes care of the children, and still is always bright and smiling. The girl sees her father refer to it as *seva* when he carries his own dishes into the sink. Yet, as Indians are typically cultured not to be publicly demonstrative of their feelings, the girl doesn't see the way her father adores her mother. She

doesn't hear the words of love offered. She doesn't know that he cannot wait to rush home to her mother's shining face each day.

Then, this girl grows up, goes to school, graduates, and is studying for her master's or her doctorate. Her parents want to arrange a marriage between her and another Indian boy. This girl cringes at the idea that she will end up in the kitchen for her whole life. She has grown up side-by-side other girls who will go on to be presidents of companies, who will become doctors. She cannot bear the idea of trading in her career opportunities to be a "housewife." But, on the other hand, she knows that if she does pursue her career goals, she will still be held responsible for all the household duties if she marries an Indian. She knows that even if she works eight hours a day, it will still be seen as her duty to have a full hot supper on the table, the kids bathed and dressed, and the house clean. She feels stuck. She knows that if she marries a Western man, a "liberal" man whom she's met at university, he will not expect her to do all the household chores. She knows that he will not consider it "negligence" on her part if they go out for dinner, or if they eat left-overs, or if dinner is only one dish. So, she is justifiably torn and confused.

From the Boy's Side

Now, from the boy's perspective: he grows up watching his mother care for his father with great love and devotion. He grows up in a home with a hot meal always waiting. He grows up in a home where his mom sacrifices everything for his father and for

the kids. Now, if he's going to marry an Indian girl raised in the West, she has different ideas. She doesn't want to be his "servant." She doesn't understand why he can't cook dinner sometimes. There are times in which she must be out for a business meeting and he is in charge of looking after the kids. He feels frustrated. Why can't his wife be more like his mother? Then, the dissatisfaction begins. Frequently, these boys decide that they want a girl brought over from India for them to marry. However, that should not be the only solution. They should not have only one choice. We must work to ensure that these Indian boys and Indian girls, raised in the West, can be compatible together as husband and wife.

The Benefits of Tradition

So, what is the solution?

Arranged marriages are a gem. Statistics show that at least 50% of love marriages around the world end in divorce. If you can fall "in" love, then there is a good chance you will fall "out" of love. These emotion-based marriages don't take into consideration so many crucial factors of making life together smooth.

Additionally, it is vitally important that (as much as possible) Indians marry Indians. This is not due to any concept of exclusivity or superiority. But, rather, it has been shown, time and time again, that when people marry within their culture, the marriages are smoother, more peaceful and more resilient.

Further, as our culture emigrates more and more, especially toward the West, it is crucial that the rich, ancient heritage of Bharat Mata not become diluted. The best way to ensure this is to encourage marriage within the culture.

Yet, how then to solve the problem of the Indian boy and girl – raised in traditional Indian homes but living amongst Western peers and Western influences – the girl who wants to marry a Western boy, and the boy who wants a girl to be like his mom?

The Solution Begins in the Home – Set An Example

This problem can be solved in the home. But, it must begin early. Husbands and wives (the parents) must realize that although they are living according to roles taught and espoused by their own parents, these are not the roles that their children are seeing each day, nor are they the roles endorsed by Western culture. So, the parents must find a balance between, on the one hand, remaining true to their roots and their customs, but at the same time providing their children with role models that will make them more compatible with other Indians and more likely to allow for an arranged marriage.

First of all, the fathers must provide their children with the example of a husband who *does* help around the house. The sons will learn that, they too, must help, and the daughters will learn that they will not be expected to do everything. I know one beautiful, divine family in America. They are completely traditionally

Indian in all the important ways: there is a holy, beautiful *mandir* in their home, they speak Gujarati in the house, they both teach at the local Sunday School, the wife wears *sarees* and cooks Indian food. However, they have found a perfect balance. Both are doctors, and her job is given as much priority as his. Yes, she cooks, but with his help. One day, when I was staying at their home, I came downstairs to find the husband alone in the kitchen, standing over a sink full of spinach leaves. "What are you doing?" I asked. "Giving the spinach a bath," he replied.

As soon as dinner is over, the husband is up beside the wife, clearing the table and washing the dishes. He does not sit down until the kitchen is spotless. They work together, side by side. I have seen him come home from work before she has come home. The first thing he does is unload the dishwasher so it is empty, clean and ready for the dinner dishes.

There is no complaining, no sulking, no resentment on either part. He loves her dearly and wants to help her with her work. She loves him dearly and wants to make everything wonderful for him. So, joyfully, they live side by side.

Their son is going to be the perfect husband. He is traditionally Indian in many ways: fluent in Gujarati although born and raised in the USA, in medical school at the moment, an active member of the Hindu Students' Council at every school he's ever attended. He knows all about the Western world and yet cries when *bhajans* are played. And, he will be ready to "give the spinach a bath" or to jump up beside his wife and clean up from dinner.

Any Indian girl, whether she has never seen the outside of her town in India, or whether she is completing her residency in surgical medicine at Harvard, would be thrilled to marry him. And, this is not due only to the grace of God; it is due to the example set in his home.

This is the task of today's parents: to set an example whereby your girls do not grow up afraid to become like their moms, and where your boys do not grow up expecting their Western-born and educated wives to act like their Indian-born and raised mothers or grandmothers.

Display of Affection

Another essential ingredient is the expression of love. Today's media culture is plastered with images of physical affection. "Falling in love" is heralded as the greatest joy in life. Yet, Indian culture at its roots is a non-demonstrative culture. It is a culture of *Namaskar*, rather than embraces. It is a culture in which the women touch their husbands' feet to say good-bye rather than have a farewell hug and kiss. This, to me, is beautiful. Yet, it is unfortunately understood in the Western world as being indicative of two people who are not really in love. I have heard so many children say to me, "My parents don't really love each other. You never see them touch each other or hug or smile or anything." We might laugh, because we know that, of course, the parents love each other; they just have been cultured not to express it in public.

For the sake of our children growing up in the West, it might be a good idea for parents to at least make it clear to their children that they *are* in love and that they *are* happy together, lest the children grow up thinking that true love cannot be found in an arranged marriage, and is only to be discovered in forbidden realms.

Chapter 9

Conclusion

You have all taken on a great challenge by raising your Indian children in the West. You have left the familiarity and comfort of your families in India (or your parents did, if they came first) in order to give your children a better educational and professional opportunity. This is a wonderful gift you have given them. This choice took courage and faith on your part. To start again, fresh in an unfamiliar land is not easy.

Now your children are growing and thriving in the Western world. They are the top of their class. However, you are concerned, and rightly so, about the influence of Western culture upon their lives. The West has a great deal to offer our children – a wonderful spirit of volunteerism and community service, a commitment to excellence and high standards, and an emphasis on promptness and punctuality. However, there are also several aspects which can be seen as detrimental to the moral and spiritual growth of a child, including the widespread use of drugs and alcohol, the *laissez-faire* attitude toward pre-marital sex, and the culture of rebellion which

tends to run rampant amongst teenagers here.

Therefore, it is crucial that we find a balance for our children between letting them absorb all of the benefits of life in the West yet trying our best to inoculate them against decadence, indulgence and rebellion. This is not an easy task. In fact, it is one of the greatest challenges facing Indians living abroad. However, if we can meet this challenge, if we can succeed in the task, then we will have accomplished something truly great and of immeasurable benefit for our children and all future generations.

There is another benefit, as well, to helping our children maintain their Indian culture and values while living in the West: these traditions, insights and ethical standards will be of great benefit to all the world. If our children can embrace their culture proudly and disseminate some of the wisdom and practices to their peers, then slowly, with the grace of God, we may be able to affect a great, positive change on the youth of the West – both youth of Indian origin and those of Western origin.

Significance of Common Rituals

Aarti

Aarti is a beautiful ceremony in which *deepas* (oil lamps) are offered to God. *Aarti* can be done to a deity in the temple, it can be done on the banks of the Ganges to Mother Ganga, or it can be done to a saint. It is performed to God, in any manifestation, in any form, and by any name.



The essence of the *aarti* ceremony is that all day long God offers us light – the light of the sun, the light of life, the light of His (Her) blessings. *Aarti* is a time when we say “Thank you,” and we offer back the light of our thanks, the light of our love and the light of our devotion.

We realize that the small *deepa* is nothing compared to the divine light which shines on us all day. So, *aarti* is a ceremony of humility, a time in which we acknowledge that “God, you are everything. I am nothing. All day you shine upon the world. All I can offer you is this small *deepa*, a flame which will be blown out by the passing wind. But, I offer it with devotion and with love. Please accept my offering. Please accept my life.”

One of the meanings of *Aarti* literally is “remover of pain.” This is beautiful, because there is nothing inherent in the name of the ceremony that says which form or name of God it should be performed to. It should be performed to the Divine Remover of Pain in our life.

Yagna



The meanings of *yagna* are vast and varied, enough to fill a book by themselves.

Yagna can refer literally to the *havan*/fire ceremony, where we sit around a fire, placing offerings into the flames. It can also be used to mean *seva* or sacrifice. The most common usage, though, is the *yagna* ceremony which involves a large fire. This is one of the most common rituals in Indian culture. It is used on most important occasions, ranging from weddings to the opening of new businesses to graduations to prayers for someone's health.

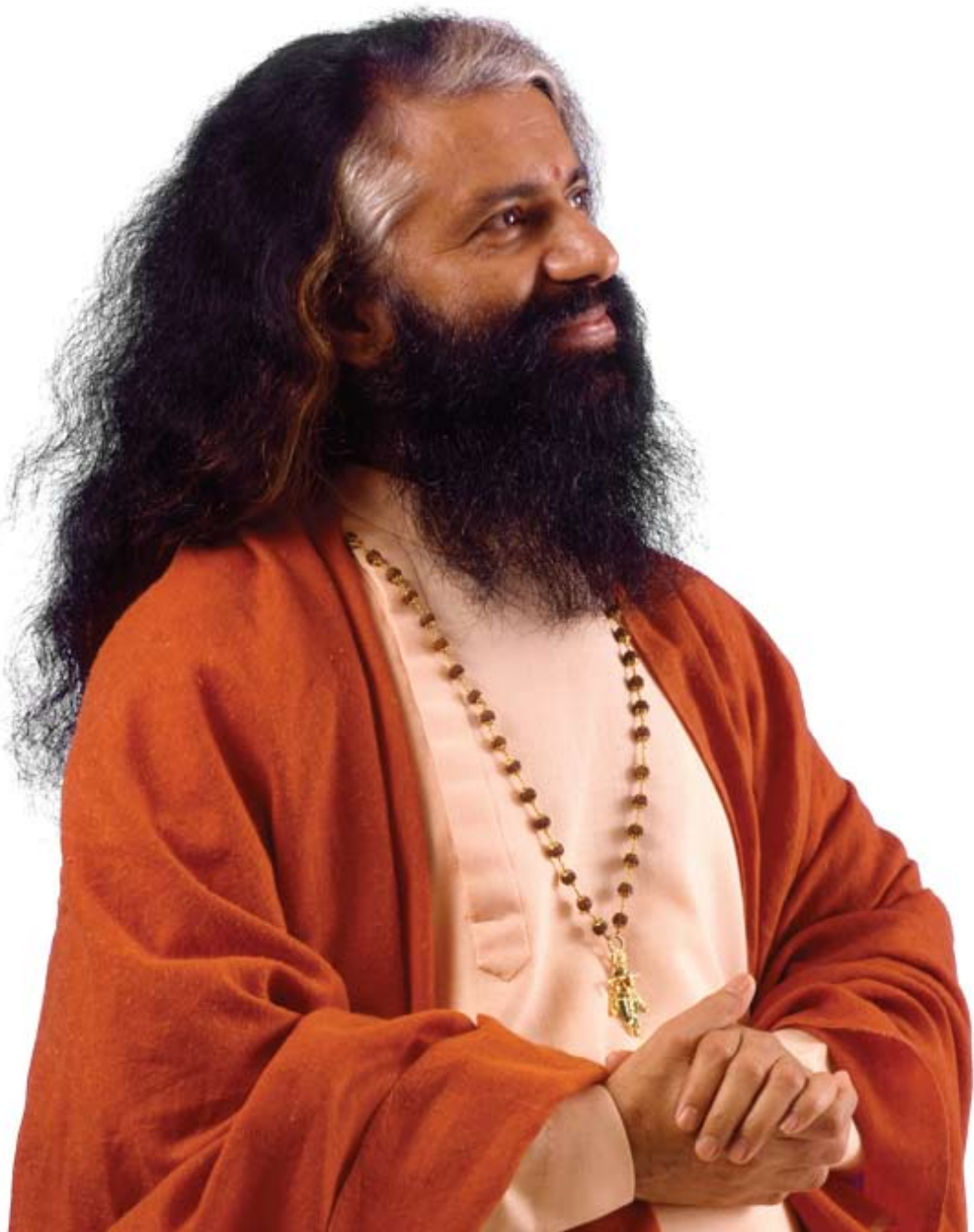
Yagna is in essence a purifying ritual. Fire purifies everything that comes into contact with it. As we perform *yagna*, we pray that we, too, may be made pure. But who is the Divine Purifier, the True Purifier, the Fire of all fires? God. So, these offerings are not being made simply to a fire, rather they are being made to the Real Fire, the Almighty. As we place the *ahuti* (offerings) into the flames, we symbolically offer all our "impurities" – our anger, our greed, our jealousy, our grudges, our pains, our obstacles – and we pray to God to make us as pure as the ghee we are pouring into the flames. We pray that our every thought, every word and every action may be pure and divine.

We sit around the *yagna* to remind us to keep God and purity in the center of our lives. Too often, we want to be the center of everything; we want to be the most important; we want offerings to be made to us. That is the root of our unhappiness. So, in a *yagna*, we sit around the fire and place our offerings inward. This reminds us that in life we should be on the outside, with God in the center, and we should offer in our every breath, ev-

ery thought, every action at His holy feet, praying for Him to purify us.

In *yagna*, if you listen to the *shlokas*, you will hear that they each end with “*idam namamah.*” This means, “Not for me, but for You.” It means that whatever I do, whatever I have, whatever I give, it is not for me, but, God, it is for You. This is the root of *yagna*, the root of Hinduism and the root of happiness in life.

Lastly, just as the flames of a fire only rise higher and higher, so we pray that God may carry our lives only upward, closer and closer to His divine abode.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*His Holiness Pujya Swami
Chidanand Saraswatiji*

Spiritual and Academic Education: H.H. Swami Chidanand Saraswatiji's motto in life is, "In the Service of God and humanity." Touched by the hand of God at the tender age of eight, Pujya Swamiji left His home to live a life devoted to God and humanity, spending His youth in silence, meditation and austerities high in the Himalayas. At the age of seventeen, after nine years of unbroken, intense *sadhana*, He returned from the forest—under the orders of His guru—and obtained an academic education to parallel His spiritual one. Pujya Swamiji has master's degrees in Sanskrit and Philosophy as well as fluency in many languages.

The Teaching of Unity: Unity, harmony, and the belief in infinite paths to God are the foundation of Pujya Swamiji's "religion." His goal is to bring everyone closer to God, regardless of what name one uses. "If you are a Hindu, be a better Hindu. If you are a Christian, be a better Christian. If you are a Muslim, be a better Muslim. If you are a Jew, be a better Jew," He says.

In this line, He has been a leader in numerous international, inter-faith conferences and parliaments, including the **Parliament of World Religions**; the **Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders at the United Nations**; the **World Economic Forum**; the **World Council of Religious Leaders at the United Nations**; the **World Conference of Religions for Peace**; the **Global Youth Peace Summit at the United Nations**; the **Hindu-Jewish Summit**; and the **Hindu-Christian Dialogue initiated by the Vatican**. He is also

a leader of frequent pilgrimages for peace across the world.

Spiritual Leader and Inspiration: Pujya Swamiji is the President and Spiritual Head of Parmarth Niketan Ashram in Rishikesh, one of India's largest and most renowned spiritual institutions. Under His divine inspiration and leadership, Parmarth Niketan has become a sanctuary known across the globe as one filled with grace, beauty, serenity and true divine bliss. Pujya Swamiji has also increased several-fold the humanitarian activities undertaken by Parmarth Niketan. Now, the ashram is not only a spiritual haven for those who visit, but it also provides education, training, and health care to those in need.

He is also the founder and the spiritual head of the first Hindu-Jain Temple in America. This beautiful, three-domed masterpiece is located on the outskirts of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and has paved the way for unity between Hindus and Jains across America. Pujya Swamiji is also the founder and inspiration behind many other temples in the USA, Canada, Europe and Australia.

Guide to Youth: Pujya Swamiji knows that the youth are our future, and He is forever changing the course of that future through His profound effect on every youngster with whom He comes in contact. Children and adolescents seem to bloom like flowers under the rays of His light. Additionally, He gives pragmatic tools to help them unite in the spirit of peace, harmony and global change. Pujya Swamiji runs youth sessions and camps in the USA, Europe and throughout Asia.

Ceaseless Service: "Giving is Living" is Pujya Swamiji's motto; He is always in the midst of dozens of projects, each one a noble and tenaciously dedicated effort to make the world a better place for all of humanity. He is the Founder/Chairman of the India Heritage Research Foundation (IHRF), an international, non-profit, humanitarian organization dedicated to providing education, health care, youth welfare, and vocational training to the needy population. IHRF also, under the guidance and inspiration of Pujya Swamiji, is compiling the first *Encyclopedia of Hinduism* in history. Pujya Swamiji is also the Founder/

Chairman of the Divine Shakti Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to using the energy, strength and capability of women to help bring the light of life, hope, education and assistance to the abandoned, orphaned babies and young girls, as well as widowed and impoverished women.

Ganga Action: Pujya Swamiji is also the Founder of Ganga Action Parivar (GAP), a worldwide family of scientists, engineers, specialists, volunteers and devotees who are dedicated to working to make Mother Ganga's waters not only *nirmal* (clean) but also *aviral* (free-flowing). The work being undertaken by GAP is multi-faceted and extensive. See the separate GAP section and also www.gangaaction.com for more details.

Awards and Recognitions: Pujya Swamiji is the recipient of innumerable awards for both His role as spiritual leader as well as for His unparalleled humanitarian work. Some of the more noteworthy are as follows:

1. Mahatma Gandhi Humanitarian Award, given by the Mayor of New Jersey, USA for outstanding charitable and interfaith work
2. Hindu of the Year, 1991, by the international magazine *Hinduism Today*, for masterminding the project of the next millennium, the *Encyclopedia of Hinduism*
3. Uttaranchal Ratan ("Jewel of the State of Uttaranchal") Award
4. Bharat Vikas Parishad 1st Utkrishtta Samman Award
5. Devarishi Award, by Sandipani Vidya Niketan, under the guidance of Pujya Sant Rameshbhai Oza, for promoting Indian culture and heritage across the world
6. Bhaskar Award, 1998, by Mystic India and Bharat Nirman,

for Outstanding Humanitarian Service

7. Prominent Personality Award, by Lions' Club
8. Diwaliben Mohanlal Mehta Charitable Trust Award for Progress in Religion
9. Best Citizens of India Award

Further, He has been given the title of Patron of the Russian Indian Heritage Research Foundation, Moscow, and is also a Patron of the Centre for Religious Experience in Oxford, UK.

The True *Sanyasi*: Pujya Swamiji seems unaffected by this incredible list of accomplishments and remains a pious child of God, owning nothing, draped in saffron robes, living a life of true renunciation. His days in Rishikesh are spent offering service to those around Him. Thousands travel from America, Europe and Australia as well as from all over India, simply to sit in His presence and receive His *darshan*. To them, the journey is an inconsequential price to pay for the priceless gift of His *satsang*. He travels the world, bringing the light of wisdom, inspiration, upliftment and the divine touch to thousands across the world.



INDIA HERITAGE RESEARCH FOUNDATION

Pujya Swami Chidanand Saraswatiji is the founder and chairman of the India Heritage Research Foundation, a non-profit, charitable organization dedicated to humanitarian and cultural projects. Founded in 1987, IHRF is committed to preserving the timeless wisdom and ageless grandeur of Indian culture. By weaving together ancient tradition, cultural history, a wide range of non-discriminatory charitable services, and inspiring youth programs, IHRF has created a tapestry of true, universal beauty.

The Encyclopedia of Hinduism

IHRF has completed the revolutionary project of compiling the first *Encyclopedia of Hinduism* in history. The *Encyclopedia* will mark the first time that the urgent need is met for an authentic, objective and insightful well of information, capturing both the staples and the spices of Indian tradition and culture. This eleven-volume work was previewed and blessed by the hands of the Dalai Lama and many other revered saints at a large function during the Maha Kumbha Mela in Haridwar in 2010, and will be available internationally by the end of 2011.

The *Encyclopedia of Hinduism* will be a significant landmark, encompassing the entire spectrum of the land called Bharat.

IHRF is dedicated to youth, education, spirituality, culture, inter-faith harmony, health care and ecology. To this end, it sponsors medical care programs, schools, *gurukuls*/orphanages, training centers, large-scale spiritual and cultural events, tree-plantation and clean-up programs, conferences geared toward inter-faith harmony, summer camps, and international youth awareness programs. Additionally, IHRF spon-

sors (both financially and otherwise) educational institutions that are already established but suffering from lack of resources.

Following are examples of only a few of the numerous ways that IHRF's arms embrace humanity:

Y.E.S. – Youth Education Services

Many villages throughout India are oceans of poverty and illiteracy. The influx of technology, commerce, education and metropolitanism that has flooded most of India's cities since independence seems to have not even touched these villages. They exist as they did centuries ago. However, one crucial change has occurred. Now, basic education and marketable skills are absolute necessities in order to subsist in even the smallest communities. Hence, those who lack this education and training go to sleep hungry each night.



In the midst of this ocean of destitution, there are islands of light, islands of knowledge, islands of hope. The Y.E.S. schools are some of these islands. The Y.E.S. program encompasses dozens of children's schools, women's vocational training programs (including sewing, handicrafts, tailoring and fashion designing as well as adult literacy education), and two orphanages/*gurukuls*. These schools are located in Rishikesh, Swargashram, Rani Pokhri, Lucknow, Himachal Pradesh, Orissa, Uttarkashi, as well as other areas of the Himalayas and North-East India.

The children and women in the Y.E.S. program are given not only an education, but they are also given the priceless gifts of hope and faith.

The Y.E.S. program is dedicated to providing poor and orphaned chil-



dren a positive, nurturing environment, and to giving them the chance to live a life free from destitution or despair.

Gurukuls/Orphanages



One visit to India is sufficient to see the urgent, dire need for orphanages and homes for underprivileged children. However, simple shelters with food, beds and babysitters are not sufficient.

These children need not only to be fed and sheltered. Rather, they also need to be educated and trained so they can become productive members of society. They need to be inculcated with values, ethics and spirituality which will make them torchbearers of Indian culture.

Our three *Gurukuls/Orphanages* serve as places where nearly 500 children are housed as well as educated, cultured and filled with crucial values such as non-violence, truth, and *seva*.

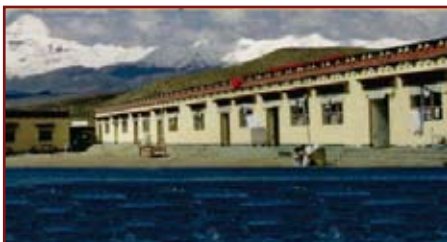


Their days are filled with academic and computer studies, *yoga*, meditation, Vedic chanting, reading of scriptures, *seva* and special programs, such as the performance of dramas based on Indian spiritual history, designed to instill in them essential *sanskaras*. Renamed *rishikumars*, the children travel on *yatra* to the Himalayas and perform *yagna* and prayers every night on the banks of Mother Ganga.

Looks of hopelessness have become looks of optimism and hope. Lightless eyes have become bright, shining eyes. Feelings of destitution and despair have become feelings of pride, faith and enthusiasm.

Mansarover Ashrams and Clinic

Under the guidance, inspiration and vision of Pujya Swami Chidanand Saraswatiji, IHRF has built three ashrams and a medical clinic in the holy land of Lake Mansarover and Mt. Kailash in Tibet.



Prior to this project, there were no indoor lodging facilities nor medical facilities for hundreds of kilometers. People frequently suffered from basic, treatable ailments due to lack of medical attention. Therefore, after undertaking a *yatra* to the sacred land in 1998, Pujya Swamiji took a vow that – by the grace of God – He would do something for the local people (who don't even have running water) and for all the pilgrims who travel there.

The ashram (tourist rest house) and clinic on the banks of Lake Mansarover were officially inaugurated in July 2003. We have also built two halls there where *satsang*, meditation and many other divine activities can take place.

Additionally, we have built an ashram in Paryang, Tibet, on the way to Mansarover, the place where every *yatri* stays one day prior to reaching Mansarover. This ashram was inaugurated in June 2006.

A third ashram has been built in Dirapuk, on the sacred Mt. Kailash *Parikrama* route, at the unprecedented altitude of 17,000 feet, and



was inaugurated in September 2009. Dirapuk is the place where all pilgrims spend the first night of the two-night, fifty-two kilometer, treacherous *parikrama*. At this location, the *darshan* of Mt. Kailash is the clearest, closest, and most spectacular.

Additionally, we have pledged our support and assistance to the local villagers of Mansarovar.

The project is truly the grace of God and is a divine gift to this holy land, to all Tibetans who live there, and to all the pious pilgrims who cross oceans and continents in order to have a glimpse of the abode of Lord Shiva.



Tsunami Relief

On the 30th of December, 2004, Pujya Swamiji, Vivek Oberoi, Sadhvi Bhagwati, *Rishikumars* from Parmarth Niketan's *Gurukul* and Vivek Oberoi's family traveled down to South India in the wake of the devastating tsunami. Upon seeing the devastation wrought upon the land, they decided to stay and offer both short-term and long-term assistance. The relief work ranged from immediate, emergency measures to the permanent reconstruction of entire villages.

Phase I – Immediate, Emergency Relief Measures

1. Construction of 100 new, temporary homes



2. Establishment and running of seven community kitchens where thousands of families received fresh, hot meals, including milk for children
3. Medical Relief Centers operated at each of the kitchens
4. Playground for the children
5. Free Eye and Cataract Operation Camp for hundreds of villagers



6. Wide-scale distribution of necessities to thousands of people, including food, water, clothing, cooking supplies, shoes, and sheets
7. Repair of over 100 boats and purchase of 15 new boats
8. Purchase of over 600 new fishing nets

Phase II – Permanent Village Reconstruction in Pondicherry

Project Hope undertook the reconstruction of villages Pannithittu and Pattincheri in Pondicherry, totaling over 350 homes. Pannithittu, built through the generosity of Rotary International, Sadeh Lok, UK, Himjyoti Foundation and many other generous donors, was inaugurated in December 2005 by the hands of the Honorable Governors of Tamil Nadu, Pondicherry and Uttarakhand.



The village of Pattincheri, sponsored by Shri LN Mittal of London, was inaugurated in April 2007.



*Phase III – Cuddalore Town,
Cuddalore District, Tamil Nadu:
Orphanage and Women's Center*



The final stage in the work was completed and inaugurated on May 12, 2007. The orphanage which we built for the tsunami orphans as well as facilities for over 300

children who had been orphaned prior to the tsunami was inaugurated by H.E. the Honorable Governor of Tamil Nadu, Shri Surjit Singh Barnalaji with Pujya Swamiji.



The orphanage includes dormitory facilities, school rooms, a computer center, medical room, beautiful kitchen and dining facilities, a vocational training center and more. It has been built on the same land as the previously existing home for approximately 200 widowed/abandoned women, which we also beautified. In this way, the orphaned children



will receive, in addition to the staff, mothers, aunts, grandmothers and older sisters; the women will receive the priceless gift of caring for orphaned children. We have also built a vocational training center for the women, and the new huge dining/kitchen facilities are shared by both the children and the women.

Rural Development Program

We are running a rural development program in a town called Veerpur, on the banks of the Ganges, three kilometers south of Rishikesh.

The following are components of the rural development program:

Water facilities – Although the town lies on the banks of the Ganga River, most people had no running water or water for their farms. We dug a boring well and have brought running water to this village.

Tree plantation program

Construction of a proper road in the village



Organic Gardening program – We have started a special organic farming program as well. We have brought in trained organic farmers and scientists to teach the local farmers alternative, chemical-free methods of farming. Further, we will have a special “buy back” program with them where we will buy back from them all of their crops. In addition, the ashram at

Veerpur has its own organic farm.

Women's Vocational training program

Sewage Control and Sanitation programs – We have laid sewage lines in the village and constructed toilets for the villagers so that no pollution goes into Ganga.

Spirituality and Culture – We have started an evening devotional ceremony there on the banks of the Ganges, called *Aarti*. It is a way for the villagers to come together in a spirit of peace, culture & piety.

Gurukul/orphanage – The second of the three *gurukuls*/orphanages is here in Veerpur, and we have plans to open an orphanage for girls here as well.

Project Give Back

With the motto “*Give Back, Feel Good,*” Project Give Back is working to bring medical, environmental and engineering *seva* to the people of rural India by experts and professionals from around the globe. So far, we have been active in organizing and running various free medical camps in the villages of the Himalayas themselves, bringing medical care to the people. Doctors from all over the world of all different specialities come to beautifully donate their skills and expertise to the patients, who usually cannot afford such care, as well as distribute free medicines, glasses and other medical equipment to the patients.

There is also an effort to better educate people to maintain health and



hygiene. We are also working on the establishment of a model village in Veerpur which can serve as a model of environmental preservation and integrity, and which we will then expand into other rural areas.

IHRF is dedicated to bringing food to the hungry, medicine to the sick, and peace to the troubled.

IHRF does not discriminate on the basis of race, religion, caste, gender or nationality.

All of its services are open to all & free to all.

GANGA ACTION PARIVAR

Ganga Action Parivar (GAP) is a world family dedicated to serving Mother Ganga. GAP intends to restore, protect and maintain the River Ganga and Her tributaries in their *aviral* (free-flowing) and *nirmal* (unpolluted) states. Under Pujya Swamiji's guidance and leadership, numerous organizations, scientists, environmentalists, activists, government officials and volunteers are coming together to bring this noble goal to fruition.

GAP was first launched on April 4th, 2010 at a special "Sparsh Ganga" event at Parmarth Niketan Ashram by the hands of Pujya Swamiji, H.H. the Dalai Lama and many revered saints. The event raised awareness about the



need for collective and holistic, solution-based action to address the crucial issues facing the holy river. Many were present to show their support and share their love and dedication towards our environment, and the massive event included participants pledging to help protect and restore the Ganga.



A similar event was held several weeks later in Gangotri, the source of the river Ganga, with Shri L.K. Advaniji and the Hon'ble Chief Minister of Uttarakhand Ramesh Pokhriyal in which thousands more took pledges to help clean and protect Ganga also.

Under Pujya Swamiji's guidance and leadership, numerous organizations, scientists, environmentalists, activists, government officials and volunteers are coming together to bring this noble goal to fruition. Several conferences have been held to bring these different groups together. On October 27th, 2010, an Aviral Nirmal Ganga Conference was held at Parmarth Niketan Ashram where prominent spiritual leaders, scientists and experts came to discuss the next steps for addressing the issues facing Ganga, and it was in this conference that the official name "Ganga Action Parivar" was created.



On April 23-24th, 2011, the National Aviral Nirmal Ganga Conference was held at Parmarth Niketan Ashram once again. During this conference, scientists, environmentalists, activists, government officials and many more came together to find sustainable, implementable solutions for the various issues facing Ganga and her tributaries. The conference was graced by many who are prominent in the movement to clean Ganga, including Shri R.K. Pachauriji, a leading environmental activist who won the Nobel Prize for his work.

Activities of GAP range from working to create sustainable, environmentally-friendly solutions for the various, complex problems facing Ganga and implementing such problems, to holding local clean-ups along Her banks, to educating people about the important and urgent need to live green. *(To learn more, please see www.gangaaction.com.)*



PARMARTH NIKETAN ASHRAM

RISHIKESH (HIMALAYAS), INDIA

H.H. Swami Chidanand Saraswatiji is the President of Parmarth Niketan Ashram in Rishikesh, India, a true, spiritual haven, lying on the holy banks of Mother Ganga, in the lap of the lush Himalayas.

Parmarth Niketan is the largest ashram in Rishikesh. Parmarth Niketan provides its thousands of pilgrims – who come from all corners of the Earth – with a clean, pure and sacred atmosphere as well as abundant, beautiful gardens. With over 1,000 rooms, the facilities are a perfect blend of modern amenities and traditional, spiritual simplicity.

The daily activities at Parmarth Niketan include morning universal prayers, daily *yoga* and meditation classes, daily *satsang* and lecture programs, *kirtan*, world renowned Ganga *arti* at sunset, as well as





full Nature Cure, and Ayurvedic treatment available on the premises.

Additionally, there are frequently special cultural and spiritual programs given by visiting revered saints, acclaimed musicians, spiritual and social leaders and others.

Further, there are frequent camps in which pilgrims come from across the world to partake in intensive courses on *yoga*, meditation, *pranayama*, stress management, acupuncture, Reiki and other ancient Indian sciences. Parmarth Niketan hosts the annual International Yoga Festival from the 1st-7th of March every year, in cooperation with the Government of Uttarakhand.

Parmarth Niketan's charitable activities and services make no distinctions on the basis of caste, color, gender, creed or nationality. Instead they emphasize unity, harmony, peace, global integrity, health, and the holistic connection between the body, mind and spirit.

True to its name, Parmarth Niketan is dedicated to the welfare of all. Everything is open and free to all.

PLEDGE TO BE A VEGETARIAN

YES! I care about the pain of animals.

YES! I care about world hunger.

YES! I care about Planet Earth.

YES! I want to live a life of non-violence.

For these reasons I pledge to eliminate the following foods from my diet:

Meat **Chicken** **Fish** **Eggs**

I know that my decision may be difficult, but I am proud to make my food choices a statement of love, care and compassion for the world and for all the living beings with whom I share this planet.

Name:

Address:

Email:

PLEDGE TO BE TV FREE

I want to be peaceful in my mind and heart.

I want my children to learn positive values.

I want every minute to be worthwhile.

I want my home to be filled with piety and divinity.

For these reasons I pledge to eliminate television from our home other than for the use of watching special videos or cultural, religious, spiritual and educational programs.

I know that my decision may be difficult, but I am proud to make my home a place where my children are inculcated with peace, love, proper morality and positive values.

Name:

Address:

Email:



TO:

Pujya Swami Chidanand Sarawatiji
Parmarth Niketan
P.O. Swargashram
Rishikesh (Himalayas)
Uttarakhand – 249 304
INDIA



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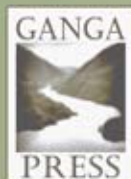
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"It is not enough to just go to temple. We must also make our home a temple."



H.H. Puja Swami Chidanand Saraswati



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