

# Giving Vedic Culture to the Next Generation

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As we have already said, the future of the Vedic community, and of the temple, is in the way the future generations get involved. But they have to understand the philosophy and the purpose of the traditions, perhaps more so than their parents. And I will explain why. When I was growing up as a teenager and became interested in the Vedic teachings, I had to research it on my own. I was not like the Indian youth who naturally grow up with it in their own families, and who may also take it for granted as if it is nothing special. I had to struggle and almost fight to acquire access to the books and information I needed. There was so little around where I grew up. In other words, there was no way I was going to take this Vedic knowledge cheaply once I got it.

I had more questions about life than it had answers. I found it rather shallow and wanted something deeper. So I looked at all kinds of religions and spiritual teachings, but with the question that is typical of most Westerners when growing up, "What's in it for me?" Plus, "How is it going to help me, and which spiritual path is going to do the most for me? How can it make a difference to my growth and understanding." This is a basic attitude of most Westerners and is spreading to most of the youth around the world.

With that premise as the basis of my exploration, when I finally arrived at the Vedic tradition, I was convinced of the depth of its spiritual knowledge and its comprehensiveness, but from the view of "What's in it for me?" Because of having this background, typical of Americans, I can also understand the position of other young people today, especially those of Indian descent, who may be asking the same questions regarding their own culture. Therefore, if they do not get the right answers to their questions, or the proper guidance to understand the purpose and meaning of its philosophy and practices, it will not make enough sense to them to seriously take up the path or fully accept it. Therefore, I realize how important it is to teach them correctly, and in a way in which they will find interest in it.

Indian youngsters of today have adopted the American or western approach to accepting their parent's tradition, which again is called "What's in it for me?" In other words, if they do not understand something, or if they cannot relate to it, or if it makes no sense or seems to have little relevancy to their lives, they will not take it. Gone are the days when sons and daughters accept something mainly because their parents or grandparents did. Now they have to be able to see the purpose of it. They need to understand the meaning and usefulness behind the tradition. And there is nothing wrong with that. In fact, that is the basis for being properly educated in the culture.

This is not only the way the next generation of Indians and Hindus are viewing things in America, but I have seen this same attitude in the youth in India as well. This is also happening in other cultures, too. So this is a challenge to the parents everywhere. But in some ways this is good because if the children really understand the customs and

traditions, if they are truly educated in the meaning of them, then if they embrace them they will sincerely follow them for life.

So it is up to the parents, teachers and gurus to find the ways in which the Indian youth of today can understand and learn about the customs and history of the Vedic tradition in a way that makes sense to them. They cannot be bored with it. It has to have meaning and be relevant to their lives. They can't see it merely as myths, but as legends and history. They should not see it as mere rituals, but as ceremonies and practices that uplift and purify the consciousness. They need to recognize the benefits of it. They should not see the images in the temple as mere idols, but as deities that can reciprocate with the devotee to the degree of sincerity and surrender in which the devotee approaches the deity. They need to see that Vedic culture is a dynamic and living tradition that holds eternal spiritual truths that are as relevant today as they were thousands of years ago. They need to see that many of the technological advancements that we take for granted today are made possible by many of the developments that had been given by the ancient Vedic tradition.

The youth of today cannot be pushed or forced into something. But they need to be introduced to the Vedic tradition through methods that involve their own interests, whether it is technology and computers, or whether it is through ways of self-expression like music, dance, art, or even martial arts. All of these avenues have strong roots in the Vedic tradition and were used in ways of discipline that would also lead one to higher awareness and refined realizations.

We need to make the youth aware of the possibilities that can be attained or learned from the ancient Vedic tradition as it is applied to the modern age. I recently got a letter from South Africa in which they explained how they were using an approach from an article I wrote on how various frequencies can allow a person to kill, heal or transcend. In it I explained that the numerous frequencies which exist around us can affect us in various ways, both beneficially or destructively. It also showed how Europeans had been broadcasting radio frequencies that could control behavioral patterns in people or even kill them, as well as how the ancients of Vedic culture used the sound vibrations in mantras to perceive and reach the spiritual strata and change social cooperation for the better.

When this was presented to the youth in a class, no one was bored, but they could see how ancient knowledge could be applied for purposes that could be used today. In this way, children that displayed no interest in spirituality suddenly had their curiosity piqued. So we need to know how to develop these kinds of methods.

Furthermore, Hindu temples, being the center of cultural preservation, also need to find the ways for the youth to get involved in all age levels. Even if it is only through association with other youngsters for fun, games, and youthful activities like camping, boating, swimming, musical sing-alongs, etc., that can be incorporated to bring them together. Then stories of the ancient histories can be told wherein they learn moral values and also the characters and traits of the Vedic personalities, both old and

contemporary. This can be done in a way that can also explain the history of India and its development. Or they can learn songs and *bhajans* as played with modern instruments like guitars and electric keyboards. The point is to use any avenue in which their interest can be aroused. It also has to be fun.

Thereafter, classes that teach the more orthodox ways of the culture can also be introduced, such as the traditional forms of dance, art, yoga, and philosophy with a modern bent to it. By this I mean how it has influenced great thinkers of the West, such as Emerson, Thoreau, and others. Or how in America yoga has become a three billion dollar business that now has over 16 million people who practice it. Plus, we can show them how Westerners and people all over the world are adopting such views as reincarnation and karma, which are thoroughly rooted in the Vedic tradition. In essence, the youth should feel proud of their culture, its global acceptance, and how it is providing upliftment for increasing numbers of people.

So how best can we relate to our children? Using the approach of emotion or entertainment is one way. Whenever children become bored with something, such as too much philosophy or intellectualism, what do they usually do? They go relate with their friends, or put on some music in their Ipod, play competitive sports, or something like that. Thus, they go and engage in one of the most basic activities that there are, which are things on the emotional level, something that can excite the mind. So we need to perceive that. Find out what activities they would like to do in the temple. Or what areas of interest in their tradition do they have. Do they have interest in the heroes or freedom fighters of India? Chances are the children do not even know of them. But many of the boys would certainly have their interest piqued if they began to hear the stories and adventures about the heroes in the Puranic epics, or the more modern heroes during India's efforts for independence. These would include the struggles, fights, challenges, sacrifices, all for the improvement of society and the people of India, and for the freedom to continue to participate in the Vedic traditions. There are also many strong women in Indian history who have worked and even fought in such a way, which could then also be of interest and provide inspiration to the girls. So, we have to open ourselves up and find out how else to reach our children and pique their interest.

Many of these ways of teaching and numerous other techniques are already being done quite successfully, but they need to be set up and documented in a way in which they can be duplicated by others who are also in need of them. When a solution is found, when there is something that works, it should be made available through the proper channels to others who could also use it. There are some networks for this purpose already functioning, but they need to increase their exposure and cooperation with other Hindu/Dharmic organizations. This lack of cooperation between various organizations and sects is indeed a prime issue in the global Hindu/Dharmic community.

Another point is that if parents are going to convey Vedic culture and *Dharma* to their children, then the parents also must know what to say and how to explain things properly to them. And if they don't know how, then they need to learn. It is not enough to merely send the children off to someone else to get the necessary information and

guidance. The parents, being our first teachers, must also be exemplary, enthusiastic, and provide the proper instructions. They must be educated in their own culture so they can explain it to their children, and also use it as the basis of their actions. Otherwise, how will the children understand the purpose of the ceremonies, or the holidays and customs that are observed? And if this is the case, why would it make sense to the children to adopt the Vedic standards and traditions when the answers to the primary question, "What is in it for me?" has not been answered? And how inspiring would it be when it seems that their own parents do not know the purpose behind the traditions, or do not take them seriously?

On the other hand, when the parents regularly bring their young children to the temple and they join together with other families and youngsters to joyously observe the eventful holidays, or the colorful worship or special classes, it can create fond memories in the minds of the children that will last their whole lives. They remember their family taking special care and lovingly doing such things together, and devotedly going to the temple for special observances, and the uplifting feeling they would get from that. These are like *samskaras* or impressions which create memories that can motivate the children to continue partaking in such aspects of the Vedic Hindu traditions long after they reach adulthood. And then they partake of the same traditions and observances with their own children.

In essence, the youth of today need to know that the practice of the Vedic tradition is going to improve and enhance their life. They have to know how it is going to help them reach their higher potential in today's world, both materially and spiritually. And how it is going to give them the fulfillment that everyone is looking for. And we have to provide those answers and insights to them in some way or other.

Even if the children engage in less activity at school, such as in sports or various social clubs, there can be an increase in the time they have for learning about their Indian heritage and culture. After all, *Sanatana-dharma* is not only the root of the identity of children of Indian descent, but it is the foundation for the balance and guidance and character that everyone can use throughout life. Children may learn all about and play baseball, basketball, or other social and sports activities, but how much will they really use such things later on? So what is the loss in learning about the traditions and heritage of India, except in not learning it at all? That would be the greatest loss.

By training our children in the principles of *Sanatana-dharma*, they also learn about the greatness of the Indian identity. Thus, if they have a difficult time in figuring out whether they are American or Indian, especially if they are Indian-born but now being raised in America, this would help them understand their great and distinguishing ethnic identity. They may still relate to things in the West, but understanding their heritage, especially the universal, spiritual standards of *Sanatana-dharma*, will help them have a balanced view of life and their real uniqueness more than anything else. It would become the foundation of who they are, and also provide the wisdom for the decisions that they make long after they have left school.

It has been said that if you ever want to destroy a generation, or create the demise of a culture, then cause a distancing between the youth and their previous generations. Then in time, the previous traditions will be forgotten and will cease to exist. Therefore, it is imperative that temples need Bal Vihars, Gurukulas, or a school or special programs to train all children in the ways and meaning of the Vedic tradition.

They can also engage in fun mock debates on various points of the Vedic culture in group discussions on why certain things are done in the temple, or on certain aspects of the philosophy and knowledge about the Vedic epics. This way they can understand, remember, and even defend their culture and be proud of following *Sanatana-dharma*. This can help remove any misconception that they have. There may be a time when they know more about Vedic culture than their parents. I have seen this, when children become stronger Hindus or devotees than their own parents.

As the youth become more enthusiastic and develop with age, they can also become united through networks that join with other youth groups from various Mandirs and temples from across the country. Then they can also plan great festivals and get-togethers with a large number of other youths for engagements in all kinds of fun activities, culturally oriented traditions, discussions on life and challenges, resolutions to develop for the future of their culture, and so on. The youth can also share the experiences with each other that they have on the spiritual path.

Everyone wants to be on a winning team, and when other youths from the same background see how they are assisting, encouraging, and relating to each other in a positive and exciting way, more of the youth will want to join. When they have the enthusiasm and independence to progress in this way on their own, there will be no stopping them. They will also become the inspiration for future generations.

For me, I write books and articles like this one. Admittedly this is only one of many ways that have to be utilized. But I view books as tools, not only for educating Westerners, but also for Indian youths and adults alike. For example, not long ago I put together a book called "Vedic Culture: The Difference It Can Make In Your Life." By working with some of the top writers in different fields of Vedic study today and letting them write on their main topics of interest, I was able to produce a book that covers the important ways that Vedic knowledge can be utilized for assisting a person to reach their highest potential. The book covers not only the spiritual paths of the Vedic tradition, as in yoga, but it also covers Vedic science, Ayurveda, Vastu Shastra, Jyotish, Vedic gemology, Vedic environmentalism, etc. The purpose of this is to clearly show the different ways the Vedic tradition can help a person sort out various problems or enhance one's life for reaching one's highest potential and state of fulfillment. So it is an educational tool for anyone to understand the wide scope of applications available in the Vedic tradition that can be used to make a difference in one's life. This certainly is to help answer the question, "What's in it for me?" Such a book is meant to assist all Hindus/Dharmists to utilize and to know how to present the validity of the Vedic tradition to others, even to one's own children, and shows the value in learning how important the Vedic knowledge

can be. This is just one aspect of preserving and presenting the great tradition known as Vedic culture for the benefit of all others.

## WHAT THE YOUTH CAN START DOING

Now some of the ways that young Hindus and devotees can consider for getting more involved, other than some of the suggestions that I have already mentioned, can be:

1. Start accepting responsibilities around your favorite temple, such as help in cleaning it, help with the mailing list and inviting people to the temple for special functions, or even start a newsletter if they do not already have one.

2. Start helping in management duties, such as in assisting in the planning of the events for certain holidays, festivals, or youth events. In other words, help make things happen, do not merely witness what happens or what has been arranged by others. But see and learn how things are being done and what you can do to improve things. This also means that the older members of temple management should be respectful toward the youth and the ideas they may have.

3. The fact is, the older temple managers will be forced to retire one day, and you, the youth, are the managers of the future. Thus, it is best to respect the elders for their experience and what wisdom they can give you. So you need to learn from them, just as they need to be flexible enough to listen to you and your ideas and allow you to start implementing those that are most practical. In this way, your own growth and value for your culture will increase in a most mature way.

4. Start a college club based on Vedic culture or yoga, where possible. Sometimes colleges do not appreciate the starting of religious groups but will help promote culture. I have seen other students at colleges start yoga groups, like a Bhakti-yoga club, or something like that.

5. Start asking your temple or college youth group to invite speakers that you feel can explain things in a way that best helps you understand the philosophy or its importance. This means they use a language that you can easily grasp, and not be overly lofty or intellectual that it goes over your head, or use examples that are not practical to you.

6. By getting involved in this way, you can learn in a philosophical and insightful basis, but also in a practical way to develop yourself into a leader for others.