

Meaning of samskara

By His Holiness Sri Kanchi Paramaachaaryal

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What is karma? It means work. Suppose you have to make a vesti (dhoti). There are a number of processes, a number of works for it. The cotton has to be gathered from the field; it has to be cleaned and spun into yarn; then the yarn has to be woven into cloth and dyed. In the same way a man has to be made a knower of the Atman through a series of rituals. Karma has to be performed in such a way as to purify him both outwardly and inwardly. Such a karma is called samskara.

That which removes the impurities from an object, takes away all the bad or evil elements, and imparts good qualities to it is samskara. For instance, we talk of "kesa-samskara". It means shaving or delousing and applying oil to the hair. Samskara is like combing the hair and applying oil to it. Certain types of samskara are conducted on land. First the land is allowed to dry in the sun, then it is ploughed and irrigated. Seeds, say, of paddy, are sown and after they sprout the seedlings are transplanted. The weeds are removed, the field irrigated again and the excess water drained off. When the corn is ripe, the crop is harvested, threshed and the chaff winnowed. The paddy has to be "seasoned" and pounded before the rice is used.

How many different steps are there in making cotton into a vesti. The weaver has to take great care that the yarn does not get tangled. Our Self is in a tangle caused by the senses. It has to be untangled and made eternally happy. There are many obstacles to accomplishing this. Now and then we experience some happiness in the midst of all our trouble and suffering. This happiness must be made to endure for ever. For that we must go to Brahmaloaka. In the presence of Isvara there will be no sorrow. After the great deluge we will become one with him. We have to prepare ourselves now itself towards that end.

The sages have laid down the forty samskaras and the eight "Atmagunas " for this purpose.

When we use the term " Atmaguna " or speak about the Atman being rendered pure, there is a suggestion that we are dualists (Dvaitins) who hold that the individual self is different from the Paramatman. In truth there is only one Atman, one Self, and there is no difference between the jivatman or individual self and the Parabrahman. The Self is ever pure. So it is wrong to believe that it has to be purified by the samskaras. It is nirguna, unconditioned and without attributes. So it is also wrong to speak of what are called Atmagunas, since the Atman has truly no gunas or qualities or attributes.

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However in practice, owing to Maya we do not realise that we are the Atman without qualities. It is the Self perceived in our dualistic life that is referred to when we speak of samskaras and it is full of impurities that have to be removed through the samskaras. It has also durgunas or bad qualities which have to be removed by cultivating the eight good qualities. Once we succeed in this, there will be neither any samskara nor any guna. We will transcend all gunas, all qualities, including the highest of them, sattvaguna. Finally there will be only the Self without any karma, without any gunas and without any distinction between the jivatman and the Paramatman. But to come to this state we have to go through the process of samskaras and cultivate the eight Atmagunas.

If we wish to emulate the example of the noble character of the Puranas, we will have to contend against various obstacles like our attachments and desires, our feelings of hatred and fear. We will have to be disciplined through works and we will have to observe the rules about our daily routine, about how we should sit and stand and eat and dress. In this way we will rein in our mind, subdue our passions and ego, and our feelings of anger, hatred, fear and sorrow will gradually wither away. The samskaras and Atmagunas are interconnected. They will help us to acquire the qualities of the noble Puranic characters whose stories we listen to or read.

The Eight Qualities

The eight gunas or qualities are : daya, ksanti, anasuya, sauca, anayasa, mangala, akarpanya, asprha.

"Daya" implies love for all creatures, such love being the very fulfilment of life. There is indeed no greater happiness than that derived by loving others. Daya is the backbone of all qualities.

"Ksanti" is patience. One kind of ksanti is patiently suffering disease, poverty, misfortune and so on. The second is forgiveness and it implies loving a person even if he causes us pain and trouble.

"Anasuya" you know is the name of the sage Atri's wife. She was utterly free from jealousy : that is how she got the name which means non-jealousy. Heart-burning caused by another man's prosperity or status is jealousy. We ought to have love and compassion for all and ought to be patient and forgiving even towards those who do us wrong. We must not envy people their higher status even if they be less deserving of it than we are and, at the same time, must be mature enough to regard their better position as the reward they earned by doing good in their previous life.

"Saucu" is derived from "suci", meaning cleanliness. Purity is to be maintained in all matters such as bathing, dress, food. There is a saying often quoted even by the

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unlettered: "Cleanliness makes you happy and it even appeases your hunger". To see a clean person is to feel ourselves clean.

In Manu's listing of dharmas that are applicable to all, ahimsa or non-violence comes first, followed by satya (truthfulness), asteya (non-covetousness; non-stealing is the direct meaning), sauca (cleanliness) and indriya-nigraha (subduing the senses or even obliterating them).

The fifth Atmaguna is "anayasa". It is the opposite of "ayasa" which denotes effort, exertion, etc. Anayasa means to have a feeling of lightness, to take things easy. One must not keep a long face, wear a scowl or keep lamenting one's hardships. If you lose your cool you will be a burden to yourself as well as to others. Anayasa is a great virtue. In many of our rituals there is much bodily exertion. When we perform a sraddha we have to remain without food until 2 or 3 in the afternoon. There is no end to the physical effort we have to put in to conduct a sacrifice. Here anayasa means not to feel any mental strain. Obstacles, inevitable to any work or enterprise, must not cause you any mental strain. You must not feel any duty to be a burden and must develop the attitude that everything happens according to the will of the Lord. What do we mean when we remark that the musician we listened to yesterday touched the "tara-sthayi" so effortlessly? Does it mean that he performed a difficult musical exercise with ease? Similarly, we must learn to make light of all the hardships that we encounter in life.

What is "mangala", the sixth guna? Well, "mangala" is mangala. There is mangala or an auspicious air about happiness that is characterised by dignity and purity. One must be cheerful all the time and not keep growling at people on the slightest pretext. This itself is extremely helpful, to radiate happiness wherever we go and exude auspiciousness. It is better than making lavish gifts and throwing money about.

To do a job with a feeling of lightness is anayasa. To be light ourselves, creating joy wherever we go, is mangala. We must be like a lamp spreading light and should never give cause for people to say, "Oh! he has come to find fault with everything". Wherever we go we must create a sense of happiness. We must live auspiciously and make sure that there is happiness brimming over everywhere.

"Akarpanya" is the next guna. Miserliness is the quality of krpana or miser. "Akarpanya" is the opposite of miserliness. We must give generously and whole-heartedly. At Kuruksetra Arjuna felt dejected and refused to wage war with his own kin. In doing so, according to the Gita, he was the guilty of "karpanya dosa". It means, contextually, that he abased himself to a woeful state, he became "miserly" about himself. Akarpanya is the quality of a courageous and zestful person who can face problems determinedly.

"Asprha" is the last of the eight qualities. "Sprha" means desire; a grasping nature. "Asprha" is the opposite, being without desire. Desire is at the root of all trouble, all evil and, all through the ages, it has been the cause of misfortunes. But to eradicate it from the mind of men seems an almost impossible task. By performing rites again and again and

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by constantly endeavouring to acquire the Atmic qualities one will eventually become desireless. Says Valluvar:

Parruga parrarran parrinai apparrai

parruga parru vidarku

Tirumular goes a step further. "It is not enough, " he says, "to be attached to Isvara who is without attachment and be free from other attachments. You must be able to sever yourself from the attachment to Isvara himself".

Asai arumingal, asai arumingal

Isanodayinum asai arumingal

The Buddha calls desire thirst. Intense desire for an object is "trnsna". (The Buddha calls it "tanha" in Prakrt). His chief teaching is the conquest of desire.

Desirelessness is the last of the eight qualities. The first one, daya, is the life-breath of Christianity. Each religion lays emphasis on a particular quality, though all qualities are included in the teachings of Buddha, Jesus Christ, the Prophet Mohammed, Guru Nanak, Zoroaster, Confucius and the founders of all other religions. Even if these qualities may not have been pointedly mentioned in their teachings, it is certain that none of them would regard people lacking them with approval.

Gunas in Practical Life

All religions teach people to be loving, to be truthful and to be free from jealousy, desire and greed. But our religion goes further by imposing on us the performance of various samskaras to acquire these qualities in practical life. There is no use in merely preaching, in asking people to be like this or that. A man must be kept bound to a system consisting of such works as would help him in practice to acquire the noble qualities expected of them. Our religion alone does this.

Other religions, it is claimed, teach love and desirelessness. But Hinduism, it is alleged, does not give any importance to such qualities and is, besides, ritual-ridden. This view is totally erroneous. In fact, our religion does more than others: while laying emphasis on the eight qualities, it imparts lessons to take people beyond them, to a state that transcends these very qualities. It also believes that merely talking about the qualities will serve no purpose. After all, we know, don't we, that we have to be virtuous, truthful, loving and so on? Still we find it difficult to live according to these ideals. What purpose is served if our canonical texts merely keep urging us again and again to acquire noble qualities? That is why, unlike other faiths which contain a great deal of ethical and moral

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instruction, our religion teaches ethics and morality only to the extent needed. But is that all? Without stopping with mere precept it tells us how we may- in actual practice- cultivate and acquire them. This it does first by telling us stories through the Puranas of virtuous people who obtained fame and of evil-doers who got ill fame. But it recognises that such examples are not enough to provide the necessary inspiration, so it lays down a number of samskaras for the purpose of obtaining inner purity. Ours is the only religion that gives practical training in making people virtuous and in acquiring moral excellence. Instead of being proud of this fact, is it right to feel that there is something lacking in our religion?

The first of the eight qualities is love which is the chief teaching of Jesus and the last of them is desirelessness which is the cardinal teaching of the Buddha.

Is it enough to give oral instruction about the qualities? In other words, is it enough merely to preach them? It is man's nature to be engaged in some work or other. And, after all, if you want to accomplish something you will have to work for it. Gandhiji taught truth and non-violence, spoke about them all his life. In his asrama he was all the time not only doing some work or other himself, he was also urging others to do the same. His followers called him a hard taskmaster. He asked them to keep turning the charka and expected them to clean their toilets themselves.

The dharmasastras have prescribed rites to make us inwardly pure and impart us the eight qualities. In this context the sutras of Apastamba and Gautama have a dominant place. Among the Smrtis Manu's is the most important.

Apastamba and Gautama deal with the dharmas common to all people. The former lays down the duties and samskaras separately for the different castes also. Gautama deals with the forty samskaras and the eight Atmagunas. These forty-eight are the means to take a man to Brahmaloaka on his death. He goes before the presence of Isvara, which is like going to a great jnanin. He can remain quiescent in bliss. When Isvara, who conducts the world himself becomes formless, he too [the man who attains Brahmaloaka] will be dissolved in him. Until then he resides in the world of Isvara (saloka) and later attains sayujya, that is becomes one with him. "Yasyaite catvarimsat samskarah astavatmagunah sa Brahmanah sayujyam salokatam jayati", so it is said.

The body is involved in various ways in performing the forty samskaras. When you work in an office you use your hands and feet and mouth, don't you? So is the case with the samskaras. He who performs them and cultivates the eight Atmagunas goes directly to the Brahmaloaka in which world there is neither sorrow nor happiness. When are you without sorrow and happiness? When you are with the One who creates them.

The Atmic qualities are described as "Atmasakti". This term has recently come into use in newspaper language. In the old Sanskrit and Tamil texts we do not see the term "Atmasakti" used, only "Atmagunas".

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Importance of agni

The samskaras cover an individual's entire life-span - "Nisekadi smasanantakam" - from the moment before he is conceived in his mother's womb to the time when his body is offered to Agni. "Niseka" (impregnation) is a rite performed with the sacrificial fire as the witness; and the funeral rites which come last are performed in the fire.

Agni, the sacred fire, must be kept burning throughout a Brahmin's life. The Brahmacharin or bachelor - student must perform the samidadhana everyday. After he is married, with Agni as witness, he becomes a grhastha (householder). He must now perform the aupasana in the fire. For the vanaprastha (forest recluse), there is a sacred fire called "kaksagni". The sannyasin has no sacrament involving the sacred fire: he has the fire of knowledge (jnanagni) in him. His body is not cremated - that is there is no Agni-samskara for it - but interred as a matter of respect. Strictly speaking, it must be cut into four parts and consigned to the four quarters of a forest. There it will be food for birds and beasts. In an inhabited place the severed parts of the body would cause inconvenience to people. That is why they were thrown into the forest. There it would be food for its denizens; if buried it would be manure for the plants. Now over the site of the interment of a sannyasin's body a Brindavana is grown [or built] : this again is done out of respect. At such sites all that is to be done is to plant a bilva or asvattha tree.

All castes have rites to be performed with the sacred fire. During marriage people belonging to all varnas must do aupasana and the fire in which the rite is performed must be preserved throughout. Today, only Parsis seem to keep up such a practice of preserving the fire. Their scripture is called the Zend-Avesta which name must have been derived from the Vedic "Chando-Vasta". Their teacher was Zoroaster [Zarathustra] : this name must have been derived from "Saurashtra". Their homeland is Iran (from "Arya"). If the fire kept by them is extinguished at any time they spend a good deal of money in expiatory rites. With us rituals performed in the sacred fire have been on the decline from the turn of the century. The lifestyle of our people has changed. If there is faith, this great treasure (rites performed in the fire) could be preserved. The most important reason for the loss of faith is the present system of education.

This body of ours has to be finally offered in the fire as ahuti (oblation) to the deities. It is treated as a dravya (material for sacrifice) with ghee applied to it before it is offered in the fire. The ceremony is called "dahana-samskara".

Names of samskaras

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The forty samskaras which are meant to purify the individual self are: garbhadhana, pumsavana, simanta, jatakarma, namakarana, annaprasana, caula, upanayana, the four rites like prajapatya (Vedavratas) performed during gurukulavasa (the years the celibate student spends in the home of his guru), the ritual bath on completion of gurukulavasa, marriage, the five mahayajnas performed everyday by the householder. We have listed nineteen so far. Then there are seven pakayajnas, seven haviryajnas and seven somayajnas to be conducted by the householder. Thus $19+21=40$

The seven pakayajnas are: astaka (anvastaka), sthalipaka, parvana, sravani, agrahayani, caitri, asvayuji. The seven haviryajnas: agniyadhana, agnihotra, darsa-purnamasa, agrayana, caturmasya, nirudhapasubandha, sautramani. The seven somayajnas: agnistoma, atyagnistoma, uktya, sodasi, vajapeya, atiratra, aptoryama.

Out of the forty samskaras some are to be performed everyday, some at certain times and some at least once in a lifetime. In the first category there are five mahayajnas (panca-mahayajnas).

Rites done to the chanting of mantras are more beneficial than those done without it - a sacrament involving mantras is a samskara. The social service that a house holder does is included among his daily panca - mahayajnas. The panca - mahayajnas are: brahmajajna, devayajna, pitrayajna, manusyayajna and bhutayajna. The chanting of the Vedas constitutes brahmajajna. Sacrifices and puja are devayajna. Tarpana is pitrayajna. Feeding guests is manusyayajna. And offering bali to various creatures is bhutayajna.

Aupasana and agnihotra are part of the daily religious routine. Though a pakayajna, aupasana is not included in the group of seven pakayajnas mentioned above, while agnihotra is one of the seven haviryajnas. Darsa - purnamasa is a haviryajna to be performed once in fifteen days. The other five haviryajnas and the seven somayajnas are to be performed once a year or, at least, once in a lifetime. As if out of consideration for us, the Smrtis have granted us this concession: that the difficult somayajnas need be undertaken only once in a lifetime.

But for the parvani - sraddha which is to be performed once a month and the sthalipaka every Prathama, the other five pakayajnas are to be performed once a year.

To put it differently: the five mahayajnas (brahmajajna, devayajna, pitrayajna, manusyayajna, bhutayajna) together with agnihotra and aupasana are to be performed everyday; darsa-purnamasa and sthalipaka once a fortnight; parvani-sraddha once a month. The other yajnas are to be conducted once a year or at least once in a lifetime.

On a plot of land growing one crop, harvesting is done once a year, while on another plot growing three crops the same is done once every four months. Some crops have to be watered everyday, some on alternate days. Such jobs are samskaras. But there are differences in the samskaras for different crops. The same is the case with the samskaras meant for human beings.

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Samskaras performed by parents

The samskaras begin with garbhadhana, that is from the moment of conception [or, more correctly, impregnation]. The "sarira-pinda" must be formed to the chanting of mantras. People mistakenly think that rites like Pumsavana and simanta are meant for the mother. Actually, they are for the life taking shape in her womb, the foetus and are meant to purify it. The elders have a responsibility in this matter. One may not do the rites meant for oneself, but it is sinful to be negligent about those meant for another life. Nowadays people omit to perform garbhadhana, simanta, etc, since they think that such rites are not fashionable.

Where there should be some delicacy in man-woman relationship people act without any sense of shame after the fashion in the West. But, when it comes to performing Vedic rites in which the well-being of the new life created is involved, they feel a sense of awkwardness. Such an attitude is not right.

Garbhadhana, pumsavana and simanta are performed before the child is born. The sexual union of man and wife must be sanctified by the mantras. Instead of being an act of animal passion, it is raised to the level of a samskara with the chanting of mantras: the purpose is the well-being of the life to be formed. It is madness to give up such rituals without realising the high principles inspiring them and, instead, thinking them to be "uncivilized". If there is any feeling of delicacy on your part about the garbhadhana (rtusanti) ceremony, you do not have to invite a crowd. But the rite itself must be gone through within the four walls of the home. It is no longer the custom to have a four-day wedding with the couple doing daily aupasana. Nor is the rite of sesahoma conducted following the day of wedding. The couple have sexual intercourse on the same day as the marriage without any ceremony and the chanting of mantras. This is an evil practice and sinful. Since the intercourse takes place in an animal manner, the children born too will be likewise. Pumsavana must be performed in the third month of pregnancy and simanta in the sixth or eighth. Nowadays both rites are gone through together anyhow.

On the birth of a child, its jatakarma must be performed. Gifts must be given away. Namakarana is on the eleventh day. Even this, the naming ceremony, has a purificatory purpose according to the sastras. There are rules regarding the name to be chosen for the child in accordance with the nakshatra or asterism under which it is born. It must be one from the many names of the Lord and to call the child by such a name is itself a samskara since it has a cleansing effect. We do not have the custom of "christening" our children as "Longfellow" or "Stone". But nowadays even in this land similar names are given to children. Also when the child's name is that of the Lord it is corrupted or twisted clumsily. The name given to a child during a Vedic ritual must be treated with some respect.

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When the child is six months old it is time for its annaprasana. The samskaras from the garbhadhana to namakarana are performed by the parents on behalf of the child. In annaprasana, even though the father chants the mantras, it is [obviously] the child that takes anna or food.

If the mother takes medicine, the baby is nourished, is it not? In the same way the inner thoughts and feelings of the parents will affect the foetus and its character will be shaped accordingly. There is a difference between what you write when your mind is calm and what you write when you are in an angry mood: the first will be good to read while the second will not be so pleasant. The body too is subject to good and bad influences. The sexual union must take place when the couple are imbued with good thoughts: it will then lead to the creation of a blob of life (pinda) that will have the potential to develop into a noble character. This is the reason why the marriage is consummated with the intonation of mantras.

There are people who have not altogether ceased to observe such rites, but sometimes they go through two or three rites together. There is a right time for every samskara and there are mantras as well as dravyas (materials) appropriate to them.

Caula comes after annaprasana. It is meant for the "sikha" which is essential to the conduct of all good rites. The sannyasin has no sikha and is shaven-headed; in fact, the sikha has to be removed with the recitation of mantras at the time one receives initiation into sannyasa. It is worn in the caula ceremony with the chanting of mantras and with a vow made to Paramesvara (as part of the samkalpa). So it is wrong to remove it as we like in violation of this vow. Is it proper to remove this lock of hair as if it were just a handful of leafy vegetables? People install the sivalinga or salagrama for worship. Would it be right on their part to discard them as they like. It would be a different matter if they were stolen or lost accidentally. Similarly, to wear a sikha ceremonially and then remove it, as and when we like, and wear a crop is not proper.

The chanting of the Vedas, the performance of Vedic rituals and the dharma practised by the householder with his wife strengthen both body and mind (the latter through the vibrations in the nadis produced by the mantras). The sikha on the Brahmarandhra is a protection and a means of obtaining such strength. It is like the tiles on the roof of a house. Only when you cease to perform Vedic rites is it not needed, that is when you are no longer a householder and became an ascetic. Today even as student-bachelors or as householders we have ceased to chant the Vedas and practise Vedic rites. So, naturally, we do not wear the sikha also.

Upanayana comes after caula. It is the first samskara that a boy performs, chanting the mantras himself. Those conducted until this ceremony are meant to protect the child from the evil influences arising from the sins committed by its parents. These are either "garbhika" or "baijika" (belonging to the womb or to the seed or sperm). The samskaras performed by the parents are to remove the ills caused to the child by these harmful influences.

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Any samskara must be performed at the right time and by doing so we are absolved of our sins. To wash away the papa earned by us in the past we have to go through samskaras in which our body, mind and speech are applied.

We think evil with our mind, tell lies with our mouth, and sin with our body also. Indeed we practise all kinds of deception. The wrongs committed by mind, speech and body must be wiped away by applying mind, speech and body to virtuous purposes. With the mind, Paramesvara must be meditated upon; with the faculty of speech, mantras must be chanted; and with the body, noble deeds must be performed. It is from the time of upanayana that one becomes mature enough to perform samskaras that bring together mind, speech and body.

I must speak about another matter. Apart from the samskaras that a father performs specifically for the sake of his child (from garbhadhana to caula), those (including other types of rites) he conducts otherwise also benefit the children. This is according to the saying, "The good done by mother and father goes to protect the children". Until recently the children of Vaidika Brahmins were particularly bright, the reason being the impetus they received from the samskaras performed by their forefathers. What our ancestors did by way of good works served as the foundation of our moral and intellectual uplift for two or three generations. Children born afterwards have been so much embroiled in worldly affairs as to have become degraded.

Our fathers did not perform any samskaras. So we may feel sorry that we have been deprived of the benefits that would otherwise have come to us. Let us not give room for our children to make the same complaint about us. Let us perform samskaras for our sake and theirs.

Why not all samskaras for all?

Jatakarma, namakarana, annaprasana and caula are common to all jatis. Only Brahmins, Ksatriyas and Vaisyas have the upanayana ceremony. There is nothing discriminatory about this nor need there be any quarrel over the same. People belonging to the fourth varna do physical work to serve the world and in the process acquire inner purity. They will gain proficiency in their hereditary vocations only by learning them from their parents or grandparents. They do not require gurukulavasa over some twelve years [as in the case with Brahmins] nor do they have to learn the Vedas. If so their work will suffer.

Upanayana is the first step taken towards gurukulavasa. When a boy learns the Vedas he must have no ego-feeling. At home he has a lot of freedom. His father will not be able to discipline him because his affection will come in the way. That is why the child is to be brought under the care of a guru. Vocations that require physical effort are different from the pursuit of the Vedas. There is no room for intellectual arrogance in them or for the

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nursing of the ego. So such work may be taught at home by the father or some other elder in the family.

Those who serve by doing manual work do not require to go through upanayana or gurukulavasa. Certain special skills or the finer aspects of an art or craft that cannot be taught at home may be learned from a Brahmin teacher. The Brahmin is expected to be proficient in all arts, all subjects, but none of these is meant to be a source of his livelihood. His vocation is teaching and the chanting of the Vedas and the performance of Vedic rites.

There is a relationship between the samskaras described for a man and his vocation and mental outlook. So it would be wrong to think poorly of certain jatis who do not have to perform certain samskaras. You may think it strange, but it is my view that it is those who have to undergo more samskaras than others that must have been thought of poorly. The idea is that these people need more rites to be rendered pure. Others are not in need of so many to be cleansed within. The larger the dose of medicine taken by patient the greater must be his affliction.

None excels the sages in impartiality. They do not talk glibly like us of equality but they are truly egalitarian in outlook since they look upon all as one with Isvara. The conduct of the world's affairs is such that it requires people following different vocations, doing different jobs and with different mental qualities in keeping with them. It is in conformity with these differences and dissimilarities that the sages assigned the samskaras also differently to different people. There is no question of high or low among them.

It is in observance of the same principle that the sastras lay down upanayana for the first three varnas (Brahmins, Ksatriyas and Vaisyas) and also certain samskaras connected with it.

Upanayana

The upanayana of a boy is performed when he is old enough to understand things and chant the mantras. During this ceremony he is asked to go begging for alms. "Bhiksacaryam cara", he is told. "Badham", he replies("I will do so"). So, before his upanayana, the child must know enough Sanskrit to understand what is meant by "Bhicksacaryam cara". When he starts learning at the age of five he will have a basic knowledge of Sanskrit by the time he is eight years old, the age fixed for the upanayana samskara.

The world will stand to gain if eight-year-old children wear the sacred thread, have sufficient knowledge of Sanskrit and chant the Gayatri mantra. Today things have so changed that Godlessness is thrust into tender minds.

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Upa=near; nayana=to take or lead(a child). Near whom or what is (the child) taken? Near the guru. That is what upanayana means. Who is a guru? One who has mastered the Vedas. There is one guru during the brahmacaryasrama (student-bachelorhood) and another during the last asrama of sannyasa. The first guru is learned in the Vedas, Vedangas and so on while the second is one who has forsaken all including the Vedas. In the first asrama you acquire vidya; in the last asrama you realise jnana. .

Upanayana is initiation into the brahmacaryasrama while "samavartana" is the completion of this stage of life. "Samavartana" means "return". To repeat, from the upanayana to the samavartana is student-bachelorhood or the brahmacaryasrama. Samavartana thus denotes returning home on completing one's study of the Vedic discipline in the gurukula.

Upanayana is the "purvanga" of student-bachelorhood. Any "anga" must have something that gives its distinctive character. This is called "angi". Thus for the anga called upanayana the angi is brahmacarya. The word "Brahma" has six different meanings. In the term "Brahmacarya" it means the Vedas. An entire asrama or stage in life is set apart for the study of the Vedas: this is brahmacarya. The minimum period for student-bachelorhood is twelve years which is the time taken to master the Vedas.

"Brahma" also means Visnu as well as Siva. The word, in addition, is also used to denote a Brahmin, tapas or austerities and the Paramatman. When you say Brahma with a long "a" at the end (Brahma) it means the Creator.

At mealtime we do "parisecana", that is we sprinkle water over our food, say, rice. It is the anga for the meal. The rice must be eaten only after it has ceremonially been made a prasada of Isvara. This is the purpose of the parisecana. Is it not foolish to refuse the food after it has been made a prasada of Isvara. Not to learn the Vedas after one has had the upanayana is akin to refusing to eat the food placed before one after one has done the paricesana. In this sense the majority of people who have had their upanayana must be called foolish.

There are four "vratas" between the purvanga called the upanayana and the uttaranga called the samavartana. These are prajapatya, saumya, agneya, and vaisvadeva [see following para].

There are certain rules to be followed to master a mantra. The Vedas are replete with mantras that help you to go forward spiritually and find release from worldly existence. "Brahmacarya" may be described as the total discipline required to master the Vedas. There are also rules meant for the study of each part of these scriptures. Each Veda has four "kandas", each associated with a great sage. Brahmajajna is performed in honour of them. For each kanda there is also a separate vrata. During student-bachelorhood when a kanda is studied its vrata must also be observed. The kandas are prajapatya, saumya, agneya and vaisvadeva. After completing the four kandas the pupil will have his samavartana with the permission of his guru.

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Samavartana is also called "snana" and one who has gone through it is a "snataka". Everybody must learn his own Veda [the Veda that is his by birth] and other subjects in addition. When we perform upakarma we must start learning a new part of the Vedas. Later, at the time of utsarjana, it must be discontinued and the study of the Vedangas taken up. The Vedas, to repeat, must be studied during the six months roughly of Daksinayana, from the south of Sravana to Taisya. The next six months must be devoted to the Vedangas.

To master the mantras the student must strictly observe the rules pertaining to the brahmacaraya and to the particular part of the Veda that is being studied. Nowadays we do not observe anything, we do not even learn the Vedas or a part thereof. Before the wedding ceremony, we perform a rite called "vrata": in one hour we go through a number of samskaras without understanding what we are doing and why we are doing them. Perhaps, I find myself giving this discourse because so much at least survives of the Vedic tradition.

The importance of the upanayana ceremony lies in this: it makes a person fit to receive instruction in the Vedas and spread their divine power throughout the world. Parents must realise this fact and perform their son's upanayana at the right time.

"Dvi-ja" ("iru-pirappalan" in Tamil) is the name given to a Brahmin, Ksatriya or Vaisya. They merit the second birth only when they become qualified to learn the Vedas. Such a birth is meant, as mentioned earlier, to spread the divine power all over the world, and it is through the upanayana ceremony that they become qualified for it. Performing this ceremony at the right time is the responsibility of the parents. At present, in matters like this, no regard is paid to the canons. In contrast, in the old days, people had faith in the scriptures and acted according to their dictates.

The sastras and popular custom

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Basic to the vedic tradition

When a child falls ill the parents take special care of it. How wrong would it be to neglect a sick child? If there is anything worse it is not to perform the upanayana of one's son at the proper age and fail to impart him the Gayatri mantra. This rite is for his Atmic uplift

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as well as for the good of the world. It is sheer vanity that the "thread ceremony" is nowadays performed like a mini-wedding. This is one reason why it gets postponed since the parents have to find enough money to "celebrate" it on a lavish scale. Delaying this samskara for such reasons must be condemned in the severest terms possible.

We in the Matha are ready to do anything [to help parents to perform the upanayana of their children at the proper age]. We arrange "mass upanayana" ceremonies. A number of other religious organisations also have similar arrangements. The Gayatri is common to all. Mass upanayana is conducted for boys belonging to different denominations, Smarta, Vaisnava, Madhva, etc, and is being done fairly satisfactorily. This practice must grow with more and more participants.

Well-to-do parents think that such mass ceremonies are meant for people without means. But, at the same time, they do not perform the upanayana of their children on their own at the right time. In this samskara the importance of which is hard to exaggerate, there is no question of some being able to spend more on it than some others or some being able to afford the expense more than others. Money or property has nothing to do with it. It is sad that in upanayana rite considerations that are not relevant to it are brought in with the result that the samskara that is at the heart of the Vedic tradition is emptied of all its meaning.

It is the duty of parents to make sure that, after they are invested with the sacred thread their sons chant the Gayatri everyday without fail. Some boys discontinue chanting this mantra the very first day after the upanayana ceremony. Parents must see to it that they don't. They must also make sure that the children perform the sandhyavandana without being distracted by cricket matches, cinema, party meetings, etc. I am not sure how far my urging is going to help, considering nowadays that parents nowadays are themselves more interested in clubs, films, meetings and the races than in matters concerning the Self. If there is any realisation on their part that their own lives have been lived in vain, they may perhaps want their children to do better. But will the boys listen to them? In all likelihood they will turn back to tell their parents: "why do you ask us to perform sandhyavandana and recite the Gayatri? What about you?"

In this unfortunate situation, if I am wasting your time by speaking about such matters, it is because I have a duty to remind you of your responsibility with regard to your children's Atmic advancement.

I do not know whether you will do what I ask you to do, nor do I know how you will do it. I will have to carry out the duty imposed on me by the Matha. The Matha bids me to see it that the upanayana of children is performed when they are of the right age, all those children who are entitled to learn the Vedas. Further, the Matha also bids me to see to it that, once the boys are invested with the sacred thread, they perform the sandhyavandana without fail everyday and that they learn to chant the Vedas at least one hour a day.

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Qualities of Bramhacharin

The celibate-student must perform samidadhana every day, beg for his food and take no salt. If he is a Brahmin he must keep a staff(danda) or palasa, if he is a ksatriya a staff of asvattha. The vaisya brahmacarin has a staff of udumbara. The staff helps the student to retain his learning. It is similar to the lightening conductor or the aerial and is scientifically valid as to "fix" these hymns. That is why it should be kept-to safeguard the treasure called the Vedas that the student has acquired. The brahmacarin must wear the skin of the black antelope(krsnajina) and must not wear any upper cloth. There are rules the electrician has to observe for his safety: he must stand on a rubber plank or wear rubber gloves during work. Similarly there are rules prescribed by our great men of the past to protect the Atmic electricity, the Atmic energy.

Today we perform upakarma as a one-day ceremony without keeping up the study of the Vedas. We do not go through the utsarjana at all. For our failure to do it we mutter a mantra in expiation, the mantra called "Kamokarsit"which says, " I did not sin. Kama(desire) did it. Anger did it. . . " There is no need to repeat this mantra if we perform the utsarjana.

Brahmacarya implies adherence to a number of rules with regard to food, the performance of rites and the observance of vratas. If a brahmacarin makes any mistake in chanting the Vedas, in matter of tone or enunciation, he must do penance for the same on upakarma day. On this occasion he eats no more than a few sesame seeds; otherwise he fasts the whole day; and on the following day he offers 1,008 sticks of the palasa in the sacred fire chanting the Gayatri. He should do this every year. Nowadays brahmacarins perform this rite only on the day following the first upakarma following the upanayana. Actually this a rite all Brahmins are expected to perform, though we find today householders doing only Gayatri-japa. When you merely mutter the mantra you feel sleepy and you may go wrong in the japa. But such will not be the case if you also perform a homa as you chant the Gayatri. Sticks offered in the fire must be those of palasa, if not of the asvattha; darbha grass may be used if the other two are not available.

At mealtime the student can have his fill. The only restriction is that he must not give free rein to his appetite. He must beg for his food for such a practice makes him humble. The sastras do not require him to fast. The student must be nourished properly during his growing years. But he must, at the same time, learn to develop sattvic qualities and there must be nothing rude or rough about him. It is by serving his guru that these qualities are inculcated in him.

During the twelve years in the gurukula the student must learn his recension of the Vedas and also the caturdasa-vidya. On completion of his stay in the gurukula he performs the samavartana, returns home and marries.

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Naisthika Bramhacharya and Family Life

In the past, some students continued to reside with their guru without performing the samavartana. Even after his passing, they remained brahmacarins and remained so all their life.

Our dharma takes into account the natural urges of man. The general rule is that, on his return home from the gurukula, the student must marry and settle down. It is difficult to go against the natural urges. But going along with nature does not mean being swept away in the flow of urges. After all the goal of all our efforts is reaching the other shore—that is release from the worldly existence. The householder must lead a life of dharma with his wife. But later he must become a forest recluse first and then, renouncing everything, a sannyasin. This path to asceticism through stages is based on the fact that curbing the natural instincts is likely to be harmful. A person who decides in his youth to become a naisthika brahmacarin (lifelong student-bachelor) may later succumb to his natural passions. This would be an offence against the asrama code of conduct and therefore sinful. As a householder he is not guilty of any offence if he goes by his natural urges within the constraints of dharma.

There are exceptions to any rule. Those who have firmness and maturity of mind and strength of character obtained from the samskaras performed in an earlier birth may become lifelong brahmacarins. We have the example of Samarta Ramadasa who lived more than 300 years ago. It was he who inspired Sivaji to uphold our dharma against the onslaught of Islam. Ramadasa, the naisthika brahmacarin, personified one aspect of Hanuman.

Sri Sankara Bhagavatpada was an incarnation of Paramesvara and his mission was re-establishment of the Vedic dharma. He went directly from the brahmacarya to the ascetic stage of life. His disciples too, with the exception of Suresvaracarya, did the same. Sankara gave initiation into sannyasa to Padmapada, Hastamalaka and Totaka. In the Sankara Matha also brahmacarins are initiated into sannyasa because, according to the rule, only such sannyasins can occupy the Pitha. All this points to the fact that everybody need not become a householder before donning the ascetic's garb. But it must be conceded that only a few will have the wisdom and mellowness necessary to skip two asramas (that of the householder and the forest recluse) to take to sannyasa. Naisthika brahmacarins do not have to perform the following samskaras: marriage, the five mahayajnas, the seven pakayajnas, the seven haviryajnas and the seven somayajnas. Their antah-karana must be sufficiently pure even without going through these rituals. So they are exceptional cases.

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Dahana-kriya(cremation)is the last samskara according to the sastras. It is argued, on the basis of this, that they (the sastras)do not enjoin all, even the aged, to take to sannyasa. If everybody were to live through all the asramas (that of bachelor-student, householder, forest recluse and ascetic) there would truly be no question of the cremation rite for anybody. Are not sannyasins their attaining siddhi, instead of being consigned to the flames? If we believe that asceticism is only for the mature, and not even for the aged among the rest, the above argument cannot be said to be wrong.

The view that cremation rite applies only to those who die too young to become sannyasins is unfounded. Indeed not only those who die prematurely but also the old are to be cremated [if they do not become sannyasins]. So the inference is that sastras do accept aged people also not taking to sannyasa.

A person who has the light of knowledge in him and is free from passion must live in the forest giving up family responsibilities and performing only Vedic rites. He must leave his children and property behind and take only his wife with him to the forest. The wife, however, is not meant for carnal pleasure but is a partner in the conduct of rites involving the sacred fire-sacrifices, aupasana, etc. This is the meaning of vanaprastha. A person qualifies for this stage of life when he is mature enough to leave home and hearth, children and relatives. Later he gives up the Vedic karma itself and turns his mind exclusively to the quest of the Self. This is the time when he enters the sannyasasrama.

The man who has thus separated himself from his wife and given up Vedic works is initiated into sannyasa by his guru. He must constantly meditate on the Paramatman and experience the Truth as an inward reality. Also, he must have the realisation that, "That Truth am I, all else is false play. "Then he is by himself, beyond his body and mind, as the Ultimate Truth. This is moksa, liberation. Such a man will continue to dwell in his body until the fruits of his past karma are exhausted. But he will not be affected by such karma as a sannyasin who has inward realisation. From the point of view of the outside world he may still dwell in his body; but even in this state he is liberated. He is now a "jivanmukta". When the body perishes he becomes a "videhamukta"(liberated without the body). And he himself is now the unconditioned Ultimate Truth.

He who becomes a sannyasin without having lived as a householder and he who becomes a sannyasin after doing so, performing all the forty samskaras and acquiring all the eight Atmic qualities, becomes alike the Ultimate Truth.

What is the fate of the man who does not become an ascetic but who keeps performing, until his death, all the samskaras and cultivates the eight Atmic qualities? He is cremated on his death, is he not? After all, the majority of people belong to this category. What happens to such people after their death?

Sankara does not state that they will dissolve in Ultimate Reality. They do not have the intense urge, the burning desire, to grasp the Brahman, abandoning everything. If they have the all-consuming desire for the Truth, no force can hold them back from their

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quest. It is because they do not possess such a desire that they do not obtain non-dualistic release. However, they have faith in the sastras and perform works according to them and contribute to the well-being of the mankind and they are also thereby rendered pure inwardly. So, though they are not united with the Paramatman, they go to the presence of Isvara, Isvara who is the Paramatman with attributes(Saguna Brahman)and is behind the affairs of the world.

This is called "Hiranyagarbha-sthana" and it is the same as Brahmaloaka. In this there is no inseparable dissolution in the Paramatman, but the man who attains it remains in bliss "experiencing" Isvara. Such a state is also to be described as moksa. There is nothing wanting, there is no sorrow, and there is the presence of the Lord. What more is wanted? This state is reached by those who perform all the samskaras even though they do not become ascetics.

But one day Isvara(the Saguna Brahman)will put a stop to the activities of all worlds and dissolve them in the great deluge(maha-pralaya). He will now become the Nirguna Brahman, the Paramatman without any attributes. At this time all those who reside by his side will unite with the Paramatman as the Paramatman, that is non-dualistic liberation.

In the great deluge all creatures-even those who have not performed any of the prescribed rituals, creatures like worms, reptiles and so on also -will merge with the Paramatman. Then what is special about the one who unites with the Supreme Being after having performed all the samskaras? When the Paramatman, as the Isvara with attributes, creates the worlds again those who do not perform the samskaras will be born again according to the karma of their past lives. Only those who have properly gone through the samskaras and been rendered pure will be inseparably united with the Brahman.

I have come far from the subject of upanayana. I had sought an answer to the following questions: "Can a person remain a brahmacarin all his life? Can a brahmacarin become a sannyasin without going through the stage of the householder? "

Upanayana and when to perform it?

A Brahmin child's upanayana must be performed when he is eight years old from conception, that is when he is seven years and two months old from birth. A Ksatriya's is to be performed at the age of twelve. Krsna Paramatman who belonged to the clan of Yadus (Yadavas) was invested with the sacred thread at that age. The corresponding age for a Vaisya is sixteen.

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According to the sastras, the lower limit of Brahmin youngsters is eight years and the upper limit is sixteen which means a grace of eight years. It is sinful in the not to have performed upanaya of a Brahmin boy before his passing the upper age limit.

Uttarayana is the right period to perform upanayana- from the Tamil month Tai to Ani. when the sun journeys northwards. While this is the right time for marriages also, the season of spring(Chittirai to Vaikasi)is considered particularly auspicious. For upanayana the month specially favoured is Masi. Upanayana and marriage are not favoured during Daksinayana(from the Tamil month Adi to the end of Margazhi).

Nowadays, for various reasons, the upanayana and marriage ceremonies are delayed for as long as possible and celebrated in any month other than Margazhi. The results are there for you to see. But one must be happy perhaps that a function called marriage is still performed somehow. So long as people perform it, let them perform it at any time. If we take this attitude, marriages may be permitted in any season as a desperate step. But upanayana is a different matter. It should never be permitted in Daksinayana. If it is for some reason celebrated during this period, I would ask for its performance again in Uttarayana. Money is the main problem in conducting an upanayana or a marriage. Parents postpone the upanayana because they want to perform it at the same time as the marriage of their daughter so as to minimise the expenses.

The upanayana is sometimes performed when the boy is only five years old. This is called "kamyopanayana", "Kamyā" meaning in persuance of desire. Such early upanayana is all right if you want the child to develop inwardly at an early age. But seven years is the proper age for the child to be invested with sacred thread because by now he would have learned enough Sanskrit to chant the mantras clearly. Nowadays, the "thread ceremony" is conducted together with the marriage, that is when the "boy" is 30 or 35 years old. So to suggest that the upanayana needs to be performed only when the child is seven years old - and not at five - would be taken as a joke. Joke or no joke, it [the delay in performing the upanayana] should make you uneasy deep within if you have some concern for the vedic dharma.

Adi Sankara's upanayana, it is believed, was performed when he was five years old. If the child is extraordinarily intelligent and can articulate words properly, his upanayana may be performed at five years.

Models to follow

It often occurs to me that two divine children demonstrate their purpose of descent to the earth through their very upanayana samskara. One of the two is Sankara who gave new life to the Vedic religion and the other is Jnanasambhandhar. The Tamil Periyapuramam

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mentions that Jnanasambhandhar's upanayana was performed when he was a small child. From the fact that he calls himself "Nanmarai Jnanasambandhan" we know that he was conversant with all the four vedas. Both the Acarya and Jnanasambandhar had to listen only once to grasp their lessons: that is why they were called "ekasantagrahins". So they could learn the vedas in one or two years. Indeed, there was no need to teach them, for they were capable of learning everything on their own. The one (Sankara) was an incarnation of Siva and the other of Subrahmanya. If they had accomplished their respective missions only after their upanayana had been performed and after they had received instruction in Gayatri, it was only to show ordinary people like us the importance of that samskara.

There was a poet called Ramabadhra Dikshita who spoke about himself thus " Before Gayatri came to me, Sarasvati was already there with me." Before he was eight years old the usual age for imparting the Gayatri mantra, he had began to compose poems. Jnanasambandar too sang his composition "Todudaya ceviyan" when he was only three years old. He had already been performing miracles. But even so he had his upanayana ceremony performed and was taught the Gayatri Mantra. If he did so it was to show the world that he was able to accomplish his great mission in life only by upholding the Vedic dharma. He has opened our eyes to the significance of the upanayana samskara and the Gayatri Mantra.

Why early Upananya

Let us leave aside the question of child being inspired by Sarasvati before he is imbued with Gayatri. The more important thing is that before Kama takes hold of a boy he must be inspired by Gayatri. That is why the age of upanayana is fixed at eight. When one is possessed by Kama one would be dragged away from one's ideal, that of acquiring the power of mantras. Even the power already acquired would be destroyed. That is the upanayana ceremony is performed early so that the boy is helped to become perfect by constant repetition of Gayatri Mantra. After 16, he will not be able to do the same. If he somehow ascends one span spirituality, he will the next moment descend by one cubit. That is why the upanayana samaskara must performed early.

We do not take such samaskaras seriously nowadays. We do things to no purpose, and at the same time we do not have the courage to give up such rites altogether. So we go through them "somehow " for a false sense of satisfaction. Far better it would be, instead, to have the courage to be an atheist. The atheist at least has some convictions, so it seems to me.

If the Gayatri mantra is learned in childhood itself it would be retained like a nail driven into a tender tree. Gayatri imparts in great measure mental strength, lustre and health. It will increase the child's power of concentration, sharpen his intelligence, make him

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physically strong. Later in life, when he feels the urge of Kama, Gayatri will prevent him from being dragged downward and be a protective shield for his body and intelligence. When one learns to meditate on the Gayatri in childhood itself, it would be a great help, as one grows up, in not wasting one's seed, in acquiring Brahmlic lustre and qualities like studiousness, humility, devotion to God and interest in matters of the Self.

Parents nowadays deny their children the opportunity of being afforded such great benefits and for no reason.

A student spends the years of his gurukulavasa in Gayatri-japa; study of the Vedas and the Vedangas, begging for his food, serving his guru, observing various religious vows. When he completes his education thus, he will have become a young man ready for his samavartana. Later he must go to Kasi and, on his return home, take a wife. He is called a "snataka" between his samavartana and his return from his journey to Kasi. Samavartana is equivalent to today's convocation ceremony. In present-day marriages there is a farcical procedure called "Kasi-yatra"

Marriage is one of the forty samskaras

Domestic Life and the carnal desire

Great men have spoken in the past about the evil done by the carnal desire. Remarkably enough, our Vedic dharma has turned the same into an instrument for the purification of the Self by means of samskara and by imparting to it an element of propriety. It is not easy for an ordinary man to go to the forest and live as a recluse there or become a sannyasin. To become mellow, he has to go through all the rough and tumble of life, experience all the joys and sorrows of his worldly existence. In the years of tenderness he must taste bitter, in boyhood or student-bachelorhood he must taste astringent, as an unripe fruit [in youth] he must taste sour and as a mellow fruit [in old age] he must taste sweet. Ordinary people must go through all these stages so as to become mellow finally and to be filled with sweetness. What has not ripened naturally, or by itself, cannot be ripened forcibly. In this context one is reminded of the words of Ramalingaswamikal who speaks of a "prematurely ripe and withered fruit dropping". The sages know that such would be the result if a man were forced into maturity by going against nature. The duties of marriage and the life of a householder are intended to make a person mellow naturally. Besides are there not many beings that are to be born again as a consequence of their past karma? How can they be reborn in the absence of the samskara called marriage?

The householder has to continue to chant the Vedas he was taught as a brahmacharin. He has also to teach these scriptures, perform a number of sacrifices and rites like aupasana and sandhyavandana. At present the conduct of sacrifices has become rare and not many

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learn the Vedas. But the tradition of sandhyavandana and Gayatri-japa is still followed though only to a very small extent. I will now speak about the Gayatri mantra.

Gayatri

“Whoever sings is protected, “ that is “Gayatri”. “Gayantam trayate yasmat Gayatri’ tyabhidhiyate.”

“Sings” is not used here in the sense of singing a song. It means intoning or chanting (the mantra) with affection and devotion. People who chant the Gayatri in this manner are protected. While speaking about this mantra the Vedas use these words : “Gayatrim Chandasam mata”. “Chandas” means the Vedas. So Gayatri is the mother of all Vedic mantras (that is the Vedas proclaim them so). It has twenty-four aksaras (letters or syllables) and three feet, each foot of eight syllables. That is why the mantra is called “Tripada Gayatri”. Each foot is the essence of a Veda. Thus Gayatri is the essence of Rgveda, Yajurveda and Samaveda. The Atharvaveda has its own Gayatri. To receive instruction in it you must have a second upanayana.

Says the Manusmriti: “Tribhya eva tu Vedebyah padam padamaduduham”. It means that each pada of Gayatri is taken from one of the (three) Vedas. We have forsaken all else that is Vedic. What will be our fate if we give up the Gayatri mantra also?

Gayatri-japa is essential to all rites performed according to the sastras.

The Bramhin must keep his body pure

The Brahmin must keep his body chaste so that its impurities do not detract from the power of the mantras he chants. "Deho devalaya prokto jivah prokto sanatanah. " (The body is a temple. The life enshrined in it is the eternal Lord.) You do not enter the precincts of a temple if you are unclean. Nothing impure should be taken in there. To carry meat, tobacco, etc, to a temple is to defile it. According to the Agama sastras you must not go to a temple if you are not physically and spiritually clean.

The temple called the body - it enshrines the power of mantras - must not be defiled by an impurity. There is a difference between the home and the temple. In the home it is not necessary to observe such strict rules of cleanliness as in the temple. Some corner, some

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place, in the house is meant for the evacuation of bodily impurities, to wash the mouth, to segregate during their periods. (In the flat system it is not possible to live according to the sastras). In the temple there is no such arrangement as in a house.

Wherever we live we require houses as well as temples. In the same way our body must serve as a house and as a temple for Atmic work. The Brahmin's body is to be cared for like a temple since it is meant to preserve the Vedic mantras and no impure material is to be taken in. It is the duty of the Brahmin to protect the power of the mantras, the mantras that create universal well-being. That is why there are more restrictions in his life than in that of others. The Brahmin must refrain from all such acts and practices as make him unclean. Nor should he be tempted by the sort of pleasures that others enjoy with the body.

The Brahmin's body is not meant to experience sensual enjoyment but to preserve the Vedas for the good of mankind. It is for this purpose that he has to perform rites like upanayana. He has to care for his body only with the object of preserving the Vedic mantras and through them of protecting all creatures. Others may have comfortable occupations that bring in much money but that should be no cause for the Brahmin to feel tempted. He ought to think of his livelihood only after he has carried out his duties. In the past when he was loyal to his Brahminic dharma the ruler as well as society gave him land and money to sustain himself. Now conditions have changed and Brahmin today has to make some effort to earn his money. But he must on no account try to amass wealth nor must he adopt unastric means to earn money. Indeed he must live in poverty. It is only when he does not seek pleasure and practices self-denial that the light of Atmic knowledge will shine in him. This light will make the world live. The Brahmin must not go abroad in search of fortune, giving up the customs and practices he is heir to. His fundamental duty is to preserve the Vedic mantras and follow his own dharma. Earning money is secondary to him.

If the Brahmin keeps always burning the fire of mantras always burning in him, there will be universal welfare. He must be able to help people in trouble with his mantric power and he is in vain indeed if he turns away a man who seeks his help, excusing himself thus: "I do the same things that you do. I possess only such power as you have."

Today the fire of mantric power has been put out (or it is perhaps like dying embers). The body of Brahmin has been subjected to undesirable changes and impure substances have found a place in it. But maybe a spark of the old fire still gives off a dim light. It must be made to burn brighter. One day it may become a blaze. This spark is Gayatri. It has been handed down to us through the ages.

Gayatri and Sandhyavandhana

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If the Gayatri has not been chanted for three generations in the family of a Brahmin, its members lose caste (they cease to be Brahmins). The quarter where such Brahmins live cannot be called an "agrahara". It is perhaps not yet three generations since Brahmins gave up the Gayatri. So they still may be called Brahmins.

In the same way if the Brahmin family has not performed sacrifices for three generations its members will be called "Durbrahmanas", degenerate Brahmins. Even though degenerate the label "Brahmin" sticks to them. There are prayascittas (expiatory rites) by means of which the corrupted Brahmins will be remade true Brahmins. But there is no such hope for a Brahmin in whose family Gayatri has not been chanted for three generations. A member of such a family ceases altogether to be a Brahmin and cannot be made one again. He is just a "Brahmana-bandhu", a kin or a friend of Brahmins. The same rule applies to Ksatriyas and Vaisyas with regard to the Gayatri mantra; they become "ksatriya-bandhus" and "Vaisya-bandhus" respectively.

The spark I mentioned earlier must be built into a fire. The spark by itself does not serve any purpose. But it has in it the potential to grow into a bright flame or a radiant fire.

At least on Sundays, all those who wear the sacred thread must do Gayatri japa a thousand times. They must not eat unclean food, goto unclean places and must atone for lapses in ritual observances and in maintaining ritual purity. Henceforth they must take every care to see that their body is kept chaste and fit for it to absorb mantric power.

Even in times of misfortune the Gayatri must be muttered at least ten times at dawn, midday and dusk. These are hours of tranquility. At dawn all creatures including human beings rise and the mind is serene now. At dusk all must be restful after a day's hard work: that is also a time of calm. At noon the sun is at its height and people are at home and relaxed and their mind is calm. During these hours we must meditate on Gayatri, Savitri and Sarasvati. In the morning the dominant presence is that of Visnu, at noon that of Brahma and at sundown of Siva. So we must meditate on Gayatri in the morning as Visnu personified, at noon as Brahma personified and at dusk as Siva personified.

Gayatri contains in itself the spirit and energy of all Vedic mantras. Indeed it imparts power to other mantras. Without Gayatri-japa, the chanting of all other mantras would be futile. We find hypnotism useful in many ways and we talk of "hypnotic power". Gayatri is the hypnotic means of liberating ourselves from worldly existence as well as of controlling desire and realising the goal of birth. We must keep blowing on the spark that is the Gayatri and must take up the Gayatri-japa as vrata. The spark will not be extinguished if we do not take to unsastric ways of life and if we do not make our body unchaste.

Gayatri-japa and "arghya" (offering libation) are the most important rites of sandhyavandana. The other parts of this rites are "angas" (limbs). The least a sick or weak person must do us to offer arghya and mutter the Gayatri ten times. "Oh only these two are important aren't they? So that's all we do, offer arghya and mutter the Gayatri ten

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times a day. " If this be our attitude in due course we are likely to give up even these that are vital to sandhyavandyana. A learned man remarked in jest about the people who perform arghya and mutter Gayatri only ten times thus applying to themselves the rule meant for the weak and the unfortunate: "They will always remain weak and be victims of some calamity or other". Sandhyavandana must be performed properly during right hours. During the Mahabharata war, when water was not readily available, the warriors give arghya at the right time with dust as substitute.

Arghya must be offered before sunrise at noon and at sunset. Once there was a man called Idaikattu Siddha who grazed cattle. He said: "Kanamar konamar kandu kodu adugan pohutu par. " "Kanamar/r" means before you see the sun rise and "konamar/r" means when the sun is overhead and "kandu" is when you see the sun before sunset. These are the three times when you ought to offer arghya. "adu" means "niradu", bathe in the Ganga. "kan" here means "visit Setu" or have " have darsana of Setu". "Pohutu par"- by bathing in the Ganga and by visiting Setu your sins will be washed away. Here is mentioned the custom of going to Kasi, collecting Ganga water there and going to (Setu) Ramesvaram to perform the abhiseka of Ramanathasvamin there.

Only by the intense repetition of Gayatri shall we be able to master all the Vedic mantras. This japa of Gayatri and arghya must be performed everyday without fail. At least once in our lifetime we must bathe in Ganga and go on pilgrimage to Setu.

If a man has a high fever, people looking after him must pour into his mouth the water with which sandhyavandana has been performed. Today it seems all of us are suffering all the time from high fever! When you run a high temperature you have to take medicine; similarly Gayatri is essential to the self and its japa must not be given up at any time. It is more essential to your inner being than medicine is to your body. Sandhyavandana must be performed without fail everyday. Gayatri-japa can be practised by all of us without much effort and without spending any money. All that you require is water. Sandhyavandana is indeed an easy means to ensure your well being. So long as there is life in you, you must perform it.

Gayatri must be worshiped as a mother. The Lord appears in many forms to bestow his grace and compassion on his devotees Mother loves us more than anybody else. We know no fear before her and talk to her freely. Of all the forms in which Bhagavan manifests himself that form in which he is revealed as mother is most liked by us. The Vedas proclaim Gayatri to be such a mother.

This mantra is to be repeated only by men. Women benefit from the men performing the japa. Similarly when the three varnas practise gayatri-japa all other jatis enjoy the benefit flowing from it. We may cease to perform a rite if the fruits yielded by them are enjoyed exclusively by us. But we cannot do so if others also share in them. Those entitled to Gayatri mantra are to regard themselves as trustees who have to mutter it on behalf of others like women and the fourth varna who are not entitled to it. If they fail in their duty of trustees, it means they are committing an irremediable offence.

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The mantras are numerous. Before we start chanting any of them, we say why we are doing so, mention the "fruit" that will yield. The benefit we derive from the Gayatri mantra is the cleansing of the mind (cittasuddhi). Even other mantras have this ultimate purpose, but cittasuddhi is the direct result of Gayatri-japa.

Even in these days it is not difficult to perform sandhyavandana both at dawn and dusk. Office goers and other workers may not be at home during midday. They may perform the madhyahnika (the midday vandana) 2 hours 24 minutes after sunrise that is called "sangava kala".

We must never miss the daily sandhyavadana unless we find it absolutely impossible to perform. When we fall ill, in our helplessness we ask others for water or kanji in the same way, we must ask our relative or friend to perform sandhyavandana on our behalf.

Let us all pray to God that he will have mercy upon us so that the fire of mantras is never extinguished in us and that it will keep burning brighter and brighter.

Other aspects of sandhyavandana

"Astra" and "Sastra" are terms used in Dhanurveda (military science) to denote two types of weapons. Knife, arrow, spear, club and so on-real weapons-come under the term "sastra". "Astra" is what is energised by a mantra into a weapon. If you discharge just a darbha or a blade of grass chanting or muttering the appropriate mantra it will be turned into a weapon. Sastras are also discharged similarly with mantras. If you hurl something at a object or person muttering the mantra proper to it, the object or person will be destroyed when hit.

The twice-born (Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaisyas) have the duty of discharging "Astras" every day to destroy asuras or the evil forces besieging mankind. Does not "Astra" mean that which is discharged, thrown or hurled? What is the "Astra" which is to be thrown or discharged [by the twice - born]? We throw water so as to drive away or destroy the demons or evil forces that have taken hold of the minds of people. This water, the astra, is the same as the libation offered during sandhyavandana. We must keep this purpose in mind when we offer arghya : "May sinfulness and falsehood be annihilated. May the sun of knowledge shine brightly. May those obstacles that keep the sun of knowledge dim in us to be demolished. "Whatever you do or do not do, you must perform this arghya thrice a day. Do it somehow "holding your breath"

When a person does a job earnestly and whole-heartedly, we say that he does it "holding his breath". As a matter of fact sandhyavandana is to be performed holding one's breath. If we do this all the evil forces will be destroyed. Nowadays all we do is to hold our nose with our fingers. The sastras do not say, "Nasikam ayamya", but say, "Pranam ayamya. "

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It means, instead of merely holding the nose, control the vital breath, the prana itself or the life force.

All work must be done with one-pointedness. There must be such one-pointedness of the mind to turn water into a weapon(astra). The breath is controlled for this purpose. You will ask: "How is it that if you control your breath the mind will be still? " We see that when the mind is still the breath also stops. When our wonder is aroused, when we are grief-stricken or when we are overjoyed, the mind becomes one-pointed. We exclaim "Ha" and the breath stops for a moment. But soon we breathe fast. We do not stop breathing with any effort on our part-the stopping is involuntary. The mind stops when it is enwrapped or absorbed in something. Then we heave a sigh-take a long breath-making up for the momentary stoppage of breathing. We learn from this that, when breathing momentarily stops, the mind becomes one-pointed. This is the reason why the breath is controlled when arghya, libation, is offered.

If we practice pranayama we will train ourselves to have mental concentration. This is important to yoga. Practicing pranayama for long is difficult and it must be done under the guidance of a guru. In sandhyavandana we do it only ten times. For some rites it is performed three times as a preliminary step. If we had practiced pranayama regularly from the time of our upanayana we should have become yogisvaras by now. What we do we must do properly. When we practice pranayama as a part of sandhyavandana we must stop our breath for 30 seconds or so, not more. When the vital breath stops, the mind will become still. If the arghya is offered in this state the evil forces will be truly be driven away. The water that we pour or throw when our mind is still will turn a weapon to destroy all evil.

After employing the arghya weapon against the evil forces, we must perform Gayathri-japa. Pranayama we must do according to our ability, holding the breath for a while, then realising it: this process may be repeated without controlling the breath for too long a time. All the steps in sandhyavandana- samkalpa, marjana, arghya-pradana, japa, stotra, abhivandana-have for their purpose the blessings of Isvara: this is stated in the samkalpa that we make at first. From beginning to end sandhyavandana is dedicated to Paramesvara and pranayama is an important part of it.

According to the sastras even the sick must do pranayama three times a day. This means that breath-control is not such as to cause trouble or discomfort. Indeed it could mean a cure for the illness and a prescription for long life.

Rsayo dirgha-sandhyatvad dirghamayuravapnuyuh

Prajnam yasasca kirtim ca brahmavarcasameva ca

- Manusmrti, 4. 94

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In abhivadana we mention the name of the sage from whom we are descended. It is our duty to observe Vedic rituals at least for the fact that we belong to the gotra of that sage. After him there have been so many rsis in the line. We use the terms "trayarseyam", "pancarseyam", "ekarseyam", meaning that, in the gotras concerned, there were three sages, five sages, one sage. . . They must have lived long and secured knowledge, fame, Brahmic lustre and spiritual eminence by performing sandhyavandana. This is what the Manusmrti stanza means.

By our neglect we should not sever the thread, the tradition, handed down to us uninterruptedly. We must perform sandhyavandana as an offering to Paramesvara and must do so understanding its meaning and with faith and devotion. There must be one-pointedness in it and no mantra must be left out.

We sin with our mind, speech and body. I told you that these sins must be washed away by performing rites with the same mind, speech and body. In sandhyavandana we mutter the mantras with our mouth and, even as we repeat the Gayatri, we meditate on it with our mind and in such rites as marjana (sprinkling of water) we acquire bodily purity. Sandhyavandana is karmayoga, bhaktiyoga and jnanayoga combined [it unites the three paths of karma, devotion and knowledge].

What about women?

I said that the twice-born must perform sandhyavandana with the well-being of women and other jatis in mind. I also explained why all samskaras are not prescribed for the fourth varna. Now we must consider the question of women, why they do not have such rituals and samskaras.

Even though we perform the punyaha-vacana and namakarana of newborn girls and celebrate their first birthday, we do not conduct their caula and upanayana nor the other samskaras or vows laid down for brahmacarins. Of course, they have the marriage samskara. But in other rites like sacrifices the main part is that of the husband, though she (the wife) has to be by his side. In aupasana alone does a woman have a part in making oblations in the sacred fire.

Why is it so?

The rites performed before a child is born are intended for the birth of a male child (niseka, pumsavana, simanta). Does it mean, as present-day reformers and women's libbers say, that Hindu women were downgraded and kept in darkness?

What reason did I mention for the fourth varna not having to perform many of the samskaras? That these were not necessary considering their vocations and the fact that they can work for the welfare of the world without the physical and mental benefits to be

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derived from the samskaras. If they also spend their time in Vedic learning and in sacrifices, what will happen to their duties? So most of the samskaras are not necessary for them. They reach the desire goal without these rites by carrying out their duties. "Svakarmana tam abhyarcya siddhim vindati manavah", so says the Gita. I have spoken to you about this earlier.

Just as society is divided according to occupations and the samskaras are correspondingly different, so too there are differences between men and women in domestic life. Running a household means different types of work, cooking, keeping the house clean, bringing up the children, etc. By nature women can do these chores better than men. If they also take an active part in rituals, what will happen to such work? Each by serving her husband and by looking after her household becomes inwardly pure.

In truth there is no disparity between men and women, nor are women discriminated against as present-day reformers allege. Work is divided for the proper maintenance not only of the home but the nation on the whole; and care has been taken not to have any duplication. There is no intention of lowering the status of any section in this division of labour.

The body, in the case of certain people, is meant to preserve the mantras and there are samskaras which have the purpose of making it worthy of the same. Why should the same rituals be prescribed for those who do not have such tasks to carry out? Glassware to be sent by railway parcel is specially taken care of since it is fragile. Even greater care is taken in dispatching kerosene or petrol. If the same precautions are not taken in transporting other goods, does it mean that they are poorly thought of? Astronauts are kept in isolation before being sent up in space and after their return. Mantras have their own radiation that is even more powerful than what is found in space. If you appreciate this fact, you will understand why Brahmins are separated from the rest and special samskaras prescribed for them.

The body of a Brahmin (male) is involved in the nurturing of mantras. So from the time of conception itself it is to be made pure through samskaras like pumsavana, simanta and so on. There are samskaras with the same objective also after the boy child is born.

The vocations have to be properly divided for the welfare of mankind. If everybody paid attention to this fact, instead of talking of rights, it would be realised that the sastras have not discriminated against women or any of the jatis.

The High status of our women

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Those who complain that women have no right to perform sacrifices on their own must remember that men too have no right to the same without a wife. If they know this truth they would not make the allegation that Hindu sastras look down upon women. A man can perform sacrifices only with his wife. He does them for the well-being of all mankind and for his own inner purity. It is for this purpose that, after the samavartana following the completion of his student-bachelorhood, he goes through the samskara called marriage.

Marriage or vivaha is known as "saha-dharma-carini-samprayoga". It means (roughly) union with a wife together with whom a man practises dharma. The clear implication is that carnal pleasure is not its chief purpose, but the pursuit of dharma. The sastras do not ask a man to pursue dharma all by himself but require him to take a helpmate for it. The wife is called "dharma-patni", "saha-dharma-carini", thus underlining her connection with dharma, and not with kama or sensual pleasure. Here is proof of the high esteem in which the sastras hold women.

The celibate-student and the ascetic alike follow the dharma of their respective asramas (stages of life) not in association with anyone else. The householder has to conduct the karma as well as the dharma of domestic life with his wife as a companion, such being the rule laid down in the sastras. The dharma of domestic life is their common property. Only a householder with a wife may perform sacrifices, not student-bachelors and ascetics. If the wife were meant only for sensual gratification, would the dharmasastras have insisted that a man cannot perform sacrifices after her death? Women's libbers, who note that a woman cannot perform a sacrifice on her own, must also recognise that fact that the husband loses the right for the same without the wife and this is according to the Vedas themselves. ("Patnivatasya agnihotram bhavati".) A great man lamented thus at the time of his wife's death: "You have taken away all my sacrifices as well as other rituals."

Our sastras have thus given a high place to women in the matter of duties and works.

(See also Part Eighteen)

For the practice of dharma

Dharma, artha, kama and moksa are the four purusarthas, the four aims of life. The first of them, dharma, is a lifelong objective. The pursuit of artha (material welfare) and kama (desire, love) must be given up at a certain stage in a man's life. But so long as such a pursuit lasts, it must be based on dharma. When a man renounces the world and becomes an ascetic, he transcends dharma, but he does not go contrary to it nor speak against it. Indeed, his life is governed by the dharma of sannyasa.

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I have already spoken about Purvamimamsa (karmakanda) and Uttaramimamsa (jnanakanda). The Purvamimamsa-sutra opens with "Athato dharmajignasa", meaning "starting the inquiry into Dharma". The "Uttaramimamsa-sutra" (or Bramhasutra), on the other hand, starts with "Athato Bramhajignasa", "meaning"starting the inquiry into the Brahman".

When you inquire into the Brahmin and meditate on it you are not conscious of the Dharma. Dharma is for the dualistic world of karma. Since the phenomenal world does not exist in non-dualistic jnana there is no consideration of dharma in it. But this does not mean that [non-dualistic jnana] is contrary or opposed to dharma; and all that is meant is that it goes beyond dharma. Bhagwan declares in the Gita: "Sarvadharmam parityajya mam ekam saranam vraja" (Forsaking all dharmas come to me alone for refuge). Are we to construe that the Lord asks us to go to him for refuge as perpetrators of adharma? The true meaning of the words of the Lord is this: "Give up all inquiry into dharma and adharma. Go beyond them and comprehend the Object that is the source of both". What is sought is an inward experience. The actions performed by the jnanins who have their inner realisation will naturally be in conformity with the dharma. The doings of the high-souled ascetics may not be consciously based on dharma, but, nevertheless, they would be nothing but dharmic.

All told, dharma is always a part of man's life. When he reaches a high spiritual state, he may not be conscious of it, but dharma will abide him and will keep shining as a light in all that he does.

The pursuit of the second of the four aims of life, artha, must be based on dharma. The same applies to the third aim, that of kama. Kalidasa expresses the same thought in his Raghuvamsam when he speaks in praise of Dilipa: "Abhyarthakamau tasyastam dharma eva manisinah" (With Dilipa, the wise, even artha and kama were of the nature of dharma). The householder's stage of life commences with marriage. In it both material well-being and desire have their source in dharma. The student-bachelor and the ascetic are not concerned with the acquisition of wealth or carnal pleasure. The householder's stage of life, or, grhasthasrama, is a bridge between the two and in it both are permitted [within the bounds of dharma]

A man needs money and material goods to live in this world. As for kama or carnal desire, it is needed so that children may be born according to their past karma. Until we have lived out our karma we too will have to be in this world. In this way if we want to give a "chance" to others, we have to earn money and experience kama so that they [these others] may be born again. We need householders to feed sannyasins who have given up karma. It would not be practical for all people in this world to become ascetics. The sastras extol householders as the backbone of the society since they live, or are expected to live, according to the dictates of the dharma and fulfil the requirements of student-bachelors and ascetics.

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After completing one's student-bachelorhood and acquiring learning and good qualities, one must marry so as to perform religious rites and live a life guided by dharma. Marriage is included among the forty samskaras, which fact shows that it is a sacred rite that sanctifies life. Just as upanayana is preliminary(purvanga)to the student-bachelor's stage of life, marriage is preliminary to that of the householder. Its purpose is disciplining the senses and the basis for the performance of various duties.

The householder's life is not to be taken to mean merely the enjoyment of sensual pleasure along with the carrying out of duties that mean good to the world. The fact is that the sastras have formulated this stage of life in such a way as to make kama itself instinct with dharma. "Dharma" means essentially bringing everything within certain limits, under a certain discipline and decorum. Kama must be inspired by dharma, that is one must bridle one's passions in one's conjugal life, so that, step by step, the carnal urge will lose its keenness and eventually one will gain mellowness to graduate to sannyasa. That stage, though, comes later. But at first, even now, in the householder's stage of life, the passions have to be curbed, little by little, but not forcibly. In the gurukula the celibate-student is brought under strict discipline. That saves him from being swept away by animal passion.

Though we talk of animal passion, we must note that animals mate only during a particular season. They have the sexual urge only when the female of the species is ready for pregnancy. Man is baser in such matters. Brahmacharya helps to control the carnal urge as it first shows up. Then, in the householder's life, since kama is made subservient to dharma, the passions are kept under check.

What is the sastric method to control the carnal urge? From the day of a women's period there should be no intercourse for four days. Then it is permitted for twelve days. Again there should be no intercourse until the women has her next period. Even during the twelve days mentioned above the couple should not meet during the new moon, on days conjoined by certain asterisms, etc., If such rules are followed the couple will remain healthy mentally as well as physically.

Upanayana for girls

If brahmacharya prepares boys [or young men] to live according to dharma, what about girls? A girl has neither Upanayana nor Brahmacharyasrama. Should not a woman's mind also be disciplined like a man's. If you echo the criticism of reformers and say that injustice has been done to woman by denying them the Brahmacharyasrama and Upanayana, my answer is "No".

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Men marry after their Upanayana and student-bachelorhood. Now for women marriage itself is Upanayana. Just as a boy dedicates himself to his guru, a girl must dedicate herself to her husband from her childhood until the start of their conjugal life and beyond. The Manusmriti says: "Strinam upanayanam-sthane vivaham Manurabravit" (Manu says that for women marriage is in place of upanayana). If you ask for an external sign of this like sacred thread worn by the men, we may at once point to the married woman's mangalasutra.

I said that "Upanayana" means "taking near", taking a boy near his guru for his brahmacharyasrama. A woman's guru is her husband. Being joined to him in wedlock is her upanayana.

According to the sastras, a boy's upanayana must be performed when he is seven years old. A girl must be married at the same age. If a boy is to be initiated into brahmacharya before his mind is disturbed by kama, a girl is to be married before she feels the carnal urge. She must also accept her husband as her guru. According to sastras, the guru must be looked upon as Isvara. In the same way a child bride must think of her husband as both guru and Isvara and dedicate herself whole-heartedly to him. She will be able adopt such an attitude only when she is married very young. Later she might start to reason about things, ask questions and develop egoistic feelings.

Laying oneself at the feet of the guru or Isvara -- in short surrender --- is the best means of liberating oneself. This concept of surrender is proclaimed in the carma sloka of the gita, surrender to Isvara, guru or husband: once you surrender to an individual or deity you no longer own any thing. Isvara will give you his grace through the one to whom you surrender.

According to the system devised by sages, a boy is made to surrender to his guru at the time of his upanayana ceremony, while a girl does the same to her husband at the time of her marriage.

It is not that the girl is considered inferior and asked to surrender to a man, that is her husband. The boy too is asked to surrender as a child to the guru. It is the view of the sastras that the age at which the girl is married and surrenders to her husband must be the same as that at which the boy surrenders to the guru.

Talking of the husband and the wife, the question whether the one is superior to the other or inferior is of no consequence. Equally unimportant is the question of rights and status. If this is realised surrender will be seen to be of the utmost importance. We must appreciate the fact that it is in keeping with this view that the concept of upanayana has taken shape in the case of boy's and marriage in the case of girls.

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The age of marriage and the law

We saw that it would be best to perform a boy's upanayana when he is seven years old. A girl must be married about the same age so that she too will develop the attitude of surrender. But you will ask : " Is it possible these days? Will it not be against the law? "

It would not be right on my part to ask you to disobey the law. Those who rule us today themselves resorted to civil disobedience once. They justified their action thus: "Some people have enacted what are called laws. But we won't let them come in the way of our freedom." Why do I ask you not to defy the law that stipulates the minimum age for the bride? Not because people are not spirited enough to rise in protest against it, not because they are not ready to go to gaol or even die instead of accepting a law that has brought down the marriage samskara with its high ideal of Atmic well-being to the mundane level. I ask you not to disobey the law because the attitude of defiance, if extended to other matter, will jeopardise discipline and order in society itself. We must, however, keep impressing upon the government the sastric view with regard to the age at which a girl ought to be married.

But it is not the government alone that has gone against the sastras. More than 90 per cent of our people do not respect the sastric view. The few conversant with the scriptures must keep enlightening the rest about this view. Without going against the law they must resolve themselves to do their best, in a peaceful manner, to restore a worthy custom, no matter whether it takes a hundred years or even more to yield results. Why, even if we do not live to see the results, even if it takes a thousand years, we must sow the seeds now. Nothing will be achieved without effort. The tree does not grow if the seed is not sown.

We must, in a persuasive manner, keep impressing upon the government and the public that the Dharmasastra itself is a great legal code.

Controversy about the age of marriage

At the turn of the century, extremely influential people, among Hindus themselves, demanded the abolition of child marriage and advocated that girls ought to be married only after they attain puberty. They held meetings and passed resolutions against child marriages. Not that they were wanting in faith in the Vedas, most of them; indeed they claimed that their view had support in the scriptures themselves. Among them were distinguished men like M. Rangacaryar, Sivaswami Ayyar, Sundaramayyar and Krsnasvami Ayyar. Then there was the Rt Hon'ble Srinivasa Sastri who was particularly vehement in his criticism of the system of child marriage.

Vaisnavas and Smartas learned in the sastras held meeting at Kancipuram and Tiruvaiyuru respectively and put forward the view that, according to the Vedas, girls in

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the past were married after they had attained puberty. They found an explanation for the origin of the custom of child marriages. Their view was this : After the advent of Islam in India, Hindu girls were abducted and dishonoured in large numbers. Girls already married were spared, they claimed. That is how the now custom of child marriage came into practise. The reformers now argued that we must go back to what they thought was the original Vedic practice and put an end to the uncivilized custom of pre-puberty marriages.

They cited their own evidence from the sastras in support of their view. One piece of evidence they presented was drawn from the Vedas themselves, that is the mantras chanted during the marriage rite. The other was from the Manusmriti which is respected by all as the foremost among the dharmasastras.

What do the marriage mantras say? Before answering the question I must tell you another matter. Each part of our body has a deity associated with it. ("adhidevata" or tutelary deity). The sun god with the eye, Indra with the hand and so on - thus there are divine forces inwardly associated with us. Apart from this, during different stages of our life various deities hold sway over us. Thus, a girl is under the sway of Soma (the moon god) from birth until the time she is old enough to wear clothes herself. (The dhoti or vesti that men wear is called "soman".) Then, until the girl has her menarche, she is under a gandharva. Thereafter, for three years, she is under Agni. When she is under the moon god as a little child she is cool like moonlight. Gandharvas are playful and beautiful, so when a girl is under the gandharva she is particularly attractive. Under Agni she has the fire that kindle kama. This is a worldly interpretation of how certain deities have hold over a girl. But let that be.

What is the meaning of the Vedic mantras quoted by the reformers in support of their view? The mantras are chanted by the groom addressing the bride: "At first Soma had hold on you; then the gandharva became your guardian; thirdly Agni became your master. I, as a human being, have come as the fourth to hold sway over you. Soma passed you on to the gandharva and the gandharva to Agni. Agni has now given you over to me."

Are we not to construe from the Vedic mantras, which are chanted at the marriage ceremony, that at the time of the wedding the girl has already had her menarche, three years after being under the guardianship of Agni? The reformers maintain that their argument against child marriage is not contrary to the sastras. The marriage custom, according to them, changed after the Muslim invasion and they want the original practice restored. No sanatani, they argue, can cite any authority better than the Vedas.

The reformers also quote a stanza from the Manusmriti in support of their argument :

Trini varsanyudikseta kumari rtumati sati

Urdhavam tu kaladetasmadvindeta sadrsam patim

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The sloka means: "A girl who has come of age must wait for three years for a groom to come seeking her hand. If no such groom turns up, she may herself go looking for a groom." Here too it is post-puberty marriage that is indicated. Not only that. Manu's code of conduct, it is argued, is "modern" in that it permits a girl to look for a husband herself without any need for her elders to do so. After Manu, the reformers contend, the orthodox Vedic scholars changed everything and made the marriage custom barbarous.

"In the light of these Vedic mantras and the dharmasastra quoted, are not the reformers right? What is your answer, Svamiji?" I will give my answer.

Eight forms of marriage

The dharmasastras, including the Manusmrti, mention eight forms of marriage.

Brahmo-daivastathaivarsah

prajapatya-statha 'surah

Gandharvo raksasascaiva

Paisavastamah smrtah

----Manusmrti, 3. 21

The eight types are: brahma, daiva, arsa, prajapatya, asura, gandharva, raksasa and paisaca.

After the student bachelor has completed his gurukulavasa, his parents approach the parents of a girl belonging to a good family and ask them to give away their daughter in marriage to their son--to make a gift of their daughter (kanyadana) to him. A marriage arranged like this is brahma. In it this girl's family does not give any dowry or jewellery to the boy's family. There is no "commercial transaction" and the goal of a brahma marriage is the dharmic advancement of two families. Of the eight forms of marriage the dharmasastras regard this as the highest.

Marrying a girl to a rtvik (priest) during a sacrifice is called "daiva". The parents, in this type, after waiting in vain for a young man to turn up and ask for their daughter's hand, go looking for a groom for her in a place where a sacrifice is being conducted. This type of marriage is considered inferior to brahma. In the sastras womanhood is elevated in that it is the groom's family that has to seeking bride for their son.

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The third form, "arsa" suggests that it is concerned with the rsis, sages. It seems the marriage of Sukanya to Cyavana Maharsi was of this type. But from the dharmasastras we learn that in arsa the bride is given in exchange for two cows received from the groom. If the term is taken to mean "giving away a girl in marriage to a rsi", we must take it that the girl is married off to an old sage because the parents could not celebrate her marriage according to the brahma rite at the right time. The fact that cows are taken in exchange for the bride shows that the groom does not possess any remarkable qualities. According to the sastras, in marriages of noble kind there is no place for money or anything smacking of a business transaction.

In prajapatya there is no trading and kanyadana is a part of it as in the brahma ceremony. But from the name prajapatya it must be inferred that the bride's menarche is imminent and that a child must be begotten soon after the marriage. For this reason the bride's father goes in search of a groom, unlike in the brahma type. The brahma type is a better type of marriage than prajapatya since, in it, the groom's people go seeking a bride who is to be the Grahalaksmi of their household.

In the asura type the groom is in no way a match for the girl, but her father or her relatives receive a good deal of money from the man who forces them to marry her to him. In arsa in which cows are given in exchange for the bride there is no compulsion. Nor is the groom wealthy or powerful like his counterpart in the asura type. Many rich men must have taken a second wife according to the asura type of marriage.

The next is gandharva. The very mention of it calls to mind Sakuntala and Dusyanta. The gandharva type is the "love marriage" that has such enthusiastic support these days.

In the raksasa form the groom battles with the girl's family, overcomes them and carries her away. It was in this manner that krsna Paramatman married Rukmini.

The eighth and last is paisaca. In asura even though the girl's willingness to marry the man is of no consequence, at least her people are given money. In raksasa, though violence is done to the girl's family, the marriage itself is not against her wish. Rukmini loved Krsna, did she not? In paisaca the girl's wish does not count, nor is any money or material given to her parents. She is seized against her wish and her family antagonised.

We have the brahma type at one end and the paisaca at the other. There cannot be the same system or the same arrangement for everybody. Our sastras have taken into account the differences in temperament and attitude among various sections of people and it is in keeping with the same that they have assigned them different rites, vocations, etc. All our present trouble arises from the failure on the part of men, who advocate the same system for all, to recognise this fact.

There are tribals living in the forests who look fierce and have a harsh way of life. But at heart they may be more cultured than townspeople, not to speak of the fact that they are useful to society in many ways. They have frequent family feuds. In consideration of this

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raksasa and paisava marriages may have to be permitted in their case. After the marriage, they are likely to forget their quarrels and live in peace with each other. Ksatriyas who are physically strong and are used to material pleasure are allowed the gandharva form of marriage and their girls have even the right to choose their husbands as in the svayamvara ceremony.

It is for these reasons that the dharmasastras, which are based on the Vedas and which constitute Hindu law, permit eight forms of marriage. In all these eight, the bride and groom have the right to be united in wedlock with the chanting of mantras. But brahma is the highest of the eight forms. In it the bride must not have attained puberty. "Pradanam prak roth": -- this statement is in the dharmasastras themselves. A girl's marriage, which has same significance for her that the upanayana has for a boy, must be performed when she is seven years old (or eight years from conception)

Unfortunately, in the case of some girls, a groom does not turn up in time for a brahma marriage to be performed. Meanwhile, they grow old and their marriage is conducted in the arsa, daiva, or prajapatya way. Only these types are permitted for Brahmins. But for the rest other types are also allowed. They may marry a girl who has come of age either in the gandharva way or in a svayamvara.

The marriage mantras are intended for all the eight forms. It means that they are employed even in the marriage rite of girls who have attained puberty. The two mantras quoted above are recited in all the eight types of marriage. They are addressed by the groom to the bride who comes to him after she has attained puberty and after she has been under the guardianship successively of Soma, gandharva and Agni. The mantras are chanted not only in brahma marriages but also in all other forms. The same are addressed by the groom to his child bride also. Though his marriage is being solemnised to the child bride now, he will start living with her only after she comes of age, after she becomes a young woman. He will bring her home to live with him only after she has come successively under Soma, gandharva and Agni. So he chants the mantras in advance.

Nowadays we sometimes perform a number of samskaras together long after they are due according to the sastras. For example, we perform the jatakarma if a son as well as his namakarana and caula during his upanayana when he is 20 or 22 years old and not long before his marriage. Similarly, instead of such postponement of the rites, in the brahma marriage the mantras mentioned above are chanted in advance.

I will give you an example in this context. When the brahmacarin performs the samidadhana he prays before Agni to grant him good children. How absurd would it be for our reformers to argue, on the basis of this prayer, that a young boy must have children when he is yet a celibate-student and that he may become a householder only later. The point to note is that the boy prays on advance for good children. The Vedic mantras cited by reformers must be seen in the same light.

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The mantras [quoted by reformers] are appropriate for the marriage of a girl who has come of age also.

This is our reply to the school of opinion represented by the Rt Hon'ble Srinivasa Sastri. If the mantras in question are chanted at the time of the marriage of girls who have come of age, it does not mean that all marriages are to be celebrated after the girls have attained puberty. According to the brahma form of marriage, the girl must not have had her menarche. There is incontrovertible proof for this in the Vedic mantra chanted at the end of the marriage rite. .

I told that a girl is under the sway of a gandharva between the time she is able to wear her clothes without anybody's help and her menarche. His name is Visvasu. The mantra I referred to is chanted by the groom addressing this demigod. "o Visvasu, " it says, " I bow to you. Leave this girl and go. Go to another girl child. Have I not become the husband of this girl? So give her over to me and go to another girl who is not married and lives with her father. " During the wedding the groom performs a puja to this gandharva and prays to him to free the girl from his control. Here is proof that the bride is not under Agni and has not had her menarche

The question now is about the verse (from the Manusmrti) cited by the reformists. According to it, a girl may wait three years after her menarche and then seek her husband on her own.

There is an answer to this. The general rule according to the dharmasastras is that a girl must be married before she attains puberty: "Pradanam prak rtoh. " What happens if this injunction is not followed? If groom does not come on his own, seeking the girl's hand, her father or brother must look for a groom and marry her off. But if they turn out to be irresponsible or otherwise fail to find a groom? Or if the girl has no guardian, no one to care for her? The lines quoted by the reformers from the Manusmrti apply to such a girl. She may look for a husband on her if none of her relatives, neighbours or well-wishers take the trouble of finding her a groom even after she has attained puberty.

Though the reformists quote from the Vedas and sastras in support of their view, they fail to take into account the context in which the relevant passages occur. They see them in isolation. That is why they keep arguing that the customs followed by people steeped in our traditions are contrary to the sastras.

In the Chandogya Upanisad there is mention of a sage called Cakrayana Usasti whose wife had not come of age. The reformists do not examine such references in our ancient texts with a cool head but are carried away by their emotions.

In the past the common people did not know how to counter the arguments of the reformists. Even so they did not accept their views thinking it best to follow the practices of their elders, of great men. That is why the bill brought twice by the Rt Hon'ble Srinivasa sastri before the legislative council to amend the marriage act (with reference to

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the age of marriage) did not receive enough support. Later (Harbilas) Sarda introduced the bill which [on its passage] came to be called the Sarda Act. Many people (in the South) think Sarda was a woman and call the law named after him the "Sarda Act". The Central legislative assembly was equally divided on the bill -- 50 percent for and 50 percent against. Then the British asked one of the nominated members to vote in favour of the bill; and thus the minimum age of marriage for girls was raised by a legal enactment. The bill was passed not on the strength of public opinion but because of the government's intervention. The mind of our British rulers worked thus: "The Congress has been demanding svaraj but we have refused to grant it. Let us give it some satisfaction by being of help in inflicting an injury on the (Hindu) religion. "

Now things have changed. There is no respect any longer for old customs and traditions. When the Sarda Act came into force in British India, some Sanskrit scholars returned the "Mahamahopadhyaya" title conferred on them by the government. Among them were Pancanana Tarkaratna Bhattacharya of Bengal and Laksmana Sastri Dravid. The latter was settled in Kasi and had the "Dravid" tagged on to his name to make it known that he belonged to the land of the Tamils. How many people today are inspired to rise in protest against the changes introduced by our government in our sastric observances.

Our children must be taught the substance and meaning of the sastras in a comprehensive manner. To speak to them about one aspect here and another there will lead to a haphazard and confused view. The half-baked research carried on in the Vedas has given rise to the opinion that the scriptures favour love marriage. The canonical texts must be seen in their entirety. When a subject is examined, its underlying meaning and purpose must be grasped. Also they must be seen in the light of other relevant passages occurring elsewhere. A conclusion must be arrived at only after a thorough inquiry into all points.

The brahma marriage is for all castes. Other forms of marriage are also permitted for non-Brahmins, also post-puberty marriage. If the idea is to give importance to carnal pleasure these other forms may be permitted. But brahma is the best if the purpose of the marriage samskara is the advancement of the Self.

Why child marriage

The samskara called marriage has a manifold purpose. One of its important ideals is to make women inwardly pure through their attachment to their husbands. With such attachment and devotion alone will they made their way to the Ultimate. The disciple cleanses his mind by surrendering to his guru. The wife must surrender to her husband for the same purpose.

Our karma and the cycle of births and deaths we are subject to stem from the unceasing activity of our mind. We sin by pandering to the desires of the mind and are born again and again. When the mind becomes still there will be neither karma nor janma (birth)--

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this state is liberation. Stilling the mind is extremely difficult. It may be possible to attain the eight great siddhis; but it is impossible to still the mind and be oneself, so says the Tamil saint-poet Tayumanavar.

If we cannot control or still our mind on our own, the next best thing is to dedicate it to another person, not allowing it to sway according to our likes and dislikes. We shall not then be subject to the consequences of doing things on our own which means we shall not be subject either to sin or rebirth. If we lay our mind at the feet of another person we will absolve ourselves of the responsibility of being a "karta" or doer. So we will not suffer the consequences that we will otherwise have to suffer for our actions like papa, punya or another birth. We are taught to dedicate ourselves to Isvara in an attitude of surrender, implying that we do not do anything on our own. But only one in a million is disposed in this way. However, there are a large number of examples in the history of our religion of women who have shown that a wife can be liberated by looking upon her husband as Isvara. The husband is the Lord in flesh and blood; even if he be a stone the husband is a husband. Total loyalty to him and the desire to die a "sumangali" are the ideals that have inspired the dharma of our womanhood from time immemorial.

It is true that all countries have produced great women. All religions too have given birth to men and women of exemplary character. But it cannot be claimed that the qualities mentioned above are as much a characteristic of life in other countries as it is in our own, in our religion and in our culture. To think of changing all this in the name of civilization or modernity would be to cut at the very roots of our great cultural and religious heritage.

A girl must become attached to her husband [that is she must be married] before her mind is distributed by thoughts of love and desire and before she begins to take an interest in her body. The innocent child that she is now, she will have the humility to regard her husband in an attitude of surrender in the thoughts that he alone is her guru and that he alone is her Isvara

Women in Andhra Prades and Maharastra even today observe many vratas. Unmarried girls in these parts of the country worship Siva, looking upon him as their husband. When they get married they worship the husband as Siva. First a girl, before her marriage, worships Siva as her husband; later whoever comes into her life as her husband she looks upon as Siva.

In childhood a girl does not ask questions. It is now that she will, out of her simple faith, look upon her husband as Paramesvara. This faith, formed in her innocence, will take firm root in her mind when she becomes older and begins to understand things. It is all the influence of our ages-old dharma of womanhood. A woman's devotion to her husband will now be enduring and she will always look upon him as Paramesvara. When a wife dedicates herself to her husband and does not nurse any feelings of honour or dishonour so far as she herself is concerned, her ego will become extinct. And that means cessation from wordly existence; in other words, liberation. Devotion, jnana, austerities, worship,

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sacrifices, yoga -- all these have for their goal the eradication of the ego. This a woman obtains naturally and with ease through devotion to her husband.

There are such examples of womanhood in our land, women who were totally dedicated to the husband. In the ethos of our nation they are exalted even above the gods. Among them are Nalayani, Anasuya, Sitadevi who was Mahalaksmi herself, Daksa's daughter Sati who was indeed Parasakti (the Supreme Goddess), Savitri, Kannagi, Vasuki (wife of Tiruvalluvar). To think of them is to feel ecstatic with a sense of pride. We bow to them in respect at the very mention of their names. Why it is so we cannot say.

We often hear critics of our traditions exclaim thus: "The husband is God to the wife? It's just babble. It's all superstition. It's suppression of woman. An outrage. " Whatever the criticism be, this is the custom of our land. In this land called Bharata we have the Himalaya and the Ganga. If you ask why they should be there, is there any answer? It is the same with the woman who were queens of chastity. Do Europeans think of the Alps as we think of Kailasa? Do we think of the Ganga in the same way as the Americans think of Mississippi? Don't we experience in our hearts the divinity of our mountains and our rivers? For people in other countries marriage is only a family arrangement. Our sastras have inspired our conjugal life with the ideal of surrender to the husband as the supreme means for the wife to obtain purity of the Self. If the system of child marriage is opposed and changed on the pretext of bringing about the social advancement of women, it will only serve the purpose of causing injury to their Atmic advancement. It would mean creating a small convenience for our women at the expense of the very great spiritual reward that is theirs as the inheritors of our traditions.

To say that child marriage is harmful to a woman's body is empty talk. Tough the girl is married as a child she will be ready for conjugal life only after she becomes physically mature. Besides on many days like the full moon and the new moon the couple will have to practice continence. Now such restrictions are not observed. Physical weakness has become more common among people and neurologists prosper at their expense.

That the system of early marriage led to the existence of child widows is said to be a blot on the Hindu religion. But the number of children who become widows is exaggerated, and the implication is that their husbands must have died when they were in the age-group of 15-25. From what I have heard there are few deaths in this age-group. So the number of child widows cannot be many. I would not deny their existence altogether. It is painful to see even one child becoming a widow. But considering the great benefits that child marriage brings we must make an allowance for misfortunes like young girls being widowed.

Even now, if she is so fated, where is the assurance that a girl married at the age of 20 or more will not become a widow when she is still young? We hear reports of couples who have been married only for two or three months being killed in rail or plane accidents. Such tragedies do create anguish. If the reason for banning child marriage is the

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phenomenon of child widows, what is the guarantee that girls married when they are older in years will not become widows?

If, according to the custom of our land, women are to look upon the husband as the Lord in order to be released from worldly existence, the only way to accomplish it is by following the sastras. "Our women receive high education, manage jobs, marry as they like. All this means progress" we often hear such talk. But that they are exposed to the gaze of all and sundry, become mentally and emotionally disturbed and are trapped in awkward situations is a matter of constant worry to me, even fear.

Reformists rise in protest against child marriages and cry angrily: "women are suppressed and are subjected to cruelties like marriage. They are denied their social rights." But I feel angrier when I think of the fact that conditions created in the name of social reform have put the great family treasure of women in jeopardy. I mean their prized possession of chastity. In fact I feel like shedding tears. Like Arjuna I too feel like crying that "when women are spoiled the family, the clan, declines. No, the whole world will go to rot. And all will go to hell (Strisu dustasu Varsneya jayate varnasamkarah, Samkaro narakay'aiva)"

That women agree to be exposed like this, that their parents look on this with approval, burns me with anguish.

Leave aside all talk of progress or advancement. My constant worry is that our girls must not be exposed to risks to their character. People try to console me with the assurance that nothing happens to our women because they go to school or college or because they work in offices. I too have not lost faith in our women. But I see that they go about as they please and that they have many opportunities to go astray. Cinema, fiction, newspapers -- all these diversions are such as are calculated to cause them injury. All such things fill me with fear.

Now and then I do hear reports of unpleasant happenings involving women. How can we right a wrong, what can we do after all the damage has been done? Can we allow even a single incident to happen in this land of ours that brings a taint to its womanhood? It makes my blood boil to think of what is happening to women in society. I seem to suffer all the worry and all the fear that parents ought to suffer about their daughters. I do not believe that all woman will go astray or will be corrupted. Reformists say that the presence of even one child widow is a blot on our society. I am afraid that even if one woman goes astray or is corrupted it should be a blot on our society that is a thousand times worse.

Vedam odiya Vedyarkkoru mazhai

Niti mannar neriyinukkor mazhai

Madar karpudai mangayarkkor mazhai

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Madam munru mazhaiyeppeyume

To ensure that the king or the government will rule justify ("Niti mannanneri") is not in my jurisdiction. But it is my responsibility to see that the Brahman chants the Vedas ("Bedam odiya Vedyarkkoru."). It is also my duty to see that women are not afforded the "chance" to stray from the path of virtue and chastity and that before a girl feels the urge of kama she will learn to look upon her husband as Isvara. Yes, it is my responsibility to see that women do not deviate a bit from pativrata. I feel that I must do all I can for this and I keep drawing up plans for the same. The goal is far off and it is receding faster than the speed with which I try to reach it. But I will not give up the race. Nor will I nod in approval of what is happening in the name of modernity. I have not been installed on this Pitha to watch helplessly the world go by and cry in despair: "What is lost is lost. It is impossible to stem the tide of Kali and change things. "

From the remote past the Vedic tradition has flourished in this land, so too stridharma. These have been nourished by this Matha for some two thousand years. I have the title of "Jagadguru" and bear the name of Sankara Bhagavadpada. I cannot therefore keep my mouth shut as this heritage of ours is being destroyed. There will be no greater offence than it. As Bhagavan says in the Gita I must do my work in the belief that victory or failure is in his hands. I will not retrace my steps and shall keep exerting myself to achieve the goal. The result will depend on my sincerity, on my inner purity and on the intensity of my austerities. If no appreciable results are seen so far, it means that I am lacking in sincerity of purpose, mental purity and austereness. I feel so however much I am applauded by the world.

Had we lost all, I would not have spoken on this subject. If all is lost where is the need to put in any effort? The Matha itself may be disbanded. But all is not lost. A spark still remains. Proof of it is the presence of so many of you here wanting to listen to me. It does not matter whether or not you will do what I ask you to do. The fact is you keep listening to me patiently. That is why I tell you that there is a spark still left. I am trying to find out whether it could be fanned into a bright flame. If I too go the way that people go -- that is the way -- I should be disloyal to Sankara Bhagavatpada.

It does good -- does it not? -- to speak my mind and unburden myself of my feelings. You will remain devoted to me and I shall keep giving you my blessings: this relationship between us will continue. But if I fail to bring you to the path for which the Matha exists and yet accept money from you, it means that I am guilty of extortion. That is why I gave candid expression to my feelings.

With the grace of the Supreme Goddess we have had some success in implementing the plans drawn up for the preservation of our Vedic heritage. True we far from having achieved the goal of ensuring that the scriptures are chanted in every home. But the fear that we once had felt that Vedic learning might become extinct by the next generation or so no longer exists. Today all over the country many students are learning not only to chant the Vedas but also to understand their meaning.

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The Child Marriage Act has my hands tied. According to the Dharmasastra, a girl must be entrusted in the hands of a man, that is her husband, before she starts feeling the urge of kama. She will then become steeped in the belief that he is her Lord. And when she begins to feel the natural urges she will dedicate her body to him. This is the law of the Dharmasastra. But the law of state is contrary to the law of the Dharmasastra. Even so I will not ask you to disobey it. However, we must keep speaking untiringly of the law of the Dharmasastra and wait and see whether the government changes its mind.

Our duty now

Let the authorities take their own time to change their mind. What is our immediate duty? If the limit fixed by the law for a girl's marriage is 14, 16, 18 or whatever, let us celebrate it immediately on her attaining this age. We must prepare for the day in advance, deciding in the groom and making all other arrangements for the wedding. It would be reprehensible on our part to prolong the period of waiting after a girl begins to feel the biological urge and the consequent emotional disturbance. It is one thing if the marriage gets postponed owing to circumstances beyond our control, but quite another if we do not exert ourselves sufficiently to conduct it in time.

Make marriage simple

Girls today are sometimes married at the age of 25 or 30, far beyond the limit fixed by the law. The inability to raise the money required for the wedding is one reason for this. All the ostentation at weddings, dowry and other gifts given to the groom's people have no sanction in the sastras. To demand a suit for the groom or a pair of boots, an expensive wrist-watch or other luxury articles is nothing but extortion. It is as good as milking the bride's party dry. This kind of plunder is not approved by the sastras. So too the procession called "janavasam", with all its glitter, taken out on the eve of the wedding as though it were an essential part of the ceremonies.

In the past, when the bride and groom were very young, the wedding included functions to keep the couple in good cheer since they would perhaps have felt uncomfortable before the smoke of the sacred fire. There were elements of play like nalangu and also the procession.

"Kanyam Kanaka-sampannam" (the bride adorned with gold): these words occur in the sastras relating to the marriage rites. Gold symbolizes the grace of Lakshmi but a mangalasutra with a grain of gold as part of it is enough. There is no need for other types of expensive jewellery, diamond studs, and so on. No silks are required. A cotton sari

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will serve the purpose of the kurapudavai. Above all the custom of dowry must be scrapped. There is also no justification on holding a lavish wedding dinner for the whole neighbourhood. Nor is a music or dance recital needed. A big pandal too is not necessary.

Duty of Motherhood

Our women must give up their fondness for diamonds and silks. This will be great help to our family and social life. Indeed womanhood itself will stand to gain and stridharma will flourish. Woman should think of the millions of silkworms killed to make the sari with which they drape themselves. They claim that they are vegetarians. So should they not feel remorse about being indirectly responsible for the destruction of countless silkworms because of their love of silk saris. If women of well-to-do families realise this and stop wearing silk, they will no longer set a bad example to their less fortunate sisters. It is because if the example of the wealthy that the poor too hanker after silks and diamonds. Then the groom's people bring pressure on the bride's parents for silks and diamond studs. This is one reason for the marriage of girls being delayed.

It is a crime to have turned the marriage samskara into an economic problem. After all, we too have daughters. That being so, merely because we belong to the groom's family, we cannot take an arrogant attitude and dictate terms to the bride's family, demanding this and that. We should not lay down conditions like Shylock and tell the girl's parents: "Give us a big dowry, bring us expensive vessels, bring us diamonds and silks". Such behaviour is unpardonable: it is one reason why girls remain unmarried, pining away at home. If you happen to be the groom's parents you must satisfy yourself about the girl's character, family, etc. "This girl will be the Lakshmi of our home and she will brighten it": with such thoughts you must accept the bride, without laying down any conditions for the marriage and without insisting that you must receive gifts in the form of money, jewellery and so on.

In this matter women have a special responsibility. They must naturally have respect and sympathy for fellow women. When they celebrate their son's marriage they must conduct themselves in the manner I suggested earlier. The presents given by other parents to their sons-in-law must not be an example for them to make similar demands. On the contrary, they must set an example to the parents of other prospective grooms, telling themselves: "Why should we be guilty of the sort of wrongs that others have committed? We will try to bring about a change and set an example for others to follow". This is how our motherhood must be motivated.

"We gave a dowry to the groom's people when our daughter was married". Or: "My father gave a dowry to my in-laws when I was married, so there is nothing wrong if I accept the same now". You must be warned against taking such an attitude. This evil

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custom of dowry that undermines our very dharma must be done away with. Someone must take the first step [take the lead] in a spirit of sacrifice. People make sacrifices in this or that cause. If their village is included in a neighbouring district a hundred or a hundred thousand people rise on protest and court arrest. Some of the agitators set fire to themselves. Shouldn't we make a little sacrifice in the cause of preserving the great ideals of our womanhood?

Women come to see me and seek my blessings, saying: "We recite the Saundaryalahari, the Abirami Antadi". What they do is commendable. But they would deserve the compassion of Amba better if they sincerely followed my advice in the matter of marriage. They must not dictate terms regarding dowry, jewellery, gifts, and so on, and must agree to the marriage alliance with their whole heart. There are girls like them, or rather women, who are getting on in years but still remain unmarried. They are emotionally disturbed and nurse a hurt to their sense of honour because of their sad predicament, but may be later they will become so hardened as to have no feelings whatsoever. You must try to change the system that is responsible for the fate of such women. If your hearts melt in sympathy for them Amba will also look upon you with a kind eye.

You cannot justify the acceptance of a dowry and other gifts on the pretext that they are given by the girl's parents on their own. This can lead to others also doing the same and cause a bad chain reaction. If the girl's parents give a dowry on their own, they will expect the same from the parents of their son's bride. You must refuse a dowry even when it is given voluntarily. If the girl's people are wealthy you may tell them: "Don't give us any money. If you wish you may give it your daughter in the form of stridhana. "

The groom's parents spend on clothes, travel, etc, and expect the expenses to be "reimbursed" by the girl's parents. This is not at all justified. They must tell themselves: "Our son is getting married. Why shouldn't we ourselves spend for it? It is shameful to take money from someone else to buy our own requirements. Will it not mean that we can't afford them ourselves?" Unfortunately, people think that they have certain rights and privileges as the groom's parents and fleece the bride's people by intimidating or browbeating them. Whether the dowry is given voluntarily or out of compulsion, it is money stolen. It is all a vicious circle that causes injury to society itself. We must somehow see to it that this evil system of dowry is scrapped.

Duty of the bridegroom

Young men who are contemplating marriage can also help in the matter. Ordinarily, no son should go against the wishes of his parents. It would not be proper for me to ask young men to defy their parents. In any case, nowadays they do not obey their parents as they used to in the past. So I should not [normally] encourage children to go against the wishes of their parents. I am not unaware of all this. However, I find that immense

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damage is being done to our ancient stridharma by the money factor brought into the conduct of marriages.

In this context, I must ask young men to lend me their support. They must clearly tell their parents that they will agree to marry and settle down only on condition that the usual dowry and other gifts are not taken from the bride's parents. I feel I should even ask them to offer satyagraha, against the system of dowry. But if they are to be true to the spirit of satyagraha, they must not marry on their own on the plea that their parents did not listen to them. Satyagraha implies an element of sacrifice. The young men offering it must tell their parents firmly: "You say that you will not celebrate my marriage without taking a dowry. All right, I will not marry and will remain a bachelor if you don't change your mind." If young men are so determined there will be a change of heart in any mother or father. The biggest reform young men can help in bringing about is to stand firm in their refusal to accept any dowry. To take pride in an intercaste marriage or a "love marriage" is not right because that would be going against the sastras. The duty of sons is to try and put an end to the dowry system. There can be no greater reform than this.

The Vedas equate mother, father and guru with Isvara. I must repeat what I stated earlier that no son shall act against the wishes of his parents. But as a guru I would ask him (I have the label of guru, haven't I?) to make an exception in the matter dowry. So, acting on my advice--the advice of a guru--he must plead with his parents that they must not take any dowry since it is against the sastras, If necessary he must offer satyagraha to convince them of his determination and sincerity of purpose.

This oppressive system called dowry is a canker eating into our society. By excising it our young men will be doing a great service to society, at the same time giving an impetus for it to blossom again. They must work for the eradication of this evil not only out of faith in our religion but also as a duty towards fellow men.

Marriage is an ancient institution, a guarantee for the future of mankind and a dharmic protection for society. That being so, young men must marry the girls chosen by their elders. But the dowry system is undermining the very foundations of society and young people ought to have nothing to do with it. If they have a duty to their parents, they have also a duty to society, haven't they? Thus it becomes obligatory on their part to refuse firmly to marry if their parents insist on taking a dowry. Such refusal will be a service done not only to the family and society but also to womanhood and religion. Young men must take a vow to act in the manner I have suggested and help in putting an end to the malignant system called dowry.

Arrangements made by the matha

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Girls must be married at least at the age permitted by the law if not at the age of seven or eight. Towards this purpose we have started the Kanyakadana Trust. Daughters of poor parents must not remain unmarried after they have attained puberty merely because they have no money. The Trust extends help to conduct their marriage on a modest scale. Much merit will be earned by contributing towards such marriage expenses.

Other communities have not degenerated to the same extent as have Brahmins. Among non- Brahmins the dowry system is not as oppressive. Their women do not go to college in such large numbers as their Brahmin sisters do, nor do they, like the latter, go about as freely wherever fancy takes them.

The Trust was created to help daughters of poor families. In my opinion, donations for the Kanyadhana Trust and the Veda Raksana Nidhi Trust must be accepted from Brahmins alone. The reason is that others ought not to be made to pay a penalty for the wrongs perpetrated by the Brahmin. The biggest offence he has committed is that of forsaking Vedic learning. By not conducting the marriage of his daughter at the minimum age permitted by the law he commits an offence equally grave. So it is his responsibility to support the arrangements made to remedy the wrongs done by him. Other communities must not be made to pay for the same. To do so would be to add to the list of his sins. After all, he takes up any calling today, does any job so long as it brings him money. He spends lavishly on clubs, on entertainment, and so on. So is it not reasonable that he should be asked to contribute to the two Trusts?

The Kanyakadana Trust meets the expenses of the tirumangalyam (mangalasutra), the 18-cubit sari, the dhoti for the groom, etc. It is ready to help in conducting a simple, inexpensive wedding.

The arrangements made for the Kanyakadana trust have not yielded the same satisfactory results as those made for the Veda Raksana Nidhi Trust. Not much has been done to solve the problem for which the former body was started. I say this with great regret. The little bit we have done for the corrupted Brahmin community is like administering a concoction made of dried ginger to a man who has swallowed a crowbar. Parents do not in the least worry about damming the swollen stream of adharma. So not many come forward to make use of the Trust. They are no longer worried about their daughters not being married at the right time. They take it easy while their daughters work and earn. What do we do with the Trust? Instead of looking for a groom, parents look for a man who can recommend their daughter for a job. Things have become so bad in our land- it is all so unfortunate. We extend help at best to hold some 50 marriages. Every year 5, 000 women go to work. Ten times that number go looking for a job. So only some 50 girls come to us for help to be married at the minimum age according to the law. The only purpose served by the Trust is that of giving me some satisfaction that I have not failed in my duty.

I have spoken frankly, without mincing words, in the hope that, with their sense of self-respect and sense of urgency aroused, parents will take timely steps to celebrate the

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marriage of their daughters without losing a moment after the girls are old enough for the same according to the law.

The real reform

The law has stipulated the minimum age for marriage. I wish it had also stipulated the maximum age considering the attitude of people today. We are not in the least justified in blaming the law if girls aged 25 or 30 remain unmarried. The reason is our own indifference. Take the upanayana samskara. After all, it does not come under the Sarda Act. . Why then do we perform our son's upanayana together with his marriage when he is 30 years or so? It is all due to our indifference to our sastras, our dharma.

Apart from this general apathy, most parents want to celebrate the upanayana and marriage on a lavish scale, indeed like festivities. Both get postponed since the money has to be raised. That even a lifetime's earnings are not sufficient to meet the expenses of a daughter's marriage is preposterous. The result is the samskaras are not performed at the proper time as required by the sastras.

According to our scriptures money has nothing to do with these samskaras. That today it has come to be so is a tragedy- and it is a tragedy that is of our own making. In none of the eight forms of marriage does the groom have to be given any money. Even in the asura type it is the groom that pays money, that is in exchange for the bride. If such a transaction is considered demoniac, what would the rsis who authored our sastras have thought of the prevailing custom of dowry, of the groom's parents telling the bride's people: "Give us your daughter in marriage and also cash." They could not have even imagined that such a custom would ever crop up. There obtained the custom of "Kanya-sulka" - money offered to the bride or "bride price" - which has some support in the canons. But you cannot find an iota of justification in our scriptures for the present dowry system.

Putting an end to this custom- this evil- is the marriage reform that is the true need of the country. Instead of carrying out such a reform, what we have done is to stipulate- in the name of reform- the minimum age of marriage for girls. And this has played havoc with our family and social life. I am referring to the present phenomenon of girls going to work. When it became difficult to find the money for the dowry, for the gifts to be made to the groom's people and for the lavish celebration of the wedding, the Sarda act came in handy by obviating the need to be in a hurry to hold the function.

Working Women

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When the marriage of girls got delayed and they had to stay at home doing nothing, the parents wondered why their daughters should not study, go to work and start earning. The money would also come in handy when the girls were to be married. Thus started the practice of women going to work. At first the parents felt a little embarrassment or a sense of shame about doing something they thought to be improper, that is depending on the daughter's own earnings for her marriage expenses. They were also worried and fearful about the girls being exposed to various risks and temptations. But, in due course, this worry and fear vanished. Also the parents came to think that there was no need to feel awkward about their daughters going to work.

According to the Puranas, even royal sages like Janaka were worried that their daughters stayed at home without being married. They felt so uncomfortable as if they were carrying fire inside them. At first we felt sheepish that our women went to work. But, by and by, we learned to accept it. Now we take it as an advance, a step forward in our civilization. Parents have thrown all sense of responsibility to the winds and are not worried in the least about their daughters going out to work and, indeed, they take pride in it. Our dharma has sunk to such low depths. Working girls come to me blessings for promotion in their office. Turning a blind eye to everything- seeing and not seeing- I have earned the name of being a good Svamiyar.

"That women are receiving higher education and are working is a great step forward", proclaim the reformists. "A great injustice done to them in the past has been undone," they add. My own view is that no injustice was ever done to women in the past and I would go to the extent of saying that, if at all any injustice was done, it was to men. You may be amused by this remark. Let me explain. A male, after his student- bachelorhood, graduates to the stage of the householder. He has now to perform many duties and rituals like aupasana and a number of other samskaras with the ultimate object of finding release from worldly existence. A woman attains the same goal by dedicating herself to her husband and to do so is to go beyond all the samskaras performed by a man. Though reformists think this to be an injustice done to women, to me it appears that the sastras favour women more than they do men. I tell you why. How does a man realise himself? He has to perform many religious works; he has to learn the Truth and feel it inwardly through nididhyasana. In this way alone does he erase his mind.

A pativrata does not need such difficult sadhana, such ardent and intense practice, to reach the same goal and all she has to do is to surrender to her husband. By respecting the wishes of her husband such a wife obliterates not only her own wishes, but all feelings of honour and dishonour and all ego-sense. In this way she comes close to stilling her mind. When the mind is utterly dedicated to another person in an attitude of surrender, should it not be close to being blotted out? Is there any "promotion" for a woman higher than this?

A woman exalted by inner purity occupies a position far higher than another who earns a promotion in her office. This is how many a woman in the history of this land won powers far greater than those earned even by the sages. According to Tiruvalluvar, if such

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a woman says, "Let there be rain", it will rain, it must rain. If she says to the sun, "Don't rise", it will not rise. Such a woman can retrieve her husband from Yama. Our sastras, our traditions, give these women a place more elevated than that accorded to any sage or deity. We see from Puranas that a woman of lofty character can transform even gods into little children by sprinkling water on them. Our religious texts speak about how a woman may rise to true heights of glory and how she is enshrined in a temple and worshipped. They do not ever condemn her to an inferior position. It seems to me that it is the reformists who do so by preventing her from rising to the heights of glory.

If marriage is one of the many samskaras to render a man pure, for a woman it is the single samskara that gives her the ultimate fruits of all samskaras. Now the essence of this samskara is cast away and what remains, the refuse, is retained. Marriage and the householder's stage of life are not meant for carnal pleasure alone. They constitute a path for liberation. If this truth is understood people will appreciate that the role assigned to women by the sastras is just and proper.

Few seem to have realised the undesirable economic consequences of women going to work. I am referring to the unemployment problem. Until some years ago parents had this excuse for their daughters going to work: "Let her work till she gets married. Otherwise she will have to stay at home brooding over things and being sorry for herself. Going to work will be a way of spending time. Besides, the girl's earnings will come in handy for the dowry and other expenses of marriage." The idea then was to let the daughter work until her marriage and then ask her to resign her job. The groom and his people thought it demeaning for the bride to work after the marriage.

This attitude changed not before long. How? During the past one century or so, the Brahmin community has developed an increasing appetite for money. Owing to this greed that grew with the years, girls going to work even after their marriage became a more widely accepted practice. The result is that the noble duties of motherhood like child care are neglected. It is the same as in Western countries and there is no warmth and sincerity governing relationships involving parents and children and other family members.

On the economic front too the phenomenon of more and more women working has had an undesirable consequence. These days hundreds of young men are unemployed. At the same time, in some families both husband and wife work and earn. If the husband alone worked, the wife's job would go to a young man who is without work. Unfortunately, husbands no longer take pride in caring for the wife and family with their earnings alone; they want the wife also to earn. At first the parents are reluctant to send their daughters to work. Then the husband did the same perhaps half-heartedly. As for the wife, she is now proud to be working. In fact, she is so used to working outside that she does not like being confined to her home. When she earns on her own she wants to spend as she likes without being questioned by her husband.

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To stay at home does not mean to be locked in. There is no shortage of sastras and Puranas in Sanskrit and in other languages. If women develop a taste for them, they will keep reading them for a whole lifetime and find happiness. They may form satsanga groups and read such books by turns at home. There is no need to form a club or some other organisation nor any board. The satsanga may be held at home without any office-bearers like president, secretary, committee members and so on. I suggest this to avoid contests and rivalry for positions. Women may also keep themselves occupied in making pure kumkuma from turmeric and in collecting unbroken rice grains ("aksata") for use in mathas, temples and other religious establishments. To stay at home does not mean being caged in while doing such work. Besides, women will not lose their most precious possession, femininity. Work mentioned above will be a means for the freedom of their Self and for bliss.

For women, surely, this is far better than going to work out of greed and loosing their femininity in the process, not to speak of earning the higher reward of Atmic well-being. It is also in keeping with a woman's nature. For a woman to work in an office on the pretext that she is otherwise confined to the four walls of her home is the cause of so many problems, so many evils. Though there is much talk of women's liberation, what we actually see is that they have to work under so many people and have to be answerable to so many of them. Is there peace in such a life? In the liberation that is so much talked about, is there the bliss of domestic life? Are working women able to cook at leisure, eat and enjoy the warmth and affection of children?

What purpose is served by all such talk? Each man thinks of his own selfish interests and is least bothered about others. People never pause to wonder whether others suffer on their account. There is no feeling for others, no sense of justice. In some families there is "double income" because both husband and wife earn while in some others even one member does not have a job and so no income. It is a sad state. If women decide not to work after their marriage it is possible that the vacancies thus created will be filled by the unemployed men. Families without any means so far will then benefit. Working women must think about this and those who try to bring equality between men and women and ought to consider the logic behind my observations.

Nowadays people do not know where to apply the principle of equality and where not to. Each entity or aspect of life has its own way of being, its own character; that is how life in the universe is ordained. It is wrong to contend that there must be a sameness about everything, that all things must be equal. To insist on such sameness and equality is to wreck the natural order of life. Each finds its fulfilment and true happiness in being related to another as intended by nature and in promoting the common social life. To pursue an arbitrary kind of equality instead of this means not only the denial of happiness on the individual level but jeopardizing family and social life.

Nature has assigned the job of child-bearing to women. However much we fight for equality we cannot change this fact of life. It is natural dharma of women to care for children and to be Grahalakshmis. They do not lose anything by doing so, nor do they

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become superior in any sense by refusing to do it. Equality in such matters has no meaning

Any use talking?

Samskaras such as marriage are akin to making chillies less hot by tempering them with ghee: they serve to tame the natural urges. We add ghee to the chilli so that it does not inflame the intestines. Carnal pleasure and worldly enjoyment are part of life of a householder but they are kept within certain limits so that he is not overcome by them. For a woman a life of chastity and loyalty to her husband, together with the care of the household, constitutes a samskara that is equivalent to all samskaras prescribed for her husband put together. All of us must recognise this fact.

The goal of this nation is Atmic well- being. We must all pray with a pure heart to Isvara that we remain true to this goal. As we pray, we must have also faith in the Lord's grace. If we keep speaking about the ideals of marriage and womanhood, one day perhaps people will see the light. As things stand now, I am afraid that one day our people will be pushed to the wall. That will be the time when they will realise how they brought disaster upon themselves. When they have such an awakening they will recognise the need to find a way out of their predicament. That is why I keep speaking about the path shown by the sastras.

"What purpose is served today by speaking about varnasrama, child marriage and so on? "This is a natural question." This is a natural question. " Three- quarters of it is all gone. Many aspects of our life are governed by the laws of the state and these are contrary to the ordinances of the sastras". This is true. The laws are such as to have our hands tied.

We are called a "secular state". It means, we are told, a state does not concern itself with the matters of religion. It further means that the government can interfere only in social matters and not in religious affairs. But ours is a religion in which all aspects of life, individual and social, are woven together. So the laws enacted by the state to govern social life have an impact on our religion too. Our rulers do not recognise or accept this fact. They limit their view of religion to certain matters and think that all else belongs to the social sphere and are the concern of the government.

All religions contain features that relate to the social life of their followers. Does the government interfere with them as it does with the social foundations of Hinduism? No. It is this fact that causes pain. Though our rulers swear by the principle of secularism, they do not apply the same standard or yardstick to all religions. The minorities rise in protest against measures affecting their religious life introduced by the government. " These are against the Qu'ran", the cry is raised. Or, if the people affected are Christians,

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they say: "These are not in keeping with Christian doctrines". Yielding to such pressure, the government exempts the minorities concerned from the scope of the measures.

In spite of its claim to being secular, the government thinks it fit to interfere with anything that has to do with the Hindu traditions. Representatives of the minority communities come forward to speak in protest against acts of interference. But what about the Hindus? Even if a couple of Hindus speak up they are dubbed "reactionaries" or "obscurantists" and the government goes ahead with its measures or laws brushing them aside. Our rulers often proclaim that "a secular state means a state that does not concern itself with any religion, that it does not mean that the government is opposed to religion as such, and that the prosperity of all religions is acceptable to the state"., But in actual practice what do we see? The government's actions are not opposed to any religion barring Hinduism. The Hindu religion has become a no-man's land.

You will wonder why I am harping all the time on sastric matters fully aware though I am of what is happening in the country.

My answer is that, whatever the present situation be, we cannot foresee how things will take shape in the future. In the previous generation we thought dollars grew in the American soil and that people there were not wanting in anything. But what is the situation there today? We now know that no other people experience the same lack, the same emptiness, in their lives as do the Americans. It is only after reaching the heights of worldly pleasure that the realisation has dawned on them that the very pursuit of pleasure has created a void in their lives, an emptiness in the very Self. They realise that, floating as they did in a sea of dollars, they were drawn to all kinds of evil like drinking, loot, murder and prostitution. Now as they have no peace of mind they come to our country in large numbers seeking peace in our yoga, in our philosophy and in our devotional music.

We learn from this that what seemed good two or three generations ago is now seen to be evil. When people realise this they go in quest of liberation. The government, however well intentioned it be, has introduced measures that are against the sastras, thinking that they are good. But some day in the future people will realise that they are harmful. Even today we see signs of such realisation on the part of people here and there. There is a saying: "In the beginning it looked good. It was like a colt but as the days passed. Well, it was seen in its true form". The same could be said about some of the reforms introduced by the government, reforms contrary to the sastras. They look fine now but eventually we will realise that they will lead to a hopeless situation in society. Bhagvan speaks of two types of happiness in the Gita. "Yad tad agre visamiva, pariname' mrtopamam." Here the first type is described. This type of happiness is like poison in the beginning but like ambrosia, amrta, in the end. It is the sattvika or the highest type of happiness, like "halahala", the terrible poison, emerging first and amrta coming up later. The sastras may now seem to be bitter like poison because of the discipline they impose on the individual, the family and society, but in due course they will be seen to be sweet. Now all bonds, all shackles will break and the incomparable bliss of Atmic freedom will be experienced. Here the poison is tasted momentarily but the amrta will be everlasting.

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"Yad tad agre' mrtopamam pariname visamiva", here the second type of happiness is referred to. In the beginning this type of happiness will taste sweet like ambrosia but, with the passage of time, it will turn bitter like poison. In America the dollar once tasted sweet like nectar but later turned bitter like poison. In India too, the reforms that are contrary to the sastras "taste" good now but they will be found to be poison in the times to come, when both the individual and society will suffer in the absence of contentment as well as discipline. People will then seek the amrta. Should they not know where they can find it? But by then the poison will have gone to their head and they will be in danger. So it is our duty to tell them where they can find the amrta. It is for them, for future generations, that we must keep speaking about the sastras instead of burying them deep in the earth.

Even though we ourselves do not imbibe the sastric nectar today we must preserve the sastras to help future generations when they will have become spiritually weak because of the poison going to their head. This lamp of the sastras should show the way at least in the times to come.

Nothing can be done now because I have my hands tied. But if I keep speaking to you unceasingly about the sastras it is because I am not yet gagged.

Marriage expenses and the sastras

Even if it is not possible for us to celebrate a marriage according to the sastras in respect of the age of the bride, could we not be true to their tenets at least in the matter of expenses? As I have made it clear so often a marriage has nothing to do with questions of money in any sense. Even though we have neither the will nor the courage to act according to the sastras in all matters, we could at least see to it that marriages are not turned into what may be called an economic problem; in other words we could follow the canonical texts at least in conducting weddings more economically.

The marriage ceremony is in fact almost as inexpensive a rite as sandhyavandana. How much is to be spent on it? The newly-weds have to be presented with new clothes(cotton will do), a tirumangalyam (mangalasutra) with a piece of gold attached to it. Only a few close relatives need be fed. At the time of the muhurta an auspicious instrument must be played. This will cost you a small sum. The other expense is the daksina paid to the priest. All this is fully in accord with the sastras. Even a poorly paid clerk can perform his daughter's marriage in this simple manner.

If wealthy people make marriages so lavish or showy affair, it would be a bad example for others not so wealthy. The money they otherwise spend on a music or dance recital or on other items that add glitter to the wedding must be used for marriages in poor families. This means that money that is otherwise wasted is converted into dharmic currency. It should be possible for every affluent man to celebrate the marriage of his daughter

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economically and save money with which a poor girl can be married and made happy. "Mass marriages" may be conducted in the same way as "mass upanayana".

The rent charged for the pandal itself [or the " hall" or mandapa] takes up half the wedding expenses. You cannot hold a marriage ceremony in a flat even on a small scale. Philanthropists should join together to construct small mandapas in various localities for the marriage of the daughters of less fortunate people.

There was a time when girls blushed when the very word marriage was mentioned. Then came a time when young women waiting to be married pined away at home, cried their hearts out, wondering whether they would be married at all. Now things have come to such a pass that women are on their own, not married and working like men in offices. The very life-breath of our culture, stridharma is being stifled. We hear reports of unseemly incidents happening here and there.

What is particularly tragic is that no one seems to be concerned about finding a remedy for all the unhappy occurrences. What is worse, these happenings are sought to be justified in terms of psychology, this and that. Stories are written on the undesirable incidents and films produced based on them and encouragement given to wrong-doing. If we question the people who give encouragement they turn back and speak to us about freedom of imagination, freedom of art, and so on. In this republican age there is freedom for everything except for the pursuit of the sastras.

I started by saying that according to the scriptures questions of money have no place in the marriage ceremony. Talking of marriage expenses, I must consider the complaint that a wedding lasting four days(which is how it ought to be celebrated) can be very expensive.

The sastras do not ask you to perform rituals likely to impoverish you. The marriage proper, the solemnisation of the wedding, is a one-day affair. The groom must spend the following three days in his own house observing brahmacharya. During these days there is no need for any music, nor any nalangu, or any other celebration. Let those who want to reform the marriage ceremony, think of changing it in this manner.

The groom's people must tell the bride's parents: "The marriage proper will be celebrated in your house. The remaining three days' functions will be held in our house without your having to spend anything". On the day following the marriage the householder(the young man just married) must bring the "aupassanagni" (the sacred fire in which the aupasana is performed) to his home. There are mantras to be chanted as this fire is being brought, as it is placed on the cart, as the bullocks are yoked to the cart, etc. You may do the same nowadays if you go by car or train. In the old days marriage alliances were formed between families living in neighbouring villages. So it was easy to carry the auspicious fire from the bride's to the groom's house.

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The four- day function may be performed in another way also. The place where the marriage is celebrated is to be treated as the groom' s house. Or the three-day function may be conducted in the house of a relative. No one need be invited for food, not even the girl's family. (The sastras do not permit the completion of the marriage rites in a single day.) The priest has to be paid a daksina-this is the only expense.

According to the sastras, the groom must observe what is called "samvatsara diksa" from the day of marriage(diksa for one year); he must practise brahmacarya during these months. The marriage is to be consummated only later. Such practices have however changed. Until the recent past, the groom observed diksa at least for four days if not for a whole year. Now everything is performed on a single day. One is reminded of the saying: " The donkey is reduced to an ant and the ant itself eventually vanishes into thin air".

During the marriage, Andhras wear cotton clothes dipped in turmeric water. However well-to-do they are they follow this simple custom. In the North too women wear ordinary clothes at weddings. We must try to follow their practice.

One of the marriage rites is " pravesa homa" which is performed when the groom returns to his house. He has to carry the sacred fire of the marriage with him and perform aupasana in his home. It is for the sake of convenience -- and with the approval of the sastras -- that it is allowed to be done where the groom's party stays for the marriage. To perform a marriage in a temple as a one-day ceremony -- and " be done with it " - is not right. Even rich people who spend lavishly on clubs and races follow this practice because of their reluctance to conduct the function according to the sastras. Unfortunately, the poor are likely to follow their example. There is no extra expense involved in performing a marriage in the sastric manner as a four-day function.

How are marriages celebrated today? The bride is one who has already attained puberty and the marriage is gone through in just one day. On the following day the bride is taken to the house of her in-laws. Another unsastric practice is that of consummation on the same day as the marriage.

The groom is expected to observe brahmacarya at least for three nights after marriage. There are eight types of brahmacarya. Even though a man cannot be continent throughout, he must remain chaste at least on certain days. The least that is expected of him is celibacy for a minimum of three days after the marriage. This rule is no longer observed. Worse, the consummation, as mentioned before, is on the same day as the wedding is solemnised.

The undesirable practices now associated with the marriage samskara are due to the anxiety to curtail expenses. If all rites are performed on the same day there is a saving in the matter of feeding the guests, the music, etc. Curiously enough, despite such an anxiety to curtail expenses, there is a great deal of ostentation in our weddings. To obviate the expenses incurred thus, parents perform the upanayana of their son along with the marriage of their daughter.

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We must try to reduce the unnecessary expenses incurred in performing Vedic samskaras. Friends and relatives can help much in this respect. They need not attend a marriage or upanayana even if invited. Instead, the money that they would otherwise spend in travel may be presented to the bride's [or the brahmacarin's] father. The fewer the invitees present at a wedding the less expensive will it be to feed them.

Three ways to economy

I feel that the marriage expenses could be reduced in three ways. First, both men and women must discard silks and other costly wear and use clothing of the lowest quality. Second, coffee must be given up; instead wheat kanji or buttermilk may be taken as a substitute. I say this because coffee has become a habit and a substitute may be needed for those who find it difficult to give it up. According to medical science buttermilk is as good as amrta(ambrosia). Expenses will be reduced by 60 per cent this way. If you check on the money you spend on rice and on milk and coffee, you will find that you spend more on the last two items than on the first. Third, you must refuse to take a dowry. If this advice of mine is taken there is no room for ostentation and vanity in our life. At the same time, apart from better physical health, there will be inner advancement. Above all, sastric life will be revived.

Ideals of marriage

The Vedas are learned during the years of student-bachelorhood. Then the "theory" taught has to be put into practice; in other words the rites prescribed in the Vedas must be performed. For this purpose a man has to take a helpmate after he has completed his brahmacaryasrama. This helpmate is a "property" that can never be separated from him. She is not meant not only to be a cook for him, not only one to give sensual gratification. She is called "dharma-patni" and also "yajna-patni". She has to be with her husband in the pursuit of dharma and has also to be a source of encouragement in it. As a dharma patni, she has to be by his side during the performance of sacrifices; she must also play a supportive role in all those rituals that have the purpose of making the divine powers favourable to mankind.

It must be noted that a wife creates well-being for the world even as she does the work of cooking or as a source of sensual gratification for her husband. I will tell you how. It is not that she cooks for the husband alone. She has to provide food every day to the guests, to the sick and to the birds and beasts and other creatures. This is how she serves the purpose of "atithyam" and "vaisyadevam". The children born to here are not to be taken as the product of pleasure she affords her husband. She gives birth to them to perpetuate

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the Vedic dharma. Yes, even the raising of sons is intended for the dharmic life of the future. No other religion has before it such a goal for the marriage samskara.

In our religion the man-wife relationship is not concerned with the mundane alone. It serves the Atman as well as the good of mankind. In other religions too marriages are conducted, say, in a church with God as witness. But ideal of marriage is not as lofty as ours. The purpose of marriage in our religion is to purify the husband further and to impact the wife fullness as his devoted and self-effacing companion. There is no such high purpose in the marriage of other religion. In other countries the man-woman relationship is akin to a family or social contract. Here it is an Atman connection. But this very connection is a means of disconnection also - of freeing the Atman, the self, from the bondage of worldly existence. There is no room for divorce in it. Even to think of it is sinful.

[To sum up and further explain] the three objectives of a samskara of so elevated a character as marriage. The first is to unite a man with a helpmate after he has completed the study of Vedas. This helpmate is expected not only to run his household but assist him in the practice of the Vedic dharma. The second is to bring forth into this world children of noble outlook and character who are to be heirs to the great Vedic tradition, citizens of the future who will be the source of happiness in this world. The third is to create a means for women to be freed from worldly existence. A man who is not yet fully mature inwardly is assisted in his karma by his wife. By doing so, by being totally devoted to her husband, she achieves maturity to a degree greater than he does. The fourth objective is the subordination of sensual gratification to the other three.

We have forgotten the first three important objectives. All that remains is the fourth, the enjoyment of carnal pleasure. If people take my advice in respect of the noble ideals of marriage as taught in the sastras a way will open out to them for their inner advancement. May Candramaulisvara bless them.

Grahastha and grihini

After a young man has completed his gurukulavasa and performed the samavartana he has to wear a "double sacred thread". He must discard the marks of his student-bachelorhood - the staff, the antelope skin, the girdle - and wear the pancakaccha and an upper cloth. As a celibate-student he was not permitted to use any footwear; he could not also adorn himself with sandal-paste, ear-studs and flowers. He may now even darken his eyes with lampblack. Adorning himself and putting up his umbrella he must approach the king or a royal representative. The latter must be impressed by his learning and the quality of his brahmacharya. The young man must acquire [from the king or the royal representative] money and material as a gift for his marriage, so say the sastras.

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One point that emerges from this is that the marriage expenses are to be borne by the groom or his parents. A second point is that a young man who has had samavartana must wear the "double sacred thread" and pancakaccha even if he remains single. One's strength or potency is preserved by wearing a cloth whose ends are pleated, or made into folds, and tucked in. Muslims have the end of the cloths sewn together. Even people who do not belong to the twice born caste - except in Tamil Nadu and Kerala - tuck in their dhotis or vestis, not to speak of pancakaccha. (Today even when they come to see me people come in trousers. That being the case it is ridiculous or meaningless to speak of differences between the two types of wears).

In these days there is neither gurukulavasa nor samavartana nor the pilgrimage to Ganga. But there is an extra "item" in weddings called "Paradesi-k-kolam" just to extort money or gift from the bride's family. The groom is presented with an umbrella, a pair of sandals and a walking stick. A ceremony called "kasiyatra" (the pilgrimage or journey to kasi) is conducted in which groom darkens his eyes with lampblack and wears a gold chain.

Those who do not marry and remain "naisthika brahamacarins" (lifelong brahamacarins) are exceptions to the rule that no man ought to remain even a single moment without belonging to one of the asramas. That is after the proper conclusion of his student-bachelorhood he has to prepare to become a householder.

The Brahmin is born with three debts: he owes a debts to the sages, to the celestials and to the fathers. He repays the first by learning the Vedas as a student-bachelor; the second by taking a wife and performing sacrifices; and the third by begetting a son. So without marriage he cannot repay the second and third debts.

Sons are primarily intended for the repayment of the debts to the fathers. Performing the sraddha ceremony is not enough. Forefathers of the past three generations are to be made to ascend from the manes. So even after a man dies, for two generations the daily libations must be offered to him. That is why the birth of a son is considered important. (The case of the naisthika brahmacharin and the sannyasin is different. Because of their inner purity and enlightenment, they can liberate, not just two generations, but twenty-one generations fathers without performing any sraddha ceremony).

Panigrahana (the groom taking the hand of the bride in his), mangalyadharana, saptapadi (the bridal pair taking the seven steps round the sacrificial fire) are important rites of the marriage function. There is a controversy about whether or not mangalya-dharana is a Vedic rite. It is an unnecessary controversy. Mangalya-dharana is a custom that is thousands of years old and it is an essential part of the marriage samskara.

As I said before, after completing his student-bachelorhood a young man must take a wife for the pursuit of dharma. The latter should dedicate herself to him so as to become pure within. The purpose of marriage is a life of harmony and the procreation of virtuous children.

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Grhasthasrama is called illaram in Tamil and it is extolled by the wise in the Tamil country also. "Grha" means a house. A young man who returns to his house from the guru's and practises dharma is a "grhastha". One who resides in a house, a grha, is a grhastha. The Tamil wife calls her husband "ahamudayan", "ahattukaran", "vittukaran": these terms have to do with the house or the home. Only the wife can refer to her husband thus, not others. She herself is called "grhini", not "grhastha". The latter would mean no more than "one who resides in a house". But "grhini" means the house belongs to her (the wife), that she manages the household. The husband is the illaratan in Tamil and it means one performs the dharmic rites in the house, "il-arattan". The wife is "illal", one who owns the house.

The husband is not called illan (illan, as it happens, means one who does not possess anything or one who is indigent). The wife is also called illattarasi (queen of the house), "manaivi"(owner of the house), or "manaiyal"; but the husband does not have similar appellations like "illattarasan"(king of the house), "manaivan" or "manaiyan"(owner of the house). In Telugu the wife is called "illu" (corresponding to the illal of Tamil).

Aupasana

Panigrahana, mangalya-dharana, saptapadi and other rites are performed on the day of the wedding. Aupasana begins with marriage and is performed every day until one becomes a sannyasin or until one's death. The sacred fire that is witness to the marriage is preserved throughout and aupasana performed in it every day.

The sacred fire has an important place in the Vedic religion. The student-bachelor performs samidadhana twice a day offering samidhs (sticks of the flame of the forest or palasa) in the fire. This rite is not continued after his marriage. When a person becomes a householder he has a number of rites to perform in the sacred fire. In place of samidadhana he now has the aupasana. The latter word is derived from "upasana" which term is used in the sense of puja, chanting of mantras, meditation, etc. But, according to the Vedas, aupasana is a rite performed in the sacred fire by all Hindus.

Though members of the fourth varna do not wear the sacred thread they have the marriage samskara and, along with it, aupasana. Dharmasastras like the Vaidyanatha-Diksitiyam describe how sudras are to go through the jatakarma and namakarana ceremonies. The work deals with how the fourth varna should perform puja, the sraddha ceremony and apara-karma (obsequies). Reformers ignore all these and allege that members of the fourth varna have no "right" to any rituals. Instead they must try to persuade people of this varna to perform the rites they are enjoined upon. Aupasana is one of the "rights" of this caste and it is to be conducted every day with the recitation of certain verses.

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Can a new bramhin caste be created?

The fact that aupasana is performed by all castes gives rise to the questions : "Why only aupasana? Why should not all castes have the right to learn the Vedas, chant the Gayatri and perform sacrifices?". On the other hand, we have atheists who want the Vedas to be consigned to the flames and the idols of Gods like Ganesa to be broken and, on the other, we have people calling themselves reformist who want to extend to all the right to perform Vedic rites.

Do I not lamblaste Brahmins for having become a degenerated class? Taking a cue from this the reformers argue: "After all, it is the Brahmin who has become debased and it is he who has debased others also. Now, when new life is being breathed into the Vedic dharma, why should Brahmins alone be given the right to it, Brahmins who have failed in their duty? All those castes that believe that the Vedas and Vedic works are essential to the well-being of mankind must be enabled to learn the Vedas and perform Vedic rites. All of them must have the right to wear the sacred thread and learn the scriptures."

Organisations like the Arya Samaj have accepted the right of all to learn the Vedas and perform sacrifices. Here and there a Subramanya Bharati or someone like him imparts Brahmapadesa to a Pancama. The reformists ask why the Vedas cannot be made common to all.

This is not acceptable in the least. I am a representative and spokesman of the sastras. It is my duty to state that this (making Vedic dharma common to all castes) is not permitted by the sages who created the sastras and assigned the duties special to each caste. They (the sages) were known for their spirit of sacrifices and impartiality and they had no interest other than the happiness of mankind.

A man sins in two ways. If he forsakes his hereditary karma, he commits one kind of sin- such a man is called a "karma-bhrasta". But if he forsakes his karma and takes up the karma of another (that is if he practices the religious customs and duties of another caste) he becomes a "karmantara-pravista". According to the sastras he is guilty of a greater offence than the karma-bhrasta.

Why? There are two reasons.

An individual who forsakes his karma because he believes that varna dharma itself is meaningless may be said to act out of conviction and he may be said to be obeying his conscience. In his action we may find some justification. But, in the matter of the sastras, the question is not one of conscience. The question is: what about the man opts for the customs and rites of others? He does so because he believes that the customs and rites to which he is born are not as good those of the latter. To think that one vocation or one type of work is inferior to another, or superior to it, is not in keeping with modern ideas of

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socialism and the principle of dignity of labour. At the same time, it is not also in accord with the sastras. The karma-bhrasta who discards all varna dharma believes that the sages created a system not suitable to the times. He does not, however, think that they were partial to some castes. But not so the karmantara-pravista who thinks that the sages were partial. He chooses another man's dharma because he believes that it is better for his inner advancement than his hereditary calling and dharma. His action implies that the sages practised deception by creation the division of varnas. So his offence is greater.

It is true that Brahmins have gone astray. But what is the meaning of creating a new class of Brahmins? It amounts to saying, "He (the Brahmin) has forsaken his dharma. Now I will take it over." To take up another man's dharma, apart from forsaking one's own dharma is a grave offence, worse than nearly giving up one's own dharma. I have stated repeatedly that all karma has only one purpose, that of destroying one's ego-sense, ahamkara. What is the foundation of varna dharma? It is one's willingness to follow the vocation and dharma that belong to one by hereditary without any consideration of one's likes and dislikes.

Such willingness is based on the realisation that the vocation and dharma that have come to us are according to the will of Isvara, that they are manifested through the Vedas and sastras and that to practise them is to destroy our ego.

What does it mean to create a new caste, to create new Brahmins? However good the intention behind such a process may be- even if it be the desire that Vedic works must be performed and that the sound of the Vedas must fill the air - the ego-consciousness will obtrude in it like the nut jutting out from a cashew fruit.

Apart from this, however much you talk of equality and rationalism, the newly created Brahmins will suffer from an inferiority complex and will be racked by doubts as to whether they can practise their new dharma and whether they can chant the mantras and practise the rites in the same manner as people who are Brahmins by birth.

The Arya Samaj and other reformist organisations have for their part abolished caste and given everybody the right to learn Vedas. Then how is it that non-Brahmins have not joined these organisations in large numbers or taken to the study of the Vedas? One important reason is a certain hesitation in joining anything new. Another, equally important, is that people believe that it is one thing to become an atheist but quite another for the old Vedic customs to be changed.

So, though a couple of reformers may start a movement to through open Vedic learning to everybody, only four or five percent of the people will join them. The remaining 95 percent or so will continue to be in the old Hindu set-up. Also the few who join the new caste will have at heart a sense of fear and a feeling of inferiority. They will keep doubting whether their actions will yield the desired result. If that be so, how will their minds be pure? It is not only the ego-sense that makes the mind impure but fear, the feeling of inferiority and being racked by doubts. Rites performed in such a frame of

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mind will not serve the purpose of creating happiness in the world. Besides, members of the new caste are likely to develop conceited thinking that they are doing what Brahmins by birth ceased to do or could not do - there will a spirit of challenge in their action. When they practise what others were practising [or were expected to practise] there will naturally be a desire on their part to make an exhibition of it. There will no sincerity in their actions. All told, neither they nor the world will benefit from their works.

We must recognise facts for facts and not be carried away by emotions. Have I not you about the power of the sound of the Vedas? This sound is not produced easily by everybody in the right manner. What I say applies not only to the sound of Vedas or the Vedic language but also to other languages and their sound. Take the case of German or Urdu. Some words in these two languages are tongue-twisting. Telugu is spoken in our neighbourhood but we find it difficult to vocalise some of its sounds. Suppose a German child or a Muslim or Telugu child were to be born in Tamil Nadu. These children would be able to pronounce such words easily -that is German, Urdu or Telugu as the case may be- because to them they would come naturally.

However vehemently you may deny the existence of hereditary factors, you find evidence of the same every day in all spheres. Those who have been the custodians of the Vedas all these centuries will find it easy to learn and chant the Vedas despite the present gap of two or three generations in their tradition. The same cannot be said of other communities. The mantras will serve no purpose if they are wrongly enunciated. However well-intentioned the new class of people studying the Vedas maybe, their efforts will not be fruitful.

Another point. Here we have a class of people born into a dharma and practising it hereditarily for thousands of years and acquiring in the process certain qualities. If such people forsake that dharma, how would you expect others who are strangers to it to take their place especially in the present new circumstances.

There are today two unfortunate developments in the country. One is that of the Brahmins giving up Vedic learning and Vedic works and the second that of other communities wanting to practise the Vedic dharma. It is difficult to say which of the two is worse. Not performing the duty that belongs to us by birth is an offence. But, as the Lord says in the Gita, to take up the duty of another is a greater offence.

"Svadharme nidhaman sreyo paradharmo bhayavahah". It is better to die within the sphere of one's own duty than to take up another's duty. Perilous and fearful is the duty of other men. Since death is certain anyway, if we carry out the duty that is properly ours there will be no rebirth for us. What do we mean by saying that another man's dharma is fearful? If a person practises another man's dharma he will be pushed into hell. Suppose such a man does not believe in a certain place called hell, we may then take it that he will suffer infernal sorrow in this or next birth. Apart from this, not being an atheist, he will be eaten up by the fear that he is perhaps committing a sin by pursuing another man's dharma. Were he not a non-believer he would not have faith in the Vedas and sastras and

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would not in the first place take up the Brahmin's vocation. So the one who has faith in the Vedas would be constantly nagged by the worry: "The sastras proclaim that the sound of the Vedas will bring good to the world. But the same sastras proclaim, don't they, that the pursuit of another man's dharma is fearful? "

The point to noted is that if you believe in the sastras you must believe in them fully. If you are an atheist you could of course reject all of them. But to make a show of being very clever and twist the sastras as you like, accepting some parts or rejecting or changing some others, is an offence more grave than that of being an atheist. To think that Mother Veda should dance to our tune is also a great offence. Learning the Vedas in such an attitude is tantamount to ridiculing them.

I am not angry with reformists, nor do I suspect their motives. They go wrong because of their ignorance or thoughtlessness. If they wish to pull down the fence to go to the other side, they must think of the possibility of the few still remaining there walking over to this side.

If people truly feel that their present vocation is as honourable as the practice of Vedic dharma, they will not think of taking up some calling other than their own. "Brahmins have forsaken the Vedas. So the world is not filled with the sound of the Vedas which is so essential to its well-being. To fill this vacuum a new Brahmin class must be created. "Those who want to take the place of the Brahmins, who are traditionally duty-bound to follow the Vedic dharma, will have a feeling of conceit, not to speak of a spirit of challenge and a sense of inferiority also. If you really want to work for the goal of making the Vedas a living reality again, your efforts must be directed towards turning those who were engaged in the preservation of the Vedic heritage back to the dharma to which they hereditarily belong.

If I criticise Brahmins it is not because I feel that they cannot be corrected or that I have washed my hands of them. Nor do I feel that Brahmins alone as a caste are responsible for all ills of today. If I administer them a reproof now and then for their having given up their dharma during Islamic and British rule and for being lured today by the glitter of modern civilization, it does not mean that they are to be wholly blamed for everything. Placed as they are in today's circumstances any caste or class would have done the same. Those who find them guilty now think that they would acquit themselves better if they were in their place. But they too would have been compelled to make the same mistakes by the force of circumstances. If people hereditarily engaged in intellectual pursuits find themselves unable to apply their minds to Atmic matters and instead find themselves involved in mundane affairs, it means a topsy turvy slide-down.

I do not justify such behaviour nor the descent into worldly affairs from the heights of spirituality. Nowadays reformists try to justify even prostitution on psychological grounds. Similarly, I wish to point out that there is a psychological explanation for the degeneration of Brahmins also. If I criticise Brahmins, it does not mean that others should join in the attack, thinking that they (the Brahmins) alone are worthless people. It is the

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duty of these others to make Brahmins worthy of their caste. After all, during the past forty or fifty years, Brahmins have been an easy target of attack and ridicule. How silently they have suffered all this, also the humiliation at the hands of their detractors. Until some four or five generations ago, Brahmins were the guardians of all our Atmic wealth, all our arts. Considering this, is it not the duty of others to bring them back to the practise of their true dharma? They must be tactfully reminded of the high dharma they had once pursued and the spirit of sacrifice for which they were known.

It is likely that in the past a few ignorant Brahmins treated other communities harshly. This is no reason why their descendants today should pay for it and be maligned and harassed in a spirit of vengefulness. It must also be borne in the mind that Brahmins themselves have been in the forefront in the fight against "the old unjust practices" and in giving other communities a high place in society. So there is no point in fuelling the flames of hatred. Nor can it be claimed truthfully that such hatred is part of "Tamil culture".

Unfortunately, what Brahmins did in the name of reforms resulted in the wrong kind of equality for, instead of raising people belonging to the lower strata to a higher level, it had the effect of bringing the upper classes downward. Equality can be of two types: in the first all occupy a high level in society; in the other all occupy a low level. To carry a load uphill is difficult but it is easy to push it down. Quality has suffered in the attempt to create equality. It is not desirable to have that kind of equality in which everyone does the same kind of work. Nor should it be thought that there is no equality in a system in which the various vocations, the various types of work, are divided among different groups of people. I have already spoken a great deal on the subject. Our endeavour must be to create unity in diversity, nor uniformity.

It is important to remember that neither hatred of Brahmins nor dislike of Sanskrit has ever been a part of Tamil culture and civilization. Sanskrit is the repository of Atmic and religious sastras, a storehouse of poetry and works on arts. Everyone must learn to regard it as "our own language". The need for the existence of "Brahmanya" as a separate entity must be recognised. This is essential to the preservation of the Vedas, the performance of sacrifices, etc, whose purpose is the good of mankind. Today the Vedas, the Upanisads and so on are available in print. Anybody can read them and try to understand them. But everybody need not learn to chant the Vedas; it takes many years to do so. Everybody need not also perform sacrifices.

There ought to be an element of humility on the part of those who wish to carry out reforms; there must be sincerity of purpose. Then no need will arise to go contrary to the sastras.

Aupasana and women

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I said [in an earlier talk] that members of all castes must perform aupasana. The husband and the wife must do it together. Even when the husband is away the wife must perform it by offering unbroken rice grains in the sacrificial fire. The Vedas themselves have given women such a right.

Aupasana is the only Vedic right that a woman is entitled to perform on her own. Of course, there are so many pauranic vratas and pujas that she can perform according to the sastras, but these belong to a different category. Besides, she has naturally a share in all the works of her husband. Apart from caring for the household, she does not have to perform any rite (other than aupasana). Even if she does, it will not yield any fruit, for such is the rule according to the Vedic dharmasastras

We hear people talk of "rights". It is my wish to create an awareness among women about their right, the right to aupasana. I should like every home to become bright with the sacred aupasana fire. Women should fight for this right of theirs and impress upon their husbands the importance of performing aupasana. "Even though you have given up all scriptural karma, you at least do the Gayatrijapa to retain your tenuous connection with the Vedic dharma. If you do not do this japa or even forget the mantra, one day you will feel repentant over it thinking of the upanayana samskara you had", women should tell their husband. "As for me I have had no upanayana, nor am I entitled to mutter the Gayatri. If at all I have any right according to the Vedas, which are the source not only of our religion but of this world and of creation itself, it is this aupasana. If you refuse to perform it I will be denied my Vedic right. " In this manner women must fight for this sacred right of theirs and make their husbands perform aupasana. Aupasana is indeed their one great Vedic "property".

Women must bear in mind the importance of aupasana and agnihotra (like aupasana, agnihotra must also be performed twice a day). "So many fires are burning in the home", they must tell themselves. "We make coffee on the fire and cook food or make the water warm to bathe. By not performing aupasana we will be extinguishing that fire which was witness to our marriage."

The sacred fire must be kept burning by adding rice husk to it now and then. In many ways it is advantageous to pound rice at home for, apart from the husk, we will have nutritious hand-pounded rice to eat. Also the poor labourer who does the pounding will get a little cash or a few handfuls of rice for his or her sustenance. (For the unbroken rice grains offered in the fire the housewife must pound the rice herself. This is a piece of work done to the accompaniment of mantras).

It does not cost much to perform aupasana nor does the rite take long to go through. All you need is the will to do it. Hand-pounded rice is also good for your health. Milled and polished rice is not good. Besides in hand-pounding there is something of the Gandhian ideal too.

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The aupasana fire will keep away all evil spirits and afflictions of all types. Many Brahmins today have exorcist rites performed by others with neem leaves or bamboo sticks. They go to a mosque for relief, or they come to me praying for help. Aupasana is a remedy for all ills and wearing the aupasana ashes is a great protection.

Agni and the vedic religion

The householder has the duty of performing a number of rites in the sacred fire. Aupasana is the first of them. Agni is of the utmost importance to the Vedic religion. This deity is called "Agni-Narayana". The hymns to Rudra also show that he has a connection with the god of fire. In Tiruvannamalai (in Tamil Nadu) Isvara revealed himself as a mountain of fire. In Kerala there is the custom of worshipping Amba [the Mother Goddess] in the form of light (in the flame of the lamp); the idol or yantra is not important. The goddess is invoked in the lamp itself. We speak of Subrahmanya who originated from Siva's third eye as fire incarnate. Thus Agni is of great importance to us. According to researchers, the term Aryan means fire-worshipper. Fire worship is the dominant feature of the religion of Zoroastrianism which is a branch of Vedism.

The sacred fire should keep burning and glowing in home after home. Ghee, milk and other oblations offered in it will produce the aroma that will bring health and mental uplift to all.

I have already stated that whatever the deity invoked in a sacrifice, the oblation must be placed in the sacred fire.

Sacrifices

Four hundred yajnas or sacrifices are said to be mentioned in the Vedas. Of these, aupasana alone is to be performed by all the four varnas. Though the first three varnas have the right to all the other sacrifices, in practice these were performed mostly by Brahmins and Ksatriyas only. But later Ksatriyas too neglected to perform them. There are yajnas to be conducted specially by them to earn physical strength, victory in war, and so on. Sacrifices like rajasuya and asvamedha were performed by imperial rulers. They are yagas that have to be performed by Vaisyas for a good agriculture yield, for wealth, etc. As mentioned before, the yajamana of a sacrifice may be a Ksatriya or a Vaisya but the four priests must be Brahmins. (The idea behind it is that if members of these two castes were to participate directly in the sacrifices their duties like protecting the country and looking after agriculture would suffer.)

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Not all sacrifices need be performed by all Brahmins. A number of them are meant to serve one specific purpose or another. For instance, you must have heard of the putrakamesti in the Ramayana, the sacrifice performed to beget a son.

Any rite meant to fulfil a wish is "kamyakarma" and it comes under the optional category. Then these are rites that are obligatory on your part to conduct for the good of your Atman as well as of the world. They come under the category of "nityakarma", but the word "nitya" here does not denote "daily".

In the category of nityakarma there are 21 sacrifices. There is no compulsion with regard to the rest of the 400. But the 21, included in the forty samskaras, must be performed at least once in a life time. As we have seen, these are divided into groups of seven - pakayajnas, haviryajnas and somyajnas.

Marriage is conducted with offerings made in the fire, is it not? Aupasana, which must be performed every day, is commenced in this fire and it must be preserved throughout one's life. The seven pakayajnas, rites like upanayana and sraddha must be conducted in the aupasana fire. The son lights his aupasana fire during his marriage from his father's aupasana fire. The son's aupasana fire, like his father's must be maintained throughout his life. Thus, without any break, the sacred fire is kept burning in the family generation after generation.

All rites in which the aupasana fire is used and pertain to an individual and his family are "Grhyakarmas". The seven pakayajnas also belong to this category. They are related exclusively to the family and are not very elaborate. Even so they are conducive to the good of the world outside also. Grhyasutras deal with such rites. They belong to the Smritis and are called "Smarta-karmas".

The elaborate works that are especially meant for the well-being of mankind are called "Srautakarmas". They are so called because their procedure is directly based on the authority of Sruti or the Vedas. The sastras dealing with them are "Srautasutras".

I told you, do you remember, that there was no question of Sruti being superior to Smrti or vice versa? Similarly, the Srautasutras and the Grhyasutras are of equal importance. In the sanatana dharma that goes under the name of Hinduism both are to be cared for like our two eyes.

The aupasana fire (lighted at the time of marriage from that of the groom's father) is divided into two in a ceremony called "agniyadhana". One part is called "grhyagni" or "smartagni": it is meant for rites to be performed at home. The second part is srautagni and meant for srauta rites. These two sacred fires must be preserved throughout.

Grhyagni is also called aupasanagni since the daily rite of aupasana is performed in it. This is the fire contained in one "kunda" and so it is called "ekagni". Rites conducted in the family are included in the chapter called "Ekagni-kanda" in the Apastamba-sutra. The

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samskaras and other rites I have so far mentioned are mostly in accordance with this work since the majority of Brahmins in the South are Krsna-Yajurvedins following this sutra. Rigvedins and Samavedins who constitute a minority follow the Asvalayana and Gobhila-sutras respectively. These differences, however, relate only to the rites performed at home. There are no differences in the srauta rites with regard to the different Vedas.

Srautagni meant for the srauta rites is in the form of three fires burning in three mounds. So it is called tretagni. The section in the Apastamba-sutra dealing with rites performed in it is called "Tretagni-kanda". One who worships the three Agnis is called a "tretagni" or "srautin" and, if he worships the srauta and grhya fires, he is called an "ahitagnin". One who performs an elaborate sacrifice like a somayajna is called a "yajva", "diksita" or "makhin". And one who conducts the greatest of the somayajnas, vajapeya, is known as a "vajapeyin". Sacrifices are called variously "kratu", "makha", "isti", "stoma", "samsta". There are some difference between these. Ancient Tamil works contain references to "mutti" (tretagni or srautagni).

One of the three sacred fires, one of the tretagni, is called "garhapatya" and it belongs to the master of the household. It must be kept burning in the garhapatya mound which is circular in shape. In this no oblations are to be made directly. Fire must be taken from it and tended in another mound for the performance of rites relating to the fathers (this is different from the usual sraddha and is ritual performed to the manes every new moon) and also for certain deities. This mound is in the south, so it is called "daksinagni" and it is semicircular in shape. Offerings to deities are made generally in a third fire in the east called "ahavaniya" and it is also to be kindled from the garhapatya fire. In the North any yaga or sacrificial rite is called a "havan", the word being derived from "ahavaniya". The ahavaniya mound is square in shape. Big sacrifices like somayajnas and other meant to propitiate deities are to be conducted in the fire taken from the ahavaniya mound to the yagnasala or the hall where a sacrifice is held.

If aupasana is a grhyakarma, agnihotra is a srauta ceremony and it too must be performed twice a day. Agniyadhana mentioned before and agnihotra are the first two of the seven haviryajnas. Those who perform agnihotra are called agnihotrins. (Nowadays smoking is referred to as agnihotra and going to the races as asvamedha. Such references are intended to be humorous but are indeed blasphemous.)

If the agnihotra fire is extinguished for whatever reason, it must be kindled again through a new adhana (agniyadhana) ceremony. The same applies to the aupasana fire. Now in the majority of houses neither the aupasana nor the agnihotra fire burns. I have mentioned here how these fires can be renewed since most of you perhaps must not have kept them after your marriage.

In aupasana unbroken rice grains are offered in the fire and in agnihotra milk, ghee or unbroken rice grains. (It has become customary now to offer milk in the agnihotra.)

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As already mentioned, the daksinagni and the ahavaniyagni are made from the garhapatyagni. When srauta rites for the fathers have been performed in the daksinagni and other srauta rites in the ahavaniyagni, the two fires no longer have the exalted name of "srautagni" and are just like any other ordinary fire and they have to be extinguished. Only the garhapatya and aupasana fires are to be kept burning throughout.

On every Prathama (first day of the lunar fortnight), a pakayajna and a haviryajna have to be performed in the grhyagni and srautagni respectively. The first is called sthalipaka. "Sthali" is the pot in which rice is cooked and it must be placed on the aupasana fire and the rice called "caru" cooked in it must be offered in the same fire. The rite that is the basis of many others (the archetype or model) is called "prakrti". Those performed after it, but with some changes, are known as "vikrti". For the sarpabali called sravani and the pakayajna called agrahayani, sthalipaka is the prakrti.

The haviryajna performed on every Prathama is "darsa-purna-isti", "darsa" meaning the new moon and "purna" the full moon. So the "istis" or sacrifices conducted on the day following the new moon and the full moon (the two Prathamas) are together given the name of darsa-purna-isti. The two rituals are also referred to merely as "isti". This is the prakrti for haviryajnas.

For soma sacrifices "agnistoma" is the prakrti, the word "stoma" also meaning a sacrifice. In conjunction with "agni", the "sto" becomes "sto" -- "agnistoma". "Sthapita" becomes "establish" in English: here the "sta" of the first word becomes "sta" in the second. Some unlettered people pronounce "star" and "stamp" as "istar" and "istamp". Such phonetic changes are accepted even in the Vedas.

I will now deal briefly with the remaining paka, havir and soma sacrifices.

Pakayajnas are minor sacrifices and are performed at home. Even srauta rites like the first four haviryajnas - adhana, agnihotra, darsa-purna-masa and agrayana - are performed at home. The last three haviryajnas - caturmasya, nirudhapasubandha and sautramani - are performed in a yagasala.

The yagasala is also known as a "devayajna". The Kalpa-sutras contain a description of it, not omitting minute details. There are altars called "cayanas" to be built with bricks. (There are no cayanas for havir and pakayajnas.) As I said before there is the application of mathematics in all this. Several kinds of ladles are used in making offerings in the fire, "tarvi", "sruck" and "sruva". Their measurements are specified, also the materials out of which they are made. No detail is left out. In a nuclear or space research laboratory even the most insignificant job is carried out with the utmost care, so is the case with sacrifices which have the purpose of bringing forth supernatural powers into the world.

To repeat, pakayajnas are simple, "paka" meaning "small", "like a child". Cooked food is also "paka"; that is why the art of cooking is called "pakasastra" and the place where cooking is done is called "pakasala". Just as in sthalipaka cooked rice is offered in the

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fire, so too in pakayajnas cooked grains are offered in the fire. The watery part is not to be drained off - this rite is called "caruhoma". But in aupasana unbroken rice (not cooked) is offered. In the pakayajna called "astaka" purodasa is offered in the fire. Astaka is performed for the fathers. The bright half of a month (waxing moon) is special to the celestials while it is the dark half (waning moon) for the fathers. The latter is called the "apara-paksa" since during this fortnight rites for the fathers are performed. The eighth day of the dark fortnight (Astami) is particularly important for them. The astaka sraddha must be performed on the eighth day of the fortnight during the Sisira and Hemanta seasons (the first and second half of winter) - in the [Tamil] months of Margazhi, Tai, Masi and Panguni. The astaka performed in Masi is said to be particularly sacred. The rite gone through on the day following the astaka is "anvastaka".

"Parvani", one of the pakayajnas, is the prakrti (or the archetype) for sraddhas. Since it is performed every month it is called "masisraddha". (This is according to the Apastamba-sutra. According to the Gautama-sutra "parvana" denotes the sthalipaka performed during each "parva").

The pakayajna "sravani" is also called "sarpabali". On the full moon of the month of Sravana caru rice and ghee are placed in the fire and flowers of the flame of the forest are offered similarly by both hands. Designs have to be drawn with rice flour over an anthill or some other place and offerings made to snakes with the chanting of mantras. This ceremony must be held every full-moon night up to Margazhi (mid-December to mid-January).

On the Margazhi full moon, apart from completing the sarpabali, the pakayajna called "agrahayani" must be performed. Like "sravani", the name "agrahayani" is also derived from the name of the month of the same name - Agrahayani is Margazhi. "Hayana" means "year" and the first month of the year is "Agrahayana". In ancient times the year started with this month. The first of January [of the Gregorian calendar] falls in mid-Margazhi. It was from us that Europe took this as their new year. Though we changed our calendar later, they stuck to theirs. There are two more pakayajnas called "caitri" and "asvayuji": these fall respectively, as their names suggest, in Cittirai and Aippasi.

Caitri is conducted where four roads meet. Since it is performed for Isana it is called "isanabali" : Isana is Paramesvara (Siva). In the other pakayajnas the deities worshipped are different but through them Paramesvara is pleased. It is like a tax paid to the ruler through the sub-collector. In Caitri it is as if the tax is paid directly to the ruler.

In Aippasi, kuruva rice is harvested [in Tamil Nadu]. This is first offered to Isvara in the rite called "asvayuji" before it is taken by us. Similarly samba rice is eaten only after agrahayani is performed in Margazhi.

The haviryajnas are more elaborate, though not so large in scale as the somayajnas. Anything offered in the sacrificial fire is called "havis". In Tamil works like the Tirukkural it is referred to as "avi". However, ghee is specifically referred to as "havis".

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Sacrifices in which the soma juice is offered are called somayajnas and those that are not elaborate are categorised as pakayajnas. Now the other srauta sacrifices among the forty samskaras are called haviryajnas.

When I spoke to you earlier about sacrifices I referred to the men who conduct them. The sacrificer is the yajamana and those who perform the sacrifice for him are rtviks (priests) who consist of the hota, adhvaryu, udgata and brahma.

In pakayajnas there are no rtviks; the householder (as the yajamana) performs the rites with his wife. In haviryajnas there are four rtviks and the yajamana. But the udgata's place is taken by the agnidhra. The udgata is the one who sings the Saman. It is only in somayajnas that there is Samagana, not in haviryajnas. In caturmasya and pasubandha there are more than the usual number of priests. But there is no need to deal with them here. I wanted to give you only a basic knowledge of the important sacrifices that had been conducted for ages until recently.

"Agrayana" is performed on the full moon of Aippasi. In this syamaka grains are offered in the fire. Caturmasya gives the impression that it includes a number of sacrifices. Some of you probably know that "caturmasya" is a term that refers to sannyasins staying at the same place during the rainy season. But it is also the name of a haviryajna to be performed by householders once every four months, in Karttigai, Panguni, Adi. From this onwards the sacrifices are to be performed in a yagasala [built in a public place].

The haviryajna called nirudhapasubandha (or simply "pasubandha") is the first yajna in which there is animal sacrifice, "mrgabali". Though I have used the word "bali", technically speaking - or according to the sastras - it is not strictly a bali. "Bali" means that which is offered directly - and not in the fire. What is offered in the fire is ahuti or havis. The floor offered in the anthill for the snakes is sarpabali. In what are called panca-mahayajnas there is a rite called "vaisvadeva": in this offerings are made in the fire or they are thrown inside and outside the house with the chanting of mantras. The latter are meant for various creatures of the earth and are termed as bali.

When we make an offering to a deity with mantras we must say "svaha". When it is made to the fathers we must say "svadha". The corresponding word to be said when offerings are made to various creatures is "hanta". Here we have something like the gradation of authority: "your majesty", "your honour", and so on.

There are rules to determine which part of the sacrificial animal's body is to be offered in the sacrificial fire. This is not the same as bali. What is offered in the fire is "homa". In pasubandha only one animal is sacrificed.

In yajnas involving animals there is a yupa-stambha or sacrificial post of bamboo or khadira to which the animal is tethered.

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In the last haviryajna called "sautramani" sura (liquor or wine) is offered to appease certain inferior powers or deities for the welfare of the world. Our government, which otherwise strictly enforces prohibition, relaxes the rules to entertain foreigners with drink, considering the gains to be had from them. The oblation of liquor in sautramani is to be justified on the same grounds. It is never offered in the sacrifices meant for higher deities. What is left over of the liquor - what is purified by mantras - is imbibed by the performers of the sacrifice, the quantity taken in being less than a quarter of an ounce. To say that Brahmins drank the soma juice and sura to their heart's content on the pretext of performing sacrifices is an outrageous charge. I have already spoken about the falsehood spread about the partaking of the meat left over from a sacrifice.

I will now deal briefly with somayajnas or somasamstas. What is a samsta? The conclusion of the Samavedic hymns chanted by the udgata is called samsta. Compositions recited in praise of deities are generally known as stotras. But in the Vedic tradition the Rgvedic hymns are "sastras". In the Samaveda such hymns which suggest the seven notes or saptasvara are called stotras. In soma sacrifices it is this, singing of the stotras of the Samaveda, that is the major feature. Homa (placing oblations in the fire) is the dominant feature of paka and haviryajnas while in somayajna it is the singing of stotras.

The name somayaga is derived from the fact that the essence of the soma plant, so much relished by the celestials, is made as an oblation. Apart from this, animals are also sacrificed. Even so the singing of the Saman creates a mood of ecstasy. When a musician elaborates a raga and touches the fifth svara of the higher octave the listeners are transported to the heights of joy. So in the singing of stotras of the Samaveda during the samsta all those assembled for the sacrifice feel as if heaven were upon earth. This is one reason why somayajna is also known as "somasamsta".

In such soma sacrifices there is the full complement of priests - the hota, the adhvaryu, the udgata and the brahma. Each priest is assisted by three others. So in all there are sixteen priests in a soma sacrifice. Agnistoma which is the first of the seven somayajnas is the prakrti (archetype) and the other six are its vikrti. These six are: atyagnistoma, uktya, sodasi, vajapeya, atiratra and aptoryama.

Vajapeya is regarded as particularly important. When its yajamana (sacrificer) comes after having had his ritual bath (avabhrtha snana) at the conclusion of the sacrifice, the king himself holds up a white umbrella for him. "Vaja" means rice (food) and "peya" means a drink. As the name suggests, the vajapeya sacrifice brings in a bountiful crop and plentiful water. The name is appropriate in another sense also. This sacrifice consists of soma-rasa homa, pasu-homa (23 animals) and anna - or vaja-homa. The sacrificer is "bathed" in the rice that is left over. Since the rice is "poured over" him like water the term "vajapeya" is apt.

In the old days a Brahmin used all his wealth in performing the soma sacrifice. Much of this was spent in daksina to the priests and the rest for materials used in the sacrifice.

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Now people are concerned only with their wealth and do not perform even sandhyavandana which does not cost them anything. Among Namputiris, until some forty or fifty years ago, at least one family out of ten performed the somayajna. Since only the eldest member of the family could conduct the sacrifice he alone had the right to property.

There was also a time when even poor Brahmins performed this sacrifice every spring ("vasante vasante ") by begging. A Brahmin who conducted the sacrifice every year was thus called "prati-vasanta-somayajin".

The Vedas will flourish in the world if at least the somayajna called agnistoma or jyotistoma is performed.

Other samskaras

There are certain rites common to all Hindus though they are not included in the forty samskaras. the ears of a child must be pierced ceremonially ("karna -vedhanam"). Initiating a child into the alphabet ("aksarabhyasa"). is another samskara.

Cremation is not included in the forty samskaras but, as already pointed out, it is also a sacrifice, the last one, antyesti, and performed to the chanting of mantras by the son or a close relative of the deceased.

An ahitagnin 's cremation must be performed with the sacred fires he had tended, that is by bringing together his grhyagni and tretagni. The four fires will consume his body and transport his soul to a sacred world. If a person has not worshipped the tretagni and kept only the aupasanagni, his cremation must be performed with that fire.

There is no cremation, of course, for a sannyasin.

Since cremation is regarded as the last sacrifice, it follows that it is a rite that belongs to all except the inwardly mature and enlightened who take to sannyasa. If sannyasa were compulsory for all there would be no dahana-kriya or cremation mentioned in the sastras.

Sahagamana

When people nowadays talk of "sati" or "sahagamana" they mean it to be a custom in which the widow is forcibly thrown into the funeral pyre of her husband. We do not know for sure whether such an act of cruelty was indeed committed at any time in the past in any part of our land, that of forcibly pushing a widow into the funeral pyre of her

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husband. In any case sati has never been a widely practised custom. Only women of exemplary chastity and devotion, who did not wish to live after the passing of their husband, resorted to sahaamana. I have heard stories of such pativratas in my childhood. When the relatives lamented, "Oh, you are burning yourself alive," the widows exclaimed, "This fire does not burn me. I am dying in the warmth of my husband's embrace." Such noble women died with a smile on their lips.

When Hanuman set the asoka woods ablaze with his burning tail, Sita remained unhurt because of her pativrata. When Kumarilabhatta was being scorched in the burning heap of rice-husk, he felt it cool in the presence of Sankara. Because of her supreme devotion to her husband the funeral pyre was as comforting as sandal-paste to a woman immolating herself. It seems even the cloth of such women were not consumed by the fire and were removed from the burning body to be cherished with devotion.

A wife of exemplary pativrata falls dead on the death of her husband. In the story of Kannagi we come across such an example of devotion. When the Pandyan king dies owing to his profound feeling of guilt, his queen also dies with him. There is a similar story told of Padmavati, wife of Jayadeva, author of the Gita-Govindam. In order to test her devotion for her husband, the queen light-heartedly tells her that Jayadeva, who had been out on a journey, was dead. Thereupon Padmavati falls dead. The queen is filled with remorse for her thoughtlessness and it is said that Jayadeva was able to restore his wife to life with the grace of Krsna.

Only women highly devoted to their husbands resorted to sahaamana. They were not forcibly thrown into the fire and were indeed prevented from taking such an extreme step. When Pandu died, Madri, one of his two wives and mother of Nakula and Sahadeva, ascended the funeral pyre of her husband as expiation for her being the cause of his death. The great men who permitted this act of sacrifice prevented Kunti, the second of the two wives, from taking a similar step. They said to her: "Desist from such an extreme act. Your duty now is to bring up your own children as well as Madri's."

When Pukazhanar, father of Apparsvamigal (he had not yet come to be called by that name--he was then Marul Nikkiyar), died his wife Madiniyar immolated herself in her husband's funeral pyre. This story is told in the Periyapuram. The chastity of Madiniyar's daughter was even of a higher order. Her name was Tilakavati. She was young and not yet married. It was her devotion to her husband-to-be that makes her a memorable character. She had been betrothed to Kalippakayar who was commander-in-chief of the Pallava army. But at the same time Pukazhanar died word came that the young Kalippakayar had been killed in battle. The young Tilakavati decided at once to put an end to her life. "I became his (Kalippakayar's) wife the moment I was betrothed to him. I will not look upon anybody else as my husband. Since he is gone I too will follow him in death. "Then Appar, that is Marul Nikkiyar, said, to his sister: "What will I do without my parents and without you? I am such a small boy. I too will accompany you to the other world." Tilakavati had now no choice but to change her mind so that she could look after her young brother. (True to her name she has remained as ornament to

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womanhood). Later her brother embraced Jainism with the new name of Dharmasena and it was she who weaned him from it. She was indeed instrumental in his becoming the poet-saint celebrated as Apparsvamigal.

In Rajasthan there were so many noble women who earned a place in history by resorting to sahadamaana.

I should like to emphasise here that there was no compulsion for a widow to ascend the funeral pyre of her husband. But women who voluntarily resorted to sahadamaana were revered and the sastras supported their action. Even today we hear rare cases of "sati", though the law does not permit it and the relatives dissuade such women from taking the extreme step. This seems to me particularly worthy of appreciation. In the old days the circumstances were favourable for the widow to perish in the fire with her husband. So, without being compelled by others and urged only by the desire to attain to a higher world, one or two widows immolated themselves. But today, in the age of Kali and of reforms, the circumstances are not favourable for such an act of sacrifice. So, despite this, if a woman decides to follow her husband in death it must be out of true devotion to him.

I have often impressed upon you the importance of gurukulavasa. Like sati it is now a forgotten tradition. We find it difficult nowadays to run a gurukula. So if one or two boys come forward to study with a preceptor in his home and are prepared to observe bhiksacarya (that is begging for their food) their example must be considered worthier than that of brahmacarins of the past.

Like sanyasa, sahadamaana has never been compulsory. I will tell you an important reason for this. The dharmasastras deal extensively with the conduct of widows. If everybody was expected to be a sannyasin there would be, as I said before, no need for cremation to be brought under the purview of the sastras. Similarly, if every widow was expected to immolate herself in the funeral pyre of her husband, where would be the need for a separate code of conduct for them (that is for the widows)?

Nobody can foretell when the hand of death will strike. It can come in one's childhood or during the time one is a householder. So everyone cannot be expected to die a sannyasin. If the sastras insist that on the death of a man his widow must also be cremated with him, then there will be no need for codifying "vidhava dharma" (code of conduct for widows).

Goal of samskaras

I have dealt with a large number of samskaras, indeed more than forty of them. The Brahmin is expected to perform sacrifices almost all through his life, thereby making his life itself a sacrifice in the cause of mankind. On his death his body is cremated with the chanting of mantras and this rite also brings good to the world. While the samskaras refine a man, purify him, the mantras chanted at the time create benign vibrations in the world.

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And, while each karma is apparently meant for the performer as an individual, it also brings benefit to the entire world. In truth there is no karma that does not benefit mankind in general. All rites begin with the prayer, "Jagat--hitaya Krsnaya". When we chant the Gayatri we do not say, "may the sun god quicken or inspire my intelligence", but "our" intelligence. So the gayatri is a prayer made on behalf of all creatures (It would be perverse to argue that it should be enough if one Brahmin did the Gayatri-japa for the benefit of all--the word "our" is not to be construed thus. Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaisyas must mutter the Gayatri not only for their own good but for that of all castes, all creatures including animals, birds, insects, all sentient beings.)

You must have seen that sacrifices constitute the major portion of the samaskaras. There is a mantra in the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad(4. 4. 22) which describes the benefits derived from their performance. It says that Brahmins endeavour to realise the Self through Vedic learning, through the performance of sacrifices, through charity, through austerities and through fasts. But when this purpose has been accomplished they renounce all (rites including sacrifices) and become sannyasins. It follows that all the elaborate sacraments are performed for the cessation of these very sacraments. Of all the benefits derived from the rituals like sacrifices this is the highest, the very abandonment of rituals. How does a big karma like a sacrifice prepare you for the renunciation of that very karma, that very sacrifice?

There are two types of karma. One is doing what we like. This, instead of purifying the mind, muddles it and make our burden of karma heavier. The second is the performance of rites without any expectation of rewards, dedicating them to Isvara in a spirit of sacrifice. In the second type we are cleansed inwardly and the burden of our karma is made lighter and ultimately we are taken to the point beyond which it is not necessary to perform any rites. A man who has renounced all works in this way may, with the compassion of Parasakti, continue to work for the good of mankind. But even though he is a doer he will not be conscious of that ability.

How is the impurity of the mind washed away? If you perform a big sacrifice without any desire in your heart, without any feelings of hatred against anybody and without any consideration of loss or gain, success or failure, your mind will be cleansed. The mind, body and speech must be totally involved in it and must remain fixed on a single goal. Then all the impurities will be burnt away. It is like the rays of the sun passing through a magnifying glass and converging on a piece of paper and burning it. There are a hundred thousand things to do in a sacrifice; there are so many mantras to be chanted; so many different materials to be collected. So the performer's mind will be fixed on a single goal.

If a king is to perform a horse sacrifice(asvamedha), he has to look into so many different requirements. Different animals have to be brought to the place of sacrifice including even a tiger. If a man devotes himself for a number of years with a single-minded purpose and devotion to some work or other his mind will be made pure and he will reach the stage when there will be no need for him to perform any more rites. To build a gopuram, to dig a large pond or to be engaged in some other public work is to make one's

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mind taintless. In fact the mental purity so achieved seems to my mind to be a reward greater than anything else.

Even if a man does not take to sanyasa after performing sacrifices as a householder, he goes to the meritorious world. With the grace of Isvara he becomes one with that very Isvara. And, when Isvara himself is absorbed in the Brahman as the Paramatman, he too becomes one with him. When Isvara emerges to create the world he does not become trapped in it. Or there is another way of putting it. Krsna Paramatman speaks of the "yoga-bhrasta", one who dies without realising the Self in spite of practising yoga. In his next birth such a man starts where he left off in the earlier birth and ascends to a higher state. What is said about people who practise yoga applies also to those who perform sacrifices. It means that a man who conducts sacrifices but dies before becoming a sannyasin is born again with a greater sense of discrimination in his next birth and with enough maturity to forsake all karma and become a sannyasin.

Those who are not entitled to all samskaras will reach state by doing their work properly, by being devoted to God, by reciting his praises, by performing aupasana and by offering libations to their fathers.

A day in the life of a bramhin

"How can any Brahmin perform so many samskaras these days?" is perhaps a natural question. "What is the use of speaking about things that are not practicable?" Suppose I myself give two lists, the first containing the samskaras that are easy to perform these days and the second containing those that are not so easy. What will happen then? You will keep on adding items to the second from the first list and, eventually, I am afraid nothing will be left for you to perform. So, on your retirement at least, you must perform all the religious rites imposed on you as Brahmins. You must not ask for an extension of service with your present employers nor look for a new job.

Let me now speak about a Brahmin's daily religious life according to the sastras. It is indeed a harsh routine. A Brahmin must get up five nadikas, or two hours, before sunrise. "Panca -panca-usatkale", so it is said. "Panca-panca" means five*five - "panca-panca usatkale" denotes during the 25th nadika". From sunset to sunrise is 30 nadikas. So a Brahmin must rise during the 25th nadika- from this time to sunrise is "Brahma muhurta".

After getting up, he cleans his teeth, bathes in cold water and performs sandhyavandana and japa. Next he goes through aupasana and agnihotra. These rites come under "devayajna", sacrifices to the gods. Next is "Brahmayajna", the daily study and chanting of the Vedas. As part of this rite there are some tarpanas or libations to be offered. (For people following certain sutras these come later). If daytime is divided into eight parts one part would have been over by now.

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In the second part of the daytime, the Brahmin must teach his disciples the Vedas-this is adhyapana. Afterwards, he must gather flowers himself for the puja he is to perform. Since he is not expected to earn a salary- and if he does not own any land received as gift - he must beg for his food and also for the materials for the conduct of various sacrifices. The Brahmin has the right to beg, but it is a restrictive right because it means that he can take only the minimum needed for the upkeep and what is required for the performance of the rituals. A considerable part of what he receives as gifts is to be paid as daksina to the priests officiating at the sacrifices he performs.

Of the six "occupations" of the Brahmin one is "pratigraha" or accepting gifts. Another is "dana", making donations to others. It is asked why Brahmins alone have the right to receive gifts. The answer is that they are also enjoined to make gifts to others. Indeed, the Brahmin accepts gifts for the purpose of the charity he himself has to render. This apart, he has also to make gifts during the rites to be mentioned next, "atithya" and "bhutayajna".

After the second part of the day and a portion of the third have been spent thus, the Brahmin must bathe again and perform madhyahnika. Next he does pitr-tarpana, that is he offers libations to the fathers; and this rite is followed by homa and puja. In the latter rite he must dedicate to the deities all those objects that he perceives with his five senses(the five jnanendriyas). It must now be midday and the fourth part of the daytime will have been over and the Brahmin must have completed the rites meant for the deities, the Vedas and the fathers.

Of the five great sacrifices or panca-mahayajnas, two remain- manusyayajna or honouring and feeding the guests and "bhutayajna" which includes bali to the creatures of the earth and feeding the poor (vaisvadeva). Rice is offered in the sacrificial fire and also as bali(that is without being placed in the fire). In bali, food is placed in different parts of the house to the chanting of mantras- food meant for outcastes, beggars, dogs, birds, etc. In the manusya-yajna, guests are entertained and it is also known as atithya. The Brahmin has his mealtime only after going through these rites. Until then he must not take anything except perhaps some milk or buttermilk, but never coffee or any snacks. If he has any other sacrifices to conduct, paka, havir or soma, his mealtime will be further delayed. If he has a sraddha to perform also he will have to eat later than usual. A sraddha ceremony must be commenced only in the "aparahna": I will tell you what it means.

Daytime, we have seen, is divided into eight parts. But it can also be divided into five, each of six nadikas. If the sun rises at 6, 6 to 8. 24 is morning or "pratah-kala"; 8. 24 to 10. 48 is "sangava-kala"; and 10. 48 to 1. 12 is "madhyahnika". From 1. 12 to 3. 36 it is "aparahna"; and from 3. 36 to 6 (or sunset) is "sayam-kala". (The time close to sunset is "pradosa". "Dosa" means night, the prefix "pra" meaning "pre" or "before". The English "pre" is derived from "pra". Pradosa thus is the time before night).

I said that the time for sraddha is aparahna. Rites meant for the gods may be performed only after the completion of the sraddha. After his meal, the Brahmin must read the

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Puranas. Next he has the duty of teaching members of other castes their hereditary vocations, arts and crafts. He does not have a moment for rest or relaxation. For soon it will be time for his evening bath, sandhyavandana, sacrifices and japa. Vaisvadeva has to be performed at night also before the Brahmin has his meal and retires to bed. On most nights he takes only light food consisting of fruits, milk, etc. On Ekadasi he has to fast the whole day.

There is not a moment without work. It is clear that, if the Brahmin created the sastras, it is not because he wanted to live a life of ease and comfort. On the contrary, the sastras impose on him a life of hardship and austerity, a life of utter physical and mental discipline.

Even today Brahmins who work in offices or other establishments must try to live according to the sastras. They must get up at 4 a. m. (Brahma muhurta), perform aupasana, agnihotra, Brahmajayna, etc, in the traditional manner. They may perform puja and madhyahnika during the sangava time (8. 24 a. m. to 10. 48 a. m.). "Madhyahnika" as the name suggests is a midday rite but, making allowances for present-day life, it may be performed during the sangava kala. In the evening too the rites may be gone through in the sastric manner. as they say, if there is a will there is a way. On holidays it must be possible for a Brahmin to perform all the rites expected of him.

Even those who are on the morning shift and have to rush to their places of work must perform the rites as best they can. In the evening the Gayatri-japa be extended to compensate for non-performance in the morning. If it is morning shift for a week, will it not be mid-shift or night shift in the subsequent weeks? There could be adjustments made to suit these timings.

Brahmins must feel repentant if they fail to perform the rites they are duty-bound to perform. They must devote the years of their retirement to the pursuit of their dharma instead of feeling sorry for not going out to work. There are rare cases ---perhaps one in a lakh---of people who have learned the Vedas during their retirement and lived the rest of their life according to the tenets of the sastras.

The rites of our religion go back to a time when no other faith was prevalent. We must make every effort to ensure that they do not cease to be performed. They are not meant for our sake alone [as individuals] but for the welfare of all mankind.

(See also Chapter 3, Part Twenty)

jatis – why so many differences?

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There are four varnas - Brahmin, Ksatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras. We identify "varnas" with "jatis". In point of fact, varna and jati are not the same. The varnas are only the four mentioned above, that is Brahmins, Ksatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras. Within each there are many jatis. Among Brahmins there are Ayyars, Ayyangars, Raos, and so on. In the fourth varna there are Mudaliars, Pillais, Reddis, Naikkars, Nayudus, Gaundars, Padayacis.

In common parlance jati is used for varna. I am also using the two as interchangeable terms.

The sastras lay down separate rites and practices for the four jatis (that is the four varnas). This means that within the fold of the same religion, Hinduism, there are numerous differences. Food cooked by one caste is not to be eaten by the another. A young man belonging to one jati is not to marry a girl belonging to another. The vocation practised by one jati is not to be practiced by the another. The differences are indeed far too many.

Apart from the large number of divisions in each varna already existing, more and more divisions (or jatis) are coming into being. Thus Hinduism appears to be a strange religion.

Hindus today feel ashamed of the fact that a religion of which they have otherwise reason to be proud (because it once belonged to the whole world) should have so many differences in it. Other religions too have their dos and don'ts. The Ten Commandments are meant for all Christians. So are the injunctions of the Quran for all Muslims. But in Hinduism the dos and don'ts are not the same for all. What one man does as part of his dharma becomes adharmas if done by another. For instance, it is dharma for one man to wear the sacred thread and chant the Vedas, while the same is adharmas for another. If the person who chants the Vedas does not bathe and keep his stomach empty he will be guilty of adharmas. Another, however, need not necessarily bathe nor observe fasts. When I see that our religion is still alive with all these differences, I am reminded of the words of a great man. . "That one day all of us will die is not to be wondered at. The real wonder is that we have nine openings (or gates) in our body but our life do not escape through any of them. "

Navadvare sarire' smin ayuh sravati santanam

Jivatityadbhutam tatra gacchatiti kim adbhutam

Similarly one must wonder at the fact that our religion is still alive in spite of all its differences and in spite of the fact that people are troubled by doubts about the same.

For the same it is offence to chant the Vedas, while for the others it is an offence not to chant the same. Why should there be so many differences in our religion and why should it seem to be discriminatory? Some feel that it is shameful even to speak about the differences and believe that they are a blot on our faith, which has otherwise many worthy features. While some Hindus try to satisfy themselves about these somehow,

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many find them to be a constant irritant. Then there are also people who feel angry about these differences and turn atheists as a reaction to the same.

Some are at heart proud of Hinduism but want the varna system to be scrapped and all Hindus to form a single class without any distinction as is the case with the followers of other religions. "The Vedas must be thrown open to all and there must be one common form of worship for all", they declare. "We must do away with the system of separate religious rites and practices." Some go further and claim that such was the concept obtaining in our religion during the time of our forefathers. "The original thinkers of our religion who proclaimed the oneness of the individual self and the Paramatman, "they argue, "would not have believed in such differences among the individual souls. Krsna Paramatman says in the Gita that the vocations are assigned to people according to differences in their nature, not according to their birth." So they hold caste to be a blot on our religion and believe that the system of hereditary occupations did not originally obtain but was a later invention.

We must examine these views in some detail

Caste according to the Vedas and gitas

Let us first consider the view that according to the Vedas themselves caste is not based on birth. (After all, the Vedas are the source of our religion. So it is essential to be clear on this point.) Earlier I sought to counter the view that there was Vedic sanction for post-puberty marriages. The present contention about what the Vedas say about caste is similar, being based on a passage read out of context. What is mentioned as an exception to the rule is being interpreted as a rule itself. I will give firm proof in support of the view that caste is based on birth and not on the nature or quality of individuals. The caula of children belonging to particular caste is performed at the age of three, the upanayana at five or seven. These are samskaras based on birth and performed in childhood. So it would be absurd to claim that one's vocation is based on one's nature of qualities. Is it possible to determine one's qualities or nature in early childhood?

Let us now come to Gita. It is true that the Gita speaks of "samadarsana", "seeing the selfsame thing in everything and everybody. But it would be perverse to argue on this basis that the Gita does not recognise any caste distinctions. When, according to Krsna, do we attain the stage of samatva, the stage when we will look upon all as equal? We must consider the context: The Lord speaks of the samadarsana of the wise man who is absorbed in the Atman and for whom there exists nothing [other than the Atman] including creation - and even the fact that Isvara is the creator is of no consequence to him. The Lord says that all are equal for a man when he renounces karma entirely to become an ascetic and attains the final state of enlightenment. The Vedas and the Upanisads say the same thing. Only an individual belonging to the highest plane can see all things as One [as one Reality]. Samadarsana is not of this phenomenal world of

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plurality nor is it for us who are engaged in works. The Lord speaks in the Gita of samadarsana, samacitta and samabhuddhi from the yogin's point of view, but by no means does he refer to "samakaryatva" as applied to our worldly existence.

Some concede that Bhagavan does not deny caste differences, but however argue that, according to the Lord, caste is not based on birth but on the individual qualities of people. In support they quote this line from the Gita. "Caturvarnyam mayasrstam guna-karma-vibagasah".

When do we come to know the qualities that distinguish an individual? At what age does he reveal his nature? How are we to determine this and impart him the education and training necessary for the vocation that will be in keeping with his qualities? Take, for instance, the calling of the Brahmin who has to join the gurukula when he is seven or eight years old. His education covers a period of twelve years; after this alone will he be qualified for his vocation which includes, among other things, teaching. If a man's occupation were to be fixed until after his character and qualities are formed, it would mean a waste of his youthful years. Even if he were to learn a job or trade thus at a late age it would mean a loss not only to himself but also to society. The Lord speaks again and again that we must be constantly engaged in work and that we must not remain idle even a moment. How then would he approve of an arrangement in which every individual has to be without any work until his vocation is determined according to his character?

Does this mean that the Lord lends his support in theory alone to the system of vocations according to the differing qualities of people and that in actual practice he wants occupations to be based on birth? But he is not like a politician [of these days] speaking one thing and doing something entirely different.

What do we see in Krsna's own life as a divine incarnation? When Arjuna refuses to fight saying that it is better to become a mendicant than spill the blood of friends and relatives even if it be to rule over an empire, what does the Lord tell him? He urges Arjuna to fight. "You are born a Ksatriya and you are duty-bound to wage war. Take up your bow and fight".

Here too it may be argued thus: "Arjuna was a great warrior and a great hero. His reluctance to take up arms against friends and relatives must have been a momentary affair. His inner quality and temperament were that of a man of valour. So the Lord enthuses him to go to war. What he refers to as Arjuna's svadharma (own duty) cannot be the same as his jati dharma (caste duty). The Lord must be referring to Arjuna's natural character as his svadharma. "

If such an argument is correct, what about the character of Dharmaputra (Yudhisthra)? From the very beginning he is averse to war and anxious to make peace with the Kauravas. Does he not go so far as to say that he would not insist on half the kingdom but he would be satisfied with just five houses? Krsna goes to the Kauravas as his envoy [of peace] but is himself dragged into war by them. Earlier he encouraged Yudhisthra to

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subjugate all his neighbouring kingdoms to become an imperial ruler and perform the rajasuya. Does Dharmaputra desire such glory? His inner character and temperament show that he is not warlike by nature nor do they suggest that he desires the status of a mighty imperial ruler. Sri Krsna Paramatman makes such a man practice his dharma of a Ksatriya. All this shows that by svadharma it is jati dharma that the Lord means. Men like Dronacarya were born Brahmins but they took up the duty of Ksatriyas. Bhagavan does not deprecate them since they were otherwise great men, but all the same he does not show any displeasure when Bhima taunts Dronacarya for having forsaken the dharma of his birth. Thus we have confirmation that by svadharma the Lord means the jati dharma of birth.

Then, why does he use the phrase "guna-karma-vibhagasah" in the Gita?

Character and vocation by birth

It is jatidharma that goes to make the inner guna (inner quality or nature) of an individual. So Sri Krsna's dictum in the Gita that the caturvana division is in accord with the gunas and the idea that the caste is based on birth are one and the same. There is no conflict between the two. You cannot find fault with Sri Krsna for his practice being at variance with his precept.

Parasurama and Dronacarya were Brahmins but they were Ksatriyas by nature. On the other hand, Visvamitra, a valorous Ksatriya king known for his violent and passionate temperament, became a Brahmin rsi. Cases like this are extremely rare, and are exceptions to the rule of jati dharma. On the whole we see that the Lord functions on the basis that, whatever be the outward qualities of individuals, their inner quality is in keeping with their hereditary vocations.

How can birth be the basis of the quality on which one's occupation is based? Before a man's individual character develops, he grows in a certain environment, the environment evolved through the vocation practiced in his family from generation to generation. He adopts this vocation and receives training in it from his people. It is in this manner that his guna is formed, and it is in keeping with his work. Everybody must have the conviction that he is benefited by the occupation to which he is born. When people in the past had this attitude in the past they were free from greed and feelings of rivalry. Besides, though they were divided on the basis of their vocations, there was harmony among them. Children born in such a set-up naturally develop a liking and aptitude for the family vocation. So what is practised according to birth came to be the same as that practised according to guna. Whatever the view of reformers today, in the old days an individual's ability to do a job was in accord with his guna; and in the dharma obtained in the past a man practised his calling according to his guna. Now it has become topsy-turvy.

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What is the view of the psychologists on this question? According to them, heredity and environment play a crucial part in determining a man's character, abilities and attitudes. In the past all vocations were handed down from grandfather to father and from father to son. Besides, each group practising a particular occupation or trade lived in a separate area in the village. The Brahmins, for instance, lived in the agrahara and, similarly, each of the other jatis had its own quarter. So the environment also helped each section to develop its special skills and character. These two factors - heredity and environment - were greatly instrumental in shaping a person's guna and vocation.

Instead of speaking about the subject myself, I will cite the views of Gandhiji who is much respected by the reformists: "The Gita does talk of varna being according to guna and karma, but guna and karma are inherited by birth." So the fact that Krsna Paramatman's practice is not at variance with his doctrine is confirmed by Gandhiji. Modernists should not twist and distort the Vedas and sastras and the pronouncements of Krsna Paramatman to suit their own contentions.

Krsna is usually imperative in his utterances. "I speak, you listen," such is his manner. But when he speaks of people and their duties, he does not inpose himself saying "I speak thus", but instead he points to what is laid down in the sastras to be the authority. During Krsna's own time the various castes were divided according to birth: we learn this, without any room for doubt, from the Mahabharata, the Bhagavata and the Visnu Purana. I mention this because some research scholars today are likely to put forward the view that caste based on birth evolved after the time of Krsna. The epic and the Puranas mentioned above declare categorically that during the age of Sri Krsna Paramatman the sastras dealing with varnasrama were the authority for dharma. It was at such a time, when an individual's vocation was determined by birth, that the Lord declared in clear terms :

Yah sastra -vidhim utsrjya vartate kama-karatah

Na sa siddhim avapnoti na sukham na param gatim

Tasmacchastram pramanam te karyakaryavyavasthitau

Jnatva sastravidhan oktam karma kartum iha'rhasi

-Bhagavadgita, 16. 23 & 24.

Who so forsakes the injunctions of the sastras and lives according to his own desires does not obtain liberation, finds no happiness. (The Sastras determine your work, what is right and what is wrong. You must know the way shown by the sastras and pursue the work - vocation - according to them.)

Sri Krsna establishes that an individual owes his caste to his birth. There should not be the slightest doubt about it.

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Vocations according to guna not inpractice

Critics of varna dharma will perhaps argue thus: "Let the pronouncements of the Vedas and of Krsna be whatever on the subject of jati dharma. We do not accept them because they represent a partisan view. We must devise a system in which vocations are determined according to one's guna or quality and mental proclivity and not according to birth. Caste systems must be done away with."

What is the relationship between a man's vocation on the one hand and his guna - his character and natural inclination - on the other? If you pause to think about the question, you will realise that this relationship is highly exaggerated these days. Everybody suffers from the sense of self-importance and want a great measure of freedom for himself in all things. That is the reason why people insist that their feelings and thoughts must be respected. They do not pause for a moment to consider whether such feelings are helpful to society, whether they are good or harmful for it. And if they are harmful, should they not be checked for the sake of the community? Freedom is demanded for everything without such questions being taken into consideration.

If we examine how far the natural inclination and character of a man have to do with the work he likes to do, we will discover that in 90 out of 100 cases there is no connection at all between the two. A person of vairagya (that is one who is detached and without any passion) would not like to stick to any job. Another who is full of energy and enthusiasm and who does his work after careful planning would be averse to any job of a routine nature. Some are keen to join army and some the navy and, in contrast, there are some others who would turn their face against either even if compelled to do so. Those with a flair for writing, music or painting would discountenance any type of drab work.

But how many get the job for which they think that they are fitted and for which they have a natural aptitude? Not even 10 per cent.

All sorts of people come to the Matha to see me. They pay their respects and tell me about what they want to do in life. I gather the impression that most of them are in jobs that are not in keeping with their interests or aptitude. A father comes and tells me: "My son has applied for admission to the engineering college as well as to the commerce college. If he fails to get admission to the first he will join the second. If he join the engineering college there is nothing like that. I seek your blessings." Is there any connection between the job of an engineer and that of a commerce graduate? Even so the boy in question is prepared to the work of an engineer (like surveying) or of a commerce graduate (like auditing). A young man tells me: "I have passed my Intermediate" I am not sure whether I should join the medical college or prepare for the IAS examination. " Again what is the connection between the work of a doctor and that of a collector perhaps? If one's profession is based on one's qualities, how is it that a young man who wants to become a doctor also contemplates a career in the IAS?

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What would you say of a lawyer or an industrialist joining a political party and eventually becoming a minister? Among ministers today we see not only lawyers and industrialists but also ex-officials, doctors, professors, and so on. Are the qualities required for a minister the same as those required for a doctor, lawyer or professor?

There being no compatibility between a man's job and his qualities and natural inclination is a phenomenon not confined to the "higher" levels. Sometimes a devotee comes and tell me: "I was a counter clerk in a cinema. Now I have joined in the army. Please bless me". Another says: "I was a waiter in a restaurant but now I manage a Kiosk." What is the connection between the job of a cinema assistant and a soldier or between that of a waiter and that of a wayside shopkeeper?

Today the government professes to be "socialistic". Its view is that appointments are to be made not on the basis of caste but on the basis of character and educational qualifications of the candidates. But when it conducts examinations for big positions some are selected for IAS and some for IPS from the same group of candidates. Now from the point of view of natural inclination what is the relation, say, between a collector and a police superintendent? So long as no technical work is involved, employees of one department are transferred to another where the work is entirely different. In these instances there is nothing to support the theory of quality and mental proclivity in the allotment of work.

The majority of people do not choose their jobs according to their inborn character. They somehow learn to adjust themselves to their work whatever it happens to be. On the whole there is competition for such jobs are very paying. To talk of inborn nature, quality or mental outlook is all bunkum. Would it not be ridiculous if "svadharm" comes to mean the job or vocation that brings the maximum money for the minimum of work?

A wrong notion

A wrong notion has gained currency that in the varnasrama system the Brahmins enjoys more comfort than the others, that he more income, that he has to exert himself less than the others.

In the order created by our sastras the Brahmin has to make as much physical effort as much physical effort as the peasant. Since, at present, there is ignorance about the rites he has to perform, people erroneously believe that he makes others work hard and himself lazes about and enjoys himself. The Brahmin has to wake up at four in the morning and bathe in cold water, rain or shine, warm or cold. Then, without a break, he has to perform one rite after another: sandhyavandana, Brahmajayna, aupasana, puja, vaisvadeva and one of the 21 sacrifices. If you sit before sacrificial fire for four days you will realise how difficult it is with all the heat and smoke. How many are the vows and the fasts the Brahmin has to keep and how many are the ritual baths.

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Other castes do not have to go through such hardships. A Brahmin cannot eat "cold rice" in the morning like a peasant - he has no "right" to it. The dharmasastras are not created for his convenience or benefit, nor to ensure that he has a comfortable life. He would not have otherwise imposed on himself the performance of so many rites and a life of such rigorous discipline. When he has his daytime meal it will be 1 or 2. (On the day of a sraddha it will be three or four). This is the time the peasant will have his rest after his meal under a tree out in the field where he works. And the Brahmin's meal, mind you, is as simple as the peasant's. There is no difference between the humble dwelling of the peasant and that of the Brahmin. Both alike wear cotton. The peasant may save money for the future but not the Brahmin. He has no right either to borrow money or to live in style.

In the "Yaksa-prasna" of the Mahabharata the simple life of Brahmin is referred to:

Pancame' hani saste va sakam pacati svegrhe

Anrni ca' pravasi ca sa varicara modate

If day time is divided into eight parts, the Brahmin may have his food only in the fifth or sixth part after performing all his rites. Before that he has neither any breakfast nor any snacks. And what does he eat? Not any rich food, no sweets like almonds crushed in sweetened milk. "Sakam pacati" - the Brahmin eats leafy vegetables growing on the banks of rivers, such areas being no one's property. Why is he asked to live by the river side? It is for his frequent baths and for the leafy vegetables growing free there and for which he does not have to beg. He should not borrow money: that is the meaning of the word "anrni", because if he developed the habit of borrowing he would be tempted to lead a life of luxury. Poverty and non-acquisitiveness (aparigraha) are his ideals. A Brahmin ought not to keep even a blade of grass in excess of his needs.

Now even the government and big industrialists are in debt. If there any people who live according to the sastras, without being indebted to anybody and without bowing to anybody and at the same time maintaining their dharma, it is the tribe called narikuravas.

"Apravasam" (mentioned in the verse) means that a Brahmin must not leave his birth place and settle elsewhere. Honour or dishonour, profit or loss, he must live in his birth place practising his dharma. Nowadays, for the sake of money, people settle in England or America abandoning their motherland and their traditional way of life - and they are proud of it. Such a practice is condemned severely by the sastras.

If all the castes worked hard and lived a simple life there could be no ill-will among people and there would then be no cry that caste must be done away with. One reason for the "reformist view" is that today one caste is well-to-do and comfortable while another is poor and has to toil. Simplicity and hard work bring satisfaction and inward purity. Such a state of simple and happy life prevailed in our country for a thousand, ten thousand years.

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I said that in these days too vocations are not chosen on the basis of a man's qualities or natural inclinations. The only considerations are income and comforts. All the people are on the lookout for all kinds of jobs and this has resulted in increasing rivalry and jealousy, not to speak of growing unemployment.

In the beginning, when vocations were determined on the basis of birth, everyone developed an aptitude for the work allotted to him as well as the capacity to learn it easily. This is no longer the case now. In the past a man's vocation was like a paternal legacy and he was naturally very proficient in it. Now there is a universe inefficiency and incompetence

Equal Opportunities

As we have already seen, we cannot sustain the claim that vocations are determined today according to the qualities of individuals and their inclinations or aptitudes. Also untenable is the demand for equal opportunities for all. To take an example: there are a certain number of seats in medical and engineering colleges. For highly specialised and new subjects like nuclear science the seats are very few. When the candidates possessing the same qualifications (or merit) apply for admission to the colleges teaching these subjects only a fixed number are selected. Naturally, it is not practicable to choose all. Would it be right to contend that all candidates, even though equally qualified, who want to do research in a new science like atomic physics, should be given an opportunity? All those who apply for high positions in the government will not be selected for appointment even though they possess more or less same qualifications. The government decides that we need so many doctors in the country, so many scientists, so many specialists and so many officials. In choosing them, a number of candidates are naturally rejected. This system is accepted by all.

It is in the same way as candidates are selected for seats in the colleges or for appointments in the government that a certain percentage of people are thought to be sufficient for the purpose of conducting the rites meant to invoke the heavenly powers for the happiness of mankind - and these few function on a hereditary basis. Not more are needed for such a task since all the other work required for the proper functioning of the society will otherwise suffer. This is the principle on which vocations are divided. People agitate for the application for the principle of equality (a product of French Revolution) to scriptural matters without realising that it has hardly any place even in worldly affairs.

Strength of Unity

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When there are so many jatis and each lives separately from the rest, how can the community remain united as a whole? But the fact is unity did exist in the past. Indeed it is now that our society is divided because of ill-will among the various groups. The binding factor in the past was faith in our religion and its scriptures. The temple strengthened this faith and the sense of unity, the temple which belongs to the whole village or town and which is situated at its centre. People had the feeling of togetherness in the presence of Isvara as his children. In festival all jatis took part contributing to their success in various ways.

In the rathotsava (car festival) of a temple, all sections including Harijans pulled the chariot together. On returning home they did not bathe before eating. This practice has the sanction of the sastras. [Talking of the past] it was a time when people were divided in their callings but were of one heart. Though stories are concocted that there was no unity since society was divided into a number of jatis, the fact is people then had faith in the sastras and in the temples and this faith was a great unifying force. Today, ironically enough, hatred and enmity are spread between the various jatis in the name of unity. That is the reason why nowadays the cry against the caste has become a cry against the vedic dharma and temples.

The vedas themselves proclaim that when a man attains to the highest state [that is jnana] he does not need either the Vedas themselves or the temples. The Upanisads too have it that in the state of jnana or supreme awareness the Vedas are not Vedas, the Brahmin is not a Brahmin, the untouchable is not an untouchable. It is to reach this state - the state in which the Vedas and all the differences in society cease to be- that you need the very Vedas, temples and caste differences. The condition of utter non-difference, may it be noted, is realised through these very means.

He who constantly strives to be free from worldly existence ultimately discovers that everything is one, so proclaim the Vedas. Krsna Paramatman pronounces the same truth when he says that in the end there is worklessness - "Tasya karyam na vidyate".

In the phenomenal world with its works and day-to-day affairs, it does not make sense to claim that there are no differences. The sastras, however, teach us that even in such a world we must be filled with love for all castes, for all creatures and we must look upon all as the same without regarding one as inferior to the rest or superior. It means the attitude of non-difference is in love, not in karma. "We must always feel inwardly that all are one and we must be permeated with love for all. But in karma, in action there must be differences," such is the teaching of the sastras.

"Bhavadvaitam sada kuryat, kriyadvaitam na karayet", so it is said. Oneness must be a matter of our feelings, not our actions. Unless differences are maintained outwardly the affairs of the world will be conducted neither in a disciplined nor in a proper manner. It is only then that Atmic inquiry can be practised without confusion and without being mentally agitated, In sanatana dharma worldly life has been systemised as though it were real for the very purpose of its being recognised and experienced as unreal.

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In this worldly life, the four varnas developed branches and many jatis came into being. From the saptasvaras (the seven notes) are formed the 72 melakarta ragas. And from them have developed countless musical modes called janya ragas. In the same way, from the four varnas the numerous jatis were born. Separate dharmas separate customs and rites, evolved for these jatis.

Hinduism and other religions

We feel apologetic about the differences in Hindu society especially since we think that the followers of other religions are not divided in the same way as we are. The latter are scornful of Hinduism on this score and some Hindus themselves feel that the differences in our society are unjust. But, if you pause to reflect on the subject, you will realise that if our civilization has survived from prehistoric times until today it is only because of these very differences in our society, the differences according to varna dharma.

In other religions too, even if there is no caste according to their scriptures, the communities are divided. Some of the divisions are almost like jatis and they do not intermarry. Muslims are divided into Sias (Shias), Sunnis and Ahmadiyahs. In the south the Pattanis (Pathans) and Labbai Muslims do not intermarry. Among Christians there are Catholics, Protestants and followers of the (Greek) Orthodox Church. Hindus are divided on the basis of labour or work, but are united on another level. But followers of other religions, though themselves divided, speak ill of us. Yet we do not respond properly to their criticism.

The Eternal religion

The moral and ethical ordinances in other religions are applicable to all their followers. In Hinduism too there is a code of conduct meant for all varnas and all jatis. But in addition to this, there are separate dharmas for jatis with different vocations. There is no intermingling of these vocations and their corresponding dharmas. This fact is central to Hinduism and to its eternal character.

This religion has flourished for countless eons. What is the reason for its extraordinarily long history. If Hinduism has survived so long it must be due to some quality unique to it, something that gives it support and keeps it going. No other religion is known to have lasted so long. When I think of our religion I am reminded of our temples. They are not kept as clean as churches or mosques. The latter are frequently whitewashed. There are so many plants sprouting from the gopurams and our temples support all of them. The places of worship of other religions have to be repaired every two or three years. Our sanctuaries are different because they are built of granite. Their foundations, laid

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thousands of years ago, still remain sturdy. That is why our temples have lasted so long without the need for frequent repair. We do so much to damage them and are even guilty of acts of sacrilege against them, but they withstand all the abuses. All are agreed that India has the most ancient temples. People come from abroad to take photographs of them. These temples still stand as great monuments to our civilization in spite of our neglect of them and our indifference. It is not easy to pull them down. Perhaps it is more difficult to demolish these edifices than it must have been to build them.

Our religion to repeat is like these temples. It is being supported by something that we do not seem to know, something that is not present in other faiths. It is because of this "something" that in spite of all the differences, it is still alive.

This something is varnasrama dharma. In other religions there is a common dharma for all and we think that that is the reason for their greatness. These religions seem to touch the heights of glory at one time but at other times they are laid low. Christianity supplanted Buddhism in some countries. Islam replaced Christianity or Christianity replaced Islam. We know these developments as historical facts. The civilizations and religions that evolved in ancient Greece and China no longer exist today. Hinduism is the witness to all such changes in other religions and it is subject to attacks from inside and outside. Yet it lives-it refuses to die.

There was a palm-tree round which a creeper entwined itself. The creeper grew fast and within months it entwined the entire tree. "This palm has not grown a bit all these months", the creeper said laughing. The palm-tree retorted: "I have seen ten thousand creepers in my life. Each creeper before you said the same thing as you have now said. I don't know what to say to you." Our religion is like tree in relations to all other faiths.

Although there are separate duties and religious rites for the different castes in our religion, the fruit of the rites are same for all.

Bramhins are not a privileged caste

It is alleged that Brahmins created the dharmasastras for their own benefit. You will realise that this charge is utterly baseless if you appreciate the fact that these sastras impose on them the most stringent rules of life. There is also proof of the impartiality of the dharmasastras in that the Brahmin who is expected to be proficient in all the arts and all branches of learning can only give instruction in them but cannot take up any for his livelihood however lucrative it be and however less demanding than the pursuit of the Vedic dharma.

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Now it is claimed that all people are equal in all spheres, that all are equal before the law. But members of legislative bodies, judges, etc, enjoy certain privileges and cannot be treated on the same footing as the common man. These privileges have indeed been codified. If anyone criticises a judge he will be charged with contempt of court. Even I may be hauled up for contempt for my remarks. People who call themselves democrats and socialists have managed for themselves special allowances, special railway passes, etc, that the common people are not entitled to. In contrast, the Brahmins who have preserved the dharmasastras have bound themselves to vigorous discipline, roasted themselves, as it were, in the oven of ritual practices. If the Brahmin's purity is affected by someone he punishes himself by bathing and fasting.

The Brahmin must be conversant with the fourteen branches of the Vedic lore. He must be proficient even in Gandharva-veda or music and must be acquainted with agricultural science, construction of houses, etc. At the same time he must give instructions in these subjects to pupils from the appropriate castes. His own vocation is the study of the Vedas and he must have no other source of income.

Visvamitra was the master of Dhanurveda (military science). When he performed sacrifices, the demons Subahu and Marica tried to play havoc with them. Though a great warrior himself he did not try to drive away the demons himself. Instead, he brought Rama and Laksmana for the purpose. Visvamitra thereafter gave the instruction to the two in the use of astras and sastras.

If the Brahmin is asked, "Do you know to wield a knife?" he must be able to answer, "Yes, I know". If he is asked, "Do you know to draw and paint" again he must say, "Yes". But he cannot wield a knife or become an artist to earn his livelihood. All he can do is to learn these arts and teach others the same according to their caste. He is permitted to receive a daksina to maintain himself and he must be contented with it however small the sum may be. The Brahmin's speciality' his true vocation, is Vedic learning.

If members of certain castes are seen to enjoy certain privileges there must be some reason for the same. The man selling tickets has a room to himself and those who buy them have to stand outside and cannot complain about it saying that the practice offends against the principle of equality. If everybody gets in on the pretext of equality how can the ticket seller function? Will the man be able to sell the tickets properly? Everybody needs some special convenience to carry out his duties. A member of a joint family who falls ill has to be afforded certain special comforts- other members are not justified in demanding the same. In our religion there are many duties and rites that are common to all. But to carry out one's special duties certain conveniences are needed: as a matter of fact what are called conveniences are actually not conveniences or privileges, and also they are necessary to carry out the duties of the caste concerned for the welfare of the society as the whole. It is important to accept this truth: the special dharma of any jati is meant not only for those who constitute that jati but for society as a whole.

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Love must spring from the heart, so too the sense of unity. Unity is not achieved by all jatis becoming one. What do we see in Western countries where intermarriage is not prohibited and where all people mix together? There is much rivalry and jealousy among people there. According to our sastras, everyone in the past performed his duty and helped others to perform theirs and this was how they remain united. The daughter-in-law does not speak to the father-in-law out of respect for him. Would you call such respect ill-will? If someone close to us and belonging to our own caste has some "pollution", we do not touch him. Does it mean that we dislike him? It seems we all are mentally confused and do not have a proper appreciation of our different dharmas.

Universal wellbeing

According to the canonical texts, the Brahmin must perform vaisvadeva everyday in front of his house-the offering of bali to the Pancama is a part of this rite. The goal of Vedic works is the happiness of all mankind, indeed the happiness of all the worlds ("Lokah samastah sukino bhavanthu"). The sound of the Vedas creates universal well-being, so too Vedic sacrifices.

As a ruler, the Ksatriya wages wars and does policing work for the security of all citizens. The Vaisya too serves society - to think that he takes home all the profit he makes is unfair. The lord speaks of the dharma of Vaisyas in the Gita. "Krsi-gauraksya-vanijyam Vaisya-karma svabhavajam." The third varna has three duties- raising the corps, cow protection and trading - and it carries them out for the welfare of all people. The Vaisya ploughs the field and grows crops for the benefit of the entire community. Similarly, the milk yielded by his cow is meant for general consumption and for sacrifices. A Vaisya must also take care to see that the calves have their feed of milk. As a trader he procures commodities from other places to be sold locally.

However rich a man may be, he cannot sustain himself with money alone. He has to depend on traders for essential goods. Trading is the dharma of Vaisyas and it is an offence on their part not to practise it. Similarly, Brahmins would be committing a sin if they gave up Vedic rituals and earned money by doing other types of work. It is wrong to think that the trader carries on his trade for his good alone. Just imagine what would happen if there were a hartal and all shops were closed for a week. Surely people would suffer when essential goods are not readily available. Vaisyas must conduct their business in the belief that their vocation is one that is ordained by the Lord and that is for the good for the entire community.

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The fourth varna has its own advantages

The dharma of the fourth varna involves much physical exertion and effort in its practice. Outwardly it may seem that its members do not enjoy the same status and comforts as others do. But we must note that they are comparatively free from the discipline and rituals to which the rest are tied down. In the past, they knew more contentment than the other castes, living as they did by the side of the lord. Vyasa himself says: "Kalih saduh, Sudrah saduh" (The age of Kali is no way inferior to other ages nor the sudras inferior to other castes. Kali is indeed elevated and Sudras exalted.) In other yugas or ages Bhagawan is attained to with difficulty by meditation, austerities and puja, but in Kali he is reached by the mere singing of his names. The Brahmin, the Ksatria and the Vaisya are likely to have self pride, so they cannot attain atmic liberation easily. The Brahmin is likely to be in vain about his intellectual superiority, the Ksatria about his power as a ruler and the Vaisya about his wealth. So these three varnas will tend to stray from the path of dharma. A member of the fourth varna, on the contrary is humble.

Has not Valluvar said, "Humility raises one to gods"? This is the reason why the Sudra, being humble, resides by the side of the lord. One must not be subject to one's ahamkara or ego-sense. It is as a means of effacing their ego and making them deserve the grace of Isvara that the first three castes are authorised to learn Vedas and to perform the Vedic rites. Performing Vedic rites implies a number of restrictions in the matter of food, habits, etc. It is only with the "pathya" of this discipline that the medicine called the Vedic dharma will be efficacious. Any lapse in the observance of the rules of personal conduct and religious life will be a serious offence and it will have to be paid for by suffering. So the first three castes must be ever careful about their religious practices. The fourth varna is free from most of these restraints. The labour put in by the Sudra will cleanse him inwardly: it is his Vedic observance; it is his God; and through it he easily achieves perfection. This is why Vyasa proclaimed, raising both hands, "Sudrah sadhuh"

If a Sudra does not have enough food to fill his belly, if he does not have enough clothing, and if he does no roof over his head to shelter him from rain and sun, the whole community and the government must be held responsible- and both must be held guilty.

I repeat that the Brahmin's means of livelihood was in no way better than the Sudra's, nor did he enjoy more comforts than members of the fourth varna

Removal of ego

"All that is fine. But what about the question of self-respect?" ask reformers who profess to be socialists. For them, however, to raise such a question is to remain untrue to their

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own ideals. They talk a great deal, don't they, about dignity of labour? They proclaim that no job, no work, is degrading. Gandhiji cleaned his toilet himself. Rajagopalachari washed his clothes himself when he was premier. To demonstrate the principle of dignity of labour VIPs like the mayor sweep the streets one day in a year. Photographs of important men doing such work are published in the newspapers. If the reformists think that manual work is degrading it means that they are opposed to the ideals they themselves uphold.

If you ask me, "ahamkara" or ego-feeling is a cover for all such ideas as "status", "self-respect", etc. If you look at the question from the angle that the Sudra does not have the self-pride associated with the Brahmin, the Ksatriya and the Vaisya, you will realise the truth of Vyasa's dictum, "Sudrah sadhuh". The sastras are one with the socialists in proclaiming that all types of work are equally noble. If the socialists say so from the worldly or material point of view, the sastras say the same from the spiritual point of view. To explain, since the well being of mankind is dependent on the performance of variety of jobs, there is no question of one job being inferior to another job or superior to it. If everybody does the work allotted to him thinking it to be an offering to Isvara, all will be rewarded with inner purity, so say the sastras. When work is accomplished in a spirit of dedication to God, the consciousness will be cleansed. And this, inner purity, is a means to becoming aware of the Self.

You may look at your work from two angles. One is from that of dignity of labour according to which principle no work is degrading. The second is from that of consecrating your work, whatever it be to God. In either case "self-respect" has no place in it. If there is neither vanity nor ego-sense in doing one's duty or work, there will be no cause for anger, no reason to feel that one is assigned a particular set of religious practices that is humiliating. One should then be willing to accept the religious ordinances prescribed according to one's vocation. It must be noted that if a Brahmin enjoys bodily comforts in the same manner as a Ksatriya or a Vaisya, his mantras will cease to be efficacious. If a labourer keeps fast like a Brahmin he will not be able to do his duty, that is he will not be able to do physical work satisfactorily.

"According to the sastras," once a learned man told me, "the Brahmin must wear white, the Ksatriya red, the Vaisya yellow and the Sudra blue. At first, I wondered whether in this order one caste was regarded as inferior to another. On reflection, I saw the reason behind it. "Until then I myself had not given any thought to the subject. So I asked the pandita to explain the principle behind the arrangement he has spoken about. He said: "Even the slightest stain will be visible on the white. When a Brahmin performs a sacrifice he has to be careful that he does not spill anything or waste anything. If he does, his white clothes will show it. He has necessarily to be frugal since he must not bother others for money or material. The Ksatriya, as a warrior, spills blood, but the bloodstains on his dress should not show, nor should it be a cause of fear for others- that is why he wears red. A Vaisya handles a variety of commodities in the bazar but it yellow that sticks to his clothes the most. That is why the Vaisya must wear yellow so that the yellow stains will not show easily. Blue is most suitable for those who work in dust and grime.

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Even in modern days workers wear blue uniforms. So blue is the most suitable colour for Sudras". You will thus appreciate the reason behind each type of wear. The sastras are indeed mindful of the conveniences and comforts of each jati. If you realise this, you will understand the meaning of saying, "Sastraya ca sukhaya ca." You will thus also appreciate the reason behind many a sastric rule and realise that there must be an inner meaning to those rules the significance of which you have yet to grasp.

Today even intelligent people do not know the meaning behind different caste duties. "How can the work done by one man be according to dharma and meritorious while the same done by another is contrary to dharma and sinful?" they ask. In the olden days even unlettered people knew that it was a sin to adopt the vocation and duties of another jati because it was injurious to society. They worked together during temple festivals and in carrying out public duties but in matters like food and so on they did not mix together since such mixing, they knew, was harmful to their traditional vocations. The mingling of castes, they realised, would damage the system of vocations, the system that was devised for the good of all society. For thousands of years all castes have lived according to this system, finding happiness and fulfilment in it. If they had not found such happiness and fulfilment, they would have surely rebelled against the system.

After the inception of British rule, Brahmins lost their royal grants of land but got jobs in the government. With the introduction of machines and increased urbanisation, the handicrafts were destroyed and village life received a setback. While other communities found it difficult to get jobs, Brahmins were able to earn their upkeep without any physical exertion. This shook the very foundations of the system of four varnas and the British now used the opportunity to introduce new principle of egalitarianism and the race theory. People lost their faith in the sastras and with it there was a change in the outlook. If by the grace of Isvara, the old system is restored, the work done by every individual - from the Brahmin to the Pancama - will bring inward purity to all. Besides there will be the realisation that each, according to his hereditary occupation, will contribute to the general welfare of the mankind. If we pause to reflect on the subject, we will feel proud of varna dharma instead of feeling ashamed of it-and we will also develop a deep respect for those who created it.

The Ultimate purpose of varna dharma

When factories took the place of handicrafts and cottage industries, the small village communities became urbanised. The needs of people multiplied, so too the number of occupations. Today when the old way of life is gone, it seems impossible to revive the system of hereditary vocations. Is it any longer practicable how to insist that only Ksatriyas ought to man the defence services, that only Vaisiyas can transact trade and business, that the members of the fourth varna must continue to remain labourers? Is it at

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all possible to revive the old system? I am not unaware of the state of affairs now prevailing. If so why do I keep extolling varna dharma? There are two reasons.

Whatever be the situation today - and whether or not we can return to the old order - it is not right to claim as people nowadays do that the old order was utterly unjust, that it was created by the vested interests for their own good and convenience. We must be able to convince the critics that the old order was not unjust at all and that there is nothing like varna dharma to help people to attain inner purity. They must also be made to realise that this dharma, apart from helping society to function in a disciplined and harmonious manner, will bring well-being to all and give an impetus to culture.

There is even more important reason. Today the functions of Ksatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras have changed and become mixed Even so the work of the government goes on somehow. Defence, the manufacture of various articles, trade, labour - all these go on somehow. But, unlike in the past, there is jealousy as well as rivalry in all fields. Even so, the duties of the three castes are carried out despite the fact that varna dharma has broken up. They are a practical necessity for day-to-day life as well as for the functioning of the government. So they are performed, albeit unsatisfactorily.

There is, however, a function higher than all these. It is that of taking all of them - all these functions - to their ultimate point. And this function belongs to the Brahminic way of life and it has become almost extinct. To teach dharma by precept and practise, the dharma that is the foundation of all activities, to invoke the divine powers through the vedic chant for the good of all mankind, to create high ideals through their own austere life, to nurture the Atmic strength of the community, to promote the arts, to nourish culture- these embrace the dharma of Brahmins and it is now on the verge of extinction.

The need for the Brahminic dharma is not widely recognised because of its subtle and intangible character. There is no realisation of the other three varnas. Indeed, it is this dharma that gives meaning to life and creates a path for the fulfilment of life. We ignore it and devote ourselves solely to the functions of the varnas. If any improvement is made in them we are happy. But what use is material prosperity without Atmic and cultural advancement? Material progress is no progress at all. Americans have realised this truth - we ought also to realise the same. So however confusedly the functions of other castes are carried out, the Brahmin must function in the right manner as a pathfinder for others by living a life of simplicity and sacrifice, performing Vedic rites and creating worldly and Atmic well-being for mankind. In this way the soul of India will be kept alive.

If the Brahmin caste is restored to order, it might well be the beginning of the end of confused state of the other castes. In this land alone has there existed - and existed for ages-a jati for the protection of dharma and the Atmic uplift of all. If this jati becomes extinct there will be all-round decay. If I have spoken at length I have this purpose in view, that this jati must be revived in its true form so as to prevent the general decline of the nation. The Brahmin jati must not live a life of self-indulgence. On the contrary it must perform rites all through the day for the welfare of society. Brahmins must live

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austerely, with love for all in their hearts. If they are restored to their dharma our society in its entirety will be brought to the path of dharma and will be saved.

The Universal remedy

In the past, though people were divided on the basis of caste, they were free from hatred and ill-will. It is now that we see ill-will and hatred everywhere in the country. One state is at loggerheads with another; one state has dispute with another over the sharing of river waters; and again one state has a quarrel with another on the question of boundaries. In the past, Cettiars[of the South] built dharmasalas[free boarding and lodging houses] for pilgrims from Kasi. Correspondingly, the Sethjis constructed dharmasalas for pilgrims going to Kasi and Badrinath. People then were united as devotees of the Lord. Everything has gone awry today because of increased political activity and empty talk. So, as a medicine for our ills, as a sovereign remedy, we must pray that people become more devoted to the Lord.

The incessant cry that "Caste must go" has resulted in an aggravation of hatred between one jati and another. Though the propaganda against caste has been going on for 30 or 40 years, the caste factor comes to the fore even today during elections. Caste feelings run so high that violent clashes between communities are not infrequent. Here it is not hatred between Brahmins and non-Brahmins. Fortunately, the Brahmin has been made to distance himself from politics. It is a matter for some comfort that, even though they have not quit politics on their own, others have pushed them out of it. So the present quarrels are between other castes. In the Andhra Pradesh the Khammas and the Reddis are quarrelling between themselves; in Karnataka the Lingayats are at war with some other community. Ironically enough, it is in these days when the cry of equality is the loudest that we witness so many caste wars. This phenomenon is something unknown to the sastric tradition. Here [in Tamil Nadu] candidates are chosen for elections on the basis of jatis. Padayacis in one district, Gaundars in another, Tevars in a third, Mukkulattars in a fourth, and so on. Elections are fought not on the basis of ideology but on that of caste.

Sankara and sanatana dharma

There is a saying in English: "Give a dog a bad name and hang him." The dog is a faithful animal and full of gratitude for its master. Few would relish the idea of a dog being hanged. So if any dog is to be hanged, it is perhaps to be given a bad name.

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Reformers who claim to be modern do the same with our dharmasastras. For ages these sastras have done this nation nothing but good. But the reformers want to sentence them to the noose on the plea that they have given rise to many an evil. Some feel that there is no need for the division of the society based on our ancient and eternal sastras. So they invent outrages ostensibly perpetrated in pursuance of the tenets of the dharmasastras. "In our country there is a stipulation about who can do what, " they say opposing the varna system. "As a result, the people have become divided. There is no unity among Hindus. This is a cause of our having frequently come under the heel of foreign powers."There is not an iota of truth in this allegation.

It may be that when a common adversary confronted us there was no unity among the rajas. But there is nothing to support the view that, because of differences arising out of caste, this or that section of the people helped the invader. Ironically enough, it is today that there is so much disunity and hatred with all the clamour for the abolition of caste differences. In the past, on the contrary, there was nothing but happiness in the society when caste distinctions were maintained. When there were disputes between two villages over a plot of land, boundary or canal, the inhabitants of either village remained united as one man—from the Brahmin to the untouchable. If it was the example of unity provided by a village, you could very well imagine how the country on the whole would have remained united.

People divided into small communities were enabled and encouraged to live together in a well-knit manner and the members of each community were proud of belonging to it. And these had also their headsman. If anybody was proved guilty of an offence he was excommunicated. Such a punishment was considered a disgrace since people were greatly attached to their respective communities apart from being proud of belonging to them. And this acted as a deterrent to crime. Now there is no institution to unite people together in this manner on a heart-to-heart basis. Perhaps it is not possible also to cement people together today since they are all part of a larger system which is not easy to control. What is the result? The incidence of crime is on the increase and correspondingly the responsibilities of the police. Those who are opposed to the sastras must pause to think about such developments.

There is bound to be opposition to any idea, any system and it is indeed to be welcomed. It is by respecting the views of the opposition that we discover our own drawbacks and prepare to remedy them. But it is quite another matter to oppose a system for its imaginary defects because the only consequence then would be that its good features would come under threat.

I will give you an example of criticism that is totally unfounded or imaginary. Some people think its "uncivilised" to wear any sacred marks on the forehead. It is given a bad name as a "caste mark". As a matter of fact the sacred ashes (bhasma or vibhuti), for example, are worn by all castes, from the Brahmin to the Harijan. So is the case with the Vaisnava namam(made of Tiruman or the sacred earth):it stands for truth that everything is of the earth and mingles with the earth, that all is Visnu. The ashes are the symbol of

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the Paramatman. When the body is cremated all that remains is the ashes which are the symbol of the eternal Brahman. Is it right to condemn the use of such symbols that stand for great truths?

All old dharmic traditions must be protected and kept alive. Sri Sankara Bhagavatpada has commanded us to do so. I bear his name. So it is my duty to remind you of his injunction. Whether or not you will heed it, I should impress upon you that the sastric customs have the purpose of ensuring the good of all mankind.

Cry –grow, don't cry – perish

To speak on the other hand of the glory of Tamil culture, constantly recalling the words of Tiruvalluvar and others who extol love and divine grace, and to raise on the other hand the cry of hatred against a certain community - with the display of posters everywhere proclaiming such hatred - does not seem to me right. It goes against the very spirit of Tamil land and causes me great anguish. If you cry "Grow", instead of crying "Perish", all the hatred and all the quarrels will vanish. Instead of agitating the abolition of the caste system, people must start a movement to build more and more temples and spread devotion.

If everybody joins in this endeavour, the devotion that brought all of us together in the past as one family will again become a powerful source to reunite us and create a sense of universal well-being. If there is devotion, there will be no caste hatred. Such was the case during all these centuries. There was caste in the old days but it did not cause bitterness amongst the communities. It is not caste itself that is to be faulted but the hatred arising from it. So to attempt to destroy this institution is like burning a house to kill a rat. The movement to put an end to the caste system has disrupted the old division of labour and together with it caused discontent, disquiet and jealousy among people. Hatred among the different communities has grown like a big tree with many branches.

It is time that we opened our eyes to the evil and started making effort to substitute the campaign with its cry of destruction with a movement to bring all classes and castes together so as to promote devotion to Isvara and service to humanity. It will be one way of ignoring caste hatred. Countering caste hatred as such might have the effect of refuelling it. If we ignore it and turn our minds to other matters - other noble matters - bitterness due to caste will cease by itself. Suppose you are admonished not to think of the monkey while taking medicine, you will perhaps be tempted to do the opposite(that is to think of the monkey). Similarly, when we keep all the while speaking against the caste hatred, the effect will be the opposite, that of reminding people of caste differences and of arousing feelings of inferiority among some sections and of superiority among others.

It is important for all to become involved in a good cause, like the construction of a temple, or some public welfare scheme. Good feelings like love will surely spring in the

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hearts of people; at the same time much good will be done to society in general. Today, it is because people are not involved together in such [constructive] work that they turn their minds to destructive ideas, to argumentativeness and to gossip and quarrels. Unfortunately, some people think that if they inflame hatred between the communities or instigate quarrels or disputes, they will be able to gather a crowd of admirers round them. If we are all the time engaged in constructive work there will be fewer opportunities for trouble-making; indeed people will not find the time to do evil.

People go in procession until their legs ache, raising cries against this and that. Would there not be all-round growth and prosperity if all this manpower were employed to good work, if all the energy of people were turned to some constructive task? There is one type of "growth" that is higher than all others, it is the love that springs in the hearts of people. I think there must be a "tight" time-table for all: performing religious rites; worshipping at temples; listening to religious discourses; all castes working together for a divine cause or being engaged in social service. Adhering to such a time-table would mean universal happiness and prosperity. Besides, it would obviate the necessity of raising the cry of hatred against any caste.

There are certainly no differences between one jati and another so far as "status" is considered; that is one jati is not inferior to another or superior to it. All jatis have produced great men - Appar, Nammazhvar, Sekkizar, Nandanar and Kannappar to name a few. The Acarya himself has sung the praises of Kannappar in his Sivanandalahari. The sastras declare that it is a sin for anybody to regard himself as superior to others. Great men have shown us the way in this matter. They have spoken, abasing themselves, "Nayinum kadaiyen"; "nayadiyen". People don't share this kind of humility in the present age of freedom - and that indeed is the cause of much of our trouble. We must regain the old sense of humility and modesty. If so, Jati will be confined to work, functions, and will not in the least be a cause of any feelings of differences. If all people adopt the same style of living that is simple and virtuous, there will be no cause for jealousy or heart-burning.

Whether or not we have the courage or the spirit of sacrifice to work towards this ideal, a way will open out for us if we at least recognise the ideal. May we have success in achieving this ideal with the blessings of Amba

Outward karyam inward meditation

I have, in the course of my talks, dealt with a large number of religious rites. It may seem that the rituals, the puja to Paramesvara and the service done to fellow men are meant for "others". But in truth they are meant for ourselves. By helping others, by serving them, by worshipping the Lord, we are rewarded with a sense of fullness. Others may really benefit from our help or may not. But when we serve them we experience inward peace

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and happiness- about this there is no doubt. What is called "paropakar"(helping others) is indeed upakara done to oneself(helping oneself).

In serving others we may have to undergo hardships, make sacrifices and exert ourselves physically. But the happiness and sense of fullness we obtain is far greater compared to the trouble taken by us. The Lord does not have to gain anything from the puja we perform. In worshipping him, in reading the sacred texts, in going on pilgrimages we find inward joy. Why do we perform puja and why do we help others? It is all our own satisfaction.

Our affection for our wife, children and others is in fact affection for ourselves. According to the Upanisadic teaching of Yajnavalkya, it is for our own inner contentment that we love others. We perform puja to the Lord purportedly because of our devotion for him and we do social service presumably because of our love of mankind. But in truth the reason is we like ourselves and find happiness in such acts. For the sake of such happiness we do not mind encountering difficulties or making sacrifices.

If we spend money on ourselves or go seeking sensual pleasure, we do not obtain the same inner satisfaction. Work done for our own sake leads to disquiet and sorrow. We see our face in the mirror and note that there is no tilaka on our forehead. What happens if we apply a tilaka of dark unguent to the mirror[to the image]? It will be blackened. To apply a tilaka to the image means applying it to the one who is in front of the mirror. Doing things for ourselves[serving ourselves]is indeed like applying a dark spot to our mind- it is blackening ourselves. We take the image of the Paramatman reflected in the Maya mirror that is the mind to be ourselves. To bedeck the image in reality means adorning the Paramatman. This is the reason why serving humanity gives us a sense of fulfilment because humanity is a manifestation of the Paramatmam. Worshipping the Supreme Being the same. Only then will the black spot that we apply to ourselves will become an ornament. We decorate Amba to decorate ourselves. If we adorn ourselves we only enlarge our ego and feed our arrogance. When Amba is bedecked everybody will be happy about it. When we wear a well-laundered dupatta and preen ourselves, do others feel happy about it? They will speak scornfully of us: "See, how well-ironed he looks."

All of you give me heaps of garlands. You do so because you think I am great and want to express your devotion for me. You also feel that instead of wearing them yourselves the garlands would be an ornament for me. If I decorate myself with them thinking myself to be a great man, it would mean that I am satisfying my ego. But you bring me garlands with devotion and would it be right for me to spurn them? So just as you want to see me decorated I want to see Amba adorned and so I offer the garlands to her.

To go in search of money, fame and sensual pleasure, thinking them to be good, is to blacken our minds. What is it that is good for us? That which is good for the world -- and it is but a form of Paramatmam. This truth is known to our inner being; we realise it deep in our mind. That is why we find greater fulfilment in doing good to others, unmindful of all the difficulties, than in finding comforts for ourselves.

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The world is a manifestation of the Paramatman and so must we be too. We must remove the mirror called the mind and experience the truth within us that we are none other than the Paramatman. This is what called meditation. All the work we do ought to lead finally to worklessness, to the mediation of the Atman. The goal of all the sacraments I speak about is this.

Our actions make us happy in many ways. But in none of these actions do we find the peace that we enjoy during sleep. How we suffer if we lose even a single night's sleep? There is so much happiness in sleep. Do we not realise from this that the supreme "comfort" or happiness is worklessness. Dhyana or meditation is the state of being absorbed in the Paramatman, a state of non-doing.

In sleep we are not conscious that we are happy. It is only when we are awake that we realise that we are happy when we were asleep. The ultimate goal of meditation is samadhi in which we are fully conscious of the great bliss experienced by us. If we teach ourselves to remain in a state of non-doing within (inside ourselves) we will experience tranquillity even though we keep working outwardly. The inner peace will never be disturbed.

The quietude of Daksinamurti is the bliss of knowingness. It is not the same as the stilling of mind during sleep. In sleep there is no voluntary control of the mind; the mind becomes still because of exhaustion. Such stillness we are not capable of sustaining on our own. What becomes still during sleep, without being subject to our control, returns on our awakening again without being subject to our control.

Death too is a kind of sleep. In it, too, the mind is stilled. But with rebirth when the individual self becomes incarnate the mind starts to be active again. If we learn to control the mind voluntarily it will be able to remain in that state. Though Daksinamurti remains still without doing anything he is full of awareness. It is because he is inwardly a non-doer that he is able to do so much in an outward sense. The Daksinamurthi who remains still is the one who dances the dance of bliss, who destroys the demon Tripura and who keeps roaming as a mendicant. After granting boons to his devotees he goes from place to place. He is still inwardly but is in a frenzy outwardly. If we manage to still ourselves inwardly we will be able to do so much outwardly.

We are the opposite of Daksinamurti. We don the disguise of non-detachment in order to make others believe that we are at peace with ourselves, but inside we remain all the time agitated.

Outward calm is the first step towards inward stillness -- and this stillness is to be brought about in degrees and will not be gained at once. That is why the wise tell us: "Reduce all your sensual activities. Do not join the crowd. Try to disengage yourself from all work including that of doing good to the world. Keep away from money and dwell in the forest." But do we listen to that advice? We shall do so only when our mind is cleansed.

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That is why so many rituals are prescribed to purify the mind, the consciousness. It means that, instead of asking us not to do this and that, we are asked to do(perform)this and that rite. It is natural for us to be involved in some work or other. So, without any regard for our personal likes and dislikes, we perform the rites laid down in the sastras. Even here our personal likes and dislikes will intrude but, unlike in the matter of meditation, we succeed to some extent at least in curbing them during the conduct of the rites. In due course, with the grace of the Lord, we will be able to perform good works without minding the discomfort and ignoring our personal likes and dislikes. Desire and hatred will be reduced and the mind will become pure. With the mind cleansed we will be able to perform one-pointed meditation. This is the time when we will be mature enough to forsake all works and become a forest recluse and practice meditation. If we are able to meditate with utter one-pointedness then everything will acquire the character of the Paramatman. There will be no need to leave everything and remain holding the nose with the hand. The forest, the village, solitude and crowd -- they are all the Paramatman. Both work and meditation are the Paramatman. Our inner peace will not be shaken by anything. Like Dakshinamurti we can remain still and tranquil and yet be all bustle outwardly.

In the Gita, the Lord exhorts Arjuna to practise svadharma-in the case of Arjun it means waging war. The lord also propounds the yoga of meditation in which there is no "doing". He refers to the example of Janaka who was all the time working for the welfare of the people but at the same time remained in the ultimate meditation called Brahma-nistha. He himself, says the Lord, is like Janaka. There is apparently a contradiction in all this. But in reality no. The one arises from the other. In the beginning when it is not easy to control the mind and meditate on the Atman, performs rituals. Then gaining mental purity through them, that is the rituals fore sake karma and practise meditation and yoga, nothing will affect us. In this all is still inwardly and yet outwardly there will be much activity.

Briefly put, this is the concept of Bhagavatpada: ultimately everything(the phenomenal world) will be seen to be Maya. The One Object, the One and Only Reality, is the Brahman. We must be one with It, non-dualistically, without our having to do anything in the same way as the Brahman. I who bear the name of Sri Sankara, keep speaking about many rites, about puja, japa, service to fellow men, etc. It is because in our present predicament we have to make a start with rites. In this way, step-by-step, we will proceed to the liberation that is non-dualistic. It is this method of final release that is taught us by Sri Krsna Paramatman and by our Bhagavatpada. At first karma, works, then upasana or devotion and, finally, the enlightenment called jnana.

If we advance in this way, by degrees, with faith and devotion, we will obtain the wisdom and mellowness for Atmic meditation and inner control. Afterwards, we may keep doing any kind of work outwardly for the good of mankind.

What is the best means of Practising Atmic meditation? We must be imbued with the tranquillity that is Parasakti incarnate and remember every day Dakshinamurti in his

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quiescence. Let alone the idea of forsaking all work and becoming plunged in meditation. Let us leave aside, for the time being, karma, which, itself is transformed into the high state of meditation. These are conditions to which we must arise at a later stage in our inward journey. But right now-at the beginning-let us train ourselves in the midst of our work to remain at peace and learn to meditate a little.

To start with, let karma, devotion and meditation be practised together. These are not supposed to one another but are complementary. In the end all will drop off one by one and the samadhi of dhyana alone will remain. When we start our inward journey we must keep this goal of samadhi before us. So every day, having aside all other work, we must practise meditation for some time. But all the same we must not dismiss rituals as meaningless or as a part of superstition. We must keep performing them. It is only when our impurities are washed away thus that we will realise the self-luminous Reality in us.

How to cultivate character and good conduct?

How do we acquire character, how do we come to possess good qualities? By living according to the precepts of the vedas and sastras and by following the good customs practised by our own forefathers as well as by performing the rites that have been passed down to us. Good conduct springs from a good mind. So the mind must be free from evil.

Everybody does not possess a good mind. Look at your child. It is all the time up to some mischief or other. It cuts paper with scissors or cuts down little plants and shrubs. It is naughty all the time. When the same child is sent to school it is brought under a discipline. It has fixed timings to go to school and return home, to read its lessons, etc. It is no longer found to be wayward.

In the same way if we have no opportunity of being involved in evils thoughts and activities, we will also come under a certain discipline. That is why the sastras lay down rules to keep us involved in good works. When we are conducting religious rites we must have no ego-feeling. The preceptors of the Vedic way have shown us the path to consecrate our karma to Isvara. The Lord has given us strength to perform them but also the intelligence and the means. Even a little ego-sense would be ruinous because it is capable of taking many disguises and of sizing us at an unwary moment.

Are we able to see ourselves in a soiled mirror? If we dust it and clean it well, we can see our reflection clearly. Even a clean mirror cannot produce a proper image if it keeps shaking. The mirror must both be clean and steady; only then will the reflection be true and clear. The mind, the consciousness, is like a mirror. The Supreme Being is the only Truth. When there are no evil thoughts in us, the mind-mirror will also be clean. If it is

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fixed on a single object it will remain steady-like a mirror that does not shake. Only than will the Paramathma be reflected in it.

Who created this world? Who gives us food, clothing and comforts? Who is an ocean of grace? If we wish to know it is we must keep our mind steady and free from impurities.

Suppose a copper pot has remained immersed in a well for ten years or so. How much rubbing will it have to take before it becomes clean? The more we rub it the cleaner and brighter it will be. If our mind has been made impure with evil actions over many years it can be made chaste only by the performance of many a good deed, many a good-work.

Is it enough to keep the copper vessel clean for today? What will happen to it tomorrow or the day after? It will become dirty again if it is not rubbed. Similarly, we must keep our mind ever pure by the daily performance of good works. In due course, a time will come when the citta, the consciousness, will vanish and Self alone will remain. Thereafter, there will be no need to be cleansed. Until then we have to keep our mind pure through good actions and good conduct.

Samsare kim saram

In his Prasnotara-Ratnamalika, our Acarya asks: "Samsare kim saram?" (What is the meaning of worldly existence?) He responds to the question himself: "You asked the question thus. Keep asking again and again. That is the meaning of samsara. ("Bahusah abhi vicintyamanam idam eva.")"

"What is the purpose of my birth? Why was I born? " You must ask yourself this question again and again. You must also have some concern about whether you will reach the goal of your birth. "Why do you keep sinning?" is a problem that always worries us. "Why do you get angry? And why do we desire this and that? Can't we remain always happy without sinning, without anger and desire?" We do not seem to know the answers to these questions.

The fruit is formed from the flowers, first in the tender unripe form and finally in the mellow form. The flowers smell fragrant to the nose and the ripe fruit tastes sweet to the palate. The mellow or ripe fruit is full of sweetness. How did the fruit taste before it became ripe and sweet? The flower was bitter, the tender fruit was astringent, the unripe fruit was sour and the fruit that is mellow now is sweet. Peace means sweetness. When the heart is all sweetness all attachments disappear. There is attachment only so long as there is sourness. When you pluck an unripe fruit from a tree there is sap in the stem as well as in the fruit. It means that the tree is not willing to part from the fruit and vice versa.

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But when the sweetness is full, all the ties will be snapped and the fruit will drop to earth by itself. The tree releases the fruit or the fruit frees itself from the tree. The separation is without any tears and happy [there is no sap]. Similarly, step-step by step, a man must become wholly sweet like a mellow fruit and free himself happily from the tree of samsara, the cycle of births and deaths. Desire, anger, and so on, are necessary stages in out development like bitterness, astrigency, sourness and sweetness in the growth of a fruit.

When we are subject to urges like desire and anger we will not be to free ourselves fully from them but we must keep asking ourselves why we become subject to these urges and passions. We must constantly wonder whether they serve any purpose. If we do not remain vigilant about them we will become victims of their deception.

There must be astrigency when it is time for astrigency and sourness when it is time for sourness. But neither astrigency nor sourness must remain a permanent state. Just as a tender fruit becomes mellow, we too must become mellow and sweet. If we do so there is no need to seek liberation on our own. If we are as we should be in the different stages of our life, liberation shall come in the natural process. On the other hand, if we make and effort at an inappropriate time [if we force ourselves] it will be like making the fruit prematurely ripe. Such a fruit will not taste sweet.

We should not, however, remain always in the same state as the one in which we find ourselves today, indifferent to everything. At the same time, when our bag of sins still to be emptied, we cannot thirst for the supreme knowledge. Instead, let us keep doing our duty hoping that we will realise the supreme knowledge, if not now, after many a birth. Let us adhere to the dharma prescribed by the Vedas. If we do so, we will proceed gradually to the supreme jnana. Now we are aware only of outward matters and outward disguises. So let us start with the outward rites of our religion and the outward symbols and signs. By degrees then let us go to the inner reality through the different stages from that of the tender fruit to the fruit that is mellow and sweet.

Inward and Outward

I have stated again and again that the people must perform the rites handed down to them from forefathers, that they must adhere to the practices pertaining to the tradition to which they belong and they must wear the symbols appropriate to the same, like the holy ashes or Tiruman, the rudraksa, etc. Some people hold the view that all that is needed is conduct and character, that conduct is a matter of the mind, that religious customs are but part of the external life.

In truth, however, your outward actions and the symbols worn by you outwardly have an impact on the inner life. There is a relationship between bodily work and inner feelings. Let me illustrate this truth. One day, unexpectedly, a man comes to know he was won

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prize in a lottery, say, one lakh rupees. His joy knows no bounds, but it makes its own impact on his body. He becomes so excited that his breathing itself stops for a moment and he faints. "A particular feeling creates a specific change in the process of breathing". From this practical observation yoga develops lessons in breathing to create healthy and noble feeling and urges. Often the outward appearance reflects the inner feelings. When you are angry your eyes become red, your lips quiver. When you are sorrowful your eyes become moist and you shed tears. If you are happy you are agape, showing all your teeth. Thus there is a definite connection between the body and the mind, between the body and the inner feelings. Based on this fact, the wise have devised yogic postures that are calculated to nurture particular Atmic qualities.

Will soldiers be less valorous if they do not wear their uniforms? All over the world members of the defence services wear uniforms and it is claimed that they keep them fighting fit and inspire courage in them.

The symbols worn outside, the samskaras performed outwardly, are inwardly beneficial. If you think that it is all a disguise so it will be. You must resolve to wear the symbols in all sincerity and perform the rites too. Then they will truly cause purity within. Outward action help you inwardly.

It perhaps natural that I should give importance to samskaras, to the custom of wearing symbols like the sacred ashes, rudraksa, etc. After all, I am the head of Matha and you will come to me only if I wear all these. You will give me money for the conduct of the Matha. So all these symbols that I wear serve a purpose in my case. But your case is different. You have your own means of livelihood and you may be able to perform samskaras even more sincerely than I do and make yourself pure by wearing the symbols of our religion.

Let us wear the signs that remind us of the Supreme Truth. Let us perform the rites that keep us away from evil. Let us be of good conduct and character and cleans our consciousness. And let us meditate on the Ultimate Reality, experience It inwardly, realise bliss.

Do we need rituals?

Some ask me whether religious functions, puja, etc, are not "mere" rituals. Atmic awareness is an inward experience. As for rituals they are outward actions. The question is how rituals will help in experiencing the Self.

Rituals are indeed not necessary for one who has realised the Self. But we must put the question to ourselves whether we have truly realised It, whether we are mature enough for realisation, whether we have become inwardly pure. Were we honest we would admit that we are far from having become mature for awareness of the Self. By taking many

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births, by performing many works and by the vasana of previous lives, we have concealed the bliss of knowing the Self. By conducting good rites, and by associating ourselves with noble objects, we have to banish the evil habits sticking to us from our past lives. Then there will be an end to karma itself and we will embark on Atmic inquiry. Until then we have to perform what are called "mere" rituals.

The proper thing for ordinary people is to conduct all the rites mentioned in the sastras. The benefits obtained from them may be seen in practice. When a person takes care to go through the rites strictly in the manner prescribed in the canonical texts, he will gain one-pointedness of mind. This should be of immense help to him in contemplating the Self later. And the desire to follow the sastras in all aspects of life will mean that he will be brought under a certain discipline. When we conduct rites according to the sastras our determination and will power will be strengthened. Since we subordinate our views to the injunctions of the scriptures, we will cultivate the qualities of humility and simplicity.

So what do we gain by performing "mere" rituals? We will acquire one-pointedness of mind, discipline, non-attachment, will power, humility. On the whole it will help us to live a moral life. Without moral conduct there can never be Atmic inquiry and Atmic experience.

The Buddha did not prescribe any Vedic rites. But he too laid stress on morality and discipline. The Pancasila that Nehru often spoke about is of the utmost importance to the Buddhists. The Buddha points to the value of morality without the performance of Vedic rites. What about the Purvamimamsakas? They believe that Vedic rites are of the utmost importance and that is no need to worry about God. In our sanatana dharma, however, there is a weaving together of rites, the good conduct and discipline arising out of them, devotion to Isvara and finally knowledge of the Self.

Morality does not arise by itself. If you want milk you must keep a cow. If you keep a cow you will get not only milk but also cow dung. Then there will come up a haystack. When you keep the cow called karma you will not only derive not only morality and good conduct from it but also something that you feel is not wanted, that is cow dung. When you keep a cow must keep the place free from cow dung - that is a part of commonsense or wisdom. It is in this manner that you must obtain the real benefits from religious rites.

If rituals are not necessary for true Atmic knowledge, even the murti called Isvara is not necessary for the same. But we can dispense with rituals and Isvara only when we reach a high plane of knowledge. At first Isvara is very much necessary for our inward journey and there are so many reasons for it. I will tell you one. We need an entity that exemplifies all that is good. Have we not for ages together thought of Isvara as such a one, one who represents all virtues and all auspicious qualities. When we mention the word "Isvara" we at once think of him as one without any evil. If anything or anyone combines beauty, compassion, power and enlightenment to the full it must be Isvara. It is a psychological principle that we become that which we keep thinking of. By meditating

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on Isvara's manifold auspicious qualities our own undesirable qualities will give place to good ones.

There are many benefits that flow from rituals, puja, etc. One of them is that they help to make us good. They are also of value in taking us to the path of workless yoga and the inward quest.

Karma is the starting point of yoga

People usually think that yoga means no more than controlling the breath and sitting stone-like. The literal meaning of the word is "joining", "uniting". All through our life's journey we have to join ourselves to various objects. But such joining is no permanent. That is why the mind remains unsteady. If we are joined to an object without the least possibility of being separated from it, it is yoga in the true sense. The root of the minds of all of us is the one Paramatman. Yogins control their breath to turn their mind to this prime root object. The root that gives rise to thoughts is the same as the root that gives rise to the breath. So if the breath is fixed on the root, the mind too will be absorbed in it.

The opposite of yoga is "viyoga". When the man dies we say that he has attained viyoga. The Lord says in the Gita that a particular kind of viyoga is itself yoga. What is it? If you keep away sorrow, that is if sorrow does not attach itself to you, you have the yoga of disconnection(Tam viyad dukha-samyoga-viyogam yoga-samjnitam.)

What we normally understand to be pleasure in a worldly sense is truly sorrow. All experiences that creates separation from the Paramatman are sorrow. It is because the citta or consciousness is unstill that we undergo sorrow and happiness. These disappear when the mind is still. To make the mind pure it to train it in one-pointedness. This is the mean of yogic perfection. To start with, all will be able to control their breath like yogins. If we are absorbed in a worthy subject, in some good work, our mind will remain untainted to some extent. If we try to control our mind in one go, so to speak, it will free itself and wander in all directions. If we keep doing some noble work or take an interest in some noble subject the mind is less likely to become unstill.

In the old days they used to wear what is called an arikandam, that is an iron ring, round the neck to keep themselves disciplined and live according to the sastras. In the same way we must wear an arikandam to keep the mind from going astray. To be involved in good actions is itself a kind of arikandam.

Performing sacrifices, observing fasts and vows, building great temple towers, digging ponds, etc, were a means in the past to cleanse the mind by making it one-pointed. In the

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midst of such good work also one experiences difficulties, even humiliation, but one should not be daunted by criticism or obstacles. This itself becomes the means of mental purification. Then come pranayama, meditation, etc.

The kashakkodi keeps rolling without gathering any dirt. If you smear some ashes on it they will not stick to it. Like the kashakkodi we too must not be affected by pain or pleasure and keep journeying towards the Paramatman and becoming one with It. Such union is called yoga - it is our original as well as ultimate state. In between we somehow become different. That is why we do not understand that ultimate and original state now. To reach that state we must make a beginning with the performance of rites

Karmayoga

Arjuna asks [Krsna] whether it is not a sin to wage war and slay friends and relatives in battle. It seems to us a natural and reasonable question. Sri Krsna Paramatman gives an answer in the Bhagavadgita. An action that outwardly seems to be bad and cruel need not necessarily be sinful. Acts that apparently cause pain to others may have to be committed for the good of the world and there is no sin in them. Then what action is sinful and what is meritorious? The Lord answers this question also. Only such deeds as are motivated by desire and hatred can be sin. Those performed for the well being of the world without being impelled by desire and hatred are meritorious even though they may seem to be cruel.

The question arises: Is there any action that does not spring from desire or hatred? I will give an example. When a judge awards punishment to a man found guilty of crime is he driven by desire or hatred? His sentence may seem cruel but it is indeed for the Atmic well-being of the accused himself. If one's son is suffering from advanced insanity does one not keep him in chains? Is that sinful? It is for the son's good as well for the good of others who might come to harm by him.

It is this manner that the sastras have kept us bound, ordering us to do this and that. It is for our benefit as well as the world's, says Sri Krsna, that we must live according to the tenets of the sastras: "Tasmacchastram prmanam te karyakarya-vyvasthitau" (the sastras are the authority as to what you must do and must not). The Gita today enjoys wide esteem. Even people who have no respect for our religious customs and traditions - researchers, Western scholars, etc - speak in praise of it. They interpret variously the Gita's teaching on the svadharma. There is no room for doubt about what the Gita says about svadharma: It is the karma allotted to a man by the sastras.

When there is neither selfish desire nor hatred, there will be nothing unpleasant about any kind of work. One can then be always happy doing one's allotted work.

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The reason for desire and hatred is ego-feeling, ahamkara. When there is no ego-sense, considerations of high and low, or inferior or superior, will be found meaningless. We will keep doing our work happily as a matter of duty and thus also contribute to the world's happiness. The Karmayoga taught by the Gita is doing one's work without ahamkara, in a spirit of dedications to the Lord. This tradition of desireless action that purifies our inner being has existed in this land from the Vedic period. Sri Krsna Paramatman presents it to us as a boon encased in a handy casket.

We must keep applying this teaching with ardour in every work and action of our life. Every time we do a work we must ask ourselves: "How do we benefit from this work? Will it bring us fame? Are we moved by desire or hatred? Are we being partial to somebody in carrying it out?" If there is any of these elements associated with our action it must be considered sinful even if it seems exalted to the outside world. If we do something on our own, dictated by our own desire, there will be much wrong-doing in accomplishing it. So, as Sri Krsna says, all our actions must be founded on the sastras. If everybody acts with equal love for all and with a pure heart there will be neither any rivalry nor any quarrel in society. The world then will be filled with joy.

How to control the mind?

What is the obstacle to one-pointed meditation? The answer is the unstill mind. All problems are caused by the mind, by the desires arising in it. It is not easy to control the mind and keep it away effectively from desire. If we ask the mind to think of an object, it seems to obey us for a moment, but soon it takes its own course, wandering off. When I speak to you about meditation and tranquillity, for a moment your mind will perhaps become still and you will be happy. But in a trice it will go astray and the calm you experienced for a few seconds will give place to unquietness.

If you bid your mouth to keep shut, it obeys you for a brief moment. Similarly, if you close your eyes asking them not to see anything, they shut themselves off from the outside world for some moments. But try as you might to tell your mind not to think of anything, it will not listen to you.

The mind must be kept under control. Thinking and non-thinking must be governed by your will. Only then can we claim that it is under our control, that we are masters of our own consciousness.

Lunatics are usually referred to as people with no control over their minds. In fact none of us have any control over the mind. A madman keeps blabbering. But what about us? We let the mind go freely to keep blabbering inwardly.

Do you know what it means to have mental control? Suppose you are suffering from a severe pain. If you ask your mind not to feel the pain, it shall not feel it in obedience to

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you [that is you will not feel the pain]. Even if a tiger comes face to face with you and growls you will feel no fear if you ask your mind not to be afraid of the beast. Now we keep crying for no reason. If the mind is under control we will keep smiling even if there is cause for much sorrow. And under the gravest of provocations it will not be roused to anger and will remain calm.

First we must train our mind not to keep wandering. One way of doing it is to apply it to good activities. When oil falls in a steady flow, without spraying, it is called "tailadhara". The mind must be gathered together and made steady. It must be accustomed to think of noble and exalted objects like the Lord. Eventually, the very act of "thinking" will cease and we will dissolve in Isvara to become Isvara.

Yoga is controlling the mind in this manner.

Before we pass on, we must find a way to control the mind. Otherwise, we will be born again and we will be subject to the constant unquietness of the mind again. So we must use the opportunity of this birth itself to subdue the mind even while we are in the midst of so much that can rouse our desire or anger. A man who has succeeded in bridling his mind thus is called a "yukta" by the yogins. He is a "sukhin", one who truly experiences bliss, so says Sri Krsna

You must not turn away from yoga thinking that it is meant only for people like the sages. Who needs medicine? The sick. We suffer from manovyadhi, mental sickness. So we must take the medicine that cures it.

There are two different ways of mastering the mind- the first is outward(bahiranga) and the second is inward(antaranga). We must have recourse to both. The Matha has a cartman and a cook. Their work is outward in nature. Then there are those who prepare the wicks of the lamps, gather flowers for the puja - they are "inward" workers. Both types are needed for the functioning of the Matha. By employing both the outward and inward means, the mind must first be applied to good things one-pointedly and eventually lead to a state in which it does not think of anything at all.

The outward means consists, for example, of sandhyavandana, sacrifices, charity and so on. The best inward means is meditation. There are five inward(or antaranga) means to aid meditation. They are ahimsa(non-violence), satya(truthfulness), asteyam(non-stealing), sauca(cleanliness) and indriya-nigraha[subduing the senses, if not obliterating them]. To practise ahimsa is to imbue the mind with love for all and not even think of harming others. Asteyam means not coveting other people's goods. For satya, or truthfulness, to be complete one's entire being, including body, mind and speech, must be involved in its practice. Sauca is hygiene, observing cleanliness by bathing, maintaining ritual purity, etc. Indriya-nigraha implies limits placed on sensual enjoyment. "The eyes must not see certain things, the ears must not hear certain things and the mouth must not eat certain things"- restrictions with regard to what you can see, listen to, eat and do with your body. The body is meant for sadhana, for Atmic discipline. The senses must be

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"fed" only to the extent necessary to keep the body alive. These five dharmas are to be practiced by all Hindus without any distinction of caste or community.

Ahimsa

According to the Manusmriti, ahimsa is the foremost among the dharmas that are common to all. It is included in the yoga of mind control. Ahimsa means much more than non-injury; it implies not doing harm to others even by thought or word.

By nature none of us wants to cause any hurt to other people. But if others do us harm we want to retaliate in anger. Suppose one of our children sets fire to our house in all innocence. We do not punish it but try to extinguish the fire and thereafter take care to see that the child is kept away from fire and other dangerous objects. We must learn to think that all those who cause us pain are like this child. If a person tries to hurt us, we must lovingly prevent him from doing so. We must not bear any ill-will against him nor think of retaliating. This is true ahimsa.

The practice of ahimsa contributes greatly to the yoga of mind control. The mind is like a demon. But see what wonders the demon- the vetala- accomplished for Vikramaditya after he had been brought under control. The mind will do us unlimited good if it is made subservient to us. Anjaneya [Hanuman] acquired his immense strength and was able to perform so many great and good deeds only because he had conquered his mind. The mind's power is immeasurable. All the cosmos is the work of the Supreme Goddess and in this creation of hers even the mind of a tiny ant pervades the entire universe.

Many great men, many yogins, have stated that they were able to control their minds by adhering to true ahimsa. When we practise ahimsa, anger will naturally give way, the mind will become clear and will easily be controlled.

Though the chief aim of non-violence the control of the mind, there is another unexpected benefit that it brings. It is called "avantara prayojana". All of you came to the Matha to see the puja. But with that you listened to the nagasvaram music and saw persons whom you had not seen for long - and now you listen to my discourse. All these belong to the category of avantara prayojana. Thus if a man practises true non-violence (by body, mind and speech), he will be rewarded with a benefit that he had not expected. In his presence all creatures will forget their ill-will and cease to cause hurt to any other creature.

Ahimsa- pratisthayam

tatsannidhau vairatyagah -yogasutra.

-- Yogasutra, 2. 35

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The minds of even cruel people will be transformed in the presence of men practising utter ahimsa: in other words when a man is full of love he can make other people also loving and this is an avantara prayojana.

A sannyasin must observe total non-violence. He must not even pluck a leaf from a tree and must not do violence to plants by cooking them. It is because of the rule of absolute non-violence enjoined on him that there is an interdiction on his performing rites in the sacred fire. Tending a fire for the conduct of a ritual might unwittingly make us responsible for the destruction of some insects. It is because the sannyasin has no Agni ceremony that when he dies his body is not cremated but interred. When he is initiated into sannyasa he takes a vow that he shall never be the cause of fear to any creature.

"Ahimsa paramo dharmah" (Non- violence is the supreme dharma). Buddhism and Jainism impose total non- violence on their followers. Not so our religion except in the case of ascetics. In Hinduism an exception to the general dharma of non-violence is made in the case of a righteous or just war and in a sacrifice in which sometimes animals are killed. It is to fetch the divine powers to earth and to appease them that animals are sacrificed in yajnas. It is our belief that the animals so sacrificed will attain to a high state that they cannot otherwise through their own efforts. Altogether it means the good of the animals and the welfare of the world.

In a war, heroes of the army sacrifice themselves in the cause of the nation. Is it not better to lay down one's life for the sake of others than fatten oneself doing nothing?

It is easy to claim oral allegiance to the principle of non- injury but difficult to practise the same. Quarrels and disputes are inevitable in the workaday world. In dealing with them action that is apparently violent may have to be taken. In reality such action is not regarded as violent. The intention or purpose is important here, not the action itself. Certain types of violence are justified according to the sastras and not considered sinful, because such violence is committed not for our personal delight but in pursuance of our duty towards the society: the offering of an animal in sacrifice, sentencing a murderer to death, killing an enemy in war.

If a religion makes the practice of non-violence universally applicable, there will be problems. Obviously, all cannot practise it at all times. So those who find it not practicable to follow these rule of ahimsa are made liable to sin. Our religion has taken a more realistic view on the question. As we have seen, Buddhism imposes total non-violence on its followers. But what do we see in practice? In all those lands where Buddhism has a hold there are armies that take part in fighting. Besides, almost without exception, everybody is a meat-eater there.

If a great dharma or principle is made common to all, in the end it is likely to lead to a situation in which no one will respect it in practice. In our religion- to repeat- the rule of absolute non- violence is meant only for sannyasins. Following their example, Brahmins, Vaisnavas in regions like Gujarat and Sivas in the South like the Vellalas and Komutti

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Cettis practise ahimsa. Without being bound by any sastric injunction they have voluntarily adopted the principle and practised it from generation to generation. Influenced by the example of the sattva guna of ascetics these communities have become vegetarians on their own. And, following their example and without being compelled to do so, other castes too abstain from meat on days like the new moon, on the day of a sraddha, and days sacred to the various deities. When a principle is imposed only on a few, since it is difficult to make it universal it becomes an ideal for others to whom it may not formally apply: they try to practise it as far as they can. Non-violence is a samanya dharma(a dharma common to all) in Hinduism. It is kept as an ideal though, on occasion, adherence to it is not practicable.

In the Vedic dharma the definition of ahimsa is the absence of ill-feeling in all action.

Truthfulness

Truthfulness means mind and speech being well integrated. The wise say that speech being at variance with the mind is untruthfulness.

Vangmanasyoh aikarupyam satyam

God has given man the gift of speech so that he may give expression to his thoughts and feelings. If what we speak is at variance with what we think (with our mind) God will take away the faculty of speech from us in our next birth- that is we will be born in the animal kingdom.

There are, as we have seen before, exceptions made in our sastras to the rule of absolute non-violence: in waging a war to preserve dharma, in offering animals in sacrifice. Are there similar exceptions to the rule of truthfulness? You will perhaps say none. But, as a matter of fact, there are.

In a locality there must be a number of undesirable characters. Let us suppose that a certain citizen is annoyed with such characters and gives open expression to his anger. "He committed this outrage. That other man is guilty of such and such a crime, " he keeps recounting the misdeeds of the bad elements. In doing so he is being truthful, that is his speech and mind are in accord. But by giving expression to his feelings no purpose is served for neither he nor the community is benefited. It is a futile kind of accord - that of his speech and mind - and it cannot be called truthfulness.

Take the example of another person. He is full of evil thoughts and, if he gives expression to them, can he be called truthful? No.

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So truthfulness, now we see, is not merely accord between mind and speech. It means voicing good thoughts, thoughts that are beneficial and are liked by people: "Satyr bhuahitam priyam."

Doing good through thought, word and deed is truthfulness. All that does ill is untruthfulness. It is not enough that you speak to a man what is good for him. You must speak with affection and the one to whom your words are addressed must find them acceptable. If you speak harshly nobody will listen to you even if you mean well. Thus words that serve no purpose do not constitute a truth. Your speech must be beneficial and, at the same time, capable of bringing happiness to the man to whom it is addressed. This is truthfulness.

The wise say: "May he speak the truth. May his speech be pleasing. May he not speak the truth that is unpleasing. And may he not speak an untruth that is pleasing."

Satyam brutapriyam bruyan-

Na bruyatsatyamaptiyam

Priyam ca nanrtam bruyad-

A mind that is subject to desire and anger will not give rise to words that bespeak affection and cause well-being. Truthful words that create good are the product of a mind free from desire and anger.

What is truth then? Thought and speech must be in accord; the mind must be serene; and the words spoken must do good to the speaker as well as the listener.

For a man rooted in truth there is an avantara prayojana, an incidental benefit, gained from his speech. Since such a person habitually speaks the truth, his words will become the truth. Such a man will never deliberately utter a lie. But, if unwittingly or out of ignorance, he commits an error while speaking, that error will turn out to be the truth. I will tell you a story to illustrate this.

In Tirukkadavur, in Tanjavur district, there was a great devotee of Amba called Abhiramibhatta. He would often go into an ecstasy of devotion to the goddess. During such times he would speak like one mad. Someone poisoned the ears of the raja Sarabhoji against him. "Abhiramibhatta is a drunkard," he told the ruler. "His devotion is a mere pretence." Sarabhoji wanted to find out the truth. So he went to see Abhiramibhatta in Tirukkadavur and asked him: "What day of the moon is it today?" The Bhatta was then lost in devotional joy and, thinking only of the radiant face of Amba which was like the moon, said that it was a full moon day. Actually it was the new moon. The raja concluded that what he had heard about the Bhatta must be true and said scornfully: "Is that so? Let us look up and see whether the full moon has risen."

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At that very moment the full moon did appear in the sky. Abhiramibhatta was steeped in truthfulness. By mistake he had spoken an untruth but Amba made it the truth by hurling her ear stud into the sky causing it to shine like the full moon. The blessings as well as the curses of great men come true because of the force of their innate and habitual truthfulness. This is the "incidental benefit" they derive from their habit of truthfulness. But truthfulness must not be practised with the deliberate intention that what one speaks must come true. Power such as this is earned unintentionally and unconsciously.

A man will purify himself completely if he performs the forty samskaras and adheres to principles like non-violence, truthfulness, non-covetousness, cleanliness and also controls his senses. He will then develop the maturity and wisdom to find out who in truth he is, who Isvara is and what the Ultimate Reality is.

Sesame and water, where do they go?

All human beings must express their gratitude to their fathers (pitrs) and to the gods- they have a debt to pay their fathers, rites to perform for the gods. We must serve our fellow creatures to the best of our ability and extend hospitality at least to one guest a day. This is atithya or what Thiruvalluvar calls "virundu", also known as manusyayajna. Then there is Brahmayajna to perform, the word "Brahma" here denoting the Vedas. Brahmayajna means chanting the Vedas and making others chant them. This is a duty carried out by a few on behalf of all. One of the rites common to all is bhutayajna, demonstrating our love to all creatures, feeding them etc. Pitryajna, devayajna, manusyayajna, bhutayajana are rites all are duty-bound to perform in one way or. If each individual does his work according to the Vedic dharma and does it in a spirit of dedication to Isvara he may be said to be performing Brahmayajna. Thiruvalluvar has said more or less the same thing as the Vedas say:

Tenpulattar, deivam, virundu, okkal, tan enru angu

aimbulattaru ombal talai.

Tenpulattar are the pitrs, the fathers. All are duty-bound to pay their debt to them. Mother Veda says: "Matr-devo bhava, pitr-devo bhava. " (Be one to whom the mother is a deity. Be one to whom the father is a deity.) Auvvai, who brings us the essence of the Vedas, observes: Annayum pitavum munnari deivam" [Mother and Father are the deities first known.]

We must treat our parents with respect and do all we can to keep them in comfort. We cannot make sufficient recompense for all the sacrifices they make on our behalf. After they depart from this world we must without fail offer libations to them and perform the sraddha ceremony, all in the sastric manner. Though they ridicule the idea of performing sraddha, even reformers have agreed that we must care for our parents.

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"The sesame you offer, the water, the balls of rice, the plantains and other items of food remain here," point out the reformists. "Or we see someone removing them before our own eyes, or eating them. You say that the departed parents are born again in this world. If that is true, is it not madness to claim that what is offered here will reach them?" Some of you must be harbouring similar doubts.

Let me tell you a story.

A certain man had sent his son to college in a distant town. One day the boy woke up to the fact that he had to pay his examination fee in a few days. So he wrote to his father: "Please send such and such a sum by telegraphic money order." The father was a little perplexed. All the same he went to the telegraph office and handed the clerk at the counter the money that had to be sent to his son. "Please send it by telegraphic money order," he told the clerk. He had thought that the clerk would make holes in the notes, put a length of wire through them and send the whole thing to his son. Moments later the clerk said to the man: "Your son will get your money. It has already been sent." The villager was again puzzled. He saw the money still in the cash box without the notes strung together. He told the clerk: "My money is still here. You haven't made holes in the notes yet." The clerk assured him: "It will reach your son." Now he turned to his work of sending messages: "Ka-tu-katu-katu." The poor village was still not satisfied.

But the money of course reached his son.

Offering libations to one's fathers is similar. If this rite is performed according to the sastras, the deities concerned will convey them to those for whom they are meant. If the fathers are reborn as cows the offering made to them will be taken to them in the form of grass or hay. The deities in charge carry out the orders of the Paramatman. So the father of the mother whose sraddha is performed need not personally come to receive the offering.

Does not the telegraphic money order reach the addressee? If the addressee resides in a foreign country our currency will not be valid there. If rupees are paid here arrangements are made to pay the money in dollars, pounds of whatever. The things offered to the fathers according to the sastras are conveyed in a form suitable to them.

What is important is a sense of gratitude to our fathers and faith in the sastras. At parties a toast is proposed to somebody and all the guests drink or eat to his health. They do so in the belief that by virtue of the mental power the man toasted will become healthy. Sraddha means that which is done in faith. Faith is of the utmost importance. If we do something we must do it according to the rules laid down for it. When you write a letter how do you make sure that it reaches the addressee? "I will write the address as I like. Why should I drop the letter in that letterbox over there? I have a better box at home." would you speak thus?

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In the state of worklessness, love, devotion, and jnana are not bound by any rules. But when an action has a purpose behind it you have to respect the rules pertaining to it.

Puja

Every family must perform puja to Isvara. Those who find it convenient to do so may conduct elaborate types of puja after receiving proper initiation into them. Others need perform only a brief puja, not lasting more than ten minutes or so. Office goers must offer at least this brief worship. The sacred bell must ring in every home.

Images must be installed to worship Siva, Amba, Visnu, Vinayaka, and Surya. This is called "pancayatana puja". According to one custom, no graven images [images with limbs] are used but instead natural objects to represent the five deities. The "bana-linga" for Siva is obtained from the Omkara -kunda of the Narmada river. The svarnamukhi stone for Ambika (it has a golden streak on it) is to be taken from the bed of the Svarnamukhi river in Andhra Prades. The symbol of Vishnu, salagrama, is obtained from the Gandaki river in Nepal. The crystal stone for surya is got from Vallam, near Tanjavur. The sonabhadra stone for Vinayaka is obtained from the Sone river, a tributary of the Ganga. These five stones are symbolic of the unity of India.

None of these five stones has eyes, nose, ears, etc. Since they have no corners that become untidy, they are easy to bathe and dry. Being small they do not occupy much space. No big puja hall or room is necessary. A small casket is enough.

Pancayatana puja was revived by Sankara Bhagavatpada. As the creator of the Sanmata system (the worship of six deities)he added Subrahmanya to the five. So with the five stones we may add a small spear to represent Velayadah (Subrahmanya) who bears the spear.

Not much effort is needed for the puja. If you have the will, it could be performed wherever you happen to be.

At home when you do the puja you have to present to the deities cooked rice called "maha-naivedya". The Lord has created the entire cosmos for our sake. Our sense organs take delight in the various objects in creation. All that gives us joy, all that is beneficial in creation, must be offered to the Lord [symbolically] before being partaken of by us. When we offer any food as naivedya to Him, do we really give it away to Him? We just place it before Him and then partake of it ourselves.

Some ask, scornfully, whether the Lord himself eats what is offered to Him. "Nivedana" does not mean making the Lord really "eat" what is offered. He does not have to eat. Puja is meant to make us inwardly pure and the Lord does not have anything to gain from it. "Nivedayami" means " I am making it know to you (informing you) " and

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does not mean "I am feeding you". You must speak thus to Isvara : "O Lord, in your compassion you have given us this food." Then you must eat the food thus offered, thinking of Him. Without His grace how does the rice grow? Experts may conduct research and write big tomes on rice. But are they capable of making one grain of rice? What is called synthetic rice is made out of materials already created by Isvara. So all that seems to be made of man must be finally traced to God's creation. To enjoy what he has given us without first presenting it to Him would be tantamount to thieving.

He who is present everywhere must be present where we want Him to be present so that He may be grasped by us. Whatever the material out of which His image or symbol is made-stone, earth, copper- he will come to us in that material and in that image or symbol. He will do so out of His compassion and He has the power to do so. We would have no need for him otherwise.

The Lord must be worshipped in every home. He must be invoked and it must be made known to Him that we are using nothing but what he has made over as a gift to us. If we keep doing so, we will in due course have the wisdom not to use in puja things not fit to be offered to Him. We ourselves will come to possess good qualities.

Philanthropy

In the chapter entitled, "Sesame and Water: Where do They Go?", the Paramaguru spoke of the debt to be paid to our fathers, our duty to worship Paramesvara as well as to feed the creatures of the earth. He stated that Tiruvalluvar also spoke of the same dharma in his "Kural": "Tenpulattar deivam, virundu, okkal tan enru angu aimbulattaru ombal talai."]

Here (in the foregoing quotation) is one good proof that Tiruvalluvar respected the authority of the Vedas. Some suggest that he did not belong to the Vedic religion and that he was a Jaina or a Buddhist. And some claim that he transcended all religions. It is also suggested that he openly condemned sacrifices in which animals are killed. In support of their view they quote a stanza from the Kural.

[The Paramaguru's comment on the Kural passage is contained in Chapter 23, Part Five.]

Tiruvalluvar who composed his Kural, with its universal appeal, was not an atheist opposed to the Vedic dharma. What he refers to as virundu is the same as the Vedic manusyayajna.

Every morning a handful of rice(uncooked) must be set apart for the poor. All the families must do this without fail every day. The rice thus kept must be collected from

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house to house, from quarter to quarter, cooked offered to the deity of the local temple as naivedya and then distributed among the poor. With the handful of rice set apart for the poor, keep just one paisa also. The paisa collected from each family would be sufficient to buy salt, chilli powder, etc, to mix with the rice to make it more palatable. It would also serve to buy firewood and to pay the rent for the vessels. To carry out such a scheme is to do a great service to the poor - and to the Lord. Charity like this should encourage temple going, not to speak of devotion. Since the food is first offered as naivedya, it would mean that the poor will take it as prasada which will impart them inner purity.

Annadan or the gift of food is one kind of service of paropakara. We talk of service to the poor, social service and so on. Today all this is done with much fanfare and publicity. In the past the needy were served naturally, without making any noise. Service comes under "purta- dharma" and it includes digging wells and ponds for the public, feeding the poor, building temples for the spiritual well-being of people, laying our gardens. Excavating wells and ponds has been mentioned first. The importance of this word may be gauged from such remarks in ordinary conversation: "What 's he doing? Digging a well or something?" It is extremely meritorious to excavate pond outside the village to slake the thirst of cattle. All the people in a village must join together without the distinction of poor and rich, high or low - work involving physical effort. It will incidentally contribute to greater social harmony.

With education we purify our intelligence, with meditation we cleanse our mind, with sloka or poetry we clarify our speech. How do we purify our body? By exerting ourselves in the service of others. As we keep serving people in this way we will obtain inward purity. When all take part in the work of digging a pond or well, without any differences, without one man feeling superior to another or inferior to him, our ego too will be dug away. More important than the water welling up in the pond is the love welling up from our hearts. No outward show is needed in social service; we must not make an exhibition of our work. Collect pieces of glass scattered on the footpath and keep them away in a safe place; even this service to people and a means of cleansing ourselves. We must try to please the Lord with the very hands and feet that he has given us - we must do so by serving others and by looking upon all as himself.

To serve others is to feel blessed

A man can be fortunate in many ways. But there is nothing that makes him more fortunate than the opportunity he has of serving others.

When we serve our family we are not conscious of how we help it. We must learn to help people who are not our kin - other families, our village or home town, our nation, indeed all mankind. We have so many problems ourselves, we suffer so many hardships, and we

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have so many worries and cares. We must not, however, mind serving others in the midst of all our difficulties. We will forget our problems when we are immersed in the work of helping others. There is a saying : "Feed milk to your neighbour's child, your child will be nourished." The Lord will raise us up from our troubles as we do good to others. However, it is not with such considerations of profit that we must try to help people in difficulties. We must not worry about how others will benefit from our work, but consider how we will become naturally pure. Also, we must think of the happiness we will experience by serving our fellow men.

Service should not be confined to mankind but must be extended to the animal kingdom. In the olden days ponds were dug exclusively for cattle and stone pillars were installed here and there for them to scratch themselves. Everyone must feed at least one cow every day with a handful of grass. This is called "go-grasam" and this act is extolled in the sastras, "Grasam" means a mouthful and the English word "grass" is derived from it.

Conducting sacrifices, offering oblations to the fathers and performing sraddha must be regarded as an extension of the service we do in this world to the denizens of other worlds. These rites must be gone through with the intoning of mantras.

There must be many others like us, many groups, who want to be engaged in social work. It should be ideal if the efforts of all were brought together under one body of like-minded members. Care must be taken that associations so formed do not break up; they must be managed honestly with a proper enforcement of discipline. Those who do philanthropic work must be men of courage and enthusiasm who take praise and blame equally.

You ought not to waste your time in eating places displaying appetizing fare nor in establishments where alluring objects are exhibited. Instead, you must spend your time in helping others. You will ask whether it is wrong to spend a little time in gaiety in the midst of life's worries and hardships. I should like to impress on you that the happiness you find in helping others is not to be found in anything else.

Krsna Paramatman was playful, wasn't he? But all his playfulness was an outward phenomenon for inwardly he served others all the time. How sportingly did he save people from trouble and how many were the men who were helped by him. To protect the cowherds the child Krsna lifted up the big Govardhana mountain. And, again, as a little child he danced on the hoods of the dreaded Kalinga(Kaliya) that poisoned the Yamuna. It all seemed play, all the heroic acts he performed to save the people of Gokula. Nobody sported like Krsna but at the same time nobody served mankind like him. It was not worldly service alone that he did. He served mankind by imparting jnana. As a preceptor of Arjuna and Uddhava alike he taught great truths. All this he did with a smile, spreading serenity everywhere. What he did he did with utmost ease. Those who have taken up the work of serving humanity must be inspired by his example.

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Among the various incarnations of the Lord, the service rendered to humanity was the greatest in that of Krsna. During the avatara of Rama, Anjaneya appeared as seva (service) personified. We must be inspired by their example [of Krsna and Hanuman] as we work for others; we must be unselfish like them and shun publicity.

We keep aloof from the outside world when we are ritually impure. We must regard any day on which we fail to do any service to others as a day of impurity. Paramesvara is the father of all creatures. By serving our fellow men we serve the Lord. This is the message of Tirumular in his Tirumantiram;

Nadamada-k-koyil nambar-k-konriyil

Padamada-k-koyil Bhagavarkadame

It means: Serving people is worshipping the Lord.

Making all creatures happy

We must not fail to perform sacrifices to the celestials, offer libations to our fathers and perform sraddha. In the past, apart from these, our ancestors did puja to the gods, fed guests and performed vaisvadeva which rite is meant for all creatures. You must have some idea of these rites even if you do not perform them. I will speak to you about vaisvadeva.

To sustain ourselves, we cause hurt to so many creatures, don't we? We take pride in keeping our house clean but we forget that every household is a butchery. According to dharmasastras it is not one butchery but five butcheries together. What are these five?

Pancasuna grhasthasya vartante harahah sada

Khandani pesani culli jalkumbha upaskarah

Khandani is used to cut vegetables- it stands for one type of butchery. Vegetables also do have life. The second butchery is represented by the grinding our pounding stone. We mercilessly grind corn, pulses, etc, in it.

Here an answer must be given to objections raised by meat-eaters about vegetarian food. They tell us:"Like the goats, cows and fowl that we eat, vegetables and cereals also have life." True. Though there is no difference in kind between them, there is a difference in the degree of violence done to vegetables and animals. Plants have life and feelings like humans but they do not have the sensation of pain to the same degree as animals and

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By His Holiness Sri Kanchi Paramaachaaryal

birds have. This has been scientifically established. Also, but for certain leafy vegetables which we uproot to be prepared as food, most other vegetables are obtained from plants without killing them: it is like removing our nails or hair. The plant suffers only a little pain. Pain even to this degree will not be caused if we eat the fruits of these plants after they drop ripe. As for the cereals they are harvested only after the crop is ripe and dry.

There is one more argument in favour of vegetarianism. Now only certain types of meat like beef are eaten. Horsemeat is not usually eaten. During World War I or II, when the question arose as to whether the soldiers could be fed horsemeat, the non-vegetarians themselves opposed the idea. People who think it civilized to eat birds and animals condemn tribes in some remote land who eat human flesh as barbarous and call them cannibals. We must tell meat-eaters who remind us that vegetables also have life. "Yes, but when it comes to violence, are all creatures the same? Why do you make a difference between animal flesh and human flesh? Similarly, we make a distinction between plants and animals. Vegetarianism also promotes sattvic qualities. "Unavoidably, for the sake of existence, we have to keep at home instruments of butchery like the khandani, pesani, etc.

The third butchery is represented by the culli or the kitchen fire. Many insects perish in the cooking fire. An ant crawls about the oven or fireplace and is burnt. Sometimes when we keep a pot on the floor or the shelf an insect or two get crushed. In the summer insects come seeking wet places, places for example where vessels are kept. The water-pot is also included among the objects of butchery. Then there is the upaskara, the broomstick. Aren't many tiny insects killed as we sweep the floor? Thus there are five instruments or objects of butchery in our home.

We must not cause harm even to those creatures that hurt us. But what do we do? We cause pain to, or kill, even harmless creatures. It is sad to think that to live, to sustain ourselves, we have to keep hurting so many living things. But it all seems unavoidable. We do not kill deliberately. There is an expiation for the sin committed unwittingly. It is the prayascitta of the "vaisvadeva". We perform this function to ask the Lord to forgive us our sin of having caused the destruction of various creatures and to pray for their happiness in afterlife. Vaisvadeva is meant for the excommunicated and for all creatures of earth like dogs, crows, insects, all. This rite absolves us of many a sin.

The pancha-mahayajnas were conducted for eons by the sages, by the children of Brahma. All performed them from the hoary past until the time of our grandfathers. The five great sacrifices are to be performed uninterruptedly until the deluge. But we have had the "good fortune" of having broken this tradition. Worse, we have deprived future generations of the benefits to be derived from them.

I have dealt with a variety of rites. Perform at least those you can without prejudice to your office or professional work. If you fail to do so you must be regretful and make amends for the same.