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Publisher's Desk

## When Kids Embrace Hinduism

For best results in passing on your faith, present concepts as life-enhancing tools rather than life-restricting rules

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All too often, hindu concepts and practices are explained to children and youth as rules rather than as tools. Rules restrict what we can do in life and have the sense of making things less enjoyable. Kids, especially, rebel at too many rules. Tools, on the other hand, make them more effective and improve their quality of life. We can transform cumbersome rules into appealing tools by clearly explaining the processes involved in a practice or custom and the benefits it has to offer. The object is to catch the child's interest, to show how Hinduism will help her make spiritual progress and enjoy a happier and more successful life. It is inspiration, not rules, that drive people forward, and children are no different in this regard.

Imagine a teenager challenging her parents about three family practices: "Why are we vegetarian?" "Why do we need to go to the temple every week?" "Why can't I listen to hip hop music like my friends do?" Unfortunately, parents may not take the time to give thoughtful, complete answers to such questions, and instead take the easy route, decreeing, "It's what our family has always done." Because many of their friends don't have to follow such a strict code of conduct, youth hearing this answer can easily conclude that Hinduism is a just a set of rules that makes life restrictive and unhappy.

Before answering these questions in a way that transforms them from rules into tools, let's review some basic concepts. These are what I call "big ideas."

## Two Big Ideas

The first big idea is that everything affects our consciousness. My guru's guru, Yogaswami of Sri Lanka, explained: "What you think, that you become. If you think God, you become God. If you think food, you become food. Everything influences consciousness."

The second big idea is that each of us is a soul, a divine being living in a physical body, and we have a three-fold nature. At the deepest level, we are a pure, radiant, blissful soul. That is our spiritual or intuitive nature. We also have an intellectual nature and an instinctive nature. So, we have three aspects: spiritual (knowing, being), intellectual (thinking) and instinctive (feeling). The instinctive nature consists of our lower, animal instincts, such as self-preservation, procreation, hunger and thirst. It also includes the emotions of greed, hatred, anger, fear, lust and jealousy. This is our desire/feeling nature. The intellectual nature is our faculty of reason and logical thinking. It is the source of discriminating thought. The intuitive nature is the mind of light, of omniscient knowing, omnipresent awareness, pure consciousness, truth and love. This is our spiritual nature.

Using this pair of big ideas, we are now ready to answer the three questions.

## Why Are We Vegetarian?

In India, vegetarianism is well established, and not eating meat is seldom a target for criticism. In other countries, however, being a vegetarian is the exception, and vegetarian children are often the brunt of ridicule, peer pressure and chiding. Adding injury to insult, in most school cafeterias and at social events, veggie options are meager, unimaginative and unhealthy. There is practically nothing a vegetarian student can eat!

Little wonder that children want to take the easy way out and abandon a vegetarian diet. However, there are compelling reasons for being a vegetarian. The

main one is that eating meat affects their consciousness in a negative way, bringing them into the instinctive nature.

Explain to children that if they want to live in higher consciousness, in their soul nature, in peace and happiness and love for all creatures, they cannot eat meat, fish, shellfish, fowl or eggs. The reason for this is that by ingesting the grosser chemistries of animal foods, one introduces into the body and mind anger, jealousy, fear, anxiety, suspicion and the terrible fear of death, all of which is locked, biochemically, into the flesh of butchered creatures.

In other words, meat eating will strengthen their instinctive nature and make them more prone to these lower emotions. By eating meat, they will become angry more often and experience darker moods. My guru stated, "Vegetarianism is very important. In my fifty years of ministry, it has become quite evident that vegetarian families have far fewer problems than those who are not vegetarian." Children who are awakening to this understanding all over the world are becoming vegetarians all on their own. And these days, with a GPS-enabled iPad, a little research and creativity, vegetarian options can be discovered just about anywhere.

### Why Must We Go to the Temple Every Week?

Explain to children that worshiping in the temple is one of the traditional ways Hinduism gives us for connecting with our soul nature and experiencing ananda, the natural bliss of the soul. They can visit the temple in state of discontent, receive the blessings of God and the Gods and go away uplifted and happy. How is this possible? The Deity's blessings have cleared their mind and aura of congested thought forms and emotions, allowing them to reconnect with their inner self. The blessings lift them out of their instinctive nature and soften their intellectual nature, bringing them into their spiritual nature.

Once children catch the idea that temple worship is a great tool for stabilizing their emotions when they get upset, their reluctance to join the family will change. The temple will become important to them, not just to mom and dad. Temple worship will help them remain calm and centered even in difficult circumstances. They will find that going in the right spirit is a way of pulling themselves back together. It is also a place for assuaging long-held hurts.

Teach children to go to the temple and place their problems at the feet of the Deity, to bring offerings and talk to the Deity about their unhappiness, just as if they were talking to a friend in this physical world. There, with the Deity, they will go through a deep, inner process and receive blessings from the Deity if they open themselves in the right way. They may find that when they leave the temple they can't remember what the problem was. That's a sign of success.

Of course, the benefits of attending a temple every week are not limited to times that they are emotionally upset. Even when everything is going well in their life, worshiping at the temple with sincerity and attentiveness takes them deeper into their soul nature. They will be more compassionate and understanding, better able to deal with the challenges that come to them in life. Once your child realizes that worship is a powerful Hindu tool, and not just another adult rule, she will ask you to take her to the temple every week.

## Why Can't I Listen to Hip-Hop Music?

Music, especially when listened to for extended periods, strongly influences our state of consciousness. Whatever children listen to brings them into one state of consciousness or another. My guru, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, was outspoken on this topic. He felt that the type of music played in the home and the message it delivers are crucial. He stated that great care should be exercised to exclude the crass music and lyrics of lower consciousness. "The drug culture and its demonic music erode the very fabric of human character and culture." If your child catches this idea, her musical preferences will evolve--not because of rules you impose, but because she understands how different kinds of music influence her mood and mind. At the very least, she will avoid crude, negative hip-hop and listen only to the genre's higher strains. Ideally, the music played in the home should be beautiful Hindu music played on traditional instruments which takes everyone in the family into their refined and cultured soul nature.

## Remember that Tools Out-Perform Rules!

Taking time to give sensible answers to your child's questions about every Hindu practice is definitely worthwhile. Include in your explanation how the practice or restriction influences her consciousness. This will greatly increase the chances of her enthusiastically following the practice. And in some instances, your child will become inspired to urge other Hindu youth to give it a try as well!