

## Nurturing a Supporting Family for Eternal Bliss

By Satyanarayana Dasa

“Charity begins at home,” is an old adage. Unfortunately, charity at home is very much missing at present. We are increasingly neglecting our families. We are failing to see that the current problems of society are deeply rooted within the family unit, for society is merely a combination of family units. Therefore, the new adage should be “Problems begin at home.”

In Sanskrit there is a *nyaya* (principle) called *sthali-pulaka nyaya* (the law of rice in a pot). To check whether rice is well cooked or not, you can just take a few grains from the cooking pot and press them with your fingers—the few representative grains are enough to indicate the status of the entire heap of boiling rice. Similarly, the condition of a society can be known by studying just a few families, because families are the building blocks of any society.

Non-profit organizations, such as PETA, Amnesty International, etc., around the globe, work for a number of issues, such as economic development, work ethics, community development, AIDS eradication and drug control, to name only a few. But where is the institution or project to save the family—the very foundation of society? There are colleges and universities offering studies in so many subjects. Where is the institution that trains one to lead a fruitful and happy family life?

The above situations are akin to the allegorical house on fire where the owner, caught unawares by the fire outside, continues mopping the floor. This eventually neither saves the house nor keeps the floor clean. The situation is pathetic and very alarming!

### The Institutions of Life

Charity that does not begin at home loses all meaning. The Vedic seers of India, whose wisdom as old as 5000 years is relevant even in this modern world, understood this. Therefore, they propagated the *varnashrama* (chronological institutions of life) system to maintain a happy and healthy society.

The *varnashrama* system places family at the center. According to the Vedas, man’s average lifespan can be divided into four equal *ashramas* (segments)—*brahmacharya* (celibacy), *grihastha* (family life), *vanaprastha* (hermitage and mendicancy), and *sannyasa* (renunciation). The first segment (*brahmacharya*) constitutes the student life during which one learns the importance of all the four goals in life (*dharma*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksa*). During this segment, students are expected to live a celibate life inside a *gurukula* under the tutelage of a *guru*. Throughout the rest of the *ashramas*, one should practice religion, earn money and indulge in activities that gratify one’s senses in such a way that none of the three gets in the way of, nor become independent of, the others. Among the four *ashramas*,

*grihastha* is the most important, because all other *ashramas* depend upon its healthy functioning for success.

All rituals, from *garbhadahan* (conception) to *shraddha* (oblation to dead ancestors), relate to family life. The purpose behind all these ceremonies is the creation of a loving family and, therefore, a peaceful and prosperous society. The *varnashrama* system affords the possibility for every individual to achieve fulfillment by training and working according to one's naturally acquired proclivities.

### **Artificial Happiness**

Everyone desires happiness. In the modern society, however, we have forgotten that happiness comes through a loving and caring family. In the words of Stephen R. Covey, author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, "happiness is a homemade product." Indulging only in so-called happiness-providing activities, such as going to parties, visiting tourist places, taking drugs, participating in clubs, etc., will not give any lasting satisfaction when there is tension in family relations.

A human being is born with a peaceful mind made to spread the message of love and peace. A child's mind becomes polluted and burdened, if he grows and develops in a disturbed family. In a family where relations are affectionate and nurturing, family members are expected to have balanced personalities. Wherever such people go, they carry an aura of peace, and this mood naturally infuses all aspects of their lives. Such people are able to execute their duties with great responsibility and care.

When we are disturbed in our family life, we carry that "virus" everywhere and infect whomever we meet. If those we contact do not have a healthy immune system to counterbalance anxiety, tension and distress, we will infect them. Young people, who by nature lack discrimination, are easily influenced by this "virus". They will then seek out alternatives to sooth their inner suffering, whose root cause is the lack of love in family relations. This lack of love is one reason why young people may prepare themselves to devote their lives to terrorism. If these young terrorists had loving parents, and affectionate brothers and sisters in their homes, they would not act so cruelly and massacre innocent people, without even batting an eyelash.

### **Adapting *Varnashrama* with Changes**

The *varnashrama* system is now dead, for all practical purposes. There is no benefit in either lamenting or singing songs about its past glory. No matter how much we try, it is damaged beyond repair, and it is not feasible to reinstate it. In the past century, the political, economic and social situation in India, the birthplace of *varnashrama*, has changed drastically. Technology, in the form of the industrial revolution, has put the last nail in the coffin of the loving family institution.

We can, however, adapt this system to our modern times by refreshing our thinking and finding the path that will secure for society and ourselves, the benefits this system provides—the principles do not change, only the modalities of their application. The fundamental principle of *varnashrama* is devotion to the Supreme Being. It recognises that without devotion to the Supreme Person, the source of our universe, it is not possible to have a happy

and peaceful society—the most important discovery on theosophy made by the Vedic visionaries.

These seers, seeking the truth, understood that a solitary human being cannot survive, let alone function, happily. Therefore, a need was felt to organize society, of which the family was, and remains, the building block. The primary purpose of family is devotion to the Supreme, not economic development or material enjoyment. Although not neglected, these two were not given prime importance, unlike what we see today. All activities were arranged around this fundamental principle. Surprisingly, given the sophistication of today's world, it may appear unattractive or ridiculous to the modern mind! These principles, however, have withstood the test of time.

The Indian scriptures, like the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, are full of historical depictions, celebrating the success of these principles. All Hindu *samskaras* (ceremonies), rituals and festivals have been propagated with this one principle in mind. We can still feel a trace of this truth in Indian festivals and rituals.

The purpose of marriage is not for the enjoyment of sex alone. Rather, it is to be partners who assist each other in acts of loving devotion to the Supreme. The individual's ego and pride naturally take second position. Cooperation is possible only with common goals. We see, at present, individuals in families have differing aims in life, creating disharmony. It is like a cart harnessed to many horses, each pulling in a different direction, or a boat being rowed by a team without coordinated effort.

And, for families who do have a common goal, such as a business, they often put up with each other for the sake of economic benefit instead of sharing in loving relations! The only thing which can truly unite a family, and then a society, is devotion to the Supreme Being.

### **Love, Thy Name is God!**

So, the best solution to modern problems is to have a loving family. An ideal way to achieve that is to unite in the service of the Lord. This need not be a global project, requiring the cooperation of different nations. Let charity begin at home, but not end there. Let us try this in our own family. Once we make our own family a blissful one, let us communicate this achievement to others. This becomes much easier in families where all the members have the same understanding of the Supreme. In fact, according to the Vedas, the amount of spiritual knowledge should be one of the criteria to choose a life partner!

Love that is unstinted and selfless can win over even the most blasé person in the world. If someone in the family is a non-believer, still, one can unite with them on the basis of love. Everybody wants love. Believers, non-believers and agnostics—all starve for love. To get authentic love, one must first develop a service attitude toward others, without a demanding mentality. This service attitude is the most natural attribute we possess, and yet, we always seem to try to cover it up with pride and ego. Pride, the elephantine enemy of love, sits like a heavy load on the head, spoiling good human relations and giving us fatigue and stress in return.

Nobody likes a person who is egoistic, arrogant and full of pride. These qualities produce burdens and tensions, causing us to avoid the most natural attribute—the tendency to serve. With such a demeanour, we become ever more desperate for love. In our ill-conceived

attempts to satisfy our ego, we become unqualified for loving affection and engage in a variety of perverse activities.

There is great pleasure in selfless service, for example, the loving mother caring for her child. While everyone is covertly begging for love, few seem to fully achieve it. We can, however, all attain this love, by properly playing our human role. The Vedic scriptures prescribe that one begins life by serving one's superiors, such as parents, and seeing Divinity in them. Indeed, they advise us to see Divinity in all beings and objects around us. Only then, will love flow to our great satisfaction.

### **Heaven on Earth**

There is a distinct difference between serving and helping. Helping people often makes us feel superior to them, thus adding to our pride. But, in serving, especially with an attitude of seeing a spark of the Divine in those we are privileged to help, we can become a fit recipient of love. This most valuable skill is most easily practiced in one's own family. Due to our natural affection toward blood relations, love will automatically overflow from within us, to include all our associations in life. This is heaven on earth.