

A Religious Way of Life Swami Paramarthananda

The uniqueness of the Vedic culture and tradition is that it prescribes a religious way of life for us to adopt and follow. Religion is not just doing something such as performing puja or chanting *slokas* for a few minutes a day or a few hours a week. Our entire lifestyle should be governed by religion.

A religious way of life consists of three aspects or components : anushtanam (rituals), dharma (ethics) and swaadhyaya (study of the scriptures).

Anushtanam : The word '*anushtanam*' means the performance of rituals but is also used to refer to the rituals themselves. Rituals are considered a very important aspect of a religious way of life. Unfortunately many people underestimate the importance of rituals.

There are many purposes of rituals, the primary purpose being to invoke our relationship. We must keep the relationship alive. And further, we should nourish the relationship.

Relationship play a very important role in our lives. We have many relationships. With our family members, friends, colleagues, etc. The scriptures point out that among all relationships, one relationship is extremely important and that is our relationship with the Lord. This relationship is fundamental and eternal.

Our relationship with the Lord is fundamental because it is common to all

individuals. In the case of our relationships with people, the relationship will vary from person to person. The same individuals can be a father, son, brother, nephew or uncle to five different people. But in the case of the lord, it is the same relationship with one and all. The Lord is the parent and we are all His children.

Our relationship with Lord is eternal. In contrast, our relationship with beings is always temporary because any individual is subject to an end called death. In the previous birth we were likely not related to the same group of individuals as in our present birth. And assuming a next birth for us, we are unlikely to have the same set of relationships that we presently have. (Strictly speaking, since we are ignorant of our previous birth and future birth if any, the nature of relationship across births is unknown to us.) Thus while worldly relationships are temporary, our relationship with the Lord is permanent.

Why is our relationship with the Lord is extremely important ? Psychologists point out that human beings are not isolated entities. 'No man is an island'. So we need relationship. We can have as many relationships as we like and many of them can even be loose relationships. But we need at least one trusting, reliable and lasting relationship. As we go through the ups and downs of life, the upheavals and challenges, we need some one to share happiness and sorrow. Happiness shared is happiness doubled while sorrow shared is sorrow halved. Who is the best 'person'

with whom we can share our joys and sorrows?

If we study human relationships, we will find that most relationships are temporary and unreliable. Consider family relationships. The parent – child relationship lasts only until the child grows up. When children get married and settled, they want to be independent and free. They may move to another city or even another country. The parents become insecure. ‘Will my children support me in my twilight year’?

Traditionally, the only strong relationship that we are supposed to depend on is the marital relationship. This relationship is supposed to continue throughout our lives. If this relationship is a strong relationship, both husband and wife will remain safe and healthy. Research shows that married people are more healthy than single ones. A strong and steady relationship will help not only in mental health but also physical health, particularly biological immunity. Happily married people are less prone to disease, heart attack, etc. Today unfortunately this relationship is becoming weaker and weaker. Many marriages are on the rocks. Articles with titles such as ‘Marriage Gone Sour?’, ‘Revive Your Marriage’, ‘How to Hold on to Your Spouse’, etc. regularly appear in magazines giving tips, advice and teaching ‘tricks of the trade’.

If there is one relationship that we can always rely on, it is our relationship with the Lord. The *sastra* says in and through all our relationships, we must not lose sight of our relationship with the lord. As stated earlier, we must invoke, we must not lose sight of our relationship with the lord. As stated earlier, we must invoke,

maintain, nourish and strengthen this relationship. And we do this by performing rituals.

Since god is formless, it is difficult for the human mind to relate to God. Hence the *sastra* prescribes a form and that too a human form because it is easy to relate to. Since all people may not be attracted towards the same form, the scriptures have given us a choice. We have hundreds of forms – male, female, male-female mixture (Ardhanareeshwar), animal (Hanuman) and human-animal mixture (Narashima). The scriptures mention many kinds of relationships that we can invoke. We can think of the Lord as our father, mother, brother, master, child, friend, spouse, etc. We can choose any relationship we like. When we invoke the relationship, initially it will appear artificial. But as we continue, we will find that the relationship becomes real and strong until it becomes the strongest of our relationships as can be seen in the lives of great devotees such as Tyagaraja and Meera Bai. The greatest advantage of having the relationship with the Lord as our primary relationship is that we will not expect anything from human relationships. We fulfil all our expectations from our relationship with the Lord. Then human relationships are only for loving and giving not taking.

We celebrate festivals for the same reason we perform rituals to invoke our relationship with the Lord. Sri Ramanavami is an occasion to invoke Lord Rama. What can a Krishna-bhakta do as this day? He should imagine that Rama is also Krishna in Rama ‘vesha’. So we see our *ishta-devata* in every festival.

Why do we need rituals and festivals? Can we not invoke our relationship with the

Lord without having to rely on 'external aids'? When we see our friends, we smile. When we meet people, we do *namaste* or shake hands. These are rituals. Since we cannot 'show' our emotions and feelings, we need rituals. A ritual is a physical expression of our sentiments. Rituals enable us to express our Love, compassion, sympathy, etc. Flag hoisting is a ritual. It gives us the opportunity to show our patriotism. Thus rituals are a necessary part of our lives. We cannot live without them. If we cease to follow religious rituals, we will have to invent a new set. So why not continue with the traditional rituals? And in doing so, let us take some time and effort to understand their significance and import.

Dharma :The second part of religious life is an ethical way of life – leading a life of values. What do we mean by values? What we do not want others to do to us, we should not do to them. Why? When others do to us what we do not want them to do, we get hurt. Similarly when we do to others what they do not want us to do, they get hurt. Since we do not want to get hurt, we should not hurt others. We can ensure this by leading a life of values. The *sastra* prescribes many values. Some of them are *ahimsa* (nonviolence), *satyam* (truthfulness), *asteyam* (nonstealing), *saucham* (purity) and *santosh* (contentment).

Why are values important? Values are the lubricating oil due to which alone all human interactions take place without friction and heat. When we apply oil to a squeaking door, it opens and closes without making noise. Value-system is the oil that makes all transactions smooth and noise-free meaning without friction. The result is mental sanity.

Swadhyaya : The third and final part of religious life is known as *swadhyaya* or scriptural study. This is an integral and the most important part of religious life. Even though a life of values and rituals makes our lives smooth, it will not guarantee total freedom from sorrow and pain. Knowledge alone will.

In the absence of scriptural study, our lives may be considered faith-based religious life. Faith can be shaky. When we see other people suffer, particularly good people we wonder - Is God just or unjust? When we face problems in our own lives (even though we may be leading an ethical life and doing all the rituals, we begin to doubt the efficacy of religion. In the extreme case, a person becomes an atheist. So faith-based religious life must be converted to knowledge-based religious life.

We have to study the scriptures. We must understand the significance of rituals. We must learn the various facets and nuances of *dharma*. We must study Vedanta. Only then can we convert faith to knowledge. We must approach a *guru* and study under him. We must not study the scriptures independently. If we do so, we are more likely to misunderstand than understand.

Many students of Vedanta tend to look down upon those performing rituals. It is important to note that the three constituents of religious life *anushtanam*, *dharma* and *swadhyaya* must be judiciously balanced and practiced. If we do so, we can see the difference in our lives. Our lives will become smooth and harmonious.