

The Form and Spirit of Vedic Tradition

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In every society, the conflict between the current demands and old traditions is a permanent problem. What we have to eliminate and what is to be retained is always a problem. Whether it is a Western European culture, or an Indian villager's culture, this problem is always there. And we find that what we cut down is generally the form. The spirit we cannot cut down.

For instance, when you greeted another person a few years ago in this country, you did not say "Hi!" It was probably "How do you do?" the British way of greeting another person. This "Hi" is a new form. It has nothing to do with the original form "How do you do." But there is a spirit in "Hi." There is camaraderie, a certain welcome and recognition of your presence. And there is a joy expressed. I met you and I am happy. And thus I say, "Hi." In this "Hi," the spirit is the same whether you say, "Howdy" or you say, "How do you do." Whereas the form keeps changing.

However, in changing forms, we should recognize how much to change or how much to retain. In today's urban lifestyle, for example, many forms have changed. The old manner of living is no longer there. And in doing so, we left a lot of things behind.

We assumed new forms and will continue to do so. Forms will keep changing. But in the process, the change of form is sometimes so great that the spirit itself is lost. And without a form, the spirit cannot be recognized.

When a person dies, the soul (spirit) who was occupying a given tenement, called the physical body, has vacated. And the body is no longer a livable (and lovable) body. What is left is to be buried. The spirit is gone and this spiritless form becomes a carcass. Similarly, we have a lot of religious forms that are dead carcasses because there is no spirit instilled in them. If the form itself is not there, where is the question of spirit? If the form is not there, the spirit is gone and if the spirit is not there, the form is dead.

Therefore, you must necessarily have a form with the spirit and the spirit should never change. What does not change – that alone is spirit. A changeable spirit is not a spirit at all. Anything that is based upon a certain eternal fact alone can be retained as the spirit. That spirit alone lasts, while the form keeps changing.

We have changed; even the Swami has changed a lot. I am using a foreign language

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which was not acceptable before. But I am using a foreign tongue because I am able to communicate to you in that language. And thus, I have changed. Also, previously swamis would never leave the country. In earlier days, Hindus never left their country because they had their on religious culture and their daily routines, etc. Also, they thought it was not acceptable to cross the ocean. Times have changed and travel has become different. These are the things that have to change. Whether we like it, they will change. And you find that people also change, but slowly. If the orthodox ones change too slowly, people leave them behind.

People are always dynamic. In fact, our scriptures say that certain things always change. Therefore, whenever you doubt whether a change is worthwhile, you ought to consult a person who is well informed and well rooted in the tradition. The *Taittirīyopaniṣad* says that whenever you have doubt about your conduct in a given situation, such as, “Am I leaving my tradition; am I compromising too much?”, follow an informed man who knows his tradition well. What he does, you follow. And if he is not in the same situation as you are, follow what he says. But make sure that the person whom you follow is dispassionate and is one who doesn't give you advice by which he becomes the beneficiary. If he is the beneficiary, don't take the advice. Those who know and are committed to values are the people you should follow. You can even blindly follow them. In time you will understand. And therefore, it is important to change but at the same time you must see that the change does not destroy the spirit.

In India, we show some forms of respect. For example, we show respect for elders. How? When an elderly person comes, you get up. This is purely a form. Respect is the spirit. The form is getting up. It is something that grows on you, for which you must have a form. If you give up all the forms, where is respect? Even if you give up “Hi,” where is camaraderie? If you give up the form of shaking hands, where is friendship? It will also disappear. People say, “If the spirit is there, the form is not necessary.” I say, if the form is not there, the spirit will die. It will die totally. And if the form alone is there, the spirit also has to be instilled.

We have temples as the forms now. They are necessary. Without a form there cannot be the spirit. You require a temple, a place which stands for the form of religion. But if the spirit is not instilled, this form will become obsolete. The children will not know what this blessed form is all about. They see the alternative forms. And when there are other forms, there is definitely a choice. They will want to know the reason for your choice and you will not be able to explain. Without the spirit, the form will die. All these temples will have no visitors in the next generations. Who will go to these temples unless you instill the spirit?

On the other hand, if there is a form of worship, there is spirit. The form is necessary, but at the same time, it can be an abridged form, a form that is practical. A form that is based on pragmatism will always be there in every society. But each time you have a form, you have to instill the spirit; otherwise it will be a dead form that will be of no use. And therefore, the

spirit is important. In a given form, you can instill the spirit.

One fellow came to me and said, "Swamiji, I hate this fellow in my office." And I asked him why. "Because he got a promotion and afterwards he became too proud. I hate him, Swamiji, and I don't like this hatred because I attend your lectures." So I asked him, "Do you want to remove this hatred?" He said, "Yes." I told him, "Give him a rose daily for 41 days." "What?" "A rose daily for 41 days; give him a rose." "Swamiji, I would like to follow your advice, but how can I give a flower to this fellow? What will he think of me?"

This is another problem. What others will think of me. People even get married because of what others think. People often incur debts because of what others think. Now he asks me, what will the other man think? I say, "Of course it will be awkward for you. I know that well. Therefore, I tell you one thing. You first tell him, 'I met this Swami and I told him that I hate you, really hate you. Then I told the Swami that I want to get rid of this hatred because I don't want to live with hatred. And the Swami asked me to give you this flower. So please accept this flower daily for 41 days.'"

Now who is going to reject your flower? When you are so frank, even an enemy will accept your flower. When you give the flower the first day, it could still be a problem. "How to give a flower to this fellow I hate?" So, you turn your head and give him the flower because your action is only the form, there is no spirit. How can there be a spirit? You hate him from his toenails to his hair. But, giving a flower is

not a symbolic action of one's hatred. When you give a flower, either you love the person, you respect the person, or you are devoted to the person. Giving flowers is definitely not an act of hatred or dislike. It is always an act of love. But when you give the flower, the love or respect is not there, much less devotion or friendship. There is hatred. Therefore, the spirit is not there. Only the act is there.

But you have to do it for a certain number of days, also. That is why I said 41 days. The next four days would be like the first. Then, on the sixth day a smile may appear on his face. What happened? He smiles because you cannot act in this particular form of giving a flower without an element of love. The form instills the spirit. If you keep giving, the spirit is discovered. The 41 days are redundant. Even after 10 days, the hatred can never be in your heart.

What brought that spirit? Love is not something you get by will. You have to provide conditions wherein love will be discovered. You can love anybody. That is the reason why nobody asks you, "Please love me." Love itself is not an action, it is not willed. It is a condition you discover yourself. And you have to provide conditions wherein love will be discovered. It all depends on how you act it out. If you provide conditions that are conducive, love is there. And similarly, spirit is always instilled in a person. It has to be discovered by a person for which he must provide conditions that are conducive. In a hateful condition, how can you discover love? But here is an action of love. Even though there was no spirit, in time you could not perform that action without the spirit. This is because while performing the action,

something happens in your mind. That very act produces a relevant emotion. You understand now, how important it is?

Indians, when they meet each other say, “*namaste*,” and bring both palms together. This is purely a form, but if you look into this form, there is a great spirit there. There is a vision in it. If you know the spirit, the form becomes more meaningful. Otherwise, the form dies and slowly becomes a formal discipline. In *namaste* there are two words, *namaḥte*. *Te*, to you and *namaḥ*—salutations. To you, my salutations. This is verbal, which is also a form. Then, there is a physical form. It must also have some spirit behind it.

What is the spirit? I have these two hands, left is left, right is right. And these two hands are definitely different. One is not the other. But they never fight against each other, because both hands belong to the same fellow. This is why you become such a patient person whenever you bite your tongue. What is your attitude towards your teeth? That is called patience. That is what they call forgiveness. Similarly, you are there and I am here. We are of the same source; there is no real difference. All that is there is one, and two become one. That is what we call *namaste*. On this *namaste*, I can teach the whole Vedānta. In this single word, everything is crystallized. The spirit is lying behind an innocuous action, a commonplace action, which is done by everybody without any knowledge. And thus, *namaste* is not just a form, the spirit is there. If you instill the spirit, the form will live. If you lose the form, you will lose the spirit, too.

The role of *ArshaVidyaGurukulam* is to reinstall the spirit in the existing forms. There are certain forms introduced, others edited, which take into account the current conditions. The forms cannot always be the same. They have to change. There is nothing wrong in changing a form, but everything is lost when, in doing so, we lose the spirit. And therefore, whatever obtaining forms we have or wish to have must be retained. And the spirit, also, has to be introduced, which requires education. This, we require a form as well as well as the spirit.

Today we are laying the foundation, or breaking the ground for a temple. What is a temple? It is a form. But, at the same time it is not a mere dead form because students surround it. It is a *Gurukula* wherein there is teaching. There is the form and there is the spirit. The spirit has to be instilled, which requires a lot of understanding.

When you go into traditional Indian temples, you will find that the sanctum, the main shrine, always remains dark. They methodically create that darkness. It is not that they didn't know how to provide some windows. They in fact create this darkness so that when you enter into the sanctum, you find that it becomes darker and darker. Thus, in the shrine where the Lord is, it is all darkness. In the dark shrine, there is an idol that is carved of stone. In south India, it is a black stone. In fact, it has to be a black stone. According to the scriptures (*śāstra*) it has to be solid silica, a monolithic stone. With regular applications of oil it becomes darker. And so the whole thing is dark. All that is there is one single flame.

As you enter this temple, you pass through the compound which is a miniature world. There, you will find various dance forms and musical instruments sculpted and people with different kinds of physiognomy. As you go inside, you find it becomes darker and darker. And in the darkest place is the Lord. Why? Because we are ignorant of the Lord – especially when our eyes are not trained or educated to see the Lord. Coming from the outside, you don't see the Lord. You stand in front of a black stone that is all dark; you don't see anything there. All that you have is sufficient knowledge, sufficient light, to see that there is a statue, and there is the Lord. The Lord is decked with precious stones. In that flame of the oil lamp all the diamonds, rubies, and emeralds glitter and you know, therefore, the Lord is there. But to know what he is, what is his nature, the light is not enough.

To know that there is a Lord, only our intellect (*buddhi*) is good enough. It is like an oil lamp. To be a believer (*āstika*) you have enough light to know there is the Lord (*Īśvara*). To know what is that Lord, you require better light and that is the light of the burning camphor. When the priest waves the burning camphor (*ārati*), he will ask you to behold the Lord (*darśan*). Then from the feet to the head of the Lord, he will show the burning camphor. In the light of knowledge you see the Lord. There you see the whole form. It is no longer purely a belief; it is like daylight – knowledge. What was a simple belief is converted into a flame of knowledge, into a light of knowledge. That is the spirit. You must instill the spirit; otherwise the form has no

meaning. Camphor is used because it is one substance that completely volatilizes. When it is burned, nothing is left behind. And similarly, when I stand before the Lord, that knowledge of the Lord consumes the very ignorant person that is me. All that is there is one flame of knowledge alone. And that knowledge should be total and should be complete, not leaving any residual ignorance or erroneous notion. Therefore, we burn camphor.

The teaching we are unfolding here is exactly what is necessary because it is a teaching that puts spirit in every form. And only by knowing what is behind a form does it become meaningful. Otherwise it is a dead form.

The Hindu religion is not an organized religion. That is the greatest virtue of this tradition. My father was the organization. My mother was the organization. They gave me what I have. You have what your parents gave you. You cannot change the genius of a culture, of a religion, overnight. It is not possible. And if we change to a hierarchical organization, it becomes power. You require, perhaps, an organized form of delivering this message; that's a different thing. But the spirit is always coming down from person to person. And therefore, this *Gurukula* will be the perpetuating institution of this tradition so that it will retain the spirit as well as the edited form. That is how Hindu religion has been preserved until today and that is how it is going to be preserved.

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