Insight
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Cultural Wisdom

There exist hundreds and hundreds of devotional observances, cultural arts, daily customs, spiritual teachings and yogas that Hindus have, for millennia, employed to experience the Divine during each earthly sojourn, ever narrowing the gap between self and Self. Here are a few time-tested ways to live well.

How Do We Overcome Life's Obstacles?

Just as a small leaf can obscure the sun when held before our eyes, so can the past cloud the present and hide our divinity. With Vedic methods, or tantras, we remove impediments to reveal the ever-present inner light. Aum.

An ancient Upanishad defines twenty obstacles, upasarga, to spiritual progress: hunger, thirst, laziness, passion, lust, fear, shame, anxiety, excitement, adversity, sorrow, despair, anger, arrogance, delusion, greed, stinginess, ambitiousness, death and birth. Another obstacle is the intellect which, unguided by intuition, merely juggles memory and reason as a way of life. The experience of these impediments creates reactions that combine with the sum of all past impressions, samskaras, both positive and negative. Residing in the subconscious mind, these are the source of subliminal traits or tendencies, called vasanas, which shape our attitudes and motivations. The troublesome vasanas clouding the mind must be reconciled and released. There are beneficial tantras by which absolution can be attained for unhindered living, including ayurveda, jyotisha, daily sadhana, temple worship, selfless giving, the creative arts and the several yogas. The Vedas explain, "Even as a mirror covered with dust shines brightly when cleaned, so the embodied soul, seeing the truth of atman, realizes oneness, attains the goal of life and becomes free from sorrow." Aum.

What Are the Hindu's Daily Yoga Practices?

Devout Hindus perform daily vigil, called sandhya upasana, usually before dawn. This sacred period of puja, japa, chanting, singing, hatha yoga, meditation and scriptural study is the foundation of personal life. Aum.

Each day hundreds of millions of Hindus awaken for the last fifth of the night, bathe, don fresh clothing, apply sectarian marks, called tilaka, and sit in a clean, quiet place for religious disciplines. Facing east or north, the devotional puja rites of bhakti yoga are performed. Hatha yoga, hymn singing, japa and chanting are often included. Then follows scriptural study and meditation, listening to the sound current and contemplating the moonlike inner light during brahma muhurta, the auspicious hour-and-a-half period before dawn. The duly initiated practice advanced yogas, such as those revealed in Merging with Siva-but only as directed by their guru, knowing that unless firmly harnessed, the kundalini can manifest uncontrollable desires. Through the day, karma yoga, selfless religious service, is performed at every opportunity. Besides these yogas of doing, Hindus practice the central yoga of being-living a joyful, positive, harmonious life. The Vedas declare, "The mind, indeed, is

this fleeting world. Therefore, it should be purified with great effort. One becomes like that which is in one's mind-this is the everlasting secret." Aum.

How Are Ayurveda and Jyotisha Used?

Ayurveda is the Hindu science of life, a complete, holistic medical system. Jyotisha, or Vedic astrology, is the knowledge of right timing and future potentialities. Both are vital tools for happy, productive living. Aum.

Ayurveda, rooted in the Atharva Upaveda, deals with both the prevention and cure of disease. Its eight medical arts, with their mantras, tantras and yogas, are based on spiritual well-being and encompass every human need, physical, mental and emotional. Ayurveda teaches that the true healing powers reside in the mind at the quantum level. Wellness depends on the correct balance of three bodily

humors, called doshas, maintained by a nutritious vegetarian diet, dharmic living and natural healing remedies. The kindred science of Vedic astrology, revealed in the Jyotisha Vedanga, likewise is vital to every Hindu's life. It propounds a dynamic cosmos of which we are an integral part, and charts the complex influence on us of important stars and planets, according to our birth chart. Knowing that the stars enliven positive and negative karmas we have brought into this life, in wisdom we choose an auspicious time, shubha muhurta, for every important event. An orthodox Hindu family is not complete without its jyotisha shastri or ayurveda vaidya. The Vedas beseech, "Peaceful for us be the planets and the moon, peaceful the sun and rahu." Aum.

How Do Hindus Regard Art and Culture?

Hindus of every sect cherish art and culture as sacred. Music, art, drama and the dance are expressions of spiritual experience established in shastras by God-inspired rishis as an integral flowering of temple worship. Aum.

Art and culture, from the Hindu perspective, are the sublime fruits of a profound civilization. Every Hindu strives to perfect an art or craft to manifest creative benefits for family and community. The home is a spiritual extension of the temple. Graced with the sounds of Indian sacred music, it is adorned with religious pictures, symbols and icons. The shrine is the most lavish room. Children are raised to appreciate Hindu art, music and culture, carefully trained in the sixty-four kalas and protected from alien influences. Human relationships are kept harmonious and uplifting through the attitudes, customs and refinements of Asian protocol, as revealed in Living with Siva. Hindu attire is elegantly modest. Sectarian marks, called tilaka, are worn on the brow as emblems of sectarian identity. Mantra and prayer sanctify even simple daily acts-awakening, bathing, greetings, meals, meetings, outings, daily tasks and sleep. Annual festivals and pilgrimage offer a complete departure from worldly concerns. The Vedas proclaim, "Let the drum sound forth and let the lute resound, let the strings vibrate the exalted prayer to God." Aum.

What Is the Hindu Outlook on Giving?

Generous, selfless giving is among dharma's central fulfillments. Hospitality,

charity and support of God's work on earth arises from the belief that the underlying purpose of life is spiritual, not material. Aum.

Nowhere is giving better unfolded than in the ancient Tirukural, which says, "Of all duties, benevolence is unequaled in this world, and even in celestial realms. It is to meet the needs of the deserving that the worthy labor arduously to acquire wealth." Even the poorest Hindu practices charity according to his means. In this unselfish tradition, guests are treated as God. Friends, acquaintances, even strangers, are humbled by the overwhelming hospitality received. We share with the less fortunate. We care for the aged. We honor swamis with gifts of food, money and clothes. We encourage the spirit of helping and giving, called dana, within the family, between families and their monastic and priestly communities. Many devout Hindus take the dashama bhaga vrata, a vow to pay ten percent of their income each month to an institution of their choice to perpetuate Sanatana Dharma. This centuries-old tithing practice is called dashamamsha. The Vedas wisely warn, "The powerful man should give to one in straits; let him consider the road that lies ahead! Riches revolve just like a chariot's wheels, coming to one man now, then to another." Aum.