

Hinduism Emphasizes The Supreme Importance Of Spiritual Life

By Swami Tathagatananda

Down the ages, India has been the eternal source of spiritual inspiration for humanity. This source has been authenticated, amplified, elucidated and rejuvenated by saints and mystics throughout the ages. The Indian mind, despite depressed situations in external life, kept this life-giving and sustaining philosophy and religion in its culture. In the Hindu view, philosophy and religion are not contradictory but complimentary. Religion is the practical side of philosophy. The Supreme Reality is at once the Absolute of philosophy and the God of religion.

The timeless Reality behind God, man and nature was discovered in the Vedic age. God provides support to all that exists. An absolute faith based on verification of the fundamental and an amazing flexibility in readjusting the external characterize the lifestyle through which the Hindu faith has survived and flourished throughout the ages. That is why Hinduism is said to be "ever aging but never old." It may be remembered that Hinduism is the oldest religion in the world, but more than this, it has also been said, "Hinduism has no origin in time. It holds high a spiritual ideal which is really a-temporal or a-historical." Hinduism is the religion of Timeless Truth, of Sanatana Dharma, the "Eternal Religion." The supreme authority in Hinduism is the religious experience of the ancient Vedic sages. There is no single founder of Hinduism: the ancient seers who experienced the spiritual truths acted as various channels of these truths to humanity. In Hinduism, author David Frawley tellingly writes, "There is no Hindu church, no Hindu Pope, no Hindu Rome, Jerusalem or Messiah or prophet all Hindus must revere, no one Hindu Bible all Hindus must read."

The dominant feature of Hinduism is its emphasis on the development of spiritual life, which finds fulfillment in seeking God within and without. God has both the Personal and Impersonal dimensions. The Bhagavad Gita (XV: 16-18) says:

Dvavimau purusau loke ksarascaksara eva ca;
Ksarah sarvani bhutani kutastho'ksara ucyate

Uttamah purusastvanyah paramatmetyudahrtah;
Yo lokatrayamavisya vibhartyavyaya isvarah

Yasmat ksaram atito'ham aksarat api cottamah;
Ato'smi loke vede ca prathitah purusottamah

There are two purushas or beings in the world—the perishable and the imperishable.

All beings are the perishable, and the kutastha (the one existing as Maya) is called the imperishable.

But (there is) another, the Supreme Purusha, called the Higher Self
The Immutable Lord, who pervading the three worlds, sustains them.

As I transcend the perishable and am above even the imperishable,
Therefore am I, in the world, and in the Veda,
celebrated as Purushottama—the Highest Purusha.

Yet, the striking fact is that we remain unaware of the stupendous fact of our divinity, that we are that Shakti Itself, we are the Power of God in motion. Swami Vivekananda says, “Matter is energy in motion.” Our overly titillated senses have become dull to the essential truth that we are divine beings. The light of divinity eternally shines, but is not seen or appreciated by the majority of persons. This is the most lamentable fact of our existence, that we love the world, which dazzles and mesmerizes us, and neglect the Supreme Shakti within and without that is behind the phenomenon.

All is spiritual and Divine. This is the way to look upon the world and experience life. This is the essence of Hinduism or Vedanta, which as a religion, is both a way of understanding as well as a scheme for living. The goal of religion is the union with the Divine, which is “the soul of Truth, the delight of life, and the bliss of mind, and the fullness of peace and eternity” (Taittiriya Upanishad, I: 6). This passion for divine life, this search for eternal life in divine excellences amid the evanescent joys of life welled forth from the deepest recess of the Hindus and found its eloquent, sincere expression in one of their most familiar prayers: “Lead me from the unreal to the Real, from darkness to Light, from death to Immortality.”

Vedanta preaches the doctrine of non-duality and non-difference. Its message is that of the oneness of life and all existence. Its assurance of joy, strength and faith and its vision of life that calls for devotion, fellow feeling and dedication are momentarily important today. In Hinduism, God is immanent as well as transcendent.

In Hinduism, the all-pervading Supreme Consciousness underlies every form of existence, animate and inanimate. It is manifest within every living being as the Self. God or Supreme Being is the Soul of all souls. He is the sum total of all souls and is their inner controller. Both the soul and God belong to the same category of Self—the former is the individual self (Jivatman), whereas the latter is the Supreme Self (Paramatman). The individual self or embodied soul is regarded as a manifestation of the other. The one has a body and is subject to many limitations; the other is free from all limitations. The

distinction between the soul and the body or the mind is fundamental in Hinduism. Swami Vivekananda says:

It has been held by the religions of all other countries except India that the universe in its entirety is composed of parts distinctly separate from each other. God, nature, man—each stands by itself, isolated from one another; likewise, beasts, birds, insects, trees, the earth, stones, metals, etc., are all distinct from one another; God created them separate from the beginning.

Knowledge is to find unity in the midst of diversity—to establish unity among things which appear to us to be different from one another. That particular relation by which man finds this sameness is called Law. This is what is known as Natural Law.

I have said before that our education, intelligence, and thought are all spiritual, all find expression in religion. In the West, their manifestation is in the external—in the physical and social planes. Thinkers in ancient India gradually came to understand that that idea of separateness was erroneous, that there was a connection among all those distinct objects—there was a unity which pervaded the whole universe—trees, shrubs, animals, men, Devas, even God Himself; the Advaitin reaching the climax in this line of thought declared all to be but the reflections or manifestations of the One. In reality, the metaphysical and the physical universe are one, and the name of this One is Brahman; and the perception of separateness is an error—they call it Maya, Avidya, or nescience. This is the end of knowledge. (C. W., V: 519)

WHAT IS MIND?

The Sanskrit word for mind is Manas. According to the Upanishads, the mind coordinates and manages the senses by integrating their functions. The mind is material; its energy is created from the subtlest part of food. Its power, however, comes from the pure Self. According to the Samkhya Philosophy, Manas is influenced by Sattva, which gives it its pure quality.

Mind is the internal organ of perception which controls the ten sense organs. Through the mind, we feel sensory perceptions of pleasure, pain, etc. The mind is cognitive, affective and conative. Through these functions of the mind, we ponder, we feel emotions, and we propose purposeful actions. Because it has sensory and motor properties, mind identifies itself with each of the senses. It is unstable and confused by its relationship to impermanent time and distance. It is very difficult to control the lower, concrete mind.

Sankaracharya goes beyond this explanation of the lower mind. He claims that the mind can perceive even when the sense organs are not functioning in their relationship to the specific senses—as in a blind man having some perception of sight or an earless snake perceiving sounds through its tongue. Sightless, colorless fish living at the ocean bottom

react when light is introduced, although they have never before been exposed to light. Other deep-sea dwellers produce their own light in the dark abyss.

Manas has a most unique property which brings it to our attention in relationship to the spiritual life. As the higher mind, it discriminates between what is definite and indefinite, what is real and unreal. It is the “Prime Minister” of all the senses. Therefore, it is our only means to guide us to the goal of Self-Realization. Advaita Vedanta prescribes the purification of the mind-stuff (Chitta) through meditation, whereby the mind becomes transparent, for the sole purpose of reflecting Divine Consciousness. We must learn to control the lower mind by understanding its functions.

FUNCTIONS OF THE MIND

The mind functions in ways that are sometimes painful and sometimes not painful, according to Patanjali (Patanjali, Samadhi-Pada, I: 5), who gives the five-fold (Panchatayyah) modifications of the mind: Pramana-viparyaya-vikalpa-nidra-smrtayah. “(They are) right knowledge (pramana), wrong knowledge or indiscrimination (viparyaya), fancy or verbal delusion (vikalpa), dreamless sleep (nidra), and memory (smriti)” (Patanjali, Samadhi-Pada, I: 6). All the possible functions of the mind fit into one or more of these five categories.

Pratyaksanumanagamah pramanani. “(Facts of) right knowledge (are based on) direct cognition, inference or testimony” (Patanjali, Samadhi-Pada, I: 7.) Right knowledge is spiritual Truth. “A man may be wicked, and yet make an astronomical discovery, but in religion it is different,” says Swami Vivekananda, “because no impure man will ever have the power to reach the truth of religion” (C. W., I: 205). Swamiji explains this sutra by giving the attributes of an Apta, one who has attained to Truth:

. . . we have first of all to see that the man who declares himself to be an Apta is a perfectly unselfish and holy person; secondly, that he has reached beyond the senses; and thirdly, that what he says does not contradict the past knowledge of humanity. Any new discovery of truth does not contradict the past truth, but fits into it. And fourthly, that truth must have a possibility of verification . . . Everyone must have the power to see it for himself. No one who sells his knowledge is an Apta. All these conditions must be fulfilled; you must first see that the man is pure, and that he has no selfish motive; that he has no thirst for gain or fame. Secondly, he must show that he is superconscious. He must give us something that we cannot get from our senses, and which is for the benefit of the world. Thirdly, we must see that it does not contradict other truths; if it contradicts other scientific truths reject it at once. Fourthly, the man should never be singular; he should only represent what all men can attain. The three sorts of proof are, then, direct sense-perception, inference, and the words of an Apta . . . I cannot translate this word into English. It is not the word “inspired,” because inspiration is believed to come from outside, while this knowledge comes from the man himself. The literal meaning is “attained.” (C. W., I: 205-6)

Viparyayo mithya-jnanam atad-rupa-pratistham. “Indiscrimination is false knowledge not established in real nature” (Patanjali, Samadhi-Pada, I: 8). This means mistaking one thing for another, as mistaking a piece of rope for a snake or seeing water in the desert where there is only a mirage.

Sabda-jnananupati-vastu-sunyo vikalpah. “Verbal delusion follows from words having no (corresponding) reality” (Patanjali, Samadhi-Pada, I: 9). Swamiji gives an important teaching in his explanation of this Vritti, or wave in the mind:

A word is uttered, and we do not wait to consider its meaning; we jump to a conclusion immediately. It is the sign of weakness of the Chitta [mind-stuff]. Now you can understand the theory of restraint. The weaker the man, the less he has of restraint. Examine yourselves always by that test. When you are going to be angry or miserable, reason it out how it is that some news that has come to you is throwing your mind into Vrittis. (C. W., I: 206)

Abhava-pratyayalambana vrittir nidra. “Sleep is a Vritti [wave] which embraces the feeling of voidness” (Patanjali, Samadhi-Pada, I: 10). By voidness is meant that there is no content in the mind—the mind is a blank or a void.

To add from SV, Vol I

Anubhuta-visayasampramosah smritih. “Memory is when the (Vrittis of) perceived subjects do not slip away (and through impressions come back to consciousness)” (Patanjali, Samadhi-Pada, I: 11).

To add from SV, Vol I

Right and wrong knowledge require direct contact with the external world through the organs of sense. Fancy and memory require no direct, external contact with the world. They are the result of stored, past impressions of the lower mind. Dreamless sleep, beyond the threshold of brain consciousness, produces no mental images at all.

To add from “Indian Psychology,” pp. 280-7.

THE AWAKENING OF SOUL POWER: SUFFUSING THE MIND WITH HIGH THOUGHTS AND IDEALS

In Vedanta the Soul is divine and the most essential ingredient of human life. The Soul is the source of life, intellect, mind, body—everything. The Soul being the source of knowledge and bliss, Soul power has to be awakened by devotion to the quest of the Self or God. There is an affinity of spirit between God and man. Through their lives, mystics have testified to the eternal hope of union with God.

This is a serious promise and encouragement for all devotees today, especially in light of the fact that modern living is very complicated. We are extremely busy due to our preoccupation with many worldly things and activities. Hardly do we know anything of the majesty, grandeur and mystery of the Soul force lying embedded within each of us. We have no correct knowledge of God, the Supreme Reality behind our life and the universe. Life itself is God as well as religion. The more we become conscious of the presence of God within us as well as without, the more we will be able to give serious thought to our spiritual life. This is the special consideration of all those who consider themselves devotees.

We misuse the great power of thought when we allow the mind to be fastened to the objective world and subdue or deny the subject of the Eternal Reality, from which the universe comes. Hinduism teaches us that the immortal radiant Atman, the knower of the Self, is submerged in the flood of knowledge our little mind seeks and enjoys. One limitless Consciousness lies behind the mind and appears variously as the many—gross matter, numberless gross forms, minds and energy are what we see through the narrow confines of space and time. This eternal Consciousness is our inner essence. How to experience it? Through spiritual insight alone, but due to the power of maya, which both conceals (avarana) and projects (viksepa), we continue to look outward and neglect looking within to find what is lasting and unchanging. The Katha Upanishad says: “The self-existent God has rendered the senses so defective that they go outward, and hence man sees the external and not the internal Atman” (Katha Upanishad, IV. 1). Before we can dedicate ourselves to the spiritual practice of going within and reaping the benefits of meditation, we must set upon the task of controlling negative and destructive thoughts and suffuse the mind with high thoughts and ideals. There are many helpful ways to do this.

Learn the supreme art of listening spiritually. Contemplate daily the pure teachings of the holy ones, past and present. Saturate the mind with the life-giving spiritual ideals. Do this day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year. This activity will strengthen the good impressions in the mind and have the beneficial cumulative effect of concentration in meditation.

Have deep abiding faith in God’s Messengers to humanity. Develop faith and trust in the teaching and lives of the Avatars, the Divine Incarnations. They sacrificed their lives for our welfare only. We must divert our confidence in mundane things and place our confidence in the wisdom of the Messengers of God. Implementing their teachings with faith will speed our progress in the spiritual life.

Be mindful of what you think and do. Many suffer today from the tyranny of a restless and flippant mind. It is an excellent practice to observe the mind acutely and critically for fifteen to twenty minutes every day. Apply a straightforward and honest observation of the mind and its restless actions. Applying objective, acute awareness to our every thought and action will remove fickleness from the mind and render it worthy of every application in spiritual life and necessary actions in life according to our dharma. Mind then becomes a good and reliable servant, protecting us from pitfalls and preventing us

from harming others and ourselves. A well-guarded mind, a focused mind becomes a perfected mind of purity.

Do not brood over the past or future. Eternal watchfulness should be our harbinger of success in the spiritual life. We waste our power in brooding over past mistakes and future fulfillment of desires. Shame and regret follow brooding; fear and anxiety accompany anticipations for the future. We lose the grace of spiritual and mental power indulging in these unspiritual moods.

Counter negative moods with positive thoughts and spiritually based habits. Thoughts of anger, jealousy and hate are defeated by countering them with thoughts of calmness, compassion and love. Every bad quality has its corresponding foil in the opposite, good quality. A negative attitude towards someone who we perceive as a threat to our ego is remarkably cured when we seek and identify some good trait in that person. Negative tendencies are only a sign of selfish egoism. Therefore, try to encourage the mind with a selfless ego. Let the mind be filled with waves of uplifting, noble thoughts that it may be purified for a higher form of lasting satisfaction in deep meditation.

Avoid delusion by constant practice. Today's popularization of spirituality has resulted in millions of people becoming interested in meditation and Yoga. Avid practitioners may yet remain unaware of the stupendous fact that the spiritual realm is an unknown territory, beyond the senses and the empirical mind. The oversimplification of the great truths of Vedanta—Brahman, the Atman, Maya, Samadhi, etc. make these truths appear easily attainable. We may become euphoric. The deep-seated urge within us to outgrow our present limitations and attain our full divine stature may give us false hopes and take us deeper into the snares of Maya. To avoid delusion we must bring the virtue of constancy to our spiritual practices, the greatest of which is the struggle to think of God always. Swami Vivekananda says:

All the immense possibilities of divine realization in the soul cannot get actualized without struggle and without such practice on the part of the aspiring devotee. "The mind must always think of the Lord." It is very hard at first to compel the mind to think of the Lord always, but with every new effort the power to do so grows stronger in us. "By practice, O son of Kunti, and by non-attachment is it attained," says Shri Krishna in the Gita. (C. W., III: 66-7)

When the mind is not thinking of the Lord, it is in an egoistic, selfish state of ignorance. We feel separated from God or Divinity. The soul is covered by the causal, mental, and physical bodies. Ajnana, primordial Ignorance of the real Self, taints the causal body. Shri Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gita (II: 20): Ajo nityah sasvato-ayam purano, "This Self is unborn, eternal, immortal and, though ancient, is ever fresh." Our tendencies and emotions taint the mental body. Selfishness and egoism taint the mental and physical bodies. Through the practice of Yoga, all three are purified and return to their Source, which is God.

THE PROBLEM OF EGO-CONSCIOUSNESS IN SPIRITUAL LIFE

There is but One, seen by the ignorant as matter, by the wise as God. And the history of civilization is the progressive reading of spirit into matter.

—Swami Vivekananda, C. W., VIII: 429

The next problem that arises is how to reduce the ego, the greatest obstacle to our spiritual fulfillment. But first, we must understand, “What is the ego?” Simply put, the ego is ignorance and selfishness. We may think of it as the symbol of Maya, of self-delusion—all that we think of as “I” and “mine.” Shri Ramakrishna says:

“I” and “mine”—that is ignorance. True knowledge makes one feel: “O God, You alone do everything. You alone are my own. And to You alone belong houses, buildings, family, relatives, friends, the whole world. All is yours.” But ignorance makes one feel: “I am doing everything. I am the doer. House, buildings, family, children, friends, and property are all mine.” (Gospel, p. 609)

When we can say, “O God, Thou art the Doer; all these belong to Thee” it is the sign of Knowledge, according to Shri Ramakrishna (Gospel, p. 162).

Ego-consciousness is the source of all our trouble. It ranges from the simple awareness of the “I” as the subject to extreme arrogance. It alienates us from society, nature and the Divine. This is the great danger of an exaggerated ego, whose insecurity and inadequacy are expressed as lust, greed, anger, jealousy, fear and hatred. “Maya is nothing but the egotism of the embodied soul. All troubles come to an end when the ego dies,” Shri Ramakrishna says (Gospel, p. 168). Again, “The petals of the lotus drop off in time but they leave the scars behind them. So the egoism of man does go off entirely, but the traces of its former existence remain. They, however, are not at all active for evil” (Sayings of RK, no. 386, p. 158).

Shri Ramakrishna further says:

There are two egos—one ripe and the other unripe. “Nothing is mine; whatever I see, feel or hear, nay, even this body, is not mine. I am always eternal, free, and all-knowing”—the ego that has this idea is the ripe one, while the unripe ego is that which thinks, “This is my house, my child, my wife, my body, etc.” (Sayings of RK, no. 389, p. 159)

A true devotee may be said to have two egos—as God’s child and as God’s devotee. According to Shri Ramakrishna:

It is the mind that makes one wise or ignorant, bound or emancipated. One is holy because of his mind, one is wicked because of his mind, one is a sinner because of his mind, and it is the mind that makes one virtuous. So, he whose mind is always fixed on God requires no other practices, devotion, or spiritual exercises. (Sayings of RK, no. 317, p. 138)

Constant devotion means perseverance. Shri Ramakrishna repeatedly emphasized the benefits of constancy in devotion:

The fire made by burning bamboo is soon extinguished unless kept alive by constant blowing. Uninterrupted devotion is necessary to keep alive the fire of spirituality. (Sayings of SRK, Saying no. 574)

If you fill an earthen vessel with water and set it apart on a shelf, all the water in it evaporates in a few days; but if you keep it immersed in water, it will remain full as long as it is there. Such is the case with your love of God. If you cultivate love of God for a time, and afterwards employ yourself in other affairs forgetting Him, then you would find that your heart has become empty of that precious love. But if you keep your blissful heart immersed always in holy love and faith, it is sure to remain ever full to overflowing with the divine fervor of that sacred love. (Sayings of SRK, Saying no. 575)

So long as there is fire beneath the vessel, the milk in it boils and bubbles, but remove the fire and the milk stands still again. So the heart of the neophyte boils with enthusiasm only so long as he goes on with his spiritual exercises. (Sayings of SRK, Saying no. 576)

How long does Godliness remain in man? Iron is red so long as it is in the fire, but it becomes black the moment it is removed from fire. So man is imbued with God so long as he is in communion with Him. (Sayings of SRK, Saying no. 577)

But how can an ordinary person hope to find communion with God? Many banal tears are shed over the loss of a precious object. When we weep for God, the banal is transformed into the sublime. Shri Ramakrishna says:

Weep for God with a longing heart. Tears shed for Him will wash away the clay. When you have thus freed yourself from impurity, you will be attracted by the magnet. Only then will you attain yoga [union with God]. If a man is able to weep for God, he will see Him. He will go into samadhi. Perfection in yoga is samadhi. A man achieves kumbhaka without any yogic exercise if he but weeps for God. The next stage is samadhi. (Gospel, p. 344)

One of Shri Ramakrishna's disciples experienced the divine Grace that flows into the one who weeps for God. Swami Shivananda's beautiful testimony of love for Holy Master Shri Ramakrishna is given here:

I often felt like weeping before the Master. One night standing in front of the Kali temple I wept profusely. Not finding me around, the Master became concerned and began

looking for me. When I came he said: “God favors those who cry for Him. Tears thus shed wash away the sins of former births.” Another day I was meditating at the Panchavati, the sacred grove of five trees. The Master came there, and the moment he looked at me I burst into tears. He stood still without uttering a word. A sort of creeping sensation passed through me and I began to tremble all over. The Master congratulated me on attaining this state and said that it was the outcome of divine emotion. Then he took me to his room and gave me something to eat. (Man of God, p. 14-15)

KARMA HELPS TO REMOVE THE EGO

Karma refers to the forces generated by physical and mental actions and reactions in the mind to external stimuli. Good actions produce good consequences; bad actions produce bad consequences. Therefore, Karma implies causation.

God favors those who cry for Him. The action of weeping for God belongs to the three pillars of culture: religion, education and work. “Work” and “action,” in this context, refer to the great moral Law of Karma, which guides the individual and collective destinies towards spiritual knowledge.

The Law of Karma has two aspects, one leading to bondage, the other to freedom. Karma will affect you as long as you remain identified with the ego, the mind, the senses and the body. You must struggle to purify and spiritualize your ego and realize your true spiritual nature through Karma-Yoga. With loving devotion, offer all the fruits of your actions to God or the Supreme Spirit. Attune your individual will with the Supreme Will through service to God in man with the feeling that you are not the doer—you are an instrument of God. Support these actions with the strength of your meditation and Japa. You will be combining Bhakti-Yoga, Karma-Yoga and Raja-Yoga in this threefold approach. You will be participating with Divinity in the removal of ajnana and unveiling of your soul.

Tears thus shed wash away the sins of former births. The Law of Karma states that wealth and happiness come to those who have practiced virtuous actions in the past in a detached way. Motiveless action, detaching the will from the results of actions, is the principal aim of Karma-Yoga. Spiritual immaturity is reflected in ego-centered living, which is detrimental to all. Every individual action guided by ignorance and every reaction to thwarted desire has cosmic effects. Therefore, Hinduism posits a corollary to the Law of Karma to fulfill the purpose of human existence. The merciful Law of Transmigration allows the Jivatman or individualized soul bound by ignorance to evolve gradually through repeated births and deaths. When it attains to spiritual maturity, the spell of ignorance is broken. The Jivatman realizes its divine nature and oneness with Paramatman, the Supreme Spirit. That is why Swami Vivekananda says:

Teach yourselves, teach everyone his real nature, call upon the sleeping soul and see how it awakes. Power will come, glory will come, goodness will come, purity will come, and

everything that is excellent will come, when this sleeping soul is roused to self-conscious activity. (C. W., III: 193)

The point is to lose your sense of separateness through your perception of the Absolute, which is always manifesting Itself through every thought and action. In the highest Advaitic sense, every action is a self-revelation of Brahman but such awareness is very, very rare. Swami Vivekananda says:

All knowledge . . . secular or spiritual, is in the human mind. In many cases it is not discovered, but remains covered, and when the covering is being slowly taken off, we say, “We are learning,” and the advance of knowledge is made by the advance of this process of uncovering. The man from whom this veil is being lifted is the more knowing man, the man upon whom it lies thick is ignorant, and the man from whom it has entirely gone is all-knowing, omniscient. (C. W., I: 28)

The tendency to work is an inner, purposeful drive, a conative experience. Every action is related to experience. Westerners regard experience as a passive phenomenon; According to Vedanta, experience is not a passive phenomenon; the light of the inner Self illuminates and reveals external objects. Every experience is a revelation of the Self. Most of us remain deprived of this wonderful truth because we identify ourselves with the mind and body, not with the higher Self. Swamiji says:

The Eastern philosophy speaks of that knowledge [of the Soul], again, as inherent in man. . . . Therefore, what we say a man “knows” should, in strict psychological language, be what he “discovers” or “unveils”; what a man “learns” is really what he “discovers” by taking the cover off his soul, which is a mine of infinite knowledge. . . . Like fire in a piece of flint, knowledge exists in the mind; suggestion is the friction which brings it out. So with all our feelings and action—our tears and our smiles, our joys and our griefs, our weeping and our laughter, our curses and our blessings, our praises and our blames—every one of these we may find, if we calmly study our own selves, to have been brought out from within ourselves by so many blows. The result is what we are. All these blows taken together are called Karma—work, action. Every mental and physical blow that is given to the world by which, as it were, fire is struck from it, and by which its own power and knowledge are discovered, is Karma, this word being used in its widest sense. Thus we are doing Karma all the time. (C. W., [Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1972-77], I: 28-9)

On the practical level of daily living, all Indian schools of philosophy point to the ideal of work. Swami Vivekananda says:

There arises a difficult question in this ideal of work. Intense activity is necessary; we must always work. What then becomes of rest? Here is one side of the life struggle—work, in which we are whirled rapidly round. And here is the other—that of calm, retiring renunciation: everything is peaceful around, there is very little of noise and show, only nature with her animals and flowers and mountains. Neither of them is a perfect picture. A man used to solitude, if brought in contact with the surging whirlpool of the world, will be crushed by it; just as the fish that lives in the deep sea water, as soon as it is brought to

the surface, breaks into pieces, deprived of the weight of water on it that had kept it together. Can a man who has been used to the turmoil and the rush of life live at ease if he comes to a quiet place? He suffers and perchance may lose his mind. The ideal man is he who, in the midst of the greatest silence and solitude, finds the intensest activity, and in the midst of the intensest activity finds the silence and solitude of the desert. He has learnt the secret of restraint, he has controlled himself. He goes through the streets of a big city with all its traffic, and his mind is as calm as if he were in a cave, where not a sound could reach him; and he is intensely working all the time. That is the ideal of Karma-Yoga, and if you have attained to that you have really learnt the secret of work. (C. W., I: 34)

All religions declare, “Be good” and “Do good.” This is because as long as we remain unenlightened as to our true spiritual nature we must practice being good and doing good in order to attain steadfastness in the spiritual goal of knowledge of the Self. We can only become qualified for actions that are meant for God through self-sacrifice, through unselfishness that leads to desirelessness. This happens gradually, it does not happen in a day. We must persevere. Swami Vivekananda further says:

But we have to begin from the beginning, to take up the works as they come to us and slowly make ourselves more unselfish every day. We must do the work and find out the motive power that prompts us; and, almost without exception, in the first years, we shall find that our motives are always selfish; but gradually this selfishness will melt by persistence, till at last will come the time when we shall be able to do really unselfish work. We may all hope that some day or other, as we struggle through the paths of life, there will come a time when we shall become perfectly unselfish; and the moment we attain to that, all our powers will be concentrated, and the knowledge which is ours will be manifest. (C. W., I: 34-5)

Love and compassion are the two wings of self-sacrifice. Without them, we cannot see God. This underlying truth of the law of Karma is the foundation of Hindu Dharma. The Bhagavad Gita (III: 16) says: “O Partha, he lives in vain who does not follow here the wheel thus set in motion, whose life is sinful, and who indulges in the senses.” In other words, we should struggle to develop a noble character and will power through work. As Goethe has said, “Genius develops in solitude, character in struggling with the world.”

Why should we be concerned about Karma? Is it only a foreign-sounding word or idea carelessly bandied in the language and the media? Swamiji sums up the significance of Karma for the world in the Kali Yuga, the current world period, characterized by a minimum of virtue and an excess of vice:

Says our Vyasa, “In the Kali Yuga there is one Karma left. Sacrifices and tremendous Tapasyas (religious austerities) are of no avail now. Of Karma one remains, and that is the Karma of giving.” And of these gifts, the gift of spirituality and spiritual knowledge is the highest; the next gift is the gift of secular knowledge; the next is the gift of life; and the fourth is the gift of food. . . .

. . . let us take up the energy of . . . the diffusion of spiritual knowledge. And that diffusion should not be confined within the bounds of India; it must go out all over the world. This has been the custom. Those that tell you that Indian thought never went outside India, those that tell you that I am the first Sannyasin who went to foreign lands to preach, do not know the history of their own race. Again and again this phenomenon has happened. Whenever the world has required it, this perennial flood of spirituality has overflowed and deluged the world. (C. W., III: 222)

Indian philosophy gives the real knowledge of eternal freedom to the world. May you realize your spiritual nature and your indivisible connection with Brahman. You will be free from bondage and the Law of Karma will no longer affect you. The cycle of birth and death which is associated with the Law of Karma, ceases for you.

CLASSIFICATION OF DEVOTEES

The capacity for devotion to God differs from person to person. Shri Ramakrishna, whose mind was charged with experiences of the Divine, points out four variations among devotees. The vast majority falls into the first two classes:

According to a certain school of thought there are four classes of devotees: the pravartaka, the sadhaka, the siddha, and the siddha of the siddha. He who has just begun religious life is a pravartaka. Such a man puts his denominational marks on his body and forehead, wears a rosary around his neck, and scrupulously follows other outer conventions. The sadhaka has advanced farther. His desire for outer show has become less. He longs for the realization of God and prays to Him sincerely. He repeats the name of God and calls on Him with a guileless heart. Now, whom should we call the siddha? He who has the absolute conviction that God exists and is the sole Doer; he who has seen God. And who is the siddha of the siddha? He who has not merely seen God, but has intimately talked with Him as Father, Son, or Beloved. (Gospel, p. 624)

Without God's grace, no one can comprehend Him. Shri Ramakrishna also classifies devotees in terms of their ability to comprehend God:

Is it possible for all to comprehend God? God has created the good and the bad, the devoted and the impious, the faithful and the sceptical. The wonders that we see all exist in His creation. In one place there is more manifestation of His Power, in another less. The sun's light is better reflected by water than by earth, and still better by a mirror. Again, there are different levels among the devotees of God: superior, mediocre, and inferior. All this has been described in the Gita. . . . The inferior devotee says, "God exists, but He is very far off, up there in heaven." The mediocre devotee says, "God exists in all beings as life and consciousness." The superior devotee says, "It is God Himself who has become everything; whatever I see is only a form of God. It is He alone who has become maya, the universe, and all living beings. Nothing exists but God." (Gospel, p. 265)

Inferior or mediocre devotees are attracted to various ideas and ideals but never develop a strong root in any one of them. Spiritual dilettantes, they remain forever tantalized on the periphery of the vast ocean of bliss. It requires infinite strength gotten from the Source to proceed along the path of spirituality. If you are a serious student of martial arts, you prepare your body and mind for the assault upon the senses you must endure if you are to become an expert practitioner in this transient world. If you are a serious student of spiritual life, you confront a greater challenge of the highest possible goal of life. If you heed Swami Vivekananda's words, that you are like a "growing plant that must be hedged round to protect it until it has grown into a tree" (C. W., III: 63), you will learn a great lesson. Certain grace will come to you in meditation.

THE VALUE OF BRAHMACHARYA IN SPIRITUAL LIFE

SPIRITUAL FOUNDATION OF EDUCATION

From ancient times, Hinduism has honored and given the greatest emphasis to Brahmacharya, the spiritual foundation of the real concept of education in India. True education motivates and teaches man for the purpose of "life-building, man-making, character-making assimilation of ideas." In modern times, Swami Vivekananda brings to life this summum bonum concept of education, which is inseparable from the practice of Brahmacharya. Its aim is the development and perfection of the entire personality of the human being. Swamiji says, "I look upon religion as the innermost core of education. Mind, I do not mean my own or anybody's else's opinion about religion. The true eternal principles have to be held before people" (C. W., V: 231). Religion is inseparably linked with education. "Religion is the manifestation of the divinity already in man," says Swamiji.

In ancient India, when social conditions were favorable, Brahmacharya was practiced only by Brahmins. They introduced their children to the preliminary disciplines of an intense spiritual life at a very early age. They received a thorough religious education under the personal supervision of rishis or saintly spiritual teachers in secluded forest academies. Protected from the demonic influences of secular and social life, they studied sacred scripture, served the rishi and meditated in the hermitages. They lived a pure life adhering to the injunctions of Vedic sacred rituals (Karma Kanda). When their minds were prepared to seek the Truth, they were initiated into the deeper study of the Upanishads (Jnana Kanda). They reached maturity with a clear and comprehensive view of life and reality.

Theoretical and scientific knowledge, whatever their good points in the West, serve the aims of a "negative education" according to Swamiji, for they do not accomplish this. Swamiji wanted India to learn the Western skills of technology, organizing capacity and business efficiency but he clearly visualized the necessary combination of theoretical

knowledge and advancement in life on the lines of Hinduism's highest ideal of Self-realization:

. . . to bring that about, the old institution of "living with the guru" and similar systems of imparting education are needed. What we want are Western science coupled with Vedanta, Brahmacharya as the guiding motto, and also Shraddha and faith in one's own self. . . . Vedanta says that within man is all knowledge—even in a boy it is so—and it requires only an awakening, and that much is the work of a teacher. We have to do only so much . . . that they may learn to apply their own intellect to the proper use of their hands, legs, ears, eyes, etc., and finally everything will become easy. But the root is religion. (C. W., V: 366)

True education enables students to develop and reach their highest capacity and noblest potential. All the physical, intellectual, moral and spiritual learning the student possesses must be dynamically harnessed and implemented to serve the highest spiritual purpose of life. Students are not mere "receptacles" or "storage bins" of mass information. They are living spiritual entities with innate capacities and potentialities. When studentship is understood in this light, religious education may be imparted. Spiritual education includes the nature of the soul, its relation to the Supreme Soul, and the eternal relationship of each eternal soul to others and to the eternal God. Spiritual knowledge is infused with a self-generating power that creates, establishes and maintains the good. This form of ideal education preserves the success of the student and the general welfare. Ideals rule the world, not matter.

HIGHEST MEANS TO MIND-DEVELOPMENT

Secular knowledge is subservient to spiritual knowledge. The concept of Brahmacharya was created as the highest means to develop the mind so that it may be a fit instrument to receive both. Secular knowledge is a part of our innate and broader attempt at Self-Realization. That is its greatest significance. The mind must become perfectly concentrated and detached. Swami Vivekananda stresses the importance of two requirements that prepare aspirants for knowledge. First, concentration and detachment to strengthen the mind:

How has all the knowledge in the world been gained but by the concentration of the powers of the mind? The world is ready to give up its secrets if we only know how to knock, how to give it the necessary blow. The strength and force of the blow come through concentration. There is no limit to the power of the human mind. The more concentrated it is, the more power is brought to bear on one point; that is the secret. (C. W., I: 130-1)

So along with the development of concentration we must develop the power of detachment. We must learn not only to attach the mind to one thing exclusively but also

to detach it at a moment's notice and place it upon something else. These two should be developed together to make it safe. (C. W., VI: 38)

The second pre-requisite according to Swamiji is strict observance of continence or Brahmacharya, which brings Shraddha and other virtues:

Chastity in thought, word and deed always and in all conditions is what is called Brahmacharya. (C. W., I: 190)

Every boy should be trained to practice absolute Brahmacharya and then and then alone, faith—Shraddha—will come. (C. W., V: 369) . . .—think how much faith in themselves will be theirs! And what a power for good they will be! (C. W., V: 343)

By the observance of Brahmacharya all learning can be mastered in a very short time—one has an unfailing memory of what one hears or knows but once. It is owing to want of continence that everything is on the brink of ruin in our country. (C. W., VII: 224)

Complete continence gives great intellectual and spiritual power. The Brahmacharin must be sexually pure in thought, word and deed. Lose regard for the body; get rid of the consciousness of it so far as possible. (C. W., VII: 67)

Controlled desire leads to the highest result. Transform the sexual energy into the spiritual energy, but do not emasculate, because that is throwing away the power. The stronger this force, the more can be done with it. Only a powerful current of water can do hydraulic mining. (C. W., VII: 69)

The chaste brain has tremendous energy and gigantic will-power. Without chastity there can be no spiritual strength. Continence gives wonderful control over mankind. The spiritual leaders of men have been very continent, and this is what gave them power. (C. W., I: 263)

PENETRATING MIND

Shri Ramakrishna says:

If a man practices absolute Brahmacharya for twelve years, the Medha Nadi (nerve of intelligence) will open, i.e., his power of understanding will blossom. His understanding will become capable of penetrating and comprehending the subtlest ideas. With such an understanding man can realize God. God can be attained only through a purified understanding of this type. (Sayings of SRK, (8th ed.), p. 170)

Swami Vivekananda, admired for his oratorical power of expounding philosophy, declared that God-realization is the fruit of Brahmacharya:

That power may come to all. That power comes to him who observes unbroken Brahmacharya for a period of twelve years, with the sole object of realizing God. I have practiced that kind of Brahmacharya myself, and so a screen has been removed, as it were, from my brain. For that reason I need not any more think over or prepare myself for any lectures on such a subtle subject as philosophy . . . it is not any power which is exclusively my own. Whoever will practice unbroken Brahmacharya for twelve years will surely have it. If you do so, you too will get it. Our Shastras do not say that only such and such a person will get it and not others! (C. W., V: 358)

Brahmacharya brings about a pure receptivity in the mind of the student. The purified mind flooded with spiritual ideas easily lifts the veil of ignorance. Swamiji makes an important distinction regarding spiritual education which is linked to the concept of Brahmacharya: “Whatever a man knows, should, in strict psychological language, be what he discovers or unveils. What a man “learns” is really what he discovers by taking the cover off his soul” (C. W., 10th ed., I: 28).

THE FIRST STAGE OF LIFE

Brahmacharya is the first of the four stages of life and begins in childhood. Every child is a student from the moment of its birth—it is constantly engaged in learning about the world around it and organizing it so that it makes sense and serves its basic needs. Everyone and every thing is its teacher. Swamiji says, “A child teaches itself. But you can help it to go forward in its own way . . . a child educates itself” (C. W., IV: 55). There is a passive and an active way to guide the child. Removing obstacles is the passive way; offering it protection, regularity and discipline as its spiritual personality unfolds is the positive way. Swami Vivekananda says:

In every house [in India] is a special room set apart, which is called the chapel. The first duty of the child, after his initiation, is to take a bath, and then to worship; and his worship consists of this breathing and meditating and repeating of a certain name. (C. W., V: 302)

Gradually, the child becomes a youth with its purity intact, having learned a little of the inner joy of sublimation and retention of its creative powers. Such children exhibit good health and mental development suitable for both spiritual and secular life.

A child, therefore, is not a mere personality made up of a mass of cells organized by the brain. A child is a spiritual being whose spiritual energy moves and dominates its mind and body. The heritage of every human being is to achieve the goal of human existence: to realize the indwelling Divinity within and the Divine immanence without.

Brahmacharya is the education and discipline that bring out the perfection already within us. Life is God. With our very first breath, the great opportunity of human experience presents itself: God is to be realized. This is the goal of education through Brahmacharya.

The child thus guided is the most fortunate child. His heart and mind remain pure and are further strengthened by the diligence of those who guide it to the maturity of youth.

In the Bhagavatam, the duties of the Brahmachari are described:

The student must practice self-control and study the scriptures, along with other branches of learning. He should observe strict continence, never consciously departing from it. He must learn to offer his heart's worship to the Divine Self in all beings and to see the One God residing in all. (Srimad Bhagavatam, transl. Swami Prabhavananda, 1st ed., p. 176)

Later, certain qualified aspirants may remain established in it, whether or not they enter into the stage of life of the householder. Hinduism offers the greatest latitude to the practice of Brahmacharya, to ensure that the spiritual practice will continue in householder disciples who elect to remain true to it while fulfilling their dharma. This is possible because according to the Hindu ideal, marriage is sacred and the household an ashrama where one's dharma is fulfilled through duties, worship and service. Ideally, the householder does not seek sense-gratification as his highest duty is duly performed.

Swamiji says in this regard:

Hinduism indicates one duty, only one, for the human soul. It is to seek and realize the permanent amongst the evanescent. No one presumes to point out any one way in which this may be done. Marriage or non-marriage, good or evil, learning or ignorance, any of these is justified, if it leads to the goal. (C. W., V: 232)

Performing all duties correctly and offering them to the Divine keeps the Brahmachari or Brahmacharini steadfast in the practice. Brahmacharya is really a vow that is honored and constantly charged by the pure mind. All nature will serve and sustain the pure vow of Brahmacharya.

SPIRITUAL POWER OF OJAS

The purity and radiance of Brahmacharya, the combined practice of continence, mental discipline and scriptural study, is to be greatly desired by the serious spiritual aspirant. Chastity of heart, body and mind is the distinctive holy marker of all true spiritual teachers on earth. This highest virtue of Brahmacharya is the unambiguous signpost of the holy Personalities. We may not always recognize this, but their state of Brahmacharya inexplicably and sweetly draws us to them. They have the Light of Brahmacharya or the grace of "Ojas," spiritual energy. In his lectures on Raja-Yoga Swami Vivekananda teaches:

The yogis claim that of all the energies that are in the human body the highest is what they call "Ojas." Now this Ojas is stored up in the brain, and the more Ojas is in a man's head, the more powerful he is, the more intellectual, the more spiritually strong. One man may speak beautiful language and beautiful thoughts, but they do not impress people;

another man speaks neither beautiful language nor beautiful thoughts, yet his words charm. Every movement of his is powerful. That is the power of Ojas.

Now in every man there is more or less of this Ojas stored up. All the forces that are working in the body in their highest become Ojas. You must remember that it is only a question of transformation. The same force that is working outside as electricity or magnetism will become changed into inner force; the same forces that are working as muscular energy will be changed into Ojas. The yogis say that that part of the human energy which is expressed as sex energy, in sexual thought, when checked and controlled, easily becomes changed into Ojas [spiritual energy]; and as the Muladhara guides these, the Yogi pays particular attention to that center. He tries to take up all his sexual energy and convert it into Ojas. It is only the chaste man or woman who can make the Ojas rise and store it in the brain; that is why chastity has always been considered the highest virtue. A man feels that if he is unchaste, spirituality goes away; he loses mental vigor and moral stamina. That is why in all the religious orders in the world which have produced spiritual giants you will always find absolute chastity insisted upon. That is why the monks came into existence, giving up marriage. There must be perfect chastity in thought, word and deed; without it the practice of Raja-Yoga is dangerous, and may lead to insanity. If people practice Raja-Yoga and at the same time lead an impure life, how can they expect to become Yogis? (C. W., I: 169-70)

The virtues of purity, equanimity, contentment, peacefulness, steadfastness, cheerfulness, sweetness, self-restraint and health also cling to the perfected Brahmachari or Brahmacharini. Anyone blessed with the grace of purified understanding through Brahmacharya inspires and upholds society through exemplary spiritual perfection. Lifelong Brahmacharya, together with obedience to the spiritual instructions of the Guru and faith in oneself definitely imparts spiritual excellence and fullness to others.

Brahmacharya is a giant pillar of support to the spiritual aspirant who is fit for it. Like the flower and its freely given scent that reminds us of That which created it for our contemplation and edification, the virtue of Brahmacharya is the divinely bestowed gift to humanity for its overall welfare and spiritual development. In India's recent history, Mahatma Gandhi summoned all the strength and of his mind and spiritual discipline in a lifelong struggle to achieve the ancient spirit of Brahmacharya. He ardently advocated its practice:

Mere control of animal passion has been thought to be tantamount to observing Brahmacharya. I feel that this conception is incomplete and wrong. Brahmacharya means control of all the organs of sense. He who attempts to control only one organ, and allows all the others free play, is bound to find his effort futile. To hear suggestive stories with the ears, to see suggestive sights with the eyes, to taste stimulating food with the tongue, to touch exciting things with the hands, and then at the same time to expect to control the only remaining organ is like putting one's hands in the fire, and expecting to escape being burnt. . . . If we practice simultaneous self-control in all directions, the attempt will be scientific and possible of success. (From Yervada Mandira, 3rd ed., pp. 13-14. Cit. from

Vivekananda: The Great Spiritual Teacher, A Compilation [Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1995], 1st ed., p. 389)

Gandhiji achieved this deep insight:

Mind is at the root of all sensuality. . . . Many aspirants after Brahmacharya fail because in the use of their sense they want to carry on like those who are not Brahmacharis. Their effort is, therefore, identical with the effort to experience the bracing cold of winter in the scorching summer months.

Brahmacharya means control of the senses in thought, word and deed. . . . So long as thought is not under complete control of the will Brahmacharya in its fullness is absent. . . . Curbing the mind is even more difficult than curbing the wind. Nevertheless the existence of God within makes even control of the mind possible. (My Experiments with Truth, pp. 258-9)

Eminent Western doctors and scientists agree that chastity produces physical and mental benefits. In *Man the Unknown*, Dr. Alexis Carrel observed:

It is well known that sexual excesses impede intellectual activity. In order to reach its full power, intelligence seems to require both the presence of well-developed sexual glands and the temporary repression of the sexual appetite. Freud has rightly emphasized the capital importance of sexual impulses in the activities of consciousness. However his observations refer chiefly to sick people. His conclusions should not be generalized to included normal individuals, especially those who are endowed with a strong nervous system and a mastery over themselves. While the weak, the nervous, and the unbalanced become more abnormal when their sexual appetites are repressed, the strong are rendered still stronger by practicing such a form of asceticism. (Alexis Carrel, *Man the Unknown*, 8th ed., p. 140)

Dr. Nicholls gave his informed view in *Esoteric Anthropology*:

It is a medical—a psychological—fact that the best blood in the body goes to form the elements of reproduction in both sexes. In a pure and orderly life, this matter is absorbed. It goes back into circulation, ready to form the finest brain, nerve and muscular tissue. This life of man, carried back and diffused through his system, makes him manly, strong, brave and heroic. If wasted it leaves him effeminate, weak, and irresolute, intellectually and physically debilitated, and prey to sexual irritation, disordered function, morbid sensation, disordered muscular movement, a wretched nervous system, epilepsy, insanity and death. The suspended use of the generative organs is attended with a notable increase of bodily vigor and spiritual life. (Dr. Nicholls, *Esoteric Anthropology*. Quoted in *Bhakti-Yoga* by Aswini Kumar Datta, p. 62. Cit. from Vivekananda: The Great Spiritual Teacher, A Compilation, p. 388)

Two other western authorities give their shared opinion: “For a young man up to the time of his marriage, chastity is most salutary, not only in an ethical and aesthetical sense, but

also from a hygienic standpoint” (Cit. from Vivekananda: The Great Spiritual Teacher, A Compilation, p. 388). In New York, the general consensus is: “Chastity, a pure continent life, is consonant with the best conditions of physical, mental, and moral health” (Ibid.). In other words, Brahmacharya requires a sattvic diet of pure thoughts, pure living and discrimination in food.

DISCRIMINATION OF FOOD STRENGTHENS THE MIND

The food we eat manufactures our thought and body. Swami Vivekananda says:

We must remember that, according to the Sankhya philosophy, the Sattva, Rajas and Tamas, which in the state of homogenous equilibrium form the Prakriti, and in the heterogeneous disturbed condition form the universe—are both the substance and the quality of Prakriti. As such they are the materials out of which every human form has been manufactured, and the predominance of the sattva material is what is absolutely necessary for spiritual development. (C. W., III: 66)

Therefore, it is important to take proper nourishment and avoid impure food. The spiritual aspirant should strive to achieve a pure, sattvic diet to ensure and preserve spiritual development. This should be done without a fanatical approach to food, without losing sight of the spiritual meaning of proper nourishment. The Chandogya Upanishad says: “When the food (ahara) is pure, the sattva element gets purified and the memory becomes unwavering” (Chandogya Upanishad, 7. 26. 2). Shri Ramakrishna says, “Sattva preserves, rajas creates, and tamas destroys” (Gospel, p. 267). In Raja Yoga Swami Vivekananda encourages the serious aspirant or yogi to strengthen the mind by taking the proper food:

Certain regulations as to food are necessary; we must use that food which brings us the purest mind. If you go into a menagerie, you will find this demonstrated at once. You see the elephants, huge animals, but calm and gentle; and if you go towards the cages of the lions and tigers, you find them restless, showing how much difference has been made by food. (C. W., I: 136)

For practical purposes, the spiritual aspirant, at least in the beginning, must be aware that certain foods are impure by their nature (jati), including foods that excite the organism, such as onions, garlic and hot peppers, old or stale foods lacking their original moisture, and foods procured by injury and cruelty to life. Food contaminated by any form of impurity or partially eaten by another (nimitta) is also disqualified. The deceptively simple admonition to avoid impurity in food further demands our utmost attention. There is a subtle pollution of food (ashraya) when it is handled by wicked or immoral people, whose unspiritual influence enters it. This is easy to avoid if we practice avoiding the company of such persons until we are spiritually strengthened and deeply compassionate.

South India's philosopher-saint Sri Ramanuja (1017-1137 A. D.) interprets ahara as "food." For serious and dedicated aspirants, Sri Shankaracharya (788-820 A. D.), an exponent of Advaita Vedanta, shed singular light on the deeper meaning of ahara:

That which is gathered in is Ahara. The knowledge of the sensations, such as sound, etc., is gathered in for the enjoyment of the enjoyer (self); the purification of the knowledge which gathers in the perception of the senses is the purifying of the food (Ahara). The word "purification of food" means the acquiring of the knowledge of sensations untouched by the defects of attachment, aversion, and delusion; such is the meaning. Therefore such knowledge or Ahara being purified, the Sattva material of the possessor of it—the internal organ—will become purified, and the Sattva being purified, an unbroken memory of the Infinite One, who has been known in His real nature from Scriptures, will result. (Cit. from C. W., III: 65-6)

Swami Vivekananda understood both commentaries and clarified the issue of food so that every type of devotee may ponder and understand it for his or her own benefit:

It is quite natural to say that Shankara's meaning is the best, but I wish to add that one should not neglect Ramanuja's interpretation either. It is only when you take care of the real material food that the rest will come. It is very true that the mind is the master, but very few of us are not bound by the senses. We are all controlled by matter; and as long as we are so controlled, we must take material aids; and then, when we have become strong, we can eat or drink anything we like. We have to follow Ramanuja in taking care about food and drink; at the same time we must also take care about our mental food. It is very easy to take care about material food, but mental work must go along with it; then gradually our spiritual self will become stronger and stronger and the physical self less assertive. Then will food hurt you no more. The great danger is that every man wants to jump at the highest ideal, but jumping is not the way. That ends only in a fall. We are bound down here, and we have to break our chains slowly. This is called Viveka, discrimination. (C. W., IV: 7)

After giving careful and detailed consideration to the various prejudiced opinions about food and what the Shastras have to say about it, Swami Vivekananda says:

After carefully scrutinizing all sides of the question and setting aside all fanaticism that is rampant on this delicate question of food, I must say that my conviction tends to confirm this view—that the Hindus are, after all, right; I mean that injunction of the Hindu Shastras which lays down the rule that food, like many other things, must be different according to the difference of birth and profession; this is the sound conclusion. . . .

All these contentions have no end; they are going on unceasingly. Now the judicious view admitted by all in regard to this vexed question is to take such food as is substantial and nutritious and, at the same time, easily digested. The food such be such as contains the greatest nutriment in the smallest compass, and be at the same time quickly assimilable; otherwise, it has necessarily to be taken in large quantity, and consequently

the whole day is required only to digest it. If all the energy is spent only in digesting food, what will there be left to do other works? (C. W., V: 484-6 passim)

Swamiji's helpful hint to beginners was given in his Bhakti-Yoga:

The control of the grosser is absolutely necessary to enable one to arrive at the control of the finer. . . The beginner, therefore, must pay particular attention to all such dietetic rules as have come down from the line of his accredited teachers; . . . It stands to reason that discrimination in the choice of food is necessary for the attainment of this higher state of mental composition which cannot be easily obtained otherwise. (C. W., III: 66)

Having a clear definition of what we are seeking and orienting ourselves to the goal of spiritual fulfillment fixes our priorities in life. Our mind has taken the right direction when, in the midst of our secular activities, our entire personality strives for the spiritual goal.

THE CALL OF THE DIVINE THROUGH BRAHMACHARYA: THE GOAL OF SPIRITUAL LIFE

Swami Vivekananda says:

Each soul is potentially divine. The goal [of life] is to manifest this Divine within, by controlling nature, external and internal [the lower impulses that alienate us from the Divine]. Do this either by work, or worship, or psychic control, or philosophy, by one, or more, or all of these—and be free. This is the whole of religion. Doctrines, or dogmas, or rituals, or books, or temples, or forms, are but secondary details. (C. W., I: 119)

. . . there is something in us which is free and permanent. But it is not the body; neither is it the mind. The body is dying every minute. The mind is constantly changing. The body is a combination, and so is the mind, and as such can never reach to a state beyond all change. But beyond this momentary sheathing of gross matter, beyond even the finer covering of the mind is the Atman, the true Self of man, the permanent, the ever free. It is his freedom that is percolating through layers of thought and matter, and, in spite of the colorings of name and form, is ever asserting its unshackled existence. It is his deathlessness, his bliss, his peace, his divinity that shines out and makes itself felt in spite of the thickest layers of ignorance. He is the real man, the fearless one, the deathless one, the free.

Now freedom is only possible when no external power can exert any influence, produce any change. Freedom is only possible to the being who is beyond all conditions, all laws, all bondages of cause and effect. In other words, the unchangeable alone can be free and, therefore, immortal. This Being, this real Self of man, the free, the unchangeable is beyond all conditions, and as such, it has neither birth nor death.

“Without birth or death, eternal, ever-existing is this soul of man.” (C. W., IV: 256)

His dynamic words are the call of the Divine in our age. His idea of education embraced the ideal of Brahmacharya because it is based on the truth that the essential nature of man is divine—Atman or pure Spirit. The human body is no other than Devalaya—the dwelling place of the Divine Being. The pure Soul, Atman, animates the body. God being the Soul of all souls, the body is Brahma-Mandira, the temple of Brahman, the Supreme Spirit.

Morality, ethics and purity come only from God. These divine qualities need to be cultivated to a certain degree prior to the qualification and inner training that brings about a true awakening to the spiritual life. Deep and abiding faith in God, genuine spiritual hunger, moral living, earnest prayer, absolute dependence on God and a humble attitude remove many alleged problems confronting humanity. Real peace, security and enlightenment can be experienced only after embarking upon and leading a moral life. First comes awareness of the stupendous necessity for a spiritual life, followed by adherence to specific, spiritual guidelines. Only then may we enjoy blissful peace and security while living in the world.

Searching for peace in the mind, modern people are becoming interested in meditation, which is rapidly becoming more popular around the world in view of its inherent capacity to make the mind calm. Japam, correct repetition of the holy Name or Mantra, is a spiritual practice that aspirants may begin with that can lead to the more profound practice of meditation. For correct meditation leading to the peace, harmony, security, enlightenment, and joy of God, a real teacher is necessary.