

Keynote Address Delivered at the First Hindu Priests' Conference, Pittsburgh, PA, 28th April 2012

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It is said that Hinduism is a view and a way of life conducive to achieving the view. The vision is best expressed in the sentence, "Ishavasyam idam sarvam," all that is here is pervaded by Ishvara, by the Lord, and is non separate from the Lord. When we use the word "all," we must not forget to include ourselves. All that is here, including one's body, mind, and senses, is a manifestation of Bhagavan and is therefore sacred. Assimilating this vision of oneness is called moksha, the ultimate purushartha, and is the primary purpose of human birth. For this, one has to seek this knowledge and study Vedanta, the knowledge of oneself as the whole, with a qualified teacher. One is already free, but due to ignorance, one does not know it. To illustrate this, we use the story of the tenth man, who went on a picnic with nine other friends. Upon returning from the outing, he counted everyone except himself and mourned the loss of the tenth man. A passing sage enlightened him that he indeed was the tenth man. In this

manner, one is ignorant of the truth oneself, and due to this ignorance one is subject to samsara, characterised by notions of bondage and sorrow.

Assimilating this knowledge requires preparation. It requires, shraddha and bhakti in Ishvara and the Veda, it requires developing surrender, spiritual discipline and emotional maturity. There is no better way to gain this preparation than by following the way of life prescribed by the Vedas —a committed lifestyle that is conducive to gaining the preparedness for self-knowledge. Here is where we have been given the wealth of the priests, a class of people whose purpose is to embody the Vedic lifestyle, and whose sole role is to assist humankind to develop the requisite shraddha, bhakti, and the maturity for gaining the ultimate purushartha. This lifestyle recommended by the Vedas and the Bhagavad Gita can be best described as one of desire-

management. Learning to manage one's desires is an important goal in the Hindu dharma, and is achieved in a unique way. The entire karma kanda, first portion of the Vedas is dedicated to specific prayers, designed to fulfill the gamut of one's desires in the here and the hereafter. My guru, Pujya Sri Swami Dayanandaji says that while every tradition has general prayers, best called "sprayers," ours is the only tradition that has "prayers," highly sophisticated means dedicated to achieving specific ends. The whole idea is for one to grow emotionally by channelling one's desires through prayer. One leaves the desires at the feet of the Lord, one dedicates the actions taken to fulfill the desires at the feet of the Lord.

Finally, one learns to accept the outcome as prasada coming from the Lord. In this way, one grows from a person who prays to being a prayerful person. In the former, the prayer is a discrete action, in the latter, it is an attitude with which one greets life. The role of the priests in our culture is invaluable in accomplishing this transformation. The Vedic vision and the lifestyle, the spirit and form are inextricably linked. They are married like Shiva and Parvati. Therefore, to uphold one, without the other, does not make sense. Upholding the spirit without the form is too abstract, whereas protecting the form, without understanding the spirit and purpose behind it is like protecting a dead body of know-hows and techniques, without understanding their purpose.

The priests, generally speaking, especially those that work in the North American context, are an endangered species. Although every priest is still the son of a priest, these days, the son of every priest may not want to become a priest. There



are few occupations in the world that are more of a calling, and are service-oriented. Such occupations cannot be considered as "professions," and their beneficiaries are not "clients" or "customers." Doctors and healers, for example, cannot say that they have clients, and neither can teachers. Likewise, the priests also do not have customers. Themselves being in service of Ishvara, they serve other devotees. The priests do not have a 9-5 job. Even when they are not doing puja, they do not stop being a priest, because priesthood is their very being. The essence of priesthood is devotion, and the priest is essentially a devotee.

During the course of one's life, one plays many roles. One is son or daughter, brother or sister. One is a student, and then, based on one's profession, one is an engineer, lawyer, etc. If one gets married, one is a spouse, and then mother or father. Again, during the course of a single day, one might be an employer or employee, a friend, a co-worker, etc. Often these roles overlap, and one plays multiple roles at once, without any problems. For example, one may be simultaneously with one's parents, siblings, and children at a family gathering. This is possible only because one is not the role. There is a basic person who plays these roles in the same manner as a single actor who dons

various costumes. This basic person is a devotee. The devotee is the individual who is connected to Ishvara, the total. If I were asked to spell out the primary role of the priests, I would say that it is to reflect the basic person, the devotee. Only when this devotee is present in the priest, as the priest, there can be worship. In this way, it is important for us to not lose sight of this basic person, the devotee. The temple attendee is a devotee, the mandir executive is a devotee, and the priest is also, basically, devotee. All are devoted to Ishvara, and the focus of every temple is to help one develop and live this life of devotion. It is only through this lived practice of invoking the devotee within oneself that one learns to not be affected by the challenges that one faces in life. When we look deeply into this, we can see that the problems and challenges in life belong to the role, and not to the person. In other words, while the role is person, the person is not the role. The person is a devotee related to Ishvara. This is the rahasya, the secret, of transcending samsara.

The role of the priest is wonderful, because this is the only occupation, where one reflects the devotee that one seeks to invoke within oneself. One is in the unique position of being able to embody this for oneself, and also reflect it for others. For this reason, among many others, the institution of priesthood deserves protection, and the priests deserve to be respected. These days, we often talk about the need to protect Hindu dharma. Dharma is an abstract concept. We cannot protect the dharma without protecting the dharmin, the one who practices the dharma. One of the best ways to protect the dharma is to sustain those who



practice the lifestyle enjoined by the Vedas, and thereby inspire others to do the same. In the North American context, the priests face certain unique challenges of negotiating linguistic and cultural barriers. Additionally, they have the responsibility of explaining the basics of Hindu dharma to people who might not know much about it, and to act as guides, counselors and chaplains. We have already heard about some of these challenges from the earlier presentations made today. To address these issues, my guru, Pujya Sri Swami Dayanandaji has planned a priests' training course at the Hindu University of America in Orlando, Florida, with the help of Sri Brahma Aggarwal. Since he is not in attendance, I request Sri Asthana to follow up on this program and help it to take off. This program will help the priests to be prepared for their manifold duties, and also to network with other priests. It is through networking alone that we grow; we stand tall like the redwood trees by connecting to one another, by holding on to one another.

I congratulate the organizers for hosting a successful and a landmark conference of Hindu pandits, and I pray that this meeting will inspire everyone to continue to probe common ground, and ways to address common concerns. Thank you.